YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

Discussing Decolonisation

READING AND RESOURCES

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Decolonisation in Higher Education

Questions and prompts

There are many ways to approach the task of decolonising thinking, pedagogy and practice within (and beyond) the university context; however, it can be difficult to know where to start.

Priyamvada Gopal suggests that, rather than a box to be ticked or laundry list of actions to complete, 'decolonisation in relation to cultural and intellectual work is best posed as a series of questions to address' (2021, 880).

Whatever your role or position within the university, you can use the questions and prompts below to begin or continue thinking about decolonisation in relation to your own institutional context, academic discipline and/or area of work.

For example, academic colleagues looking to decolonise their practice might consider:

- What is the history of my discipline and how does it relate to the imperial-capitalist project? How does thinking about this change my approach to scholarly work or pedagogy?

- What are the underlying assumptions of my discipline or field, and where do they come from? How might these disciplinary assumptions help to maintain or legitimise colonial activity of the past or present-day?

- What insights or interpretations have been omitted or marginalised from my field of expertise? What are the politics and consequences of these omissions?

- How might my colleagues and I develop richer, more critical and historically robust accounts of our subject matter? Are there any counter-hegemonic or dissenting voices on this topic that we are missing out on?

- What value do I attach to indigenous knowledge systems and/or other forms of knowledge produced in struggles against colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy (see Santos 2016, 21)? Is there a role for such epistemologies of struggle within my discipline or field?

- What are the politics of different research methodologies, and how could we do things differently to ensure less harm to indigenous communities and individuals in the name of academic research (see Tuhiwai Smith 2021)?

- What does academic solidarity look like in the context of the 'neoliberal-imperial-institutionally racist university' (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021, 3)? How can I use my position to promote solidarity with oppressed groups, both in the UK and globally?

- What kinds of preparation or guidance might my students need to enable them to participate effectively in and/or contribute to co-producing a curriculum that both demands and practices decolonisation (see UAL 'Decolonising Reading Lists')?

- Does my practice help students to better understand the world beyond the university, and does it empower them to act or resist?

- What else might my students need to become more politically conscious and/or active on issues pertaining to anti-racism and decolonisation beyond curriculum reform?

For professional services or academic-adjacent members of staff, questions might include:

- How do whiteness, wealth and other forms of privilege and inequality assert themselves in the processes and practices with which my team and/or I am involved? Is there scope for disrupting this? What might this entail?

- In what ways does our work impact those at the sharp end of structural and institutional racism in Britain today? How might this be challenged? Can my team do more to work 'in service to' racialised and minoritised communities in the UK and globally (see Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021, 57-87)?

- How might our staff and students be 'subject to racialised securitisation and surveillance, including as part of the hostile environment on university campuses' (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021, 23)? What can we do to collectively resist such hostility and other manifestations of the border regime within UK HE?

- How do my team's standard operating procedures reproduce institutional and structural hierarchies, and/or their underpinning logic? How might we reprogramme ourselves in pursuit of more equitable approaches at work, as well as fairer and more manageable workloads?

- What impact do the technologies and resources we/I use at work have on communities and ecologies across the world? How might we roll back or at least seek to delimit the harm on which our professional lives and institutions rest?

- How might we reimagine our institutional and professional practices in response to calls for a 'just transition' in HE? What do ecological justice and sustainability mean in this context, considering capitalism's own self-sustaining, self-destructive logics?

Managers may also ask themselves:

- Does my managerial practice disrupt or only reinforce white, colonial, patriarchal hierarchies? Could I be more subversive, or use my position to begin to dismantle these hierarchical structures and norms?

- What scope do I have to push back to or do things differently regarding institutional decision-making, especially in relation to budgetary or funding decisions?

- What is my understanding of productivity based on, and is it compatible with social justice and the pursuit of equity? Do I recognise and value forms of work that are typically seen as 'non-productive'?

- Could I do more to work in solidarity with colleagues I manage and/or who occupy different positions within institutional hierarchies?

- How can I take action to help build capacity for decolonising work within my team? What kinds of additional support, development, time or other resources might be required?

Further prompts for all staff and students could include:

- What habits of mind have I acquired (including from my own experience of education) that rub up against decolonial work? What might help me 'unlearn' these? Am I actively pursuing such unlearning?

- What can I learn from anti-colonial thinkers of the past and/or anti-racist scholar-activists today? How can I implement this learning in my teaching, activism and/or my conversations with peers and colleagues?

- What is the difference between decolonisation, diversification, engagements with 'race equality' and other EDI (equality, diversity & inclusion) initiatives? Are these conflated in my mind or institution? What are the politics of this conflation?

- What is the relationship between colonialism, imperialism and neoliberalism in the context of HE, and what 'pockets of hope and possibility' exist to progress decolonisation and anti-racism within (and against) the contemporary university (see Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2022, 1)?

- Are there any strategies or tactics we can learn from grassroots anti-racist activism and praxis that might help us resist further neoliberalisation and/or reactionary responses to the decolonising movement within HE?

- How might we dispel the deeply entrenched (neo)liberal ideas about academic and institutional 'neutrality' that have helped legitimise colonial power and suppress anti-colonial movements in the past and present-day?

- What other barriers exist that serve to obstruct or slow down anti-racist and anti-colonial work within my institution or the sector overall, and how can we begin to dismantle these collectively?

- Is there a role for trade unions in relation to both decolonisation and anti-imperialism within the UK HE sector? Can we learn anything from union activity within (formerly) colonised countries?

- What would an anti-colonial, anti-racist university even look like? What needs to happen to make this a possibility?

Thinking further about specific institutional contexts, YSJ colleagues might also ask:

- What does it mean to decolonise the 'post-92' university, specifically, and how does it differ from decolonising work within ancient universities with direct ties to the British Empire (see Gopal 2021, 881)?

- How does YSJ's 'origin story' as a teacher training college relate to local or wider colonial histories? Is it important to understand this history today? Why/why not?

- How should we approach decolonising curricula across the whole institution at 'post-92s'– including those courses accredited by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies (PSRBs)?

- How do our students' priorities, experiences and circumstances differ from those who have 'traditionally' had access to higher education? How does this impact our pedagogies, and how can we empower or mobilise our students to take action on the issues that concern them most?

- To what extent are small, post-92 universities such as YSJ enmeshed in the global financial system and its neoimperial arrangements of power and profit? What capacity or agency do we have to disrupt or divest from such structures and systems?

- What is YSJ's relationship with other universities in the UK and beyond? Can we build more solidarity within, across and beyond the UK HE sector, including with those working and studying in former British colonies and/or satellite campuses around the globe?

- How should we navigate the political geographies and histories of YSJ's two campuses (in the centre of York and the London docklands) in relation to empire and colonial power structures?

For further ideas, questions and prompts pertaining to decolonising work in HE, see DMU's Decolonising Toolkit, UAL's 'Decolonising Reading Lists' and the Decolonising SOAS Learning & Teaching Toolkit.

For further questions pertaining to anti-racism work in any institution, see the 'Questions for White-Dominated Organisations' developed by grassroots anti-racist movement, Voices that Shake! (Annex E, 2020 report).

References:

Joseph-Salisbury, R. and Connelly, L. (2021) *Anti-Racist Scholar-Activism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

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