

The racialist agenda of the ‘Decolonise Education’ movement

By Joe Mount
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The students’ union at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London recently demanded the removal of “white” philosophers from the university curriculum.

The union’s “Educational Priorities” statement for 2016/17 outlined demands for far-reaching changes to curricula and teaching under the heading, “Decolonising SOAS: Confronting the White Institution,” opposing what it describes as “the structural and epistemological legacy of colonialism within our university.”

“Our aims,” they write, are “to make sure that the majority of the philosophers on our courses are from the Global South or its diaspora. SOAS’s focus is on Asia and Africa and therefore the foundations of its theories should be presented by Asian or African philosophers.”

SOAS, founded in 1916, is one of Europe’s most elite higher education institutions. It was established to promote the long-term interests of British imperialism in Africa and Asia by training a cadre of colonial administrators. Alumni include countless heads of state, diplomats and civil servants in the former colonial countries.

Under the cover of anti-colonial rhetoric, the students’ union advances a racialist perspective: “If *white philosophers* are required, then teach their work from a critical standpoint. For example, [by] acknowledging the colonial context in which so-called ‘Enlightenment’ philosophers wrote within [emphasis added].”

The classification of philosophers based on their skin colour, rather than their place in the historical development of human thought, is combined with an attack on the entire progressive tradition of the Enlightenment. A period of great intellectual awakening during the 18th century, the Enlightenment was a product of enormous advances in science that profoundly altered man’s understanding of the universe and his place within it.

The SOAS campaign is part of the broader “Why is My Curriculum White?” movement by student unions nationally, calling for an end to the “Eurocentric” educational curriculum and the dominance of “white” social institutions. It is supported by the National Union of Students (NUS), sections of academia and columnists in the *Guardian* newspaper. NUS President and former Black Students’ Officer Malia Bouattia is a prominent spokesperson for the campaign. The movement began at University College London (UCL) in 2014 and spread to universities in London, York, Warwick, Nottingham and Kent. It also gained a presence at Bristol, Birmingham and Manchester universities in recent months.

The social interests motivating the campaign are revealed by the alternative slogan adopted by the campaign: “Why isn’t my professor black?” Its promotion of identity politics, based on race, gender and sexuality, is a bid for social privileges and influence. In line with this, there are demands “[t]o proactively encourage greater representation of BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] academics in teaching and research positions and support heterodox research and knowledge production” and to “redistribute university resources as a form of reparative justice.”

A blog on NUS Connect complains that universities and institutions of

further education “have a fundamental role and responsibility towards the progression of thought, *and instruction of social mobility* [emphasis added].” The “failure of the academy to recognise certain subjects taught by BME academics as ‘core’ subjects, means they are over-scrutinised compared to their peers, more likely to suffer from casualisation (receiving temporary or part-time contracts only), threatening both job security and the ability to resist conforming to abject requirements.”

Rather than launching a joint struggle against the attack on education and working conditions, the campaign is purely concerned with the circumstances faced by BME students and professionals, on the grounds that the task of universities is to promote “social mobility.”

This echoes the “Rhodes Must Fall” campaign that was initiated in 2015 by privileged social layers in South Africa and which spread internationally.

Last summer, undergraduate students at Yale University in the United States protested the “canonical status” of writers such as Shakespeare, Chaucer and Milton, claiming, “It is unacceptable that a Yale student considering studying English literature might read only white male authors.”

At SOAS, a number of academics gave qualified support for the demands by the student union. A blog on the SOAS web site stated that “there is no question of ‘white philosophers’ being removed from the curriculum at SOAS; Plato and Kant will remain at the table. Yet beside them, now, thinkers from the rich and longstanding non-Western philosophical traditions of Asia and Africa are taking their rightful places. [1]”

The blog continues:

Any critical thinker will want to ask how it could be that the great European philosophers of the Enlightenment could write so profoundly about the liberating potential of knowledge, could hail the slogan of the French Revolution, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, at the very same moment that Europe was colonising much of the globe and participating in the slave trade.

An attack on the Enlightenment

This amalgam of the progressive ideals of the Enlightenment with the crimes of colonialism and the slave trade is ahistorical and reactionary. Firstly, it ignores the work of Guillaume Thomas Raynal and other thinkers opposing slavery, not to mention the crucial influence of the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality in shaping events such as the Haitian slave revolt led by Toussaint Louverture in 1791.

