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Decolonising geographical knowledges: the incommensurable, the university, and democracy

'Decolonising geographical knowledge' is the theme of the 2017 annual conference of the Royal Geographical Society-Institute for British Geographers (RGS-IBG). 'Decolonising geographical knowledge' is, however, a disputed undertaking, and so whether it makes for an appropriate theme for the RGS-IBG annual conference is therefore also open for discussion. In this regard, Esson et al. (2017) raise a set of concerns that centre mainly around the problems that arise when an ostensibly 'white' discipline undertakes "to query implicitly universal claims to knowledges associated with the west, and further interrogate how such knowledges continue to marginalize and discount places, people and knowledges across the world" (RGS-IBG, 2017). Here the main problem is that without prioritising Indigenous and non-white scholars¹ or foregrounding the way that decolonisation is a political movement centrally concerned with the return of appropriated land (as opposed to merely an intellectual exercise), the RGS-IBG conference risks reproducing the very disciplinary privilege it seeks to unsettle by recentring 'white' academics as the agents of something called 'decolonising geographical knowledge' while marginalising Indigenous scholars and activists at the forefront of struggles for decolonisation. This is an important and fair criticism and ought to be taken seriously by the RGS-IBG, its membership, and the conference participants. It cuts to the core of disciplinary self-understanding as much as it exposes a fundamental epistemological tension that cuts across all knowledge forms, namely the role of 'difference' in designating how ideas, experiences, histories, and values are mobilised to construct forms of collective belonging, such as an academic discipline, a public, or a shared critical consciousness.

This short intervention offers some brief reflections on how we as a discipline with a shared interest in concepts of place, space, nature and time, among others, might approach the contentious politics of 'decolonising geographical knowledge'. Writing from the point of view of a white ally from a settler-colonial background, the central claim I wish to make is that while the conference theme may well turn out to be more 'metaphoric' than real, as Esson et al. (2017) have suggested, it nevertheless offers an important occasion for reflecting on the *democratic* function of the university at a moment when the university is under extreme pressure to conform to a model of learning in which knowledge is instrumentalised and stripped of its inherently political nature. Echoing the wider societal condition in which unconscionable concentrations of wealth and power as a result of neoliberalism *and* colonialism are undermining democracy, Wendy Brown (2015) argues that the very same "are at the heart of the crises besetting public universities today" (p.179). The crises towards which Brown is pointing are well known to us so need not be rehearsed at length, but in brief amount to the increasing marketization of higher education in North America and the United Kingdom and the transformation of higher education into a private good as opposed to a central mechanism in the realisation of a public culture in the service of the higher, even if fraught, ideals of equality, reason, liberty, justice and the like. Importantly, too, Brown also presages the ascendancy of American fascism (my term) when she writes that democracy "cannot survive the peoples' wholesale ignorance of the forces shaping their lives and limning their future" (p.179). An educated citizenry is, Brown reminds us, essential to a thriving democracy which is undermined when universities are themselves stripped of their public function and status. In this respect we should read the current politics of 'post-truth' and 'post-factualism' as symptomatic of postracialism and of a loss of faith not only in democratic institutions, but also in the public university.

It is in this context that I want to argue that the RGS-IBG conference theme 'decolonising geographic knowledge' offers an opportunity for academic *and* institutional² Geography to reflect on the

¹ I refer throughout to 'Indigenous and non-white scholars' and 'Indigenous and non-white scholars and scholarship' as doing best reflects the intent of Esson et al.'s standalone commentary, even while other labels such as 'Black scholars', 'Black scholarship', or 'Black and Brown scholars' might equally suffice.

² By institutional Geography I have in mind the Royal Geographical Society, National Geographic Society, and the Royal Geographical Society of Canada, among other similar institutions.

democratic function of the university at moment when public faith in the university appears to be waning. In this respect, the academic conference is precisely a space for debate and *disagreement* and it builds on a vision of the university in which the university serves the wider public function of producing a range of knowledges that reflect the world we inhabit. And if the university is adequately performing this function then the result ought to be a proliferation of *competing* forms of knowledge, knowledges that derive from different methodological and philosophical traditions, that reflect the full range of differences that comprise contemporary social and political life, and above all knowledges that reveal egregious power disparities and that thwart the realisation of public life founded on notions of equality, including forms of knowledge that reveal the colonial and racial origins of the university itself.

In this respect, the conference theme 'decolonising geographical knowledge' may well reproduce what Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) call 'settler innocence', the practice by which settlers and colonizers assuage their colonial and/or imperial guilt by disaffiliating from colonial epistemology through their alignment with decolonial thought and practice. The same can also be said of 'white' scholars working within the anti-racist tradition (Wiegman, 1999). But equally the conference theme offers an occasion for geographers to come to terms with what Tuck and Yang (2012) have called an "ethic of incommensurability." If settler innocence is a pre-condition for reconciliation, then Tuck and Yang's ethic of incommensurability is the deep refusal of reconciliation³, a refusal of "settler moves to innocence" (p.10), and acknowledgement that "decolonization is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity" (p.35) and owes nothing to settlers. For many 'white' geographers committed or even just sympathetic to anti- and de-colonial struggles of various sorts, Tuck and Yang's ethic of incommensurability may well be a tough pill to swallow. But this is precisely the point of their intervention, to sow sharp disagreement at the centre of the colonial relation and to ensure that decolonisation remains materially focussed on as Esson et al. (2017) put it "Indigenous-led demands for radical restructuring of land, resources and wealth globally" (p.X). And it is in this respect that I want to suggest that Tuck and Yang's ethic of incommensurability provides the impetus for RGS-IBG conference goes to reflect on the democratic function of the university alongside the conference theme of 'decolonising geographical knowledge'.

Functioning democracies require disagreement without which political life becomes evacuated and meaningless. They require the deep contestation of ideas, structures, subject positions, modes of power, and perhaps above all an abiding recognition that knowledge, *all* knowledge, is political. And universities are one of the few institutions that exist in which its constituents can actively and vocally acknowledge the contestability of knowledge, indeed are encouraged to engage in contestation as one of several ethics that guide one's involvement in university life. In this sense, universities are a proxy of democratic life. Brown reminds us that democracy is 'rule by the people'. But if 'the people' is a narrowly defined subset of 'citizens', or if the people who are said to possess the right to rule themselves only come into being through the negation of a different subset of people (i.e., the colonised, the enslaved), then democracy is greatly diminished. Universities by contrast can play and have played a vital role in democratic life by proliferating difference, by, for example, valuing Indigenous and non-white scholars and scholarship. This is not to suggest to that the university is perfect or that all universities are equal in this regard. Clearly they are not. Nor am I trying to imply that the university is a means for domesticating the ethic of incommensurability. And nor am I advocating that the university embrace what Glen Coulthard (2014) calls "the colonial politics of recognition." My point is simply that universities as sites for the proliferation of disagreement have an ongoing responsibility to reflect the worlds they study, and that we as a discipline, as a subset of the university, have a part to play in ensuring that universities follow through on this ideal. Alongside and *not* in place of thinking what 'decolonising geographical knowledge' might mean, the RGS-IBG conference is an occasion for the discipline to think carefully about how Indigenous and non-white scholarship could be better reflected in the institutional structure of the discipline. Doing so, I would suggest, is not only an index of democratic

³ For an extended discussion on the refusal of reconciliation see Glen Coulthard (2014) *Red skin, white masks: rejecting the colonial politics of recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

political life, 'rule by the people', but the basis upon which new forms of political solidarity might arise to resist colonialism alongside other contemporary crises, not least an emboldened transatlantic white supremacy.

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