



Identities

Global Studies in Culture and Power

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gide20>

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To cite this article: Gurminder K. Bhambra , Kerem Nisancioglu & Dalia Gebrial (2020): Decolonising the university in 2020, *Identities*, DOI: [10.1080/1070289X.2020.1753415](https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2020.1753415)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2020.1753415>



Published online: 08 Jun 2020.



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Decolonising the university in 2020

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ABSTRACT

We came together as editors of *Decolonising the University* through a commitment to understanding the university and our place within it; to examine what else might be possible for us, collectively, in the domain of higher education. Although we do not always agree about the university— or, perhaps more specifically, about the possibilities it contains for intervening effectively in the world— we nonetheless coalesced around an idea of ‘decolonising the university’ as an important strategic mode of engagement. Here, we set out the positions that we come from in relation to the broader debates about the university and its political possibilities and offer responses also to the reviews. These are not our final words on the matter, but words shaped by the political possibilities that present themselves at the outset of 2020 and which, we hope, will contribute to the increasingly necessary dialogues on this topic.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 10 February 2020; Accepted 16 March 2020

KEYWORDS Universities; decolonising; public; citizenship; capitalism; race; abolition

Gurminder K Bhambra: 2020 began in much the same way that 2019 ended. There were few endings, and fewer beginnings; political life occurred and recurred much as always [Covid19 was yet to take on the significance that it was to do within a few short weeks of writing]. Climate crisis, war, persecution, turmoil, protest, resistance, and more. Amid the news, from around the world, sparking horror, disbelief, and resignation, calls were made for locating hope, finding hope, nourishing hope. And yet, as Lester Spence wrote on Twitter at the end of 2019, asking where hope is to be found is the wrong question. The question we should be asking, he continued, was what institutions do we need to build or rebuild?

As the new year dawned, we witnessed the violent suppression of student protests at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, India. The students had been

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This response was written before the coronavirus pandemic reached the UK where the authors are based. This is likely radically to transform the material conditions of the university sector (and wider society) and the implications of this will also need to be addressed alongside the issues raised in this response.

protesting a steep fee hike and were set upon by masked attackers while the police seemed to stand by and do little to prevent the assaults. These protests coincided with and built upon growing unrest among civil society in India at the changes to citizenship laws that would disenfranchise Muslim minorities and turn them into second-class citizens. One of the first locations of this unrest, was at Jamia Millia Islamia where a student rally against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) at the close of the previous year was brutally broken up by the police. Both JMI and JNU are public universities.

Commenting on the place of universities in these struggles, and the ferocity of the state's response to protests there, Dasgupta (2020) writes, that as '[h]ollowed out and neglected as they have been, the universities remain one of the few truly public spaces in India'. That is, he suggests, they are spaces for critical reflection and the development of relationships beyond the settled hierarchies of caste or class or, then, solely of private transactions. They are spaces in which citizenship can be, and has been demonstrated to have been, activated. They are spaces, as Dasgupta (2020) continues, in which the substance of citizenship – through acts of collectivity, solidarity, and collegiality – can be imagined and enacted beyond the 'cold logic of documents and identities'.

This is the potential of the public university and perhaps now, more than ever, is the time to reclaim it and rebuild it. Between the state and the market, the expansion of the public university has been one of the ways in which the social rights of citizens have been entrenched in the latter half of the twentieth century – both in post-war societies and newly decolonised ones. The association of the system of public universities with deepening democratisation is perhaps only really seen once this process has moved into reverse (Holmwood 2017; Lalu 2019).

Similar to what is happening in India, the neoliberal reforms of the past decade have also 'hollowed out' public institutions in the UK and, at the same time, brought into sharp relief institutional injustices and inequalities oriented around race. The most effective of the campaigns 'to decolonise the university' across UK campuses focus on the need to address our shared colonial histories as well as to examine the racial inequalities that structure practices of teaching and assessment.

To say that the university as an institution is intrinsically a colonial institution is, I believe, deeply problematic. There have been institutions of higher learning across much of the world prior to the advent of European institutions and despite European colonisation. Even Eric Ashby who, writing in 1963, claimed educational institutions as one of the key assets on the balance sheet 'for British colonialism', acknowledged that these institutions 'are no monopoly of Europe' (1963, 92).

The university, as John Dewey argues, is one of the vital repositories of the common learning of communities. If we accept this understanding of the

university then we should also recognise that, as those communities change (Johnson, Joseph-Salisbury, and Kamunge 2018), so our understandings of the present and the past should also be transformed. The rise of authoritarian populism across the world requires those of us oriented to a different world to take stock of the resources at our disposal to address what is and what is to come. As Holmwood (2017, 939) argues, '[p]ublic reason in a democratic society requires more than an effective system of higher education at the service of democratic knowledge, but that is at least one of its conditions'.

