

## EDITORIAL I: CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS ‘DECOLONISATION IN PRAXIS’, SOAS 2018

On 7 June 2018 the Research Students’ Association (RSA) and The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research (SJPR) organised their first joint conference dedicated to the theme of Volume 11: *Decolonisation in Praxis*. The initiative was funded through the SOAS Early Career Development fund and aimed to bring together students, faculty and staff from SOAS and other universities to discuss issues of decolonisation. The term ‘praxis’ (from the Greek ‘πρᾶξις’) etymologically pertains to ‘action’ or ‘doing’<sup>1</sup> and reflects the objective of both the conference and the current volume to explore practical and embodied ways for overcoming west-centric attitudes and perspectives in the realm of knowledge-making.

These objectives attune to other decolonisation discourses within SOAS, other UK universities and elsewhere in the world. SOAS, which started as a colonial project in 1916, is today one of the institutions at the forefront of discussions on decolonisation. As such, it has been affected by current critiques denouncing the dominance of a single knowledge-centre, which revolves around a supposedly normative (western) epistemology. In the past year, the *Decolonising SOAS Working Group*, comprised of administrative staff, faculty and students, was set up to promote a more diversified and critical teaching along with reflexive university policies to counter “the wide, complex and varied impacts of colonialism, imperialism and racism...shaping our university.”<sup>2</sup>

At the Journal, we emphasise diversifying the epistemological landscape while critically engaging with the one currently mainstreamed. We insist that colonialism today is perpetuated by a lack of transparency and awareness among some researchers and scholars of their own “epistemological situatedness”,<sup>3</sup> which result in transposing personal beliefs or experiences to the study of other societies and contexts. There is more need to recognise that knowledge is always situated, and that it has been situated historically within a western epistemological system. We argue that as long as the sciences remain embedded within the mainstream, knowledge will continue to be disproportionately informed by western metaphysics.

Coming from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds, the Editors of this volume acknowledge that people have very different criteria of analysing and making sense of the world. When promoting the decentring of knowledge-making, it is important to leave behind the perception that there should be a standard epistemology for the sciences to progress. The aim is not to replace mainstream standards of knowledge production with another normative system, but to enable a dialogue of different cosmologies and ideas from

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<sup>1</sup> Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, PERSEUS Digital Library, accessed 7 August 2018, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Dpra%3Dcis>

<sup>2</sup> “Decolonising SOAS Vision”, SOAS University, accessed 30 June 2018, <https://www.soas.ac.uk/decolonising-soas/>.

<sup>3</sup> Romina Istratii, “Mainstream Gender and Development Concepts and Theories at the Interface with Local Knowledge Systems: Some Theoretical Reflections”, *The Journal of Development Practice* 3 (Annual 2017): 4, <http://journals.dbuniversity.ac.in/ojs/index.php/jdp/article/view/305/301>.

which everyone can benefit in some way. Only then can we actively start learning from each other and building a multidimensional understanding of the world, especially urgent in this era of cultural misunderstanding, extremism, fanaticism, and isolation.

Thus, instead of discussing colonisation theoretically or producing post-colonial theory, our hopes for this conference were to consolidate a decolonisation of attitudes by humbly and respectfully sharing our diverse worldviews and listening to perspectives that emanate from cosmologies different from our own. The other aim of the conference was highlighted by Katharina Schmoll, a key organiser of the event and current Academic Officer of the RSA. Katharina made the important point that it was imperative to create a forum for postgraduate students to build academic skills and to discuss topics at the heart of the vibrant and critical SOAS student body.

We can gratefully affirm that the conference met and surpassed these ambitions. The keynote contributions, student presentations and concluding panel discussion not only concretised for us what decolonising the mainstream academia might mean, but also indicated the challenges, dangers and potential advantages of our limited positionalities. It is not possible to do honour to the complex discussions that the presentations raised among the audience, but an attempt will be made to highlight the key points of each presentation and to conclude with a brief note on the very concept of ‘decolonisation.’

The first keynote speech was given by Dr. Amina Yaqin, Senior Lecturer in Urdu and Postcolonial Studies at SOAS and active member of the *Decolonising SOAS Working Group*. In her presentation Amina took issue with a piece written by Kenan Malik for *The Guardian* motivated by the recent discourses of decolonisation happening at SOAS.<sup>4</sup> Amina argued that his analysis omitted to draw attention to deeper institutional structures and informal power dynamics that have conventionally determined academic curricula in British universities and influenced also who is hired and who is offered opportunities for career advancement. Amina urged the need for exploring how “Enlightenment ideology” has influenced administrations and policies and warned that administrative acquiescence to an amendment of curricula can end up just a “cosmetic exercise” when deeper structural norms remain in place.

