

Decolonising the IR Curriculum: Reflections from a Classroom

Written by Ananya Sharma

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/02/18/decolonising-the-ir-curriculum-reflections-from-a-classroom/>

ANANYA SHARMA, FEB 18 2025

Across the globe, decolonising the curriculum (DtC) has been the buzzword in higher education institutions as a result of movements such as Rhodes Must Fall (2015) at the University of Cape Town, with similar iterations in the UK. The Black Lives Matter movement (2020) further pushed for challenging the centrality of whiteness in the narratives that have shaped how we come to learn about the world. Many universities in the global north addressed the probing question: 'why is my curriculum white?' by establishing toolkits for module convenors, drafting manifestos and holding meetings and seminars addressing demands of BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) students. Scholars within the discipline of International Relations have been quite vocal in expressing concerns about the anglo-centric production and dissemination of knowledge claims in International Relations (Bhambra 2021; Go 2018; Santos 2014; Shilliam 2021; Smith 2012; Quijano 2007). Their attempts at decolonisation are based on acknowledging the racialised, capitalist and heteropatriarchal structures of power modeling global politics.

Decolonisation, entails challenging the intellectual mono-cultures stemming from positional superiority accorded to western knowledge systems that have treated (and continue to treat) indigenous and non-western knowledge(s) as raw materials and commodities to be discovered, extracted, appropriated and distributed (Smith 2012). Colonisation might be part of history but its afterlives model our classrooms in indelible ways. Whether engaging with international political economy through global financial imperialism or teaching security studies with reference to the Global War on Terror, the dominant frameworks of international politics remain tethered in western theories, histories and methodologies rooted in colonial legacies. The canon we teach as universal knowledge, the stories of conquest and echoes of empire are reflected in the hegemonic discourses taught in 'standard' courses.

This is a reflective piece on what decolonising the IR curriculum at an elite private university in India looks like? It is an exercise in contradictions. The efforts to decolonise though necessary, unfold within institutions that are shaped by the structures of privilege and inequality that decolonisation seeks to dismantle. Neoliberal ideals defined by intensified marketisation, focused on delivering products and outputs enabled through economic rationalism and managerialism leave little space for critical thinking (Smith 2022). Often institutions in the global south emulate other 'core' institutions to achieve recognition; feel a sense of belonging and compete for rankings and in the process end up reproducing the dominant structures of knowledge production. It is important to reinstate that knowledge hierarchies are enacted and experienced differently in different sites. Rather than approaching decolonisation as an 'one size fits all' checklist of tokenistic diversification of reading lists, the author argues for the need to reimagine what decolonising the curriculum means in relation to the socio-political-economic context in which we teach and engage with global politics.

In my introductory module on International Relations last semester, students partook in a seemingly fun group activity: filling the world map with as many country names they could recall. As their scribbled sheets were collected, the gaps were quite glaring. Europe was complete, USA, Canada and Australia were marked with precision. But Africa? South America? Middle East- only a handful names scattered across. In retrospect, the activity became an unintentional yet powerful demonstration of how their world was already hierarchical with certain regions being the centre and hyper-visible while others were peripheral, neglected, forgotten conveniently. This knowledge gap wasn't an accident; the omissions were not just geographical but epistemic: a result of the foundational ways in which

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International Relations is imagined. This imagination is curated in their social settings – in the MUNs they participate, the peers they hang with and the aspirations they hold, their world view is colored by a glamorous great power rivalry with a dash of nationalist fervour. The map-activity exposed how all knowledge is situated, shaped by context and power. As we finished the class, watching a TED talk by Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie on the 'Danger of a Single Story', the realization that decolonising entails unlearning our biases and the first step was to recognise where the silences lie dawned upon me.

As an early-career teacher, the question of whether to retain or abandon the canon always lingers while thinking about the curriculum design. It is a question that doesn't simply reside in the academic domain but extends to broader anxieties of being taken seriously in academia. What really counts as successful decolonisation? The decision to teach, regardless of our rigorous endeavour to remain neutral facilitators, is never innocent of power. Curricula, by their very nature, are exclusionary articulations that are shaped by definitive decisions on what should be incorporated and what should be left out. This may favour certain elite voices from the periphery and further exclude those who are marginalised among the marginalised. We subconsciously erect signposts and are complicit in guiding our students towards meaning-making.

The call for multi-epistemic literacy and pluralising knowledge systems encompasses not just what we learn but also how and where we learn from. The syllabus for the Introduction to IR course diligently covers the canon: John Mearsheimer, John Ikenberry and Alexander Wendt but also includes works from Sankaran Krishna, Pinar Bilgin, Siba Grovogui among others. However, a truly decolonised curriculum needs to move beyond the famous scholars treated as 'ethnographic trophies of display' (Puwar 2020). As Anibal Quijano (2007: 174) points out 'not all peripheral knowledge is created equal.' It would be impossible to decolonise without incorporating adivasi and dalit contributions in challenging oppressive power structures. Much of this knowledge exists in oral traditions, folk narratives, community memory and activist movements – forms that are often excluded as not being 'proper' scholarship. The exclusion one enacts is a function of many structural constraints – not just due to the finite nature of the semester but also shaped by concerns regarding accessibility and translation. Decolonisation thus remains an incomplete project – one that continues to exclude, even as it seems inclusive.

In one of the instances during a class discussion, a student raised their hand with an impassioned question: 'Why do we study Morgenthau? Shouldn't it be replaced with Kautilya?' Another chimed in: 'Shouldn't we be objective? Isn't this just political?' These questions reflect a common misinterpretation of decolonization as an absolute rejection of western ideas rather than critiquing its dominance and the structures that privileged these ideas over other traditions. Decolonial interventions formulated in a top-down manner as part of a political project, often perpetuate what they seek to undo, in part because non-western knowledge(s) have imperial tendencies themselves, thus replacing one form of hegemony with another.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) published a report on Guidelines for Incorporating Indian Knowledge in Higher Education Curriculum in 2023 as part of New Education Policy (NEP). Framed as a step towards decolonising the curricula, there is a troubling conflation between decolonisation and indigenisation. The call to decolonize the curriculum, at its core is a redressal of the hierarchies that efface marginalised knowledge systems. However, there is a related danger of decolonisation being co-opted for promoting nationalist revivalism. The nationalist co-optation of decolonial discourses tends to selectively target 'foreign' influences leaving domestic hierarchies intact. Rather than challenging the existing structures of knowledge production, decolonisation risks becoming a smokescreen for cultural exceptionalism, a call to return to an imagined glorious past and reinforcing majoritarian ideologies (Acharya 2014; Hurrell 2016).

Classrooms reproduce epistemicide through the enactment of canon-obscuring and devaluing alternative ways of viewing and studying the world (Hutchings 2023; Paraskeva 2011). Students don't experience education by being part of silo courses but as overarching programmes. If decolonisation is to be meaningful, it must be woven into the very fabric of academic experience. Students who sit in the classrooms are poised to work in think tanks, diplomatic circles and multinational institutions. The way they are trained – the texts they read, whose voices they consider as authoritative will influence their understanding of the world. Decolonial praxis involves engaged reflexivity that encourages students and instructors to critically reflect on their own positionalities and power dynamics inherent in

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their epistemological assumptions. One can't singularly take on the role of 'decolonial killjoy' (borrowed from Sara Ahmed's feminist killjoy).

In attempting to decolonise the classroom, one shifts from top-down teaching models to participatory and dialogic pedagogies which enables students to co-create knowledge. The classroom does not necessarily emerge as a space with answers but trains students to ask sharper, more unsettling questions. These questions demand experiential learning based on collaborative projects, interacting with local communities to ground theoretical discussions in real-world contexts. It is important to introspectively locate the inadequacies, limitations and contradictions that inadvertently perpetuates the status quo rather than dismantling it. The challenges of decolonising do not invalidate the pursuit of critical pedagogical approach, rather they underscore the need for continuous introspection, recalibration and dialogue.

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