

Modern Colonial Monuments

A Review of Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nisancioglu (eds.), *Decolonising the University*, Pluto Press. 2018. 259pp. £16.99 (PB). ISBN: 978 07453 9910 2

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In recent years, University College London, a constituent college of the University of London, has extended its campuses from their traditional locations in Bloomsbury in the West End of London to Stratford in the East.

University College London describes its acquisition of grounds on the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in Stratford – collectively named UCL East – as “...the largest ever single expansion...since the university was founded nearly 200 years ago...” (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-east/>). By 2022 it is expected that UCL East will comprise of several new academic buildings, which will house (among others) a culture lab, experimental engineering labs and the London memory archive (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-east/our-buildings>).

For the mere onlooker, these units, when erected, will stand as lasting testimonies to the successful outward expansion of the university college. But what might these same units represent to those more intimately associated with University College London’s educational experiments in the East End of London? More generally, what might these units come to represent to the black and minority ethnic students who, according to Last, Britain’s universities have “...aggressively recruited as the white middle-class market is saturated” (2018: 212)?

In positing the view that, in future, the UCL East buildings may be looked upon as modern colonial monuments, I choose to take up an invitation which the three editors of the volume of essays which make up *Decolonising the University* have extended to their readers. Readers are invited (urged, perhaps?) to think of decolonising as an educational *practice*; as “...a way of thinking about the world which takes colonialism, empire and racism as its empirical and discursive objects of study...” (Bhambra, Gebrial and Nisancioglu, 2018: 2). The intellectual practice which the editor’s advocate cannot be confined to the colonial monuments that have already been identified and named, such as the statue of Cecil Rhodes, but must also be able to anticipate those which even now may be silently, anonymously consolidating around us.

It need hardly be said that University College London is not unique, or even exemplary, in terms of its capacity to gather modern colonial monuments. The value of using UCL’s Stratford projects in this review lies in the fact that they are of recent origin, and are very much still in progress. This means that the public-facing website for UCL East is able to offer a live resource from which to anchor the contributors’ accounts of the colonial tropes and techniques which they see manifested in the everyday operations of universities in Britain and in other European countries.

Colonialism, at its base, is a mode of invention/regeneration - in the aid of which territorial acquisitions are an indispensable requirement. The newly acquired territories – and the communities already resident there, or which are enticed there by the prospects of advancement which regeneration promises – are then deemed to be ripe for experimentation and change. Presented as part of the overall regeneration of Stratford, the narratives surrounding the expansion of the UCL in an eastward direction carries an uncomfortable flavour of the aforementioned colonial techniques and tropes. It is in the new campuses of East London and not in the old location of Bloomsbury that UCL can be “...non-conformist, quirky, effortlessly radical, progressive, creative, egalitarian, meritocratic, transformational...” (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-east/our-academic-vision>). Does the decolonising project require that we wait until the units have been standing for a 100 years or more before it can do its work? Surely now is the time to question whether UCL’s modern monuments to come will simply record these promises of advancement as having been fulfilled, or whether they will stand as a reminder of the sacrifice, in the pursuit by UCL of profit and glory, of the educational futures of, among others, the “Black students of continental African heritage” who, according to Shilliam are “...one of the fastest growing ethnic groups entering university and...the largest ethnic minority of the UK student population...” (2018: 59).

Shauneen Pete states that “...decolonisation begins with naming colonial structures then moving to reframe, remake and reform them...” (2018: 174), In so doing, she provides me with a useful structure within which to explore how the contributors respond to the pressing questions identified above. With this extended introduction to the collection, I have already begun the task of “naming colonial structures”. Thus the first part of Pete’s three -step process of decolonisation needs little more by way of supplement, save than to place my preliminary observations about UCL’s project of expansion within a broader context of what Aparna and Kramsch refer to as the “...accelerated corporatisation of the European university landscape...” (2018: 96). This will then lead to the more extensive section of the review in which I attempt to deploy the tools which the authors have so skilfully assembled in order to engage the urgent task of decolonising the BAME attainment gap narrative. The final section of the review explores, with the authors, the impediments to remaking/reforming these colonial structures. Here I feel bound to question whether the collection as a whole, with its repeated emphasis on “colonial legacies” might struggle in an encounter with what, from the example of the UCL Stratford projects, is evidence that universities might even now be engaging in surprisingly unreconstructed techniques of colonial imposition and governance. In this regard, the warning against “...reproducing problematic conceptions of time, space...” (Maldonado-Torres, Vizcaino, Wallace and We, 2018: 66) is well taken.

