

Teaching modern political thought beyond the canon: an experience in the UK

A paper presented at the European Teaching and Learning Conference, Charles University Prague, 1 June 2018

The research in this paper is ongoing, so please do not cite it or circulate it more widely.

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While modern political theory courses and textbooks tend still to be dominated by the canon of so-called 'dead white men', there are increasing calls and attempts to move beyond the canon by incorporating non-Western, non-white, and women thinkers and texts into political theory syllabi. This paper reflects on the experience of rewriting and delivering a core second-year undergraduate modern political thought course at a U.K. university in order to teach 'beyond the canon'. It begins by elucidating the various contexts within which syllabus changes were made, which include: the ethnic diversity of the university; university-wide attempts to address the black and minority ethnic student 'attainment gap' by developing an inclusive curriculum program; and broader debates within the U.K. about 'decolonising the curriculum'. It then explains and justifies the specific changes made and discusses some of the difficulties encountered, including the potential problems associated with a white man teaching feminist, black, and non-Western political thought. Finally, it provides an assessment of the changes, drawing on student feedback and student attainment data.

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Introduction

In this paper, I reflect on a modest experiment in decolonising the curriculum, centred on a political theory module at a post-92 London university. Of all the sub-disciplines of the arts and social sciences, political theory is ripe for decolonisation: not only is it dominated by a canon of overwhelmingly white thinkers, but many of those thinkers played significant roles in legitimating and promoting the colonial project (Omar 2016). The paper begins by explaining the institutional and wider political contexts within which I initiated changes to Kingston University's Level 5 Modern Political Thought module. It then outlines the basic problem, surveying UK political theory curricula and associated textbooks in order to highlight the relative neglect of non-white thinkers and of themes and concepts related to race. The focus is on thinker-based political theory modules of the kind that are typically compulsory for second-year undergraduates. The paper then provides several arguments for why this neglect matters, before specifying the changes I introduced into the syllabus. I end by considering the impact of the changes on student engagement and attainment and reflecting on the experience.

Contexts

Over the past five years, student-led calls to 'decolonise the curriculum' have become increasingly widespread, vocal, and insistent. These calls are part of a broader, global movement to 'decolonise the university', whose most prominent recent iteration has been the 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign in South Africa. In the UK, high-profile campaigns have included those at SOAS ('Decolonising SOAS'), UCL ('Why Is My Curriculum White?'), and Oxford ('Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford').¹ These campaigns have attained wider public notice, albeit in large part as a result of hostile and derisive (and often inaccurate and inflammatory) coverage by the popular press and rightwing commentators (e.g. Turner 2017; Williams 2017; Woolcock 2017). The concept of 'decolonisation' and its specific applicability to university curricula are highly contested. Yet every variant of the movement to decolonise the curriculum is ultimately rooted in the claim that university syllabi reflect, embody, and perpetuate the legacy of colonialism, often by ignoring non-white thinkers and by neglecting the

¹ See, respectively, <https://soasunion.org/campaigns/decolonisingsoas/>; <http://www.dtmh.ucl.ac.uk/>; <https://rmfoxford.wordpress.com/> (all last accessed 8 May 2018).

colonial contexts within which texts were written. In this way, universities become a key site for the reproduction of racism and white privilege (Peters 2015: 643).

Whilst the changes I introduced at Kingston were inspired by these broader movements, there was also a specific institutional context. Kingston University has a high proportion of black and minority ethnic (BME) students: in 2016/17, 52.4% of all UK-domiciled students at Kingston were BME.² (Across the UK as a whole, 22.4% of UK-domiciled students in British universities in 2016/17 were BME.³) Since 2014, Kingston University has been measuring and trying to address the so-called BME attainment gap (McDuff et al. 2018). This is the gap between the proportion of white students who achieve a good degree (defined as a 1st or 2.1) and the proportion of BME students achieving the same. The gap is measured using 'value added scores', which take account of a student's prior entry qualifications and their subject of study, and hence control for these factors (i.e., it cannot be claimed that BME students do worse because they study 'harder' subjects or because they enter university with poorer qualifications). Data for all UK HE graduates over the past five years is used to produce a probability of a given student attaining a 1st or 2.1; this data is aggregated to give an 'expected' percentage of a given cohort of students who should achieve a 1st or 2.1. If a cohort achieves exactly this percentage, their value added (VA) score is 1. For the cohort of students who graduated from Kingston in 2017, the VA score for white students was 1.13 (73% were expected to attain a good degree and 81% did so) and for BME students 0.99 (71% were expected to attain a good degree and 70% did so). In the Department of Politics, in which I am based, the results for students graduating in 2017 were worse than the university-level results, with a VA score of 1.02 for white students and 0.87 for BME students.