The issue of slavery was hotly debated by the philosophers, so that Denis Diderot’s *Encyclopaedia* (1772) says of the trade, “This buying of Negroes, to reduce them to slavery, is one business that violates religion, morality, natural laws, and all the rights of human nature... If commerce

of this kind can be justified by a moral principle, there is no crime, however atrocious it may be, that cannot be made legitimate... Men and their liberty are not objects of commerce; they can be neither sold nor bought nor paid for at any price.”

It calls for the freeing of all slaves, stating that the sale of a slave is always invalid because, “This Negro does not divest himself and can never divest himself of his natural right; he carries it everywhere with him, and he can demand everywhere that he be allowed to enjoy it. It is, therefore, patent inhumanity on the part of judges in free countries where he is transported, not to emancipate him immediately by declaring him free, since he is their fellow man, having a soul like them.”

The colonial empires that emerged in the 16th century were not the result of the “ideas” of “rich white men,” but were critical to the emergence of a global capitalist economy. Karl Marx explained the origins of modern industry in terms of the primitive accumulation of capital in the first volume of *Capital*:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre... If money according to Augier, ‘comes into the world with a congenial blood-stain on one cheek,’ capital comes dripping from head to foot from every pore with blood and dirt. [2]

The resources brutally extracted from colonial conquests were used to develop vast banking and manufacturing enterprises, accelerating the proletarianisation of the domestic population and the establishment of the modern capitalist state.

The interests of the newly emerging bourgeoisie increasingly came into conflict with the old feudal system based on a rigid social hierarchy crowned by a parasitic nobility and justified by the state church. Broad socio-economic developments undermined the old political structures. These social contradictions were to erupt in the great bourgeois democratic revolutions of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, principally the American and French revolutions, whose leaders were profoundly influenced by the great Enlightenment philosophers.

The Enlightenment originated in the scientific revolution of the preceding two centuries that undermined the ideological domination of official religion. Rather than mankind’s problems being the eternal consequence of original sin, its leading figures believed that the application of rational analysis could discover the truth underlying all aspects of the natural world and human society. Human beings were potentially perfectible if social conditions were engineered correctly.

This undermined the “Divine Right of Kings” and absolute rule, and gave ideological form to the simmering social grievances of the emerging bourgeoisie against feudal society. However, as David North explained in a 1996 lecture “Equality, the Rights of Man and the Birth of Socialism”:

...it would be simplistic and superficial to see in the work of the Enlightenment nothing more than the narrow expression of the class interests of the bourgeoisie in its struggle against a decaying feudal order. The advanced thinkers who prepared the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century spoke and wrote in the name of all of suffering humanity, and in doing so evoked universal themes of

human solidarity and emancipation that reached beyond the more limited and prosaic aims of the capitalist class. [3]

There were inevitable historical limitations to the realisation of the goals of the Enlightenment. Despite the genius of Rousseau, Locke, Hume et al., they could not escape their historical epoch. Although many thinkers of the time were critical of private property, slavery, colonialism and their attendant social evils, their ideals could not be fully realised in the context of the capitalist society that emerged from the bourgeois revolutions.

The realisation of a socialist society without class distinctions based on scientific economic planning depended upon the emergence of the working class and its political struggle against the bourgeoisie.

Socialism and the Enlightenment

Socialism was both the great heir to the Enlightenment and its negation. It was Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels who proved scientifically that it was only the working class in a political struggle against the bourgeoisie which could realise the principles and goals of social emancipation, equality and the Rights of Man. It necessitated the abolition of private ownership of the means of production and the ending of class exploitation through socialist revolution. This was confirmed by the October 1917 revolution in Russia, led by Lenin and Trotsky.

These historical truths are anathema to the academics and middle-class students involved in the “decolonise education” movement. They use “whiteness” as a pejorative term for the entire Enlightenment tradition. Their struggle for social privilege requires the encouragement of racial divisions and an attack on the philosophical roots of Marxism. Their obsession with race is driven by their opposition to social equality.

The identification of the Enlightenment with colonialism is set out in *The Postcolonial Enlightenment* by Daniel Carey and Lynn Festa, in deliberately obscure academic language:

Irremediably Eurocentric, the ideas grouped under the rubric of Enlightenment are explicitly or implicitly bound up with imperialism. In its quest for the universal, Enlightenment occludes cultural difference and refuses moral and social relativity. Inasmuch as its values are identified as coextensive with modernity, the Enlightenment naturalizes a teleology in which all roads lead inexorably to an episteme associated with the West. Frozen in the dark backward and abysm of the ‘primitive’ or ‘savage,’ non-Western populations are stripped of the agency and historicity that underwrites civilized advancement. The doctrine of progress, in turn, legitimates imperial conquest under the guise of the civilizing mission, while the celebration of reason disqualifies other belief systems as irrational or superstitious. Enlightenment becomes alternately the engine of a relentlessly totalizing historical spirit and the ideological sugar coating designed to disguise the bitter nature of empire from both its victims and its perpetrators. *Cast in these terms, any vestiges of ‘the Enlightenment’ that remain within a theory become a sign of insufficient liberation* [emphasis added]. [4]

