Canon Fire

Decolonizing the Curriculum

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Abstract

Despite sustained critical attention to the politics of knowledge, contemporary anthropology disproportionately engages with ideas produced by academics based in European and North American universities. The 'decolonizing the curriculum' movement speaks to core areas of anthropological interest while making a critical comment on the academic structures in which anthropologists produce their work. The articles in this collection interrogate the terms on which academic work engages with its own history, and ask how the production of knowledge relates to structures of race, gender and location. The collection considers the historical, political and institutional context of the 'decolonizing the curriculum' movement, the potential impact that the movement might make on education and research, and the major challenges facing it.

Keywords: anthropology, colonialism, decolonize, education, ethnography, post-colonialism, race

Whiteness, colour and anthropology

The introductory note to this special issue begins with a personal story about race and anthropology.

I am from the United Kingdom, and my family is made up of people who are White British, Afro-Caribbean and Romany Gypsy. This is a rare combination of ethnicities, which makes it hard to define my own racial identity. In some cultural contexts, 'mixed race' constitutes a distinct ethnicity that is reproduced intergenerationally.[1] However, in the contexts with which I am personally familiar, mixed race people tend to be coded according to a *de facto* 'one-drop' convention that locates them within an encompassing minority ethnicity. My own experience is that I am coded very differently depending on the viewer and the context. When I was a younger man, living in England with long dreadlocks and less social capital than I have now, I believe that I was usually coded loosely as a 'non-white person'.[2]

Now that I am a bald man edging towards middle age, with a permanent academic job at an elite university, I think that I am usually coded as 'white'. This reveals something important about the intersectionality of race and class in the United Kingdom. Or perhaps it just reveals something about the power of ethnic symbols like dreadlocks. In any event, I accept a position of racial indeterminacy, and I am not a member of any existing ethnic group.

Nonetheless, the hard edges of race have been constantly present in my life. Until well into the 2000s, many pubs in my English home town still displayed signs in their windows that read 'No Travellers', and the gypsy members of my family were barred from entering them. As a child, I heard stories about my black father being refused service in British shops and abused with terms like 'darkie' and 'nig nog'. On several occasions, acquaintances and complete strangers have called me a 'nigger' myself. This last happened when I was eighteen years old, and three white men in their twenties attacked me at a British railway station, after asking me to clarify whether I was white or mixed race. As they hit me and shouted racist abuse, one of the men felt it necessary to spit in my Afro. More broadly, I have a subjective sense that people find it uncomfortable not being able to tell what my race is, and I often find myself in situations where people try to find out. This is a common feature of my interactions with people of all nationalities, races, classes and genders. My experience is that the people who most want to know what I am are the most likely to be hostile to the answer.

In 2000, a year after that man spat in my hair, I began an undergraduate degree in social anthropology at the London School of Economics. What I wanted from social anthropology was a way of looking at the world that was sensitive to and respectful of cultural difference but was nonetheless opposed to racial essentialism. Based on my life experience, my view at the time was that racial thinking was usually the chosen worldview of racists. It is probably easier for a racially indeterminate person to believe this than it is for other people.

At that point in the early 2000s, I found what I was looking for in anthropology. The American Anthropological Association (AAA) had recently declared that race was a social and not biological object (American Anthropological Association 1998), and during my studies I learned about post-colonialism, subaltern studies and the crisis of ethnographic authority. I believed that I was part of a discipline that had stared its colonial origins in the eye, and productively interrogated questions of race and power. However, as I began doctoral studies in social anthropology, and then pursued an academic career, it became clear that the words in the books had not translated into major shifts in the racial structures of the discipline.

However problematic I may personally find the framework of race, it is indisputable that the discipline is still being overwhelmingly written, taught and studied by white people. I do not say this to invoke anything as reductive and homogenous as 'white thinking', or to flatten out distinctions of nation, class and gender (see Allen and Jobson 2016 for an excellent appraisal of race and decolonization). However, all academics have life experiences that shape how they approach anthropology; I know that I certainly do. It is therefore important

that despite decades of sustained critical attention to colonialism and racialized structures of power, the anthropological conversation is still light on non-white voices. The current 'decolonizing the curriculum' movement is one attempt to address this imbalance.

Coloniality and the academy

Critical interrogations of colonialism have a long history in the humanities and social sciences. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) laid the foundations for four decades of scholarship by asking how exoticized imaginations of the Orient support the concentration of power in the global west and north. In the 1980s, the (largely Indian) Subaltern Studies collective embarked on a radical rethinking of South Asian history, which initially sought to rewrite the experience of colonialism from the perspective of the region's poor and disenfranchised (Guha 1982). The European intellectual frameworks of Antonio Gramsci, E. P. Thompson and latterly Michel Foucault heavily informed the work of the Subaltern Studies scholars (Sanchez and Strümpell 2014). However, as Zeus Leonardo observes in his appraisal of Said (this volume), during the 1970s and 1980s an engagement with the European canon of academic thought was not deemed antithetical to the generation of new and destabilizing ideas. In a similar vein, Jovan Scott Lewis (this volume) notes the paradox of C. L. R. James' affinity for colonial forms of education, and his enduring love of British literature and poetry. The current 'decolonizing the curriculum' movement might therefore seem to be at odds with the tenor of earlier post-colonial scholarship (cf. Hage, this volume).