In order to reduce the attainment gap, the university has introduced a range of initiatives, including the creation of an Inclusive Curriculum Framework.⁴ The university's reasons for addressing the attainment gap are no doubt varied, and alongside idealistic reasons may include instrumental reasons such as wishing to perform better in university league tables. (As the university acknowledges in an internal staff briefing, '[w]e... believe the AG [attainment gap] is damaging to our reputation'.) Regardless of its motivations, however, the adoption of the reduction of the attainment gap as an institutional key performance indicator means that the university compiles data that can usefully inform any assessment of the impact of curriculum changes. Before looking at

² <http://cdn.kingston.ac.uk/documents/aboutkingstonuniversity/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/documents/equality-data-tables-2018.pdf> (last accessed 1 May 2018).

³ <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/11-01-2018/sfr247-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers> (last accessed 1 May 2018).

⁴ <http://www.kingston.ac.uk/aboutkingstonuniversity/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/bme-attainment-gap/>; <http://www.kingston.ac.uk/aboutkingstonuniversity/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/our-inclusive-curriculum/inclusive-curriculum-framework/> (last accessed 17 May 2017).

the changes I made and their impact, however, I will outline the problem with political theory curricula more generally.

The whiteness of the curriculum

Almost every Politics degree in the UK offers some kind of module on the history of political thought, usually at Level 5 (second year) but sometimes at Level 4 or even 6, and more often than not compulsory for students. Typically, such modules are structured around a recognized canon of key political thinkers. Some of these modules begin in the ancient world with Plato and Aristotle, but most focus on *modern* political thought: beginning with Machiavelli, students are required to make their way through the likes of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Mill, Marx, and Rawls. Whilst contents of curricula vary, there is one constant: the canon of political thought is dominated by dead white men. This, of course, reflects and rests upon a wider set of exclusions: white, property-owning males tend to be the main authors and subjects of political theory because, historically, non-whites, the working classes, and women have been excluded from the institutions in which political theory has been written and from participation in politics more generally.

Yet although the discipline of political theory may move slowly, it is not entirely static, and today's undergraduates are increasingly called upon to reflect on the themes of class, gender, and race and the ways in which these themes have been ignored or (mis)represented by political thinkers. Analysis and use of the concept of class is a ubiquitous element of modern political thought modules, thanks to the near-universal acknowledgement of Marx as a canonical figure. Many such modules also dedicate weeks to later Marxists such as Lenin and Gramsci, and secondary readings such as Macpherson (1962) encourage students to consider the relation between the works of other political thinkers and the rise and consolidation of capitalism. The significance of gender to political theory has arguably taken longer to receive recognition. Since at least the 1970s, however, various scholars have produced feminist readings of the canon (e.g. Okin 1979; Pateman 1988; Coole 1993; Elshtain 1993), and these interpretations are widely used to interrogate the gender biases of canonical thinkers. It is also common to see the (albeit somewhat tokenistic) inclusion of (white) women thinkers such as Wollstonecraft and Arendt on the syllabus.

