The politics of science: A postscript

Somdeep Sen

Department of Social Sciences and Business, Roskilde University, Roskilde, Denmark

Corresponding author: Email: sens@ruc.dk

(Received 21 January 2022; revised 20 March 2023; accepted 30 March 2023)

Abstract

This postscript deliberates the wider implications of decolonising the academy. It takes point of departure in the often-contentious public discourse on the topic and asks, why is the decolonisation agenda so concerning to public officials and the target of public policy? In many ways, derisive and irreverent responses to efforts to decolonise universities, schools, and the curricula is only expected seeing as it has the potential to disrupt the futures of the beneficiaries of colonial norms, practices, and institutions. But equally, the decolonisation agenda is contentious as it unsettles the assumption that scientific knowledge production is an apolitical affair. There are of course ample examples of scientific ‘progress’ being deeply indebted to histories and legacies of colonialism. However, it is in revealing this politics of science that decolonisation finds wider political relevance as not just an effort to recognise and remedy the legacies of colonisation in the academy. It also reveals the politics that is embedded in what we know and, in doing so, underlines the fallibility of a singular (scientific) frame, means of measurement, or rule of inference for understanding a social reality. In fact, decolonisation understood in this way is about opening up the possibility of acknowledging there isn’t a social reality. Every social phenomenon can be experienced in a multiplicity of ways and therefore reimagining IR in view of decolonising it requires a political response that empirically, methodologically, and theoretically forefronts the multiplicity of perspectives and experiences that have thus far been marginalised in the studying and understanding of social realities.

Keywords: Colonialism; Decolonisation; Politics of Science; International Relations

The conversation on decolonising universities, schools, and the curricula has now breached the walls of the academy and become a wider societal concern. It appeared, for instance, in the UK Parliament in early 2021 when Minister of State for Universities Michelle Donelan called the decolonisation of the curriculum a form of ‘censoring of history’ seen in the Soviet Union and China. She explained,

As a history student, I’m a vehement protector and champion of safeguarding our history. It otherwise becomes fiction, if you start editing it, taking bits out that we view as stains. A fundamental part of our history is about learning from it, not repeating the mistakes, being able to analyse and challenge why those events happened, how those decisions were made so that we don’t repeat those actions in the future. If we’re going down this road of taking bits out, are we then going to end up putting bits in that we wish had happened?1


© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the British International Studies Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.
When the ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ movement reached the UK and led to calls for the removal of Cecil John Rhodes's statue from Oxford University’s Oriel College, critics took a similarly irreverent tone. The wider intent of the original movement, which began at the University of Cape Town, was to decolonise the South African university and upend its colonial traditions that ‘minimize African knowledge and experience’ and hinder Black South Africans’ access to higher education. However, the Apartheid-era former President of South Africa Frederik Willem de Klerk described ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ as ‘folly’ and its leaders ‘full of sound and fury’. He added that Rhodes – often considered a symbol of the white-supremacist, colonial rule of southern Africa – had made an undeniable ‘impact on history which included the positive contribution of his scholarship scheme.’ Former Australian Prime Minister and Rhodes Scholar Tony Abbott noted that the removal of the statue from Oriel College would ‘substitute moral vanity for fair-minded enquiry’.

The narrative has been equally derisive in the United States. Alongside state legislative efforts to ban critical race theory from classrooms, President Donald Trump sent a memorandum to all federal agencies, directing them to ‘cease and desist’ federally funded anti-bias trainings that address racism and white privilege. When asked to explain the purpose of the directive during the first presidential debate in 2020, he said, ‘I ended it because it’s racist. I ended it because a lot of people were complaining that they were asked to do things that were absolutely insane, that it was a radical revolution that was taking place in our military, in our schools, all over the place.’ We could also look to Denmark, where public officials led an effort to censure critical scholarship on race and racism, postcolonialism, gender, and migration. Eventually, a majority in the Danish parliament adopted a written declaration that called for curbs on ‘excessive activism in certain humanities and social science research environments’.

But why have efforts to decolonise research and teaching become such a political ‘flash point’? Be it, say Loyola University Chicago's efforts to decolonise the syllabus as means of ‘unlearning the dangerous and harmful legacy of colonization’ or Cornell University’s decision to change the name of the ‘Department of English to the Department of Literatures in English’ in order to better...