In anthropology, critical engagements with this broad topic have traditionally focused not only upon histories of colonial power but also on matters of interpretive agency and the methodological limitations of ethnography itself. In the mid 1980s, the postmodern turn in social anthropology destabilized the notion of ethnographic authority and invited a critical examination of the ethical and methodological bases of anthropological knowledge (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Anthropology's self-reflection was supported by an iconoclastic reassessment of the discipline's founding figures, which revealed the prejudices, errors and eccentricities that informed their work (Freeman 1983; Kuper 1973). In the 1990s, attention to the colonial resonances of anthropology was reinvigorated by Faye Harrison's *Decolonizing Anthropology* (1991), followed at the close of the decade by Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999). As such, there is a considerable precedent for anthropologists to engage with the (post)colonial power dynamics of their discipline, and to view the decolonization of intellectuality as 'crucial to the future intellectual and academic success of the discipline' (Overing 2006: 12).

Nonetheless, the current 'decolonizing the curriculum' movement is not simply a repeat of older anthropological debates. The current movement is more firmly rooted in the humanities than its predecessors were, and is notably inspired by the radical student politics of the global south (see Mogstad and Tse, this volume).

The movement also has a determined focus on the content of higher education curricula, and comparatively less of an emphasis upon research methods and styles of writing. This approach is more consistent with the US curriculum studies that emerged in the early twentieth century and have shaped critical education scholarship since (Leonardo, this volume). The 'decolonizing the curriculum' movement raises demanding practical questions about how contemporary scholars might engage with the canon of 'classic' anthropological work (Sanchez 2017), the limits of identity politics (Kumar et al. 2018) and the basis on which a writer is assigned a racial and national identity by their audience, and how that might inform readings of their work.

If it is to be successful, decolonizing anthropology entails careful thinking about the relationship between power, place and race. A categorization of the world into a simple binary of 'white people' and 'people of colour' fails to interrogate the edges of racial identities, and the tensions and plurality of experiences within them. It is also not helpful for addressing the intersection of race with structures of gender and class. Similarly, a coding of the world into colonized and colonizer does not grapple with the difficult fact that colonialism was not practised and experienced consistently across different times and regions (Hart, this volume). Working through these problems, Leonardo (this volume) invokes Maldonado-Torres' efforts to distinguish contemporary 'coloniality' from the structures of historical colonial systems. Maldonado-Torres explains that coloniality 'refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations' (2007: 243). Turning her gaze to the challenges of intersectionality, Ritty Lukose (this volume) suggests that we might use Adrienne Rich's 'politics of location' to speak more productively about how the practice of feminism meets with the politics of decolonization in different parts of the world (Rich 1986).

The project of decentring anthropological knowledge has the capacity to improve our critical understanding of human social life, by virtue of considering a wider range of methodological possibilities and interpretative frameworks. However, putting this into action requires a frank engagement with questions of race, intersectionality and the implication of understanding the contemporary in reference to historical projects of colonialism. The articles in this collection are attempts to meet this challenge.

The collection

In late 2017, the authors in this collection were asked to contribute an article that considered three issues: the historical, political and institutional context of the 'decolonizing the curriculum' movement; the current and potential impact that the movement might make on education and research; and the major challenges and problems facing the movement. In the spirit of the project, authors were encouraged to freely interpret the call in the manner they found most productive.

In short, there was an attempt not to impose too restrictive an editorial frame on the collection. However, the articles have all been subject to peer review. As a consequence, many have undergone extensive revision, while some are published much as the author originally intended them.

The collection is motivated by a sense that the current manifestation of the decolonizing movement has its greatest momentum and creativity in universities of the global south. It is also motivated by an editorial belief that the practical, professional and intellectual challenges of the movement are likely to find the greatest tension in the elite universities of the global north. It is in such environments that the imperative of decolonizing is acute and yet particularly fractious (Branch, this volume). For that reason, the collection is comprised of articles by authors writing either within or about such institutions. An alternative version of this collection written entirely by scholars based in the global south would make an excellent complement to this volume.

The collection begins with an article by Zeus Leonardo that interrogates coloniality in the curriculum from the perspective of a Critical Whiteness Studies scholar, followed by a contribution from Jovan Scott Lewis that draws on diaspora theory to propose what forms a decolonized curriculum might take. Ritty Lukose then engages with the intersection of the politics of gender and race, in an interrogation of what it means to decolonize feminism in the #MeToo era. The collection then proceeds to Mogstad and Tse's critical discussion of fieldwork training and teaching, which draws on their experiences as first year PhD students.[3] We then move to a discussion of the colonial resonances of African Studies, authored by the director of the Cambridge Centre of African Studies, Adam Branch. Branch's article is followed by a reflective piece from Keith Hart that reassesses the reading of the University of Cambridge as a space of colonial hegemony. Hart's article was not written as a rejoinder to the other pieces. However, it does propose a counter perspective to several of the contributions. The collection closes with a critical afterword by Ghassan Hage.

What you are reading is an attempt to think through the context, tensions and practical implications of the 'decolonizing the curriculum movement', in a manner that should be productive. This is not a manifesto, and the reader will not find a sustained programmatic statement about what 'decolonizing the curriculum' should mean and how it should be done. Rather, they will find a series of interjections about important aspects of the movement. I hope people will find these articles useful to think about as they make up their minds about how to approach the subject.

Acknowledgements

Andrew Sanchez is Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. He has published on economy, labour, class and corruption, and is the author of *Criminal Capital: Violence, Corruption and Class in Industrial India* (Routledge, 2016). He is currently completing a project about core conceptual debates in the anthropology of value.

Notes

1. This is the case with Canadian Métis and Southern African 'Coloured' communities.
2. The term 'person of colour' was not in common, popular usage in the UK during the 1990s and 2000s.
3. This piece was originally intended to be co-authored by six undergraduate and PhD students in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. Four of the original authors withdrew from the project during the planning and writing process.

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