Naming

Few would argue against the assertion that British universities are in an inventive phase, which can be “...traced back to the 1980s, but...accelerated since the financial crisis of 2008...” (Holmwood, 2018: 37). What lends this process of invention its seeming colonial flavour is the way in which black and minority ethnic people are captured within a logic which has seen universities “...producing highly indebted and unemployable graduates in the context of economic austerity” (Icaza and Vazquez, 2018: 109-110).

According to Shilliam, “[a]ll ethnic groups, as listed in the UK census, are over-represented in university student populations *vis-a-vis* their percentage of the general UK population. All except white...” (2018: 59). Thus, it is, disproportionately, black and minority ethnic people who are the targets of new “for-profit providers” of higher education (Holmwood, 2018: 47). They are the university’s “...new source of revenue that can be freely tapped” (Andrews, 2018: 134) because a key feature of the expansion of the universities has been “...the end of the cap on student places...” (Andrews, 2018: 134). Of crucial significance is the fact that this expansion is occurring away from the places in which, in the main, prestigious “old” universities are located. Whilst Andrews notes that “...the size of the student body at Russell Group universities have gone up by 15 percent, while numbers have declined in the less prestigious institutions by over 22 per cent” (2018: 133), black and minority ethnic students are much more likely to be recruited to the “...newest universities, far away from the elite in terms of prestige and league table position” (Andrews, 2018: 130). The “...imagery of theoretically disadvantaged Africans and Indians...” (Lockley, 2018: 149) has driven expansion of the university beyond its physical campuses toward the virtual world of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) – although they have apparently yielded little of their benefits, since MOOCs “...tend to provide a function for those already advantaged” (Lockley, 2018: 148). Finally, expansion has entailed “...a focus on...overseas...students (Last, 2018: 208). and the acquisition by British universities of “...about 45 external campuses, most of which are located in Asia and the Middle East” (Last, 2018: 209).

Re-framing

If colonial techniques and tropes are at the heart of the 21st Century reinvention of the university, then we will not need to look far to see their violent manifestations. For as Pete reminds us “...colonialism is by definition - violent” (2018; 179). Colonial violence is revealed in “...not only the manner in which lands and resources are originally acquired, but also in how power over these lands and resources is maintained” (Pete, 2018: 179). I would suggest that there is no greater violence than that which places on those whose economic futures are laid hostage to various colonial projects the burden of the projects’ inevitable weaknesses and failures.

As all of the contributors to *Decolonising the University* attest to, it is students who have led/driven current “decolonial movements” (e.g. Gebrial, 2018: 21-23 & 26-27; Aparna and Kramsch, 2018: 93; Icaza and Vazquez, 2018: 108 & Dennis, 2018: 191). The source of the students’ motivation is not merely a sharper appreciation of the university’s “...histories of segregation...” (Icaza and Vazquez, 2018: 122), but rather a visceral reaction to the reality that theirs are the bodies on which the “...modern/colonial order” (Icaza and Vasquez, 2018: 122) is to be built.

So, upon students will be played out the old familiar colonial oppositions between the old, replete worlds and the uncharted and ungoverned new spaces, which, in turn, inaugurates a “...racialised and gendered decolonising hierarchy” (Dennis, 2018: 192).

A central figure marking out what will be an increasingly distant and antagonistic relationship between the old and new university is the black/minority ethnic student deemed to be intractably resistant to higher learning. In this vein, Richardson speaks of marginalised students who see “...the knowledge they gave or intend to produce...marginalised along with them” (2018: 239). The BAME attainment gap attempts to reconcile a narrative of progress against the evident fact that the experience of black and minority ethnic students in the university sector are greatly diminished in comparison to their white counterparts. This is a familiar colonial strategy and is the only way in which the so-called BAME attainment gap can be sensibly comprehended. Instead, it is an attainment gap that:

“[s]ome have explained away...by presuming that Black students arrive at the gates of university with pronounced social and cultural deficits garnered from their familial and community upbringing – that is, their Blackness...[I]n fact, all the evidence so far points to the fact that these racialised differentials are, in the main, produced within the British Academy and cannot be accounted for in terms of deficits that Black students bring with them to the gates of higher learning” (Shilliam, 2018: 59).

