



WHO IS AFRAID OF DECOLONISATION?

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WHO IS AFRAID OF DECOLONISATION?

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ABSTRACT

This article is an opinion piece which examines the objections behind the press hostility towards the “decolonisation” campaign. The principal aims of this campaign are curriculum reform and improved equality of opportunity at British universities and university colleges, including SOAS. The article identifies conservative critiques of “cultural Marxism,” “cultural relativism” and “radical egalitarianism” and the perceived threat to “Western civilisation” by such perspectives as key drivers of the media hostility concerning this issue. To help understand such hostility I draw on the moral panic theory of Stuart Hall et al. espoused in the classic work, *Policing the Crisis*. This article also examines more moderate criticisms by two high profile journalists. My research is based on personal contact with journalists and academics at SOAS as well as critical examination of newspapers and broadcast materials.

The face of Lola Olufemi stared out from the front page of *The Daily Telegraph* in newsagents and newsstands across the country on the morning of 25 October 2017. Emblazoned in pink above her picture was the headline: “Student forces Cambridge to drop white authors.”¹ Olufemi was an English undergraduate from Cambridge University. The cause of her notoriety was that her name was at the top of a letter as part of a campaign for changes to the curriculum of her course.² It is truly rare that a major British newspaper should make a previously unknown undergraduate the focus of hostile coverage on their front page or concern themselves with the details of course content on degree courses. Other newspapers swiftly picked up the story. A tirade of hate against her built up on social media.³ Subsequently *The Telegraph* had to print corrections stating that she and the university had been seriously misrepresented and there were no plans to exclude any white authors from reading lists as suggested by this newspaper.⁴

This *Telegraph* article has been just one of a number of hostile articles on similar campaigns. An article by Jonathen Petre in *The Mail on Sunday* earlier in the year had specifically denounced proposals for curriculum changes at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) suggesting that student campaigners were trying to ban Plato, Kant and other such authors.⁵ Dr Meera Sabaratnam, the Chair of the Decolonising SOAS Working Group stated that there was no truth in such a claim and no such *diktat* from students. She added:

...it’s not correct to say [curriculum changes are] being left to the students. What students and staff are engaged in at SOAS is a dialogue about how the curriculum should be organised. And this is informed by up-to-date research on racialised attainment gaps within universities as well as the freshest thinking of the scholarship in those areas.⁶

She summarised the aims of the campaign as being implemented at SOAS. According to Sabaratnam, its aim is to question “assumptions about the world” as well as “asking questions about the location and identity” of authors.⁷ In addition, it aims at promoting better equal opportunities including measures to address the “attainment gap” between Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students and others.⁸ SOAS’s Director, Baroness Amos, is fully in support of the campaign. She wrote on Linked In: “What I find difficult to understand is why there is so much resistance to looking at the wealth of history, scholarship

¹ Front page, *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 October 2017.

² Camilla Turner, ‘Cambridge to ‘decolonise’ English literature’ in *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 October 2017.

³ Jon Dunne & Anna Davis ‘I’ve faced a flood of abuse says Cambridge diversity campaigner’ in *Evening Standard*, 26 October 2017.

⁴ The corrections appeared in 26 October and 13 December editions of the paper.

⁵ Jonathan Petre, ‘They Kant be serious! PC students demand white philosophers including Plato and Descartes be dropped from university syllabus’ in the *The Mail on Sunday*, 8 January 2017.

⁶ Meera Sabaratnam, ‘Decolonisation What’s All the Fuss?’ in SOAS Blog, 18 January 2017. <https://www.soas.ac.uk/blogs/study/decolonising-curriculum-whats-the-fuss/>.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Sabaratnam, ‘Decolonisation’.

and research from across the world to give depth to current knowledge and understanding.”⁹ A key objective of my article is to try to find the basis for such objections.

I argue that opposition to the campaign is not simply a matter of misunderstandings but based on profound ideological objections to its aims.¹⁰ It is these objections that appear to be fuelling a moral panic. I was struck by the pertinence of the moral panic theory relating to race and immigration espoused in the classic 1970s work by a group of authors including the late Professor Stuart Hall entitled *Policing the Crisis*.¹¹ The authors of this work argue that more often than not behind the journalists are authority figures and “primary definers” who set the terms of debate and fuel such panics. Most journalists act as “secondary definers” reproducing “the definitions of the powerful.”¹² The articles by British journalists referred to above frequently use such language as “snowflakes,” demonising students as intolerant and unstable, plus the term “political correctness.”¹³ Such journalists frequently use but rarely explain what is meant by the latter term.

