

Reconciling the Colonial Past and Present to Build a De-Colonial Future in the Department of International Relations at LSE

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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 engaged in similar battles to safeguard health and well-being, from the pandemic to climate change, racial justice and beyond. The possibility of 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 afforded equitable weight in society, including in educational settings. Recognizing this gap, my Change Makers project emerges from 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 social movements, we confront a growing consensus to “decolonize” the status quo.

Alongside a recognition of the interconnectedness of global communities amidst 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 attempted 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 Framework¹ and the Inclusive Education Action Plan² provided a foundation for the project, which focuses on undergraduate students in the Department of IR. I strived to investigate not only what these students learn, but also how and why they learn. As a result, my methodology is composed of three elements.

- 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 the overarching *student experience* through an anonymous survey questionnaire.
- Turning to *program structure*, I met “decolonizing” scholars from various universities and referred to archival research on the Department of IR at LSE.

¹ <https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/equity-diversity-and-inclusion/EDI-at-LSE/Race-Equity-at-LSE/race-equity-framework/Race-Equity-Framework>

² <https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/education/Assets/Documents/Inclusive-Education-Action-Plan-2019/Inclusive-Education-Action-Plan.pdf>

I align my project closely with the provisions of the aforementioned Inclusive Education Action Plan, leading me to gather and analyze multiple forms of data. “Decolonizing the Curriculum” is an initiative to probe course syllabi and reading lists, a substantial starting place for my work. “Inclusive Pedagogy” invites collaboration with students. The anonymous survey plays a vital role, then, in my data collection. I spoke to scholars and addressed the history of the Department of IR to understand where we stand right now, in terms of exclusivity in education. I continually ran up against the challenge of time with my layered approach. This research must continue to effect real change within the university, operating even on levels that I did not have the capacity to reach, such as “Academic Mentoring” and “Anti-Racism Training.”



Literature Review:

Before looking at reading lists and formulating a survey questionnaire, I decided to first define what it means to “decolonize” by evaluating 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 narratives³ in the discipline view Europe as the central actor in history and approach contexts 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 patterns⁴ in IR that uphold “imperial and colonial reasoning.” In this vein, courses often start with “traditional” Eurocentric viewpoints like realism, state power and liberalism, leaving marginal space for “critical” thought.

While the history of the discipline presents a window into the Department of IR, decolonization is multifaceted, pointing us to several avenues for change. The Inclusive Education Action Plan distinguishes diversifying from decolonizing, as the former involves creating an intersectional, inclusive curriculum and the latter prompts discussion about the enduring influence of imperial attitudes on society. Both initiatives are crucial to dismantling the “colonial matrix of power⁵,” which refers to the myriad ways of knowing that reinforce Western worldviews, characterized by themes of modernity and civilization. Reviewing reading lists opens up a conversation about which voices are centered in courses, but racial and class-based inequities also frame academic

³ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2016.1245100>

⁴ <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780742540248/Decolonizing-International-Relations>

⁵ <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/21/interview-walter-mignolo-part-2-key-concepts>

expectations and demographics. When BME students see 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 significant contributions to the discipline⁶.

My research builds upon the existing literature by recognizing diversification as part of a larger movement to uproot an asymmetrical world order. To decolonize is to: 1) conceptualize IR as a field that is not only examined 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 realities⁷.



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Data Analysis:

With each stage of data collection, I discovered a layer of colonial pedagogy in the Department of IR. All in all, these layers demonstrate the urgency of curriculum redesign, bolstering student experience and reassessing 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 ethnicity of the authors to the regions covered and forms of knowledge (written text, video, etc.) shared.

Student Survey/Questionnaire

36 undergraduate IR students completed the anonymous survey, composed of 15 open-ended and tiered questions. Nearly 70% of students have heard of efforts to decolonize

⁶ <https://insights.uksg.org/articles/10.1629/uksg.475/>

⁷ <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2018/03/04/decolonising-international-relations-some-pedagogical-reflections>

LSE, but admitted 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 Padlet⁸ to feature student voices—visit this [link](#) to view their illuminating quotes.

Scholarly Outreach

As I conducted the reading list audit and formulated the anonymous survey, I contacted scholars backing 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, encouraging me to pursue multiple routes for change. 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 reached out to undergraduate student researchers in the Department of Anthropology, Eliana Radaelli, Alex Seuren, Leonie Zeuner and Neelofar Ahmed, to learn about their project on LSE’s historic role teaching colonial administration. Established in 1927, the Department of IR emerged in the context of imperialism, conquest and domination. The era in which it arose is reflected in the framing of its course offerings through the 1920s and the 1940s. These descriptions are an alarming, yet perhaps unsurprising, testament to a still unsettled colonial legacy.

1. “IR: Cultural Contacts Between the West and Primitive Peoples” studied “the white man’s tendency to accelerate reforms” as well as the purported “physical aspect of race impact” (1927-1928)
2. “IR: Problems of Colonial Government” elaborated on the “problems created by the contact of advanced and backward civilizations” and identified “possible solutions” such as “assimilation” and the “subordination of native society” (1930-1931)



Photo Source: News24

⁸ <https://padlet.com/zoyazarazia/changemakers>

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.
- Current core course reading lists are dominated by perspectives from Europe and North America, maintained by a “colonial matrix of power” that regularly marginalizes non-Western voices.
- Students view decolonization as an urgent matter, one that entails much more than just 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 may also need to reconcile its colonial past with its present.

Recommendations:

1. Develop a curriculum that acknowledges the Department of IR’s colonial history while actively facilitating research in this domain. The Department has historically led in the education of former colonial administrators. LSE needs to confront this past to address its legacy within the classroom setting and the discipline of IR. Without addressing this concrete history, the institution cannot redirect its positionality.
2. Review the course reading lists in the Department of IR and restructure them to become inclusive of perspectives from the Global South, non-traditional subjects and forms of knowledge (like film, art, literature) and learning styles. One option is to contextualize the racism and Eurocentrism of theorists in the cannon by embedding post-colonial and feminist thought throughout the term. World Wars I and II can be framed in the urgency of anti-colonial or anti-racist struggle. Instead of casting non-Western viewpoints aside for later weeks, LSE syllabi should include them earlier on through journal articles and creative platforms like film screenings and virtual museum visits.
3. Collaborate with students in focus groups to gain a better understanding of their needs and experiences in classrooms, especially those identifying with BME backgrounds. As racial disparities permeate the environment surrounding faculty and students, LSE must evaluate existing feedback channels and introduce new mechanisms. Structural barriers limit the possibilities of moving toward BME equity, specifically with reading lists and the awarding gap—these topics are worth investigating together.
4. Contextualize academic material with the development of fields of knowledge and real-world racial and class-based disparities. For example, IR100 could bring in a participant in “Justice for Cleaners,” a movement to advance the rights of largely BME immigrant workers at LSE. Similarly, IR101 might invite climate activists from Latin America to engage with students via Zoom, thereby centering non-Western voices and approaching academic material through an empirical lens.
5. Identify and draw upon best practices from other departments and institutions. Various scholars and Change Makers have carried out research in their own fields. To make the most effective use of their conclusions, it is our responsibility to learn from one another and pursue emerging avenues for decolonization. Simply diversifying reading lists, one course at a time, will not dismantle colonial structures. Instead, LSE would benefit from respecting the specific elements of each class or department while also building bridges between them, ensuring this movement is neither isolated nor divided.