Via citations of “historic agency,” we therefore have the elevation of “cultural differences” as opposed to class interests, the replacement of scientific thought with “moral and social relativity,” and the repudiation of the goal of social progress—of socialism—in favour of the preservation of capitalist society, albeit with the necessary culturally sensitive veneer provided by the national bourgeoisie and its petty bourgeois ideologues.

Postcolonial theory is a trend of postmodernist philosophy that emerged in the context of the independence struggles that broke out in the former

colonial countries in the period following the Second World War. It represents an attack on the Marxist analysis of imperialism as being based on the economic domination and division of the world by monopolistic banks and corporations. Instead, colonial dependence is cast in terms of psychological and cultural factors. Its proponents were influenced by poststructuralism, psychoanalysis and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and the dead end of bourgeois nationalism

Frantz Fanon, a psychologist and philosopher, is the major representative of this tendency. His influential book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, sets out a supposedly anti-imperialist political strategy that rejects the Marxist insistence on the revolutionary role of the working class, focusing instead on issues of race, and fixating on the *lumpenproletariat*, criminals and other social layers which have been excluded from the processes of production. Fanon discusses the psychological aspects of colonial rule and advocates violence as a cathartic means for the oppressed individual to free themselves from colonialism. His work is cited as a key influence by various bourgeois nationalist movements and the black nationalist Black Panther party.

Another key figure is Edward Said, author of *Orientalism* (1978), who advanced the theory of “cultural imperialism” that reduces classic works of art to propaganda in the interests of imperialist domination. His ideas are based on the irrational and subjective conception that Western scholars cannot provide an objective insight into the colonial world.

Notwithstanding their leftist pretensions, these were ideologues of the bourgeoisie. They opposed Marxism on the basis of nationalism, insisting that the oppressed masses could be liberated from imperialist rule under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie and through the establishment of capitalist nation states in the former colonial countries. Fanon was a member of the National Liberation Front during the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) against French colonial rule. His work influenced a number of bourgeois nationalist movements. Said had a senior role in the Palestine Liberation Organization for over a decade.

The perspective of bourgeois nationalism has proven to be a historical dead end. Far from liberating the oppressed masses, the bourgeois regimes became the mechanism through which the imperialist powers maintained their grip over the former colonial countries—ruthlessly suppressing the workers and peasants, overseeing the repayment of colossal state debts to international financial institutions and plundering raw materials.

None of the pressing problems confronting the masses in these countries can be resolved under the leadership of any section of the national bourgeoisie, or on the basis of national policies.

The history of Africa and the Middle East since decolonisation has proven the theory of Permanent Revolution developed by Leon Trotsky. This states that in the oppressed countries, the democratic and national tasks that in an earlier historical period were associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie can, in the epoch of imperialism, be achieved only through the independent revolutionary mobilization of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

Today, the real class character and function of the “post-colonial” regimes established in Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere is clear. The coming to power of the national bourgeoisie was used to preserve imperialist domination, rather than end it. As is epitomised by the ANC regime in South Africa, only a narrow layer of the bourgeoisie and upper middle class politicians, academics and administrators has grown wealthy through presiding over the continued brutal exploitation of the working class and oppressed rural masses.

These same social interests motivate the “decolonise education” movement. They do not constitute an oppositional trend of any kind and

their demands for the allocation of employment and privileges through positive discrimination and affirmative action are without a shred of democratic content. Rather, mirroring the bourgeois nationalist movements’ evolution into the direct agencies of imperialism, their objective is to integrate an upper middle-class layer into the echelons of academia, big business and the capitalist state.

It is not accidental that the “decolonise” movement has nothing to say on major contemporary world issues, such as the neo-colonial wrecking operation conducted by the major powers across the Middle East. They do not want to overthrow imperialism, but to gain their seats at its table.

References

[1] Study at SOAS Blogs, “Plato will remain but time for non-Western thinkers to be given their due, say SOAS academics,” January 2017.

[2] Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 31.

[3] David North, *Equality, the Rights of Man and the Birth of Socialism*, October 1996.

[4] Daniel Carey and Lynn Festa, *The Postcolonial Enlightenment*, OUP Oxford, February 2009.

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