

# Decolonizing the Curriculum

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Nearly everywhere in educational circles we hear calls to “decolonize the curriculum” of our schools. This is part of a broad movement consistent with a program labeled “Social Justice,” and it draws heavily from the neo-Marxist “critical” tradition as well as postmodernist conceptions of knowledge, power, and culture. These theories were developed by postcolonial scholars drawing on French philosophers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, as well as by critical education theorists. These traditions of radical activism slowly fused in higher education and coalesced into a push to “decolonize” just about everything, including the curriculum, the faculty, the university, literature, science, and even time and space. The purpose of this movement is, nominally, to create “justice,” at least as it understands that concept internally—as “justice for marginalized socially constructed *groups*” instead of individuals—but for all its vigor and indefatigability, it isn’t well understood outside of its own activism. This essay seeks to change that.

This perplexing turn of phrase—“decolonize the curriculum”—immediately raises three questions: 1. what is the curriculum?; 2. what could possibly be meant by “decolonizing” it?; and 3. how did the curriculum come to be “colonized”? As none of this makes sense from a straightforward reading of one of the hottest buzz-phrases in education, ranging all the way from pre-K through the end of post-graduate education, these three questions are in desperate need of clear, straightforward answers.

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Making matters worse, this worldview is only ever communicated to us in reformulated perversions of our own concepts. I mean words like “racism,” which no longer only describes intentional acts of racial prejudice but instead sees what is generally understood as racism as just the most obvious symptoms of a mysterious set of systemic power dynamics that pervade all of society, always operating from “whiteness” and always oppressive. This understanding of racism is believed to be so deeply and permanently embedded in the system that even when no genuine racists or overt acts of racial prejudice are present, the system itself can and will be regarded as racist. These kinds of lexical issues apply just as much to words like “curriculum” and “colonize.”

Decolonizing the curriculum is just one step in a “long march,” as it was originally described by the communist philosopher Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, to do away with liberalism and Enlightenment rationality and replace it with a utopian dream euphemistically described as “ideal democracy.” The starting place for this revolution is our institutions, particularly educational ones.

### **What is the Curriculum?**

We all have a sense of what is meant by “curriculum.” It is what is taught, or, as the mindset we’re interested in understanding would have it, it’s what gets taught. This may seem a subtle distinction, perhaps even an obvious one, but the shift from thinking of the curriculum as what is taught to that of what gets taught is the crucial one to understand if we are to make sense of a movement bent on “decolonizing the curriculum.”

Regardless of which of these frames are used to look at the curriculum, they are, in the sense a reasonable person would see them, the same thing. They both refer to that collection of materials, readings, concepts, lessons, and so on that constitute a program of teaching and learning in our educational programs, institutions, and spaces, even when broadly construed. For example, it makes just as much sense to think of “the curriculum” for a nonsense workshop on alleged healing crystals as it does to think of the curriculum as a program of study in a four-year or advanced degree, our entire K-12 (in America) educational trajectory, or the specific syllabus of any given course or even class embedded anywhere within that. In that sense, the curriculum can be understood as “what is taught” or as “what gets taught” with equal clarity, and the difference between the two phrases seems to boil down to little more than the difference in the aspirations of our teachers and our educational systems and the somewhat less perfect results as they prevail/manifest from classroom to classrooms. This,

of course, is usually determined by making the best possible guesses as to what kinds of materials and lessons will round out students optimally for the society into which they are graduating.

The mindset that talks about wanting to “decolonize the curriculum,” doesn’t think in terms of programs, their aims, challenges, and the unfortunate contingencies and compromises made around the realities of situations. It thinks in terms of power: thus, for those with this mindset, the curriculum is *what gets taught*, and the key word of the phrase is “gets,” as in what is *allowed* to be taught by the powerful administrators and teachers who like the status quo and wish to preserve it. It will therefore be concerned with what material is considered “core” (like math) and what is considered “elective” (like ethnic studies).

The activism behind “decolonizing the curriculum” will, as a rule, read the dynamics of systemic power it believes shape all of society into all of these decisions, and disrupting these dynamics will be considered of far more importance than equipping students with knowledge. The only thing that distinguishes this mindset from a vulgar type of conspiracy theory is that it posits that we’re all—unless imbued with the right kind of awareness, which is sometimes called a “critical consciousness”—part of the conspiracy through the machinations of neo-Marxist concepts like “hegemony” and “ideology.”