A clearer idea of what is meant by political correctness in this context can be found by examining the academics used as primary definers in the hostile media coverage of the campaign. These include the right wing philosopher, Professor Roger Scruton, who was promoted as an expert critic of the campaign in both the *Mail* and *Telegraph*, and the economist Dr Richard Wellings who was featured on *Russia Today*.¹⁴ The arguments of such academics against political correctness encompass ideological critiques of cultural Marxism and cultural relativism as well as what they see as the distortion of equality of opportunity by trying to enforce “equality of outcomes.” I shall deal with each of these in turn.

CONCERNS ABOUT CULTURAL MARXISM

Professor Jérôme Jamin, a political scientist at the University of Liège, suggests that when used in a neutral way cultural Marxism refers specifically to the works of Frankfurt School who analysed the way culture works in society.¹⁵ However, Jamin adds that the term’s use in

⁹ Valerie Amos, ‘Decolonising Knowledge: The Role Universities Can Play’ in Linked In: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/decolonising-knowledge-role-universities-can-play-valerie-amos>

¹⁰ For the purposes of this article my use of the term “ideology” is a relatively straightforward and neutral one. As Gramsci suggested the term “ideology” can simply mean a “specific system of ideas” that relates not only to politics but more broadly to such fields as culture. Acceptance of such a definition does not necessarily mean endorsement of the Marxist theory of economic determinism of ideology. Hoare & Smith ed., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971): 375-377.

¹¹ Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd. 1978).

¹² Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*: 57-60 & 220-222.

¹³ Turner, ‘Cambridge’, 2017; Petre, ‘They Kant be Serious!’, 2017.

¹⁴ Petre, ‘They Kant be Serious!’, 2017; Turner, ‘University students demand philosophers such as Plato and Kant are removed from syllabus because they are white’, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 January 2017; Debate on Decolonisation between Richard Wellings and Rahmaan Mohammadi, *Russia Today*, 26 October 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQVCqDPofMc> [last accessed 30 April 2018].

¹⁵ Jérôme Jamin, ‘Cultural Marxism a Survey’ in *Religion Compass* 2018.12;e12258: 4. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/rec3.12258> [last accessed 30 April 2018].

a pejorative sense has been popularised in the 1990s by conservatives such as William S Lind and Pat Buchanan.¹⁶ Such critics turn these authors into a focus for a conspiracy theory.¹⁷ They link them with political correctness and claim that cultural Marxism is aimed at deliberately undermining the values of Western Christian civilisation and encouraging moral degeneracy.¹⁸ The phrase has been taken up by some libertarian academics as part of their critique of the decolonisation campaign. I shall give two examples.

In response to one of *The Daily Telegraph* articles, a SOAS academic who describes himself as a libertarian asserted on social media that the campaign was an attempt to enforce cultural Marxism in universities. I drew to his attention the articles referred to above by both the Director of SOAS and Meera Sabaratnam clarifying the aims of the campaign.¹⁹ However, he told me that: “For what it’s worth, my views on this topic have not changed in the slightest.”²⁰

Another libertarian and academic critic of the campaign to express similar concerns was Dr Richard Wellings, the Deputy Research Director of the Institute of Economic Affairs. In October 2017, he asserted on *Russia Today*: “... what we are seeing at universities is increasingly the cultural Marxist wing of the hard left trying to impose their particular world view on students.” He added that this made “libertarians” and “conservatives” feel uncomfortable and excluded. He asserted that those exposed to such “cultural Marxist” ideas “then go on to senior positions in politics and the media.” He also asserted that lecturers even at the elite university of Cambridge have come under the influence of “hard left cultural Marxism.” A spokesperson for the National Union of Students (NUS), Rahmaan Mohammadi, appeared on the same programme. He felt that Wellings’s argument relating the campaign to a “divide” between political ideologies was “absolutely mad.” He emphasised that the campaign was “not about politics” but ensuring that students were not “narrow minded” and that both the history of and writers from BME communities were not undervalued.²¹

I discussed the issue of “cultural Marxism” with Dr Sabaratnam. She said she would not describe herself using that term. Judging by our discussion she seems to consider cultural Marxist works such as those of the Frankfurt School to be a worthy if somewhat dated genre. She denied that the decolonisation campaign is particularly concerned with the ideas of such works.²² I agree with both Sabaratnam and Mohammadi that the fixation with cultural Marxism by academic critics of the campaign such as Wellings is unwarranted. The

¹⁶ Jamin, ‘Cultural Marxism’: 1 & 5.

¹⁷ *ibid*: 1-3.

¹⁸ *ibid.*: 5-8.

¹⁹ Sabaratnam, ‘Decolonisation’; Amos, ‘Decolonising Knowledge’

²⁰ Email from anonymous academic at SOAS to author, 29 April 2018. For perfectly good reasons that I cannot disclose as they would identify this individual I have chosen not to make his name public and he has not expressed a wish that I should do so.

