



This is a repository copy of *Can political science decolonise? A response to Neema Begum and Rima Saini*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/210299/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Emejulu, A. (2019) Can political science decolonise? A response to Neema Begum and Rima Saini. *Political Studies Review*, 17 (2). pp. 202-206. ISSN 1478-9299

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929918808999>

Emejulu, A. (2019). Can Political Science Decolonise? A Response to Neema Begum and Rima Saini. *Political Studies Review*, 17(2), 202-206. Copyright © 2018 The Author(s). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929918808999>. Article available under the terms of the CC-BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can't change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Can political science decolonise? A response to Neema Begum and Rima Saini

Akwugo Emejulu, University of Warwick

Introduction

Neema Begum and Rima Saini have clearly set out the grim reality facing women of colour early career researchers in political science. Political science, and British academia more generally, is enmeshed in a multi-pronged crisis. This an economic crisis triggered by budget cuts from central government and the introduction of tuition fees¹. Whilst many political science and international relations departments have seen their coffers swell in these austere times, this new injection of cash actually masks a longer running labour crisis within departments which are over-reliant on the precarious, under-rewarded and undervalued labour of PhD students and teaching fellows who do much of the heavy lifting in terms of teaching, tutoring and pastoral care. The complex economic relations within departments intersect with the long-standing crisis of legitimacy². As evidenced by the 2018 statistical report of the Equality Challenge Unit and work by my colleagues and me in the first double issue of the *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, this crisis relates to the under-representation of people of colour—women of colour in particular—and white women in the discipline as a whole, in its senior ranks specifically, and the gender and racial disparities in citations and publications in the discipline's most prestigious journals. Further, with the spread of Rhodes Must Fall, Leopold Must Fall and other decolonisation sister struggles, such as those highlighted in Julie Cupples and Ramón Grosfoguel's recent book on unsettling eurocentrism in the westernized university, political science is also facing an epistemological crisis about its knowledge production and how different kinds of knowledges produced outside and against the white male Eurocentric gaze are largely delegitimized and excluded within the discipline. In this short riposte, I aim to amplify Begum and Saini's analysis of the intersecting inequalities of political science and attempt to set out a roadmap for decolonising political science. From my vantage point, it is not at all certain that there is either an understanding or a political will to confront the problems plaguing the discipline and the profession of political science in Britain, nevertheless for those seeking to affect change in their departments and in their learned societies, perhaps this short article will be of use.

The politics of political science

Begum and Saini ask us to confront and combat the intersecting inequalities in political science. By 'intersecting inequalities' I mean how race, class, gender, sexuality, disability and legal status interact to generate disparities between different groups. At stake here for women of colour early career researchers (ECRs) is how they must navigate institutionalised racism, sexism and

¹ First introduced by the Labour government in 1998, tuition fees were set at £1,000 and were means tested. For the 2018/19 academic year, fees have now ballooned to more than £9,000 at several universities.

² To be sure, it is not at all clear how many of my colleagues would agree with me that this under-representation is a challenge to the discipline's legitimacy

exploitative labour conditions which undermine their present and future academic careers. Racism and sexism frame how departments prioritise and value particular research agendas. Note the relative marginality of gender, sexuality and race politics as sub-disciplines and how white women and people of colour in political science are, generally speaking, clustered in these neglected areas. Working in these sub-disciplines means that it is unlikely that women of colour ECRs will be able to attract support, in terms of viable peer groups and mentors, funding for research projects and invitations to powerful, career-defining networks. This has a profound impact on what is seen and understood as 'knowledge' in political science and simultaneously creates its own virtuous circle of epistemological and discursive exclusion. Those who are most marginal work on marginal subjects which in turn, further justifies marginalisation because they are seen as not up to job of producing 'world class research' in 'mainstream' political science.

Further, women of colour ECRs must fulfil almost impossible standards to achieve the dream of a permanent full time job: publish in top-ranked journals, secure a large research council grant and have solid teaching experience. These criteria are enforced by senior colleagues who either never had to meet these standards, or did achieve them and now believe that it is their solemn duty to continue the academic arms race. To be sure, the conditions that Begum and Saini describe are not limited to ECRs; that handful of women of colour in the senior ranks of the discipline also report similar treatment—a logic exclusion and dismissal seems to be a constant across many women of colour's academic careers, as the 2017 book edited by Deborah Gabriel and Shirley Tate on the experiences of women of colour within British academia attests. And, of course, the conditions I describe apply to all ECRs in the labour market, but the point here is to understand how women of colour, most likely already working in 'marginal' research areas, are further disadvantaged in these exploitative labour relations. Yes, getting any kind of permanent academic job is difficult but that goal is made much harder by a prevailing assumption that one's work does not matter or that one might not 'fit' with the 'culture' of a given department.

The irony here is that the neglected sub-disciplines of race, gender and sexuality are essential to understanding our current illiberal moment. The shock vote for Brexit and its shambolic implementation is the story of a long running civil war within the Conservative party *and* a broader trend of white backlash infused with colonial nostalgia. The spike in racist and xenophobic hate crimes in the aftermath of the Brexit vote and the anti-feminist organising happening is a battle about what Britain (but really England) means in a rapidly changing world. To understand the history and nuance of these upheavals should place race and gender at the centre of political science. And yet, this is not happening. This is why Begum and Saini argue political science must decolonise.

