

Against Decolonisation: Campus Culture Wars and the Decline of the West

By Doug Stokes

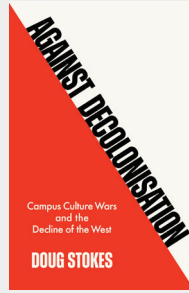
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Once frontiers of civilization's intellectual accumulation, universities now find themselves accused of the very crimes they helped humanity overcome. Doug Stokes, in his recent book *Against Decolonisation: Campus Culture Wars and the Decline of the West*, argues that decolonization and identity politics in British universities exaggerate the prevalence of racism, foster division, and threaten the university's mission of free inquiry. Departing from the roots of postmodern relativism, critical race theory, and cultural Marxism, which aim to undermine truth, science, and liberal democracy, the ideologically driven project of universities presents an autogenic dilemma due to the very nature of these institutions. Stokes calls for a return to the rationalism of the Enlightenment, scientific realism, and a universalist conception of knowledge as the only antidote to the dangers of cultural fragmentation. By integrating postcolonial theory, campus practices, and cultural politics, the book presents a clear narrative that cautions against the risks of illiberalism in the name of anti-racism. The emphasis on defending universalism resembles broader debates in IR theory over whether norms of truth and rationality are Western impositions or necessary foundations for dialogue across cultures.

Complemented by a concise introduction and conclusion, the book comprises a total of five



chapters. The first chapter revolves around the arguments within neo-colonial and postcolonial traditions of IR to lay the intellectual foundation of the book. Stokes draws on a wide range of critical theorists, including Fanon, Wallerstein, Foucault, Derrida, and Said, to frame the persistence of colonial hierarchies in contemporary global politics. This eclectic theoretical basis divulges the ambition of the book to challenge the Eurocentric assumptions of mainstream IR and to bridge structuralist critiques of dependency with poststructuralist analyses of discourse and power. In doing so, this chapter echoes ongoing debates about the need to provincialize Western theory and to incorporate non-Western perspectives into the study of global politics. Reproducing binary categories of world-system theories and post-structuralist approaches in an attempt to combine their respective structural determinism and abstraction may deviate toward findings of realization, providing original conceptual tools to maintain theoretical coherence.

Chapter 2 makes a compelling case for why racism in higher education must be taken seriously. The Equality and Human Rights Commission's (EHRC) survey suggests a sector-wide prevalence based on a relatively small sample of 1,009 students. This data from the 2018-2019 academic year leads to the Guard-

ian's widely circulated claim in 2020 that 60,000 students experience racism. How a combination of empirical data and high-profile political events like George Floyd's murder has propelled the decolonization agenda into the mainstream of UK higher education is laid out. The direct statements from figures like Dandridge (Chief Executive of the Office for Students) and Grady (General Secretary of the University and College Union) lend credibility to the sector's view on racial inequality as urgent and systemic. This makes the narrative persuasive in linking broader social justice movements to tangible institutional reforms. Although it is rhetorically powerful, emphasis on institutional blindness and denial risks overlooking the nuances of underreporting and the potential gap between perception and lived experience. The exploration of the Race Equality Charter (REC) and initiatives by Advance HE show how equality frameworks are embedded in university bureaucracies. This illustrates how the decolonization agenda has moved from moral discourse to structural enforcement. While these mechanisms may raise awareness, their effectiveness in fostering genuine change remains contested. The chapter also highlights the role of critical race theory concepts such as "white privilege" (p. 35), "microaggressions" (p. 36), and "structural racism" (p. 37) in shaping institutional policies.