We cannot build the decolonised university separate from rebuilding and transforming the public university.

Kerem Nisancioglu: A quick caveat, I will write specifically from and of the UK context in what follows. This is a problematic limitation but one that might help me be specific in my argument. Or perhaps my core claim is actually really vague: I'm ambivalent about the prospects of decolonising the university mainly because I'm increasingly unsure of the politics behind this call.

My uncertainty is the result of how both contestation and agreement currently characterise campus movements to decolonise. Within these movements, it is now possible to observe three distinct currents or positions. For one constituent within the movement, decolonising the university is an extension of diversity, inclusion and representation politics: more Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME, that cursed acronym) people in classrooms, reading lists, citations, research collaborations, boardrooms and executives. Here, the framing of 'decolonisation' offers a way of interrogating and challenging how colonial legacies inform contemporary exclusions and alienations of people racialised as not-white within university work, admissions, curricula and governance.

For other constituents, decolonising is an attempt to either recover or create anew an alternative vision of the university, one free of colonial legacies, institutional racism and market forces; a university for the public good(s) of critical thinking, educated deliberation and informed citizenship. Decolonising is a means and opportunity to transform teaching and research practices in ways that critically interrogate and even unlearn the coloniality that inflects higher education. Decolonising is also a promise to challenge the neoliberal or market logics that have come to dominate the sector.

For another constituent – the neoliberal managers that continue to drive these very logics – the call to decolonise represents a market opportunity, to refashion the brand of institutions and restructure its teaching practices in ways that put more bums on seats and more fees in pockets. For these managers (and many academics aligned with them), decolonisation is not a politics but a career.

Despite important differences in positions, interests and political visions, each of these constituents seem to *agree*: the university is 'unfit for purpose'; the university is in need of reform and that decolonising is one way of doing it.

Such agreement rests on a shared but, in my view, problematic and unexamined assumption: that the university is something we want and something that needs saving. There may be disagreement over why it needs saving and what this looks like, but the existence and desirability of the university is an already settled question. These constituents tell us, in agreement, that the university can only be fought for, never struggled against or beyond.

Such agreement troubles me. It has the effect of naturalising the university and reifying what is an otherwise hegemonic but historically specific 'mode of study', to use Eli Meyerhoff's helpful term. Agreement also produces a certain institutional loyalty and ethical commitment to the university among its constituents. This delimits the horizon of struggle to a basic requirement that universities must be reproduced (albeit perhaps reproduced much better). Consequently, alternative, revolutionary and insurgent political positions that question the university itself are foreclosed and externalised: placed outside of the movement to decolonise the university.

This is why the contributions to this forum by Sujata Patel and Eli Meyerhoff are so welcome and important. Rather than accepting the mission of the university, they invite us to historicise and interrogate it. Patel asks: 'what is the University for? Who benefits from higher education?' She argues that universities have served projects of colonial-capitalist governance by institutionalising one of its constitutive alienations: the separation of manual and mental labour. Similarly, in this forum, but also in his brilliant book *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World*, Meyerhoff (2019) argues that university education was a particular mode of study that emerged in and through projects of capitalist-colonial worldmaking.

By historicising the university and situating it in a wider set of colonial relations, we might follow Meyerhoff and Patel to also ask: who loses out from higher education? what is the university against? In *Beyond Education*, Meyerhoff rereads the university from the perspective of its Others: the drop-outs who have to leave the university because of abusive professors; the precariously employed teaching assistants who are worked to the bone then casually discarded when their contracts are up; the migrant cleaners who are detained and deported by border agents following a raid organised at (and in complicity with) the very university they work in (these are all examples from my workplace, SOAS. See, for example, Sabin 2020; UCUBSN 2019; SOAS Unison 2019).

Such alienations should not be seen as mere aberrations or departures from the normal functioning of the university but their structural condition. Through violence against its Others the university is able to draw its constitutive lines of demarcation. Inside is a compartment of enlightenment and progress, composed of faculty, managers, students and good citizens. Outside – beyond the pale – we find the non-student, the surplus labourer and the undocumented, wretched presuppositions whose lives, struggles

and study must be continually negated in the name of reproducing the university.

