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Whose politics and which science? Rethinking the discipline in the context of Australian settler colonial relationships

In the United Kingdom and America, political scientists are involved in increasingly intense conversations about the implication of the discipline in racial and colonial hierarchies. As a recent volume by Bhambra, Gebrial and Nisancioglu begins, 'the call to decolonize univeristies across the global north has gained particular traction in recent years' (2018: 1). In the contemporary 'post-race' world, these interventions insist on the importance of naming and challenging ongoing inequalities and the role of disciplinary knowledge in maintaining them. In 2016 Kennan Ferguson asked in *Perspectives on Politics* 'Why Does Political Studies Hate American Indians?' and in 2018 two key edited volumes were published: *Dismantling Race in Higher Education* edited by Arday and Mirza*,* and the Bhambra, Gebrial and Nisancioglu volume cited above (*Decolonising the University*). Most recently, *Political Studies Review* published two articles on the need for and possibilities of decolonising political science pedagogy in the British context of empire and race (Begum and Saina 2019; Emejulu 2019). The chair of the Political Studies Association of the UK responded in the same issue, acknowledging that 'these two pieces challenge the discipline to be better at inclusivity' and that 'this issue is a key concern for political science' (Wilson 2019: 207).

In Australia, however, we are not subjecting ourselves to sustained academic self-examination nor discussing how we might contribute more effectively to scholarly and public debate in this domain. Here, political science generally continues its long running approach of positioning Indigenous people as subjects and objects to be known and problematised by the settler-dominated discipline. Rarely are they seen as producers of knowledge and as members of unique sovereign polities. The emerging field of critical Indigenous studies systematically challenges this dynamic, 'disrupt[ing] the certainty of disciplinary knowledges produced in the twentieth century, when the study of Indigenous peoples was largely the domain of non-Indigenous scholars' (Moreton-Robinson 2016: location 174; see also Moreton-Robinson 2015, Tuhiwai Smith 2012, Watson 2012). It traces the links between imperialism and academic production over history, and shows that universities have done more than simply sideline Indigenous people as knowers – they have produced knowledge that has directly facilitated colonial rule and the dispossession of Indigenous people (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, see also). As articles in this symposium suggest, this rich body of Indigenous critical work is sidelined within Australian political science and its deep challenge is yet to be addressed. Will Sanders (2015) criticises this longstanding pattern in his review of AJPS publishing trends, highlighting the 'paucity of contributions from Indigenous Australians' and the absence of a substantive article by an Australian Indigenous scholar. In maintaining these patterns, our discipline does violence. It naturalises settler colonialism and its political institutions, rarely questioning the sovereignty of the settler order or the authority of colonial power to make decisions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

A critical interrogation of Australian political science is especially important given the nature of colonial relationships in this place. As Bhambra et al point out, the contested notion of 'decolonisation' goes beyond anti-racism to 'resituate [colonialism, empire and racism]… as

key shaping forces of the contemporary world, in a context where their role has been systematically effaced from view' (2018: 2). Here in Australia, the term has a particularly urgent meaning. While UK scholars examine racial violence as a legacy of empire and of contemporary Western liberal and populist politics, in Australia we are not concerned with distant empires or past legacies. We remain locked within a contemporary colonial relationship where the terms of sovereignty, land ownership and statehood are violently contested. Here, as Tuck and Yang famously put it, 'decolonisation is not a metaphor' (2012). As in other settler colonies such as the US, Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand, Indigenous peoples challenge fundamental political relationships with the settler state that occupies their territories.

In this symposium, we aim to respond to this challenge, using our national disciplinary journal to explicitly raise questions that have already been asked elsewhere in the world. The most urgent of these is 'how can we decolonise political science in the precarious and politicised contemporary university?' Yet before we can address this question, we need to understand the nature of contemporary dynamics, and make the case to the broader discipline that decolonisation is necessary. Much of the symposium is concerned with this foundational analysis. In this short introduction, we aim to place the symposium in its broader contemporary context, and identify some of its key theoretical framings. We also briefly introduce the articles, which represent very different attempts to rethink the discipline in the context of Australian settler colonialism.