For those who would “decolonize” our curricula, then, the curriculum is that which power and privilege have decided should be taught because it is in the interests of the powerful and privileged to teach it. These decisions are usually believed not to be intentional but implicit, accepted by the hegemon as justifiable, right, and natural. To summarize this view, when it comes to “decolonizing the curriculum,” the curriculum is an ideological project devised by the powerful in society—meaning mostly straight, white, Western men with a “Eurocentric” bent on things like science, reason, and rationality, among other proven epistemological and pedagogical frameworks. The curriculum came to be in its current form to serve the interests of the powerful at the expense of everyone else’s, either by intention or by failing to understand that they’ve internalized their dominance and come to believe it right and natural.

There is an even more sinister attitude tucked away in another buzz-phrase that hovers around the “decolonize the curriculum” agendas: the “hidden curriculum.” This term dates back to one of the earliest critical pedagogists, Philip Jackson, who coined the term in his 1968 book, *Life in Classrooms*. By the “hidden curriculum,” Jackson meant the ways that behavioral expectations for citizens, thus values related to orderliness and obedience, were an intrinsic but not explicit part of the school experience, thus a kind of implicit (or hidden) curriculum in and of themselves.

This idea was extended a few years later in 1971 by another early critical pedagogist, Michael Apple, who went on to devote an entire chapter of his 1979 book *Ideology* to it. Apple expanded Jackson's concept to include all of the ideas that are normalized by the curriculum itself, which is chosen, according to dominant ideology, not just to teach behaviors and instill values but to advance a particular worldview that isn't sufficiently challenged. Apple's agenda, ultimately, was to bring Marxian conflict theory to bear on pedagogy and the curriculum. As he put it:

There has been, so far, little examination of how the treatment of *conflict* in the school curriculum can lead to political quiescence and the acceptance by students of a perspective on social and intellectual conflict that acts to maintain the existing distribution of power and rationality in a society. (Italics Apple's)

This lack of conflict wasn't something he viewed favorably, of course, going on a few pages later to write that this gives students "a view that serves to legitimate the existing social order since change, conflict, and man as creator as well as receiver of values and institutions are systematically neglected." So the point for Apple and essentially all critical pedagogists since has been to expose and dismantle this "hidden curriculum" and instill radical, conflict-and change-oriented (i.e., revolutionary) values into education. All of this proceeds on the assumption that the curriculum itself, whatever it is, must encode and then re-inscribe through teaching the values of the unjustly dominant groups upon all of society or those who oppose it, with no middle ground (since to be neutral against oppression is to side with the oppressors).

Michael Apple is ancient history, however, so far as the activists of today are concerned. *Ideology* is, in fact, older than they are in most cases. Nevertheless, this is the spirit in which "decolonizing the curriculum" persists even today, as can be read in modish updated terminology in the 2018 book *Decolonising the University*, published by Pluto Press, which informs us that

"History" is fixed, unquestionable and precious because it preserves a particular reading of the past, which reinforces a particular understanding of the present; like the statue, its objectivity rises above the emotional, hand-wringing rabble, who are declared intellectually unfit to participate in the process of its production. What this demonstrates so clearly, is that the

construction of a curriculum at any education level is the product of a power struggle; however, it is not perceived as such.

Apple's neo-Marxist presence in radical pedagogy is clearly still felt.

### **How Did the Curriculum Become Colonized?**

The prevailing mindset of the activists is that the curriculum was colonized by the presumption that white, Western epistemologies and pedagogies are unjustly favored over “other ways of knowing” and teaching. This happened under an ideology that presents these approaches as superior and the processes by which they attained dominance as natural and utterly ignorant of its own political—methodological—success. As we read in *Decolonising the University*, for example,

It appears as a “natural” process, in which disciplinary canons and narrative framings come into being through apolitical, “rational” means that do not themselves need to be scrutinised; indeed, the very claim to apolitical greatness is itself the defining feature of the canon.