Decolonising political science

Begum and Saini call for decolonisation; but what might a decolonised political science actually mean in theory and in practice? To decolonise is to fundamentally transform knowledge production. It means that the unquestioned value systems that govern what knowledge is, how it is produced and who is

allowed to be a knowing and knowledgeable agent must be radically reshaped. The starting point is taking a long hard look at the Enlightenment and considering how the organising principles of European modernity, especially liberalism, contain at its heart a logic of violent exclusion and subjugation. Understanding the political economy of the Enlightenment and modernity is crucial in any process of decolonisation. We cannot and should not separate the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade and colonisation from the Enlightenment as these brutal systems demanded a political justification and exerted their own epistemological and ontological rationalities. Thus, the Enlightenment clarion call that all rational men must be free should be understood in the context of its time that this was a narrow and specific call for the freedom of propertied white men. As the work of Carole Pateman, Charles Mills and Gloria Wekker shows, the error in political theory and practice is the universalising of 'rational men' when Kant, Locke, Rousseau and Jefferson, for example, were exclusive and careful with whom this category applied. Thus the first step of decolonisation is a reckoning with how our most cherished ideals are soaked in blood. This does not mean that liberal concepts such as equality, liberty and rationality have no value but that they contain a submerged history and ontology that must be understood and then, perhaps, we can desire better for ourselves.

The second step of decolonisation is connecting our governing Enlightenment principles to the intersecting inequalities that Begum and Saini highlight. Once we understand that the inequalities and exploitation that Begum and Saini examine are not merely unfortunate and exceptional but in fact a logical and intentional outcome of an exclusive and excluding idea of knowledge production in the academy, then the problem can be named and effective action can be taken. What this action looks like will vary across the discipline and departments but perhaps a key action must be to audit the discipline and map women of colour's pipeline through the academy from undergraduate student to full professor. At the moment, it is not clear that the Political Studies Association (PSA) can tell us how many women of colour are studying political science at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, where they are studying, how many get PhD studentships, how many are employed in departments and at what rank. From my searching, I can only find an outdated report on 'equality and diversity' from the PSA in 2014 with dismal figures that show that less than 4% of British political scientists are scholars of colour. There needs to be a presidential commission, similar to what has happened with the American Political Science Association and the work of Fraga, Givens and Pinderhughes, on the state of race, class, gender and sexuality in the discipline.

Simultaneously work can be done on curriculum redesign. To be clear, curricular redesign does not mean the wholesale removal of white male authors from reading lists. What it does require, however, is an honest consideration as to why white men dominate reading lists and the implications this has for which groups get to enjoy the status of a knowing agent. Further, the deceptively simple act of 'adding different voices' to a given reading list does not sufficiently address the problem. Take the curious case of Hannah Arendt. Arendt is usually reached for when seeking to 'diversify' reading lists. Certainly, Arendt's work on the impossibility of claiming rights for stateless people and the need for the

'right to have rights' is a crucial intervention in liberal democratic theory, particular in the sub-discipline of human rights. However, alongside Arendt's important work on citizenship is her steadfast opposition to the American Civil Rights Movement and especially the struggle for desegregation. As Kathryn Gines argues in her pioneering book about Arendt's anti-Black racism, what can the 'right to have rights' possibly mean when Arendt opposes Black American citizens struggling to take up rights that have been systematically denied them for generations? To decolonise means that in a curriculum redesign, Arendt's work, for example, would be juxtaposed with her *actual* political positions and that her work would be debated in this context.

Curriculum redesign also involves asking different kinds of questions of our governing institutions and social relations. For example, for my fellow colleagues in European politics, how might we rethink the idea of European social solidarity from the vantage point of European citizens of colour? How has social solidarity changed in light of the Mediterranean crisis? Once we upend the taken-for-grantedness of some of our key ideas related to institutions, citizenship and power, we can start asking more urgent questions in our current illiberal moment. Decolonisation is difficult and intellectually dangerous—but it is not impossible. It only requires the political will for change.

Conclusions

I have little faith that the discipline will attempt to decolonise. Observing how little has changed in political science in the midst of the economic and Mediterranean crises and the far right backlash—there is too much invested in the usual obscuring narratives—even as liberalism has consistently shown us its limitations—for the change that is needed to encounter the world differently. That the politics of colonialism can be set aside when discussing the contemporary British polity, when colonialism's afterlife haunts British politics, as seen in the Windrush scandal or the aforementioned Brexit vote, gives an indication of the lack of seriousness of the urgent task at hand. Or, we may point towards, how in this moment of renewed anti-racist and feminist activism across Europe, we are saddled with disingenuous critiques about the dangers of identity politics to liberal democracy. I note, at the time of writing, that an eminent political scientist is speaking at a PSA event who was proven spectacularly wrong about the 'end of history' and yet gets the space to peddle refashioned culture war arguments from the 1990s. Rather than engage honestly with the challenge of decolonisation, what we see instead is it mischaracterised and dismissed as the naive politics of coddled students who do not wish to debate competing ideas.

I do see small glimmers of hope—for example, in the 2018 ECR-organised event, *At The Intersections*, which brought together political sociologists from the Political Studies and British Sociological Associations to discuss cutting-edge intersectionality research and I see fledging work at the European Conference of Politics and Gender attempting to take decolonisation seriously. But frankly, the most interesting decolonising work is happening on the fringes and outside of the discipline with little institutional acknowledgement or support as seen in the student movements at SOAS, Oxford, Cambridge and UCL. I remain gloomy in my

outlook for change in the discipline and advise women of colour academics to build networks of support, solidarity and mentoring within—but most importantly *beyond* political science—for the hard road ahead.