²¹ Debate on Decolonisation between Richard Wellings and Rahmaan Mohammadi, *Russia Today*, 26 October 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQVCqDPofMc> [last accessed 30 April 2018]. While giving airtime to both views in my opinion the questioning by the interviewer was biased in favour of Wellings, using a snide tone towards Mohammadi and such phrases as “political correctness gone mad.”

²² Interview by author with Meera Sabaratnam, 27 April 2018.

campaign is concerned rather with broadening the perspectives of students, not indoctrinating them into any ideology. Moving on from cultural Marxism I shall now turn to consider other objections.

CONCERNS ABOUT CULTURAL RELATIVISM & RADICAL EGALITARIANISM

A related concern is about “cultural relativism.” Prominent critics of the campaign accuse academics of making morality entirely relative by suggesting that all cultures are valid and that no one culture such as “Western civilisation” is superior. For instance, Jonathan Petre in his article denouncing the SOAS decolonisation campaign asserted that Western philosophers such as Plato and Kant were “names that underpin civilisation.”²³ By implication non-Western philosophers were sidelined as of marginal importance to the construction of “civilisation.” Professor Roger Scruton, a high profile right wing philosopher, was promoted by Petre as a primary definer in opposition to the decolonisation campaign. Scruton sees as key to such cultural relativism a number of New Left thinkers influenced by the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci although he does not focus exclusively on cultural Marxists but incorporates others such as Michel Foucault.²⁴ Dr Richard Wellings also criticises cultural relativism. He asserted that it is an “uncomfortable historical fact” that the “highest proportion of great authors” were “white males” even in the Middle Ages, when Europe was not dominant in the world culturally or otherwise.²⁵

Sabaratham refutes such claims, suggesting that they are based on ignorance of the contribution of literature outside of Europe. She also does not believe there is any such thing as absolute moral values. For instance, she believes that murder is never acceptable. She also regards “Western civilisation” as a dubious construct. She believes that behind such ideas are ideas of supremacism. As I discussed with her this can take different forms.²⁶ One notable example of Anglo- rather than Euro-Centrism is a work by Daniel Hannan, one of the principal ideologues behind the campaign to leave the European Union, entitled *How we Invented Freedom and Why it Matters*.²⁷ This takes the somewhat dubious historiographical position that England is the sole origin of genuine freedom and human rights. For instance, Hannan suggests that the *Magna Carta* (Great Charter) of the thirteenth century is the basis of the rule of and equality before the law.²⁸ However, as Professor David Carpenter pointed out in his recent study of this charter, the rights awarded were confined to the small minority of free citizens and not the 90% who were unfree.²⁹

²³ Petre, ‘They Kant be serious!’, 2017.

²⁴ Roger Scruton, *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015): 233 & 237-238.

²⁵ Wellings in *Russia Today*, 2017.

²⁶ Interview, Sabaratham, 2018.

²⁷ Daniel Hannan, *How We Invented Freedom & Why it Matters*. (Head of Zeus Ltd., 2013).

²⁸ Hannan, *Invented Freedom*: 111-112.

²⁹ David Carpenter, *Magna Carta* (London: Penguin Books, 2015): 107 & 110-111.

Finally, there are concerns about “radical egalitarianism” that is trying to impose “equality of outcomes.” Such concerns are shared by Roger Scruton.³⁰ One key influence in this way of thinking is Milton and Rose Friedman's book *Free to Choose*. However, the focus of the Friedmans is upon attempts to remedy such gaps relating to class and income rather than race, including in higher education.³¹

Sabaratnam is familiar with the argument that students are admitted solely on merit and that measures to rectify inequalities are unwarranted.³² However, evidence about undergraduate admissions at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge show that such concerns need to be addressed. Data obtained by MP David Lammy showed that between 2010 and 2015 about a third or more of Oxford colleges fail to admit any black applicant for first degrees and that less than one in ten offered places to black applicants each year. Less than one percent of applicants of Pakistani descent were successful in gaining admission to Cambridge University. Nearly half of Cambridge colleges turned down all such applicants.³³ Sabaratnam is aware of a number of studies which prove that applicants with ethnic names are discriminated against by employers and that such discrimination can also take place in universities.³⁴

MODERATE CRITICISMS

Some journalists are critical but sympathetic to the aims of the campaign. They neither buy into the above ideological positions nor any kind of “moral panic.” Kenan Malik, a prominent Marxist writer, was the only journalist to visit the campus and engage with campaigners. Most of his comments were positive but he still felt there was excessive focus on the racial identity of authors and an overly negative attitude towards the Enlightenment.³⁵ Malik told me though he still questions the wisdom of using the term “decolonisation” to describe the process of reform. He adds, “a broader, more diverse curriculum is a good [thing], but the issue is not as straightforward as simply creating a more diverse reading list or lecture series.”³⁶ Dr Amina Yaqin of the Decolonising SOAS Working Group made an address to a SOAS conference on “decolonisation” which critiqued Malik’s article. She was

³⁰ Scruton, *New Left*, 3-4.