There are two ways in which this notion of a false apolitical (objective) superior canon makes sense. The first is simpler: the world had many different approaches to knowledge, knowledge systems, and educational programs which were systematically dominated by white, Western ones in an act of colonization. This colonization took place at the level of knowledge itself, although it also led to educational systems around the world adopting similar methods as were employed by colonialist Europe and its descendants. Again, it is noted that methodological success cannot possibly be the explanation for people whose minds can only conceive of unjust applications of political power and sociocultural dominance. Jet airliners, vaccines, lower infant mortality rates, human footsteps on the moon and, somewhat more pertinently, cruise missiles, aircraft carriers, thermonuclear weapons, not to mention the physical comfort, safety, and health of billions are irrelevant as testimony to the power of a successful methodology, except insofar as these can be gang-pressed into arguments about dominant power structures forcing political compliance upon the “oppressed.”

The other conception of a false superior canon is a bit more subtle. It sees knowledge and the curricula that might transmit it kind of like a Platonic ideal, a

sort of imaginary territory that only exists in abstract space. In the decolonizer's aggrieved view of history, every culture had the ability to stake out "land" for itself in that space and define what knowledge and effective teaching looks like right up until the Enlightenment, which happened to occur in earnest in Europe about five centuries ago. At that point the Platonic ideals of curriculum and of knowledge itself were "unfairly" colonized by the powerful forces of white, Western men who have used their resulting technological dominance to convince themselves and, increasingly and by force, the rest of the world's many pristine cultures into believing their methods are genuinely superior rather than just one among many potentialities. That is, the effectiveness of science and reason have been so overwhelmingly successful, not least at creating technological tools that really were employed in the attempt to dominate the world, that they must somehow be intrinsically unfair. Science and reason allowed white, Western men to colonize most abstract knowledge and curricular space with their exclusionary Eurocentric cultural supremacies. Every other group has therefore had their approaches "colonized."

### **What Does "Decolonizing" Involve?**

Decolonizing is not just about including a more diverse array of scholarship, voices, and perspectives into the curriculum, or even about decentering patriotic or nationalistic narratives in education. It's about attending to a complete revolution in terms of what we consider knowledge, how that can be determined, and how it should be taught. Changing specifics about the curriculum, say by replacing John Stuart Mill with Ta-Nehisi Coates, is merely a proximate tool in a far more radical project that could threaten not only Western culture but the tremendous strides into modernity some aspects of that culture have enabled much of the world to take. Clearly, this must be resisted.

Decolonizing the curriculum is a project to turn education away from learning according to that which has methodological success and toward seeing methodological success merely as an unjust application of political power—specifically, "colonialism" of knowledge, epistemology, and pedagogy. As explained in *Decolonising the University*,

Indeed, at its heart, decolonisation is about recognising the roots of contemporary racism in the multiple material, political, social and cultural processes of colonialism and proceeding from this point; this involves the

laborious work of structural change at several levels of society—a far cry from the administering of welfare and representation services that has typically been the response to racialised grievances.

Decolonizing the curriculum is about dismantling the values conveyed in the “hidden curriculum,” which include methodological rigor, rationality, and liberal civics and ethics (sometimes described, following Audre Lorde, as the “master’s tools”), and replacing them with other agendas. Sometimes these include cultural traditions and witchcraft instead of empiricism, as in the South African “Science Must Fall” movement.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes emotion, interpretation, and highly tendentious “discourse analysis” is put forward as being at least as epistemologically sound as reason. Sometimes these include deliberate projects like “research justice” and “citational justice” that skew the academic record in favor of views they deem politically acceptable. Always, these projects resist at their core instruction in liberal civics and ethics, as these are seen as impediments, not the fundamentally necessary ingredients of an ideal democracy. Conflict theory and its bastard child, identity politics, are, in fact, the intended replacement for civil liberal society, and this begins, for them, with decolonizing the curriculum.

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<sup>1</sup>The Science Must Fall movement is part of the broader decolonization movement known as Rhodes Must Fall, which refers to Cecil Rhodes and seeks to unmake his entire legacy in every detail, including irrelevant ones to the real abuses of colonialism and slave trading. In 2016, the Science Must Fall Movement held a meeting in a South African university in which its representatives argued for local witchcraft traditions to be held on the same standard or as a higher standard than science for South African people. This was captured and shared in a video that went viral on the Internet.