---

10 Cady Lang, ‘President Trump has attacked critical race theory: Here’s what to know about the intellectual movement’, Time (29 September 2020), available at: [https://time.com/5891138/critical-race-theory-explained/].
13 Sophie Standen, ‘Why are Denmark’s politicians criticising university researchers?’, The Local Denmark (9 June 2021), available at: [https://www.thelocal.dk/20210609/analysis-why-are-denmarks-politicians-criticising-the-countrys-university-researchers/].
14 Faculty Center for Ignatian Pedagogy, ‘Preparing to Decolonize My Syllabus’, Loyola University Chicago, available at: [https://www.luc.edu/fcip/anti-racistpedagogy/decolonizingyoursyllabus/preparingtodecolonizemysyllabus/].
reflect ‘the department’s diverse fields of study’ – why are they so concerning to public officials and the target of public policy?

In a sense, this antagonism is all but expected when decolonisation is a structure that, in keeping with the proposals of this forum, seeks to disrupt and dismantle the norms, practices, and institutions that ensure colonial continuity. As such, these derisive and irreverent responses are only a reflection of the realisation that – if successful – the decolonisation agenda would unsettle (and render insecure) the futures of the beneficiaries of colonial norms, practices, and institutions. Yet, in proposing this manner of decolonisation in a disciplinary context, this forum also stands as an indictment of the assumption that science and scientific knowledge production is apolitical in nature. On the contrary, the university is where the rationale for maintaining a hierarchical global order is often formulated and ritually narrated/reiterated, shaping the ‘intellectual orientation of generations of students’ who then go on to normalise and perpetuate these hierarchies through policy, practice, and in everyday life.

To be sure, there is ample evidence demonstrating that politics often informs the scientific endeavour. For instance, American racism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well as social Darwinist ideas adopted and promulgated by the social and natural sciences, were in the background of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study conducted by the United States Public Health Service and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The study led to four hundred African American men in Macon County, Alabama being infected with latent syphilis. Afterwards, they were left untreated to ‘determine the natural course’ of the disease. In 2018, the removal of the statue of J. Marion Sims – the ‘father of gynecology’ who experimented on enslaved African American women – served as another reminder of the way race and racism often underlines scientific progress. Indeed, Robert Thom’s oil painting Marion Sims: Gynecologic Surgeon is meant to depict Sim’s experiments as a sterile, scientific affair. The reality, however, could not be more different. As Harriet Washington writes, the scene of the experiment was in fact ‘a violent struggle between the slaves and physicians and each woman’s body was a bloodied battleground.

The politics of scientific knowledge production is also evident in the disciplinary genealogy of International Relations (IR). In the introduction to this forum, I noted that race and racism marked the very foundations of the discipline. But alongside the works of its founding fathers, IR’s racism is also reflected in the way scholars and scholarship, collectively identified as the Howard School of International Relations, theorising the role of race and imperialism in the workings of the global order, were relegated to the margins of IR – this, despite the Howard School being active during

---


22 Washington, Medical Apartheid, p. 2.
the founding years of the discipline.\textsuperscript{23} It is also not mere happenstance that indigenous perspectives have been missing from the mainstream of Political Science and International Relations. In fact, in the United States, ‘Native identity, Native philosophy, and Native history’ were actively erased as ‘areas of concern’ for the study of politics since indigenous conceptions of law, sovereignty, democracy and governance undermine the ideology and values of the settler colonial state.\textsuperscript{24} For this very reason, scholarly efforts to decolonise IR have sought to reassert the importance of the indigenous conceptions of sovereignty and denaturalise ‘indigenous dispossession’.\textsuperscript{25} Finally, the gendered and heteronormative workings of the global order are also reflected in the disciplinary vocabulary and priorities of IR.\textsuperscript{26}