The second keynote speaker was as insightful as the first. Dr. Alena Rettová is a Reader in Swahili Literature and African Philosophy at SOAS. Alena found the theme of ‘Decolonisation in Praxis’ to align with her vision of epistemological decolonisation through linguistics. She made the evocative comment that one’s epistemological situatedness is analogous to a hard disk that has been partitioned. She asked: can we overcome this partitioning and where might we start? Alena then drew attention to the importance of studying languages as a way to approximating foreign cosmologies. This is premised on the observation that languages are not mere semantics, but shape conceptual repertoires and rationalisations and can grant a deeper look into people’s worldviews. This is why translation is inherently limited, what Alena described as “imperfect bridges.” The presentation concluded on the concerned note that language learning has not received the

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<sup>4</sup>Kenan Malik, “Are SOAS Students Right to ‘Decolonise’ their Minds from Western Philosophers?”, *The Guardian*, February 19, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/feb/19/soas-philosophy-decolonise-our-minds-enlightenment-white-european-kenan-malik>

desirable support at SOAS and has declined significantly with many African languages, so unique to SOAS expertise, being at the border of extinction.

Our student presenters raised additional important points and stood out for their reflexive affirmations regarding the challenges and limitations they have faced in their own research and scholarship. By eschewing the certitude that one finds in much solipsistic colonial (and we may add some post-colonial) scholarship and espousing an attitude of humble self-awareness, they embodied the decolonial attitude we have envisioned for ourselves and this conference overall.

Our first presenter, Tiara Roxanne, is a PhD Candidate at the The European Graduate School. She examined if decolonisation is possible for the indigenous figure who has been defined by colonial practices, and what the possibilities of overcoming the trauma of colonialism could mean in this case. Using evocative symbolic and medical language she argued for a return to materiality as a means to reclaiming oneself and indigeneity.

The second speaker, Dhruv Rahmnath, is a Master's student of social anthropology at SOAS. He discussed the guru movement of Sharavana Baba in India, arguing that studying the spiritual and material politics of this charismatic guru provides an insight into what might be called a making of postcolonial Indian identity. His enlightening paper is one of the contributions to this volume.

The third speaker, Jonathan Galton, is a second-year PhD student of Anthropology at SOAS. His presentation of a British victory over an Indian force in the Battle of Koregaon raised the important observation that while we should continue to remember and analyse the colonial pasts and postcolonial presents, we should not overlook that oppression, has come in various shapes and has been caused by various (local and global) actors. His captivating piece has also been included in this volume.

Next, Marianna Zegianini, a first-year PhD student in the History of Art and Archaeology Department at SOAS, provided a fascinating juxtaposition of European and Chinese portraiture art embedded within a discourse of decolonisation. Her presentation revealed that while within western epistemology the individual was made historically the centre of portraiture art, in the Chinese context in the period she examined subjectivities were constructed in reference to historical figures of the past.

The final presenter, Monika Hirmer, is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Religions and Philosophies at SOAS and one of the editors of the current volume. Her equally enriching presentation traced western dialectics of 'othering' the Indian female body. She juxtaposed this to historical and more recent Indian responses, and traced what she considers an effective act of decolonisation in praxis in the art of Telangana women. This piece is also included in the contents of this volume.

The conference concluded with a panel on the prospects of Open Access publishing to contribute to diversifying the epistemological landscape. Romina Istratii, a PhD Candidate in the Department of Religions and Philosophies at SOAS and current Open Access advocate and co-editor of the current volume, underscored the potential of Open Access to make state-of-the-art research accessible to children of disadvantaged families and to contribute in this way toward the diversification of what has been historically an elite-dominated knowledge realm. She examined the prospects of Open Access publishing to contribute toward an

epistemological decolonisation in view of linguistic, cosmological and attitudinal obstacles. Helen Porter, who is responsible for policy development in Open Access and Research Data at SOAS, provided her expert commentary on how Open Access resources could be leveraged best and how recent shortfalls could be circumvented to serve the needs of decolonisation. Both presentations are hosted in this volume.

The conference triggered multiple promising dialogues but also doubts, not least regarding the discursive deployment of the concept of decolonisation. As some conference attendants observed, the terminology—like all concepts circulating in the mainstream—has already started to become merely “cosmetic,” so much so that it seems to have been appropriated by some to disguise the very continuation of colonial attitudes. We are aware of these appropriations, but we believe that the problem is not one of terminological choice (since there will never exist a perfect concept that will eschew the risk of de/politicisation), but one of personal attitudes which we must reverse. A practical decolonisation does not mean anything more than changing our own attitudes and becoming more reflexive about ourselves and others. It requires embodying our distinct positionalities and cosmologies transparently within our research and scholarly engagements and recognising humbly that we have no authoritative grounds for imposing our worldviews as normative on our interlocutors.

Romina Istratii, Monika Hirmer, Iris Lim