³¹ Milton and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1980): 166-176 & 220-224.

³² Interview, Sabaratnam, 2018.

³³ David Lammy, ‘Oxbridge Access Data’ <https://www.davidlammy.co.uk/single-post/2017/10/20/Oxbridge-access-data> [last accessed 30 April 2018].

³⁴ Interview, Sabaratnam, 2018. Rajeev Syal, ‘Undercover job hunters reveal huge race bias in Britain's workplaces’ in *The Observer*, 18 October 2009; Kuheli Dutt, ‘Evidence of Unconscious Bias’ in web site of Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, Columbia University: https://www.ldeo.columbia.edu/ldeo/dir/academic-affairs-diversity/searchcommittees_files/Best%20Practices%20Bias%20Search%20Committees%20Sep2015%20.pdf [accessed 28 June 2018].

³⁵ Kenan Malik, ‘Are SOAS students right to ‘decolonise’ their minds from western philosophers?’ in *The Observer*, 19 February 2017.

³⁶ Email from Kenan Malik to author, 30 April 2018.

critical of his neglect of equal opportunities issues, including the treatment of BME staff. She spoke of her own bad experiences at SOAS in that respect.³⁷

Another moderate critic was David Aaronovitch of *The Times* who took part in a debate in *Radio 4* with Sabaratnam. He told me that his concerns were twofold.³⁸ Firstly, it is perfectly legitimate for students to make criticisms of teaching quality. Both of us had experience of exceptionally bad teaching practices at Oxford among many lecturers and he does not defend them. However so far as course content is concerned he believes that is “best be decided by people who have some authority, not just anyone with an opinion.”³⁹ Sabaratnam told me that is certainly not going to be the case. Students will have input but the responsibility for designing curricula remains with academics.

Secondly Aaronovitch is concerned that “decolonisation” is a “politicisation” of courses. He adds, “I don't quite see why a curriculum should be “decolonised” any more than it should be “colonised” or “recolonised.” Aaronovitch add that his overall concern is exemplified by something he heard a young woman in the United States said when advocating the teaching of creationism as opposed to evolution in school: “It's my belief and I have a right to be taught what I believe.”⁴⁰ He made a similar point in his debate with Sabaratnam on *Radio 4*. Sabaratnam's response was firstly that knowledge had always been politicised to some extent. All what SOAS academics were trying to do was to deal with perspectives that had been “shut out and occluded.” Secondly, she felt that universities are “about challenging received wisdom.”⁴¹ By implication this would mean thinking critically about the evidence for differing positions including both “creationism” and “evolution.” It would not mean the crude indoctrination into one position or the other even where the merits of one particular position seem to be clear.

My own view of the campaign is also very positive though I feel that the scope could be broadened. For instance, I asked Sabaratnam if some attention should not also be paid to the way Ireland is taught in this country, typically from an English perspective. She strongly agreed and said that it even had relevance to SOAS. It was Britain's first colony and had implications for colonialism in India. She also agreed that the issue of anti-Semitism at SOAS needs to be addressed despite the disputes about the meaning of anti-Semitism with respect to criticism of Israel.⁴² Overall though I share her optimism that the decolonization process is an opportunity for SOAS to improve its courses for students and maybe even set a standard for others to follow.

³⁷ Dr Amina Yaqin, ‘Keynote Address’ at ‘Decolonising in Praxis’ conference, SOAS, 7 June 2018.

³⁸ Email from David Aaronovitch to author, 24 April 2018.

³⁹ Email from Aaronovitch to author, 2018.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ Debate between Meera Sabaratnam and David Aaronovitch on Today Programme BBC Radio 4, Broadcast 22 February 2018 [sound file no longer available].
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09rwt84?platform=hootsuite> [last accessed 30 April 2018].

⁴² Interview, Sabaratnam, 2018.

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Simon Forbes's main interests are in the field of international and transnational history, including the arms trade and religious ideas on war and sexuality. He taught a short course on the international relations of the Pahlavi regime in Iran at SOAS for two years. His Birkbeck MA dissertation was on relations between Britain and Iran, 1973-78. He is currently completing a PhD at SOAS on missionaries and war in China, 1931-45.

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