Racism in UK universities has been exaggerated into a "moral panic" that justifies illiberal interventions, such as Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) bureaucracies and microaggression monitoring, as discussed in Chapter 3. Stokes highlights that reported cases of racial harassment are statistically minimal and challenges claims of systemic racism. This section denounces "mathiness" (p. 51) or the selective use of statistics and "conceptual apartheid" (p. 53) in which knowledge is

cialized through a "correspondence theory" (p. 54) of identity between teachers and students. Although the criticism of statistical inflation and the conflation of overt harassment with microaggressions highlights potential weaknesses in the evidentiary base of the decolonization movement, Stokes challenges the premise of structural exclusion by pointing to the over-representation of black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) staff and students. However, there is a risk of over-correction in Chapter 3. While questioning whether evidence is valuable, the dismissal of racism as a "moral panic" (p. 58) undermines substantial qualitative research on discrimination in universities. Moreover, the portrayal of EDI initiatives as merely authoritarian overlooks comparative evidence from the U.S. and Australia, which suggests that such initiatives can broaden participation when carefully implemented. In comparative terms, this chapter resonates with the literature of "moral panics" in Furedi's *How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century*, but its application to racism risks minimizing systemic problems rather than illuminating them.

The shift in Chapter 4 to theoretical and historical terrain gathers the argument around the criticism of postmodern social constructivism and the defense of scientific realism in absolutist terms. This part of the book critiques decolonial theorists for portraying Western civilization as irredeemably malign and for neglecting non-European histories. By highlighting non-Western forms of slavery and colonialism, Stokes contends that decolonial critiques reproduce a Eurocentric narcissism. Moreover, this keeps the West at the center of analysis. The call to recognize non-Western agency addresses a blind spot in much postcolonial scholarship that risks portraying the Global South only as victims.

References to alternative imperial histories like Chinese slavery and African corruption remind us that the empire is not solely Western. It portrays postcolonial epistemologies as mere relativism by overlooking nuanced positions. This emphasis on non-Western complicity may cause sliding into a whataboutism that deflects from the enduring structural legacies of Western imperialism. The dismissal of CRT and postcolonialism as ideological overlooks the rich contributions these fields have made.

In Chapter 5, Stokes interrogates how the discourse of whiteness has been institutionalized in British universities and wider culture. This positions it as a framework of collective guilt and cultural reprogramming. It is discussed that whiteness studies and critical race theory encourage a vision of systemic racial domination that pathologizes whiteness as inherently oppressive. Regardless of their intent or behavior, white students and staff are framed as complicit in structural racism. Chapter 5 further criticizes how curriculum reform and unconscious bias training reinforce this framework. The author criticizes the interventions in the curriculum rather than improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged students from a race-first ideological framework. These interventions are accused of emphasizing systemic racism and historic oppression, overshadowing class disparities, increasing bureaucracy, and harming the mobility of students. This way, universities are to shift from their traditional role as spaces of free inquiry. The focus on the political implications of whiteness studies connects theoretical claims to institutional practices, such as mandatory training and curriculum audits. The risks of illiberalism and ideological conformity in higher education are emphasized

by highlighting the potential for self-reinforcing bureaucratic power.

Overall, *Against Decolonisation: Campus Culture Wars and the Decline of the West* relies on a binary between Enlightenment rationalism and postcolonial relativism. This duality overlooks the efforts of combining plural epistemologies with critical realism. By presenting structural racism as the only valid explanation, the argument jeopardizes being reductive and circular. Additionally, when ordinary statements such as “there is only one race, the human race” or “your color does not matter, everyone is human” (p. 44) are classified as microaggressive racism, there is a risk of raising concerns about academic freedom and the potential pathologizing of intent. Exaggerating racism endangers dismissing the persistence of structural inequalities that are argued in studies like Rollock’s chapter in *Education across the African Diaspora* in 2023. Through the conclusion, the lack of meaningful engagement with the constructive contributions of postcolonial IR scholars exposes its contingency. The book closes off the possibility of reformist pathways that could reconcile universalism with epistemic plurality by framing decolonization as primarily a threat rather than a debate. In a comparative perspective, the book’s conclusion resembles conservative critiques of cultural politics, but risks alienating readers who see decolonization not as the destruction of the university, but as its democratization at the same time. Yet, parties that want to understand internal debates within postcolonial theory, institutional governance, and the effects of decolonization initiatives on curricula would benefit from reading this book further to enhance their conceptions of the West and Enlightenment values.