So, it is not without reason that Jeffrey C. Isaac claims that the study of politics is a ‘contest of perspectives’ in his editor’s introduction to the last issue of Perspectives on Politics in 2016.\textsuperscript{27} But contestation here insinuates a horizontal struggle between different perspectives that enjoy equal/comparable standing within the discipline. This notion of contesting perspectives is what drives the push for more disciplinary plurality. But while plurality is indeed a ‘good thing’, the assumption that this can be achieved by being more inclusive fails to recognise that the lack of plurality is a political choice meant to serve ‘those at the apex of political and economic power’.\textsuperscript{28} That is to say, the lack of plurality is not just a consequence of a lack of awareness of the existence of other perspectives. What the decolonisation agenda struggles against, is a manner of disciplinary politics – steeped in a colonial legacy – that is driven to keep up a singular, hegemonic perspective on social reality. To be sure, IR is often presented – in research and teaching – as a discipline that is concerned with truth, driven by reason, and primarily focused on the task of scientifically validating social reality. However, in practice the ‘appeal to science’ – or trust in the unequivocal validity of scientific knowledge – is strategically invoked to marginalise scholars and scholarship that waver from a hegemonic disciplinary perspective.\textsuperscript{29} This is evident in David Laitin's conception of ‘a scientific frame’ in the social sciences that is informed by natural science-like ideas of ‘careful measurement’ as well as clear and formal ‘rules of inference [and] replication’. Such a frame, he adds, is a means of avoiding error and guaranteeing ‘valid inference’.\textsuperscript{30} In the same vein, in the opening section of their influential volume Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research, Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba emphasise that they are concerned with the ‘science in social science’ and conclude that research can successfully interpret social reality

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{24} Kennan Ferguson, ‘Why does political science hate American Indians?’, Perspectives on Politics, 14:4 (2016), p. 1029.
\bibitem{29} Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), p. 3.
\end{thebibliography}
only if it ‘follows the logic of scientific inference’. This ‘appeal of science’ has now been almost institutionalised due to the rise and resilience of positivism in the human sciences and it being the central orientating logic of ‘hirings, tenure decisions and grant-giving practices.

In a sense then – seeing as the (a)political nature of science and scientific knowledge is at the crux of the contentious discourse on decolonisation – the task of decolonising universities, schools, and the curricula has come to signify an agenda that is not limited to recognising and remedying the legacies of colonisation in the academy. Fundamentally, it is also about acknowledging the fallibility of what we know. This does not just mean being open to the possibility that there are other ways viewing the world. It is about accepting, valuing, and accommodating the possibility that we may be wrong about our understanding of the world and that this flawed understanding is a culmination of politically driven scholarly and institutional norms and practices. Reimagining the nature and purpose of IR, then requires dispelling the assumption implicit in the writings of the likes of Laitin and King, Keohane and Verba that there is a singular (scientific) frame, means of measurement or rule of inference for understanding a social reality. On the contrary, it is about leveraging the multiplicity of scholarly works cited throughout this forum that reveal the colonial, imperial, racist, and gendered roots of a discipline like IR to forefront the reality that scholarly knowledge production is a political affair. And since this politics is intertwined with our empirical priorities, methodological approaches, and theoretical assumptions, reimagining IR requires a political response (like decolonisation) that empirically, methodologically and theoretically forefronts marginalised perspectives and experiences in studying and understanding a social reality.

That said, adopting this disciplinary approach also unsettles the idea that there is a social reality that can be studied, measured, and validated using the ‘right’ scientific frame of assessment. There are of course generally observable and identifiable social, political, and economic phenomena, conflicts, instances of contestation, and crises that are of interest to a discipline like IR. However, accepting that a certain politics that informs our understanding of a singular social reality, also allows for the possibility that every social phenomenon can be experienced in a multiplicity of ways – each of which makes for its own social reality. In ‘The Speed of Darkness’, American poet Muriel Rukeyser wrote, ‘The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.’ Making the political choice to decolonise and rethink IR in the manner proposed in this forum then opens up the possibility of accounting for the many ignored stories that constitute what the global order is and how it is experienced.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their engaged and constructive feedback.

Somdeep Sen is Associate Professor and Head of Studies for Global Development Studies at Roskilde University, Denmark. He is the author of Decolonizing Palestine: Hamas between the Anticolonial and the Postcolonial (Cornell University Press, 2020) and co-editor of Globalizing Collateral Language: From 9/11 to Endless War (University of Georgia Press, 2021). His writings have also appeared in Al Jazeera English; Foreign Policy; The Washington Post; and Jacobin.

---


Cite this article: Sen, S. 2023. The politics of science: A postscript. Review of International Studies 49, 404–408. https://doi.org/10.1017/S02602105230000128