

The Censorious Left's Latest Mania: 'Decolonizing' Everything

By Joanna Williams

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At Northern Michigan University, students can discover how to “decolonize” their diet. That means learning “about where the common foods and ingredients come from, what a ‘decolonizing diet’ is, and how they can incorporate the diet into their daily lives.”

Meanwhile, the editors of the *American Historical Review* have announced plans to decolonize the journal and confront its “past lack of openness to scholars and scholarship due to race, color, creed, gender, sexuality, nationality and a host of other assigned characteristics.”

In the UK, London’s School of Oriental and African Studies has announced plans to “decolonize” its degree courses following high-profile student campaigns such as “Why is My Curriculum White?” that are critical of “the domination of white ‘Eurocentric’ writers and thinkers.” Last year, students at Reed College protested the Eurocentrism of their Introduction to Humanities course. At Yale University students petitioned for the removal of a course in Major English Poets that featured, surprisingly enough, mostly white men. Thanks to their efforts, that course has now been downgraded to optional.

The fight to decolonize Harvard led to the removal of the Royal family seal, for fear that it might “evoke associations with slavery.” At the University of Oxford a plaque honoring Cecil Rhodes, the British imperialist who established the Rhodes Scholarships, has been taken down. At Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada, professors can take a course in decolonizing education in order to “understand indigenous perspectives in the history of colonization to contemporary realities in Canada.” All around the world, universities are decolonizing courses, buildings, libraries, and reading lists.

The drive to decolonize is not confined to academia. In the UK we have discussions about decolonizing health care, translation, and feminist art. There are campaigns to decolonize architecture in the United Arab Emirates, the media in New Zealand, design in Mexico, bookshelves in South Africa, and seemingly the whole of Alaska.

Throughout the U.S. we’ve seen the removal of Confederate monuments. Clearly, we have many unresolved issues with the past. But too often the rush to decolonize evades a discussion of history and instead paints everything that happened before today as irredeemably racist and wicked—in need of obliteration rather than discussion.

Last year, the journal *Third World Quarterly* published an article in which Bruce Gilley set out "The Case for Colonialism." Those who read the piece criticized it for shoddy scholarship and historical inaccuracies. But most of us will never know how it measured up, as the publication was soon withdrawn following threats to the journal's editor. In the UK, Oxford University's Professor Nigel Biggar wrote a newspaper article arguing that people should not "feel guilty about our colonial history," and as a consequence received a critical letter from over 200 colleagues and scholars condemning him as "an apologist for colonialism." Biggar said: "There is a view that people with views like mine are not to be reasoned with, but only to be silenced."

Preventing all discussion of colonialism erases, rather than confronts, the past. Indeed, the logic of the decolonize movement is that colonialism is not a legacy of history but a malignant impact upon the present. This sleight of hand allows campaigners to equate past invasion, murder, oppression, and exploitation with being made to sit through a lecture on Kant or Shakespeare in an expensive and elite institution.

The move to decolonize is not based on a nuanced critique of the West's historical legacy. We cannot have a discussion that asks how and why colonialism occurred, and considers its impact then and now, because the conclusions have already been decided for us. Rather than questioning the past we must remove all trace of it from our universities, architecture, and food. We must start history afresh.

This Year Zero approach is inevitably censorious. It's about removing monuments and articles, not adding to a national debate. Campaigners might claim they want to expand and diversify reading lists and university courses, but this is often disingenuous. When teaching time is limited, including new content means removing material elsewhere.

All teachers, professors, editors, and town planners should review what gets taught, written, and constructed. To teach the same courses year in, year out, without question, does students a disservice. New research may lead to a re-evaluation of material that had previously taken a central place within the curriculum. Knowledge should not be set in aspic but considered in new contexts. The problem with the decolonize movement is the basis on which it asks us to make these judgments.

The drive behind decolonize pushes us to consider the worth of art, literature, and all forms of knowledge based on biology rather than on intellectual merit. Instead of looking at what Hegel or WEB Du Bois, Audre Lorde or Sylvia Plath, have to offer in terms of beauty or truth, we are asked to make crude judgements based on sex and skin color, with white and male being bad, black and female being better. We are asked to

start by assuming that knowledge carries no universal truth or relevance, that ideas can only ever represent and speak to particular identity groups.

Decolonize campaigns present black people and white people as two distinct groups with nothing in common. No books or facts or ideas can transcend this racial divide and be equally relevant to all. In this way, the decolonize movement entrenches racial thinking. It promotes a racist and patronizing view that black students can only learn if they see themselves, in a most basic and biological form, represented in the curriculum. This is to suggest that black students can only learn “black knowledge”; in other words, black students can’t learn Kant or Shakespeare.

Decolonize presents black people as bearing the scars of history and white people as benefiting from inherited privilege. In reality, wealthy students at elite universities have access to opportunities denied to youngsters from poorer families—irrespective of skin color. The presentation of all black students as victims and all white students as privileged masks the real inequalities with us today.

Ironically, the decolonize movement is colonizing more and more areas of life. As it does so it introduces an uncritical disdain for the past and a censorious, intolerant approach to the present. It entrenches racial thinking and presents a debilitating view of black people as burdened by historic victimhood. We do need to engage in a critical and open-minded debate about the legacy of colonialism—but the decolonize movement moves us further away from the likelihood that such a dialogue will take place.

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