Most students who take a modern political thought module in a British university today, then, are exposed to debates about class and gender, and most will read at least one female thinker. This is not the case, however, if we consider race. In as yet incomplete research, I have so far examined the course content of 54 UK universities that offer a Politics degree (not including my own

university).⁵ Of those 54, 43 require their students to take a compulsory module in political thought (of the remaining eleven, six offered a political thought module as an option, whilst in five cases it was not clear whether or not the political thought module was compulsory or optional). Examination of syllabi provided on university websites – including module descriptors and, where available, reading lists – suggests that of the 43 compulsory political thought modules, only four include any significant content on race – where ‘significant’ means a week dedicated to a non-white thinker (e.g. Leeds’s Level 4 module Freedom, Power and Resistance: An Introduction to Political Ideas contains a week on Frederick Douglass) or explicit reference to race-related themes in the module descriptor (e.g. the summary for Edinburgh’s Level 4 module Political Thinkers refers to ‘non-western thinkers’ ‘whose work is becomingly increasingly recognised within a broader, non-Eurocentric canon’).⁶ A further five modules include passing acknowledgement of race-related themes (and I include here very minor references, including in one case a 661-item reading list that contains a single reference to colonialism, in a supplementary reading on Locke). The remaining 34 modules make no reference to race. Of the eleven modules which are not clearly compulsory, only one refers to race (Kent’s Level 5 Modern Political Thought module has a week on Frederick Douglass).⁷

In other words, it appears that few modern political thought modules ask students to reflect on race-related themes (such as colonialism, imperialism, slavery, or the Civil Rights Movement), and only a small minority dedicate even a single week to a non-white thinker. It is of course true that information provided online is of variable quality, length, and accuracy, and often it will not capture what is actually taught on a module. It should also be emphasised that this research is ongoing, and the results may look different if I am able to access further reading lists. But even one-line module summaries can be telling, for they indicate what a university considers to be the essential or key elements of a module (and, presumably, what they think might attract prospective students). Of the many concepts and themes which are listed in modern political thought module summaries – human nature, liberty, equality, democracy, justice, rights, sovereignty, power, obligation, consent, the social contract, reason, revolution, tradition, property, class, gender – ‘race’ is almost never mentioned.

In addition to examining university syllabi, I also looked at commonly used textbooks. Most thinker-based modules require students to read primary texts (Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, Hobbes’s

⁵ The total number of UK universities offering a Politics degree – by which I mean a degree for which the study of Politics constitutes the major part: usually a single honours Politics or Politics & International Relations degree – is over 100.

⁶ <http://webprod3.leeds.ac.uk/catalogue/dynmodules.asp?Y=201819&F=P&M=PIED-1601>; <http://www.drps.ed.ac.uk/17-18/dpt/cxplit08011.htm> (last accessed 17 May 2018).

⁷ <http://resourcelists.kent.ac.uk/lists/8E185DCB-0207-1E76-5FE7-7FEF0AEB14BF.html> (last accessed 17 May 2018).

Leviathan, etc.), but many also use and recommend textbooks as required or supplementary reading. The most cited textbook on reading lists is Boucher and Kelly's (2017) *Political Thinkers*, which contains no chapter on any non-white thinker (with the possible and partial exception of St Augustine, who was of North African origin but is a central figure in European political thought) and only passing references to race-related themes. Many thinker-based textbooks likewise have no chapters on non-white thinkers (other than Augustine) (see Abramson 2009; Edwards and Townsend 2002; Hampsher-Monk 1992; Lively and Reeve 1989; Warburton et al. 2000). (Most of these books also have no chapters on women thinkers.) Even Adams and Dyson's (2007) *Fifty Major Political Thinkers* can only manage two non-white thinkers (Gandhi and Fanon, plus Augustine). The latest edition of Roberts and Sutch (2012) has a chapter on 'The Internationalisation of Political Thought', but it refers to international political theory (e.g. Just War Theory) and contains only a single mention of colonialism (cf. the chapter on 'Contractarianism and international political theory' in Boucher and Kelly 1994). They also have a chapter on 'Liberalism and the Challenge of Multiculturalism', including discussion of Bhikhu Parekh's work, but this is fairly typical: where there is any mention race-related issues, it is usually contained safely within broader discussions of (analytic) liberal philosophy and its critics (cf. Wolff 2015). References to race itself are usually to the 'human race' or to the (supposedly) race-blind nature of Rawls's original position; references to slavery are usually within discussions of Aristotle's work rather than to the transatlantic slave trade. Almost no mention is made of the racism of very many canonical thinkers, and even where mention is made, not much is made of it: e.g. Warburton (2000: 312) acknowledges John Stuart Mill's racist views but reassures us that '[t]his wasn't simply blind prejudice'.