It is not inconceivable to imagine or cultivate spaces where study takes place without these demarcations, alienations and violences. While some pursue this within the university itself, others have sought abolitionist horizons (Meyerhoff 2015). Abolitionists aim to break the university's constitutive demarcations by crossing and blurring the lines between inside and outside: pirating books and teaching resources which circulate in non-academic study spaces; opening university rooms and facilities to organising groups; redirecting research funds to anticolonial and anticapitalist movements beyond the university; sabotaging business-as-usual within universities by disrupting its entanglements with gentrification counterinsurgency, militarism, extractivism, borders, and colonial occupation (see, for example, Imaginary Party 2012; NUS Black Students 2015; Demilitarise SOAS 2019; Fossil Free Sussex 2018; Unis Resist Border Controls n.d.; Palestine Solidarity Campaign n.d.).

I'm not sure if 'abolition' is my answer to the question 'what do I take decolonising to mean?'. Instead, I think abolition provides a way of reframing 'decolonising the university' as a position against (rather than for) the university. It might allow us to disagree with the idea of reproducing the university. Being against rather than for might also better attune us to the possibilities of solidarity with the university's Others and other disloyal subjects that sneak in and out of higher education. An emphasis on abolition might provide openings for those struggling against the university to connect with anticolonial worldmaking and modes of study beyond it.

Dalia Gebrial: Contemporary struggles in and around the university have a central, unresolved contradiction. This is a contradiction shared with many of the struggles that have emerged in the 21st century surrounding institutions which, depending on context, had once been conceived of as 'public', or 'for the public good' – such as education, healthcare and transport. This contradiction is between being compelled to defend what once was from the attacks of neoliberal austerity, while fully understanding that what once was, was never truly public. The desperation to protect the basic gains of the 20th century social democratic university – of pensions, permanent contracts, liveable wages, state funding, academic independence from the private sector and free education – makes it difficult to imagine having the bandwidth to conceive of alternative futures, let alone develop the strategies to fight for them. This is perhaps why austerity is so effective at not only economically but politically crippling the populations it squeezes.

Decolonisation as an education movement sits squarely within this contradiction. Depending on who you speak to, decolonisation is about interrogating, resisting, dismantling, reforming or transforming the university. It is about critically engaging with how the university has historically produced, sustained and justified violence and domination across the world. It is a direct

critique of the notion that the university has ever been a 'public good' – or at least, if it was, the 'public' of that public good has always been a highly contested and exclusionary category. The constraints of the idea that the 20th century university was a 'public' one is outlined throughout the book from a range of spatially and temporally specific contexts.

So how do we reconcile this tension between the old and the new? As we witness the co-option of decolonisation as a term, we see its potential to fit neatly with the agenda of Management to discredit old forms of organising the university. It can be harnessed to promote ideals of 'newness' and 'USPs' that are central to the encroaching marketisation of Universities as companies competing for 'clients' (read: students). This uncomfortable contradiction comes to the fore in Kehinde Andrews' piece. Andrews writes about how being given the resources to develop a Black Studies programme at Birmingham City was connected to the fact that creating a new degree programme was seen as a low-cost, high-return way of capitalising on increased student fees and the removal of student caps. In other words, humanities and social science degrees are cheap to run but fees are high – and Black Studies could attract a new 'market' of students.

With unrest rising in campuses across the world – from Jawaharlal Nehru University to the recurring waves of strike action across UK universities, it is becoming increasingly important for those fighting in the name of decolonisation to clarify its position within these struggles. As the term picks up currency in university management circles particularly in the UK, decolonisation must not be allowed to become the progressive face of a reactionary turn in the higher education sector. We must not allow the same forces responsible for increasing the reliance of research on the private sector, or diminishing the workers' rights of academic and non-academic staff to claim decolonisation as a project. There is a tendency amongst liberal circles to operate as if in order for a movement to be inclusive, boundaries should not be put on its definition or interpretation. However, if we are to retain the idea of this movement as being about *power*, and not public relations, we must not be afraid to draw red lines around this term that has come to mean so many, arguably contradictory, things.

Decolonisation must make itself relevant and live to the current material struggles happening at universities across the world. As we see an increasing number of committees and panels dedicated to decolonisation and diversity (two things that are frequently and wrongly equated), there is a danger of the energy being turned into a series of bureaucratic welfare measures, administered in isolation of the broader structure and social relations in and around the university. Indeed, could decolonisation provide a framework through which marketisation can be fought in a way that does not rely on nostalgia for a public university that never truly existed? Could decolonisation offer a framework that holds both critique of the old

and resistance of an unwanted new; that can extend from that uneasy contradiction, and find a way to defend, dismantle and re-build all at the same time? In order for this to happen, decolonisation must be understood for its anti-capitalist character. Situated in a context where the centre is no longer holding, movements to decolonise the university must understand themselves as taking part in a world that is bursting out of its old definitions and political categories, and forming new ones – for better or for worse.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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