analysis

Whitewash

At a time when universities are emphasising their commitments to equality and diversity, **Adam Smith** asks: why are they still so white?

Students are kicking off again. What began with a video made at University College London in November has spread to York, Warwick and now Oxford. The aim of the campaign is to "decolonise the curriculum": in videos, Facebook groups and on campus, students are arguing that their lectures and institutions are too white. Their criticism of the system is similar to that produced by the group of economics students who, since the 2008 crash, have called for a curriculum that covers more than just neoliberal capitalism.

This is a dramatic divergence from the soft-spoken diversity movement in universities. The Equality Challenge Unit will soon complete the trial run of a Race Equality Charter Mark, which will certify institutions that are helping to improve the representation, progression and success of minority ethnic staff and students. The scheme, due to be rolled out next year, is welcome—but is not enough for some. Rather than building up black and minority ethnic people so that they can thrive in scholarly institutions, the radicals are asking: how can institutions be rebuilt so that they don't keep non-white people out?

The challenges to the research agenda are clear. Some academics worry that lectures in history, philosophy and sociology rely on a reading list that is disproportionately white, and on ideas developed to further imperialism. One consequence is that those who want to ask research questions that are critical of the university system and the intersecting biases to do with race, gender and other characteristics may have a tough path to tread.

Nathaniel Adam Tobias ~~Coleman~~ is one of those in limbo. The philosopher, who strikes through his surname because it was bestowed on his family by slave masters in Jamaica, made national headlines in May when it emerged that University College London had not approved his proposed masters degree in critical white studies. ~~Coleman~~, who worked in the United States for six years and came back to the UK in 2013 to challenge institutions to take a look at themselves, is fighting the decision. But without a green light for the course he was hired to devise, his contract ends in September.

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Katie Markham, who helps to run the Critical Race and Ethnicities Network of junior academics, says this is a common problem: critical race scholars find it hard to get research funding because they struggle to get a university job. But even if they do get a foot in the door, they still find it hard to access funding. "I was naive," says Adam Elliott-Cooper, who is working towards a PhD at the University of Oxford on how UK African-Caribbean people organise to defend themselves against police violence. "I know Oxford has lots of internal money so I thought that once I got in there I would get funding." Instead, he is living with his mum and paying his own salary from a loan and savings from a previous job at a charity.

It is difficult to know whether Elliott-Cooper is merely one of the many unfortunate junior scholars whose work is good enough but not funded because of a lack of money in the system, or whether the system is unconsciously prejudiced against critical research on race. But we do know that black and minority ethnic people are not represented in academia in the same proportions as in society, so no-one can deny that a problem exists.

The mystery around the extent of this problem leads researchers to look for concrete causes to rally around. In April, students at the University of Cape Town managed to persuade their institution to remove a statue of the British colonialist Cecil Rhodes; students in Oxford, where Rhodes endowed his famous scholarships, are now taking aim at their statue. But their broader point is a huge challenge to how universities are organised.

Shona Hunter, a sociologist at the University of Leeds, argues that a university's self-belief that it is the benevolent host of debates about how to restructure society is one reason why it is reluctant to let go of its own structures. "When you start to apply radical knowledge to a university, it destabilises the institution," Hunter says. "So the institution resists, and refuses to reorganise the way power is distributed."

The funding structure is an obvious example. As Elliott-Cooper says, funding is awarded on academic merit, which in the humanities or social sciences is often about reproducing or developing the ideas of white thinkers. But he is trying to do something more marginal—and as a result, he feels that he is kept at the margins.

For decades, there has been a pattern of critical race scholars emigrating to develop their careers, especially to the US, where the struggle against white dominance has been much more palpable. ~~Coleman~~ has a few job interviews lined up, but is not confident that his research agenda will find a place in the UK; he is already thinking about moving to the US. Elliott-Cooper, whose career has barely begun, says: "I really don't want to have to do that."

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