Why it matters

There are several, interrelated reasons why we should consider it important that non-white thinkers and the theme of race are largely excluded from the syllabi of modern political thought undergraduate modules. In the first place, racial divisions – as much as, if not more than, class and gender divisions – have been central to politics everywhere on the globe for several hundred years. As Charles Mills (2017: 139) argues, racial injustice is 'the distinctive injustice of the modern world'. As such, it is right to expect that modules which claim to survey the most significant political ideas and arguments of the past few hundred years have something to say about race. If they do not, then there is a risk of reinforcing the preconceptions of some students that political theory is 'abstract' and unrelated to 'real-world' concerns and issues.

It might be argued in response that although it would be nice if modern political thought modules included discussion of race, this cannot be done – or can be done only arbitrarily and

anachronistically – given that race was not a preoccupation of the major political thinkers. But such a claim does not withstand scrutiny: although it has yet to filter through to undergraduate textbooks, there is a substantial and growing body of literature demonstrating precisely that racial prejudices played an important role in shaping the views and arguments of many canonical political thinkers (Losurdo 2014; Mills 2017; Parekh 1995; Pitts 2005; Valls 2005). As specific examples, we could point to: Locke’s justification in *Two Treatises of Government* of the colonization of America (and his earlier role in drafting *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, with its clause that ‘Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his Negro slaves’) (Locke 2003: 230); Kant’s elaborate and detailed theories of race, including his contentions that ‘[h]umanity has its highest degree of perfection in the white race’ and ‘[t]he Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the ridiculous’ (Kant 2012: 576; 2011: 58); and Mill’s exclusion from his liberty principle of ‘those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage’ and hence for whom ‘a vigorous despotism is in itself the best mode of government... to render them capable of a higher civilisation’ (Mill 1993: 78-79, 415). Race, then, is not an alien concept to be imported into the canon from the outside: establishing the supremacy of the white ‘race’ and its domination over other ‘races’ was a central preoccupation of many canonical thinkers. Students will not have understood *modern* political thought, therefore, if it is not explicitly acknowledged that modernity has been characterised in large part by European colonial and imperialistic expansionism and that this colonialism and its institutions have been justified and defended by the thinkers who form the canon of modern political theory.

Excluding the concept of race distorts students’ perceptions of political theory not only by limiting their understanding of the white political thinkers who dominate the canon, but also by perpetuating the erroneous impression that only white thinkers have made a significant or lasting contribution to the history of political ideas. Racism has manifested itself in the history of political thought in both the writings of canonical thinkers and in the formation of the canon itself. Contesting this racism must therefore mean both exposing the racism of Locke, Kant, Mill, and others *and* introducing students to non-white thinkers. There are various ways in which the latter can be achieved. Perhaps the most straightforward strategy is simply to expand the geographic reach of political theory modules by introducing weeks on Indian, African, Islamic, or Chinese philosophy.

This approach might be resisted by some lecturers, on the basis that the type of module under consideration here is usually concerned with *Western* political thought. But this kind of argument – that it is reasonable that students at European universities study their own European or ‘Western’ tradition – is ultimately unsustainable. The desire to differentiate ‘Western’ from ‘non-

Western' is itself a legacy of colonialism: what is Western (and therefore universal, civilized, rational) has historically been defined and constituted only in relation to what is not Western (and therefore particular, barbaric, animalistic), and primarily so that the former could subordinate and dominate the latter. The very attempts of the West to distinguish and separate itself from the non-West, in other words, have been a function of the real interaction between and imbrication of the two. What this means for the curriculum is not only that students should be encouraged to consider what European thinkers have had to say about the non-European world (as we saw above), but also that there is a need to challenge the self-understanding of the 'West': students should recognize that the 'West' and 'Europe' are not self-contained entities, that their boundaries have always been fluid and porous, and that they have developed in relationships of interdependency and exploitation with the non-European world. Indeed, in today's world, distinctions between 'the West and the Rest' look increasingly tenuous and inadequate (Dabashi 2015). The reconfiguration of boundaries and growing exchