

Reconciling the colonial past and present to build a de-colonial future in the Department of International Relations at LSE

Zoya Zia

Background

As COVID-19 continues to transcend and reinforce borders, the field of international relations (IR) is increasingly applicable to our daily realities. Although the world is divided by disparate economic and political agendas, communities are fighting similar battles to safeguard health and well-being, from the pandemic to climate change and racial justice. Ensuring a sustainable future depends on our ability to work collaboratively. While our lived experiences are inherently linked within a larger context, they are not designated equitable weight in society, including in educational settings. Recognizing this gap, my Change Makers project emerges out of a tense historical moment, one that deeply impacts the lives of LSE students and faculty. Witnessing COVID-19 coincide with Black Lives Matter, Rhodes Must Fall and other public-led movements, we confront a growing consensus to “decolonize” the status quo.

Alongside a recognition of the connectedness of global communities under the pandemic, my academic background led me to undertake this Change Makers project. Whilst studying IR at the University of Texas at Austin, I noticed a tendency to exclude non-Western perspectives in the curriculum and marginalize minority students. Motivated by this experience, my research aims to reconcile the colonial past and present of the Department of IR and build a de-colonial future. I endeavored to answer the following questions. *How can IR curricula be diversified and decolonized and in what ways would such changes influence the experience of students in the Department, especially those who are ethnically underrepresented at LSE?* My project mirrors other Change Makers projects, indicating the importance of decolonizing today.

Methodology

To answer my research question, I developed a three-pronged investigation, drawing upon key literature from within and outside LSE. Notably, the Race Equity Frameworkⁱ and the Inclusive Education Action Planⁱⁱ provided a foundation for the project, which focuses on undergraduate students in the Department of IR. I strived to investigate not only what they learn, but also how and why they learn. As a result, my methodology is composed of three elements. I continually ran against the obstacle of time—this effort must continue to effect real change.

- To review *curriculum design*, I conducted an initial audit of the reading lists in two core courses: IR100 (International Relations: Theories, Concepts and Debates) and IR101 (Contemporary Issues in International Relations).
- I collected feedback about coursework and *student experience* through an anonymous survey questionnaire.

- Turning to *program structure*, I met “decolonizing” scholars from other universities and referred to archival research on the Department of IR at LSE.

Literature Review

Before looking at reading lists and formulating a survey questionnaire, I decided to first define what it means to “decolonize” by evaluating the existing research on the topic. Many scholars have described the coloniality of IR as a discipline and the coloniality of pedagogy, unworking how students acquire and produce knowledge. Mainstream narrativesⁱⁱⁱ in the discipline view Europe as the primary historical actor and approach contexts outside of Europe as derivatives, undermining the agency of non-European populations. Furthermore, these narratives impose binaries including “core” or “periphery” and “advanced” or “uncivilized” over entire regions. As a result, scholars expose the “colonial matrix of power^{iv}” in IR, which refers to the myriad ways of knowing that perpetuate Western worldviews, characterized by major themes of modernity and civilization. In this vein, courses tend to begin with “traditional” Eurocentric viewpoints like realism, state power and liberalism, leaving marginal space for “critical” thought.

My research builds upon the existing literature by recognizing diversification as part of a larger movement to uproot an asymmetrical world order. Racial and class-based inequities influence academic expectations and demographics. When BME students find a lack of plurality in elite universities, they are made to feel that they do not belong, that those from their backgrounds have not made any contributions to the discipline^v. To decolonize is to: 1) conceptualize IR as a field that is not only studied but also experienced in the classroom; 2) identify and confront disparities in the curriculum and beyond; 3) acknowledge universities including LSE as spaces of power, established by empires, and face their exclusionary realities^{vi}.

Data Analysis

Each stage of data reveals a layer of colonial pedagogy, urgently calling on the Department of IR to rethink its curriculum design, student-faculty engagement and overall program structure.

Reading List Audit

Whilst reviewing the IR100 and IR101 reading lists, I quickly ascertained that the vast majority of authors are based in North America and Europe. Non-Western perspectives are left for later weeks, and even when the topics shift to “peripheral” regions, they are approached in relation to the West. Notably, “Could the International Community Have Saved Syria” is a weekly theme in one of the courses. There is an abject lack of diversity in the curriculum, from the ethnic identities of the authors to the world regions covered and forms of knowledge (written text, video, etc.) shared.

Student Survey/Questionnaire

36 undergraduate IR students completed the survey, composed of 15 open-ended and tiered questions. Nearly 70% of students have heard of efforts to “decolonize LSE,” but have expressed that their teaching engages in conversations around race, gender and decolonizing “only sometimes” and includes different perspectives “only sometimes.”

Just a handful of students say they have learned the history of LSE. I arranged a Padlet^{vii} to feature student voices—visit this [link](#) to view their quotes.

Scholarly Outreach

I reached out to scholars supporting efforts to decolonize institutions including Oxford Brookes University and the University of London. Dr. Maia Pal, Dr. Doerthe Rosenow, Dr. Molly Cochran and Elizabeth Charles offered their expertise and encouraged me to pursue multiple routes for change. In particular, Dr. Cochran, an LSE alumna, remarked on the possibility of “activizing the curriculum” or studying IR through activism. Several of my recommendations speak to her suggestion.

Archival Research

I contacted undergraduate student researchers from the Department of Anthropology, Eliana Radaelli, Alex Seuren, Leonie Zeuner and Neelofar Ahmed, to inquire about their project on LSE’s historic role teaching colonial administration. Established in 1927, the Department of IR emerged in the context of imperial domination. This era is evident in the framing of its course offerings at the time. “IR: Cultural Contacts Between the West and Primitive Peoples” studied “the white man’s tendency to accelerate reforms” and the “physical aspect of race impact.” “IR: Problems of Colonial Government” examined the “problems created by the contact of advanced and backward civilizations,” hailing “assimilation” and the “subordination of native society” as solutions. Such descriptors are an alarming marker of a still unsettled colonial legacy.

Findings

- The Department of IR has been and continues to be a renown, global force in producing research, knowledge and leaders in the world order.
- Currently, course reading lists are dominated by perspectives from Europe and North America, maintained by a “colonial matrix of power” that continually marginalizes non-Western voices.
- Students view decolonization as an urgent matter, a campaign that entails much more than diversifying the curriculum.
- Students have different ideas around decolonization and would like to collaborate with lecturers in sharing these views and shaping their overall classroom experience.
- Not only will the Department need to look ahead to develop and improve upon current teaching practices, including the content of curriculum and assessment, but it will also need to reconcile its colonial past with its present.



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Recommendations

1. Develop a curriculum that fully acknowledges the Department of IR's colonial history while actively facilitating research in this domain. The Department has promoted the education of colonial administrators. LSE needs to confront this past in order to address its legacies within the classroom setting and the discipline of IR and redirect its positionality.
2. Review core course reading lists in the Department of IR and restructure them to become more inclusive of perspectives from the Global South and non-traditional topics, learning styles and forms of knowledge. One potential change is to contextualize the Eurocentrism and racism of mainstream IR theorists by incorporating post-colonial and feminist thought throughout the term. Instead of casting non-Western viewpoints aside for later weeks, LSE should include them earlier on with articles and creative platforms like film screenings and virtual museum visits.
3. Collaborate with students in focus groups to more effectively understand their needs and experiences in education, especially those identifying with BME backgrounds. Since racial disparities permeate the environment surrounding both its faculty and students, LSE must evaluate existing feedback channels and introduce new mechanisms for jointly discussing and challenging barriers to BME equity, like the awarding gap.
4. Contextualize academic material with the historic development of fields of knowledge and ongoing racial and class-based disparities. For example, IR100 could bring in a participant of "Justice for Cleaners," a movement advocating for the rights of largely BME immigrant workers at LSE. Similarly, IR101 could invite climate activist groups from Latin America to engage with students via Zoom, thereby platforming non-Western voices and approaching academic material through an empirical lens.
5. Identify and draw upon best practices from other departments and institutions. Numerous scholars and Change Makers have carried out their own research. To widen the impact of their work, it is our responsibility to learn from one another and pursue emerging facets of decolonization. Simply diversifying syllabi, one course at a time, will not dismantle colonial structures. Instead, LSE would benefit from respecting the specific characteristics of each class and department while also building bridges between them, ensuring this movement is neither isolated nor divided.

ⁱ <https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/equity-diversity-and-inclusion/EDI-at-LSE/Race-Equity-at-LSE/race-equity-framework/Race-Equity-Framework>

ⁱⁱ <https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/education/Assets/Documents/Inclusive-Education-Action-Plan-2019/Inclusive-Education-Action-Plan.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2016.1245100>

^{iv} <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/21/interview-walter-mignolopart-2-key-concepts>

^v <https://insights.uksg.org/articles/10.1629/uksg.475/>

^{vi} <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2018/03/04/decolonising-international-relations-some-pedagogical-reflections>

^{vii} <https://padlet.com/zoyazarazia/changemakers>