Holmwood shows similar scepticism over the student deficit model on which the BAME attainment gap narrative is based, arguing that:

“[i]t is correct that ethnic minority students have fared worse than white English students in higher education, both in terms of access and in terms of attainment once at university. The latter is significant because although it is evident that there are class differences in access to universities...there are no class differences in attainment for students with similar entry scores. This is not the case for BAME...students where they have worse degree attainment than white British students with similar entry scores. This is an indictment of the current system of higher education...” (Holmwood, 2018: 46-47).

How might we set the BAME attainment gap narrative in its proper colonial setting of an open market in student numbers - carrying all the colonial connotations that openness imports (Lockley, 2018: 161). This is a context in which resources and infrastructures, including academic and administrative staff, are not proportionately matched, and where attempts to overcome the inevitable shortfall by “... reducing costs and increasing competition...” (Lockley, 2018: 147) are “...likely to disadvantage the already disadvantaged groups who would more likely have to use those cheaper universities” (Lockley, 2018: 147).

Attempts to disguise inadequate resources are sought through, among other things, “...calls for improved mental health services, mentoring and other remedial actions that are aimed at helping minorities fit with the present system: once again, not the system, but the obstinate individual are at fault” (Last, 2018: 214). By denying the true causes of the BAME attainment gap, the presumed intellectual deficit of black and minority ethnic students can be paraded, or, as Icaza and Vazquez would say, “exhibited” (2018: 118). For them, the university is a place “...in which some people feel at home and others are alienated...(2018: 111) and where the “...exhibition of diversity functions to reinforce exclusion and discrimination by marking bodies and knowledges as “the other’ (2018: 118). Further examples of a resurgence in the modern university of colonial idea that some individuals – usually marked by race – will resist all efforts to develop them, economically and intellectually, are provided in the collection, but I believe the foregoing is sufficient to justify my view that of all that the collection offers, it should be valued most for the evidence and analysis it brings to all those intent on effecting a a decolonial re-framing of the BAME attainment gap narrative.

As stated in the introduction to this review, the task is an urgent one - not least because the parading of black students as impervious to higher learning infects the wider community of which these students are a part, for, "...the line between the campus and the community is a thin one at best" (Richardson, 2018: 241).

Reforming

The contributors are fairly evenly split between those who perceive decolonisation in the form of a bloodless revolution, and those seemingly inspired by the Fanonian idea that only equivalent force will successfully confront the violence of colonialism. For example, whilst Maldonado-Torres, Vizcaino, Wallace and We argue for acceptance of Sylvia Wynter's caution against relying upon "...colonial forms of recognition and redistribution..." (2018: 80), which, in turn, entails scepticism over "...concepts like justice, equality and rights..." (2018: 80 & 80-83), Andrews sees "...the university...as institutionally and intractably racist .." (2018: 138), and, as such, not amenable to reform (2018: 139). A bloodless revolution is predicated upon a radical casting aside of traditional ways of thinking the violence of colonialism, in support of which the collection itself will be an enduring resource. However, being resolutely on the side of Fanon, I will bring this review to an end by exploring what it is that stands in the way of a bloody confrontation with the colonial university. What stops those who wish to decolonise the university from acting so as to "...abuse it's hospitality...spite its mission...join its refugee colony, it's gypsy encampments, to be in but not of the university" (Dennis, 2018: 196)? What stops academics from declaring: "I refuse to be satisfied with yoga classes, and unconscious bias training as solutions to institutional inequality" (Last, 2018: 223)? How and why are academics prevented from saying: "I refuse to accept Prevent duty as the new normality" (Last, 2018: 223)? What stands in the way of a strategy that "...makes use of the language, time and authorial voice provided by the university to accomplish its purposes..." (Dennis, 2018: 199)?

The consistent answer to all of the above questions, which the authors' provide, is fear and self-interest. For Andrews "[a]cademics as a class of people are...the last group...to challenge the status quo" (2018: 136) He goes on to say "[l]eft to our own devices, the institutional temptations will more than likely override our political sentiments" (2018: 142). Last bemoans the fact that "...many academics in supposed positions of power complain about fear and exhaustion themselves, due to increasing job insecurity and corporatised research conditions in the neoliberal academy" (2018: 217). But it is Aparna and Kramsch who speak most at length on the "...diffuse, unlocatable fear" (2018: 103) that pervades the university; warning that "[t]his fear, and its psychic effects, should not be forgotten..." (2018: 102). When fear and self-interest are not in operation, what Richardson alludes to as the "...respectability norms ..the ways in which academics are influenced to engage in disagreement and dissension in certain prescribed ways that often allow already dominant and abusive behaviour to continue largely unabated..." (2018: 242) will almost certainly work to discourage action.