Clearly we, as symposium editors, start from an acknowledgement of the political impacts of our intellectual work, and draw upon the critical race, feminist and critical Indigenous frameworks that have animated these debates elsewhere (though not all articles within the symposium share all these assumptions). These frameworks highlight the embodied and interested nature of knowledge, and its connections to the material world. In this vein, UK scholars and activists have approached academic decolonisation through the twin questions of 'Why Is My Curriculum White?' and 'Why Is My Professor White?' (2019: 196). These questions are distinct, yet intimately connected, for the content of our scholarship (ontologies, theories, theorists and topics) is enmeshed with our institutional practices (hiring, employment conditions, research funding and publication). As Bhambra, Gebrial and Nisancioglu argue, the Western university has long been 'a key site through which colonialism – and colonial knowledge in particular – is produced, consecrated, institutionalised and naturalised' (2018: 5). On one hand, the curricula of Western universities remains 'by the West for the West', resolutely centring white male scholars and theories that reinforce colonial hierarchies (a number of papers in this symposium make this argument in the Australian context). On the other, universities themselves remain difficult institutions for certain groups. As Begum and Saina point out, scholars of colour, Indigenous scholars and women scholars are much more likely to be marginally located within disciplinary institutions, which sidelines their topics of research and means they face pressure to avoid raising 'troubling' questions. In the UK, 'universities are more likely to employ Black staff as cleaners, receptionists or porters than as lecturers or professors. Women, particularly female academics of colour, are less likely than men to be in senior positions as heads of school or department' (2019: 197). This pattern is repeated in Australia, where there are only a few

Indigenous political science academics, and women are concentrated at the lowest levels of the discipline as casual employees (Cowden et al 2012; Kneist 2018). Women make up 47 per cent of political science PhDs, but only 28 per cent of tenured positions, and more than half of casual employees. There is no Australian data collected for scholars of colour but anecdotally these exclusionary dynamics hold (for broader discussions of these issues in Australian higher education see Behrendt et al 2012, Parker forthcoming).

In the precarious academy, workforce casualisation is one of several institutional issues that amplify inequalities and maintain the colonial dynamics of the discipline. Precarity exacerbates already existing structural inequalities, for in the environment of high demands and high workloads, only those with significant social and financial capital can undertake the unpaid labour required to meet the increasingly unattainable bar for permanent work. While our discipline remains a white, settler and male dominated space, there will be fewer hard conversations about the content of our research and teaching programs. Institutional and knowledge dynamics reinforce one another in a loop – where white settler knowledge is valued white settler academics will continue to be seen as 'excellent' and hiring practices will remain skewed. For those who do persist and survive within the discipline, the price is paid emotionally and bodily; '[t]rying but ultimately failing to fit the classic, British professorial mould results in both a sense of internal unease and external conspicuousness' (Begum and Saina 2019: 198, see also Ahmed 2012).

This symposium is structured to try to disturb the colonial dynamics it describes. Firstly, three of its five articles are authored or co-authored by Indigenous scholars, reflecting the absolute importance of conversations about colonialism being led by and conducted with Indigenous academics. Several articles also take up the question of why so few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars choose to locate themselves in this discipline. It is not the case that there are no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars engaged in political research—quite the opposite in fact—and yet the majority choose other disciplinary locations in which to do their work. Is this be because this discipline perpetuates knowledge practices that are hostile to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and ignorant of Indigenous knowledges and political practices? Does it currently have little to offer them in terms of tools and space for grappling with their major concerns? If this is the case, how can political science conceive of a role for itself in understanding and transforming Indigenous-Settler conflict?

Secondly, in general the collection aims to reflect on colonial and racial structures but not to examine Indigenous political life. This is a conscious decision that reflects our own status as non-Indigenous editors, and that fact that, as yet, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have not tended to use our discipline as a space to examine their own polities. It also acknowledges the long history of violent settler academic work. It is not the case that Australian academic disciplines have simply neglected Indigenous peoples. Instead, they have been deeply involved in producing knowledge about Indigenous peoples in ways that facilitate control and dehumanisation (see discussion in Tuhiwai Smith 2012 and Moreton Robinson 2016). To understand and challenge colonialism, white scholars do not need to possess the content of Indigenous sovereignty, nor is it available for our possession. As Nicolls puts it, 'Indigenous sovereignty exists *because* I cannot know of what it consists; my

epistemological artillery cannot penetrate it' (2000: 370). However, in some articles Indigenous scholars draw on Aboriginal ontologies and methodologies to turn critical reflection back onto Western politics. Graham, Murphy and Brigg, for example, track liberalism as a political newcomer to this place by following its traces, habits and desires.

Finally, this symposium comes at a critical time for these questions in the broader academic world. Those of us who feel at home in our discipline might wish to avoid the abrasiveness of explicit discussion of colonialism and racism and instead hope for incremental change. However, it is increasingly difficult to sustain the story of gentle progress given our current political debates over university curricula. This symposium takes place in the context of debate over the proposed Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation, which epitomises a counter push to retake scholarly ground lost to diversification and critique over the past few decades (Abbott 2018). Overseas these moves have been framed as 'attempts to rehabilitate the empire and whitewash the academy's historic role in intellectualizing and justifying racism' (Begum and Saina 2019: 198). The Ramsay Centre is only one Australian example of a broader global dynamic – the Ethics and Empire research project at Oxford University and the controversy over 'The Case for Colonialism' in *Third World Quarterly* are international examples of this broader trend. Attempts to decolonise disciplines cannot help but clash with this agenda in an academic 'culture war'. In one sense, this helps to bring to light the political nature of our academic work, which many imagine to be neutral and able to stand above the conflicts it analyses. On the other hand, such ostentatiously politicised academic initiatives might allow progressive political science academics to cry 'racism!' in ways that mask the systemic colonial dynamics of the discipline as a whole. The articles in this symposium examine these fundamental dynamics and make a range of arguments about their nature and effects.

While all articles challenge the status quo and argue for change, they offer different accounts of the problems and the nature of required change. In the first article, Alissa Macoun, Elizabeth Strakosch and Kirsty Parker suggest that political science tends to (re)produce a form of 'disciplinary innocence' that makes it appear as though the discipline is not implicated in colonial power regimes. They argue that the discipline is in fact enmeshed in colonial dynamics in a range of ways, including in the production and reproduction of knowledge about Indigenous people. Given the dominance of other disciplines such as anthropology, however, political science has facilitated research that assumes culture and policy as the primary lenses through which to understand Indigenous people rather than, for instance, as political orders.

In the second article, Mary Graham, Morgan Brigg, and Lyndon Murphy posit liberalism as a political newcomer to this continent, a new kind of animal that needs to be tracked and understood in light of the relationalist and survivalist ethos that is intrinsic to Indigenous politics. In this way, they draw on Aboriginal methodologies and political principles to reflect upon and disrupt the dominant political and ontological assumptions of the discipline.

Sana Nakata and Sarah Maddison highlight the consequences that arise from the discipline's failure to confront its role in the colonial project. They argue that while critical feminist scholarship has centered gender in political analysis, there has not been the same effort made

to understand the colonial structures and logics that underpin contemporary politics. They make the case that the discipline as a whole needs to reorient the dominant understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples themselves as 'the problem to be solved' through political and policy analysis towards a new understanding—and an associated research agenda—that problematises the *relations between* First Nations and the settler colonial state.

Will Sanders asks how it might be possible to decolonise policy and the associated sub-field of policy studies. Drawing on Rowse (2012), Sanders suggests that such a shift will only be possible if and when Indigenous groups are recognised as rights-bearing *peoples* rather than as populations whose main problem is a lack of socio-economic equality. He argues that this approach was more dominant in the self-determination policy era, and his view on the political possibilities within the dominant state based liberal order is therefore more hopeful. Similarly, Dominic O'Sullivan identifies the colonial dynamics of the liberal order to date, but searches for and finds ways to make liberal theory and institutions work for Indigenous people as well as settlers.

This short symposium raises far more questions than it answers, but they are questions upon which the discipline would do well to reflect. For example: are we conscious of the ways in which political science and policy studies participate in producing knowledge *about* (rather than from and with) Indigenous people for use in settler governing systems? As individual scholars are we taking the lead in building constructive Indigenous-settler relationships in our own institutions? Do we consciously make an effort to understand racial hierarchies and decentre whiteness in our scholarship? Do we value Indigenous scholarship from the places in which we work? How does focusing on and naturalising Western scholars and structures erase other forms of political life?

These questions are relevant for all political scientists, not just those working in Indigenous studies or undertaking research with a specific focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander politics. All Australian political research takes place in a colonised space, and this has implications for all of our work, all of the time. This symposium makes clear that there is exciting new scholarship and collaborative practice already responding to this challenge. It comes at a critical time in the discipline, where we can choose to respond to the emerging political and academic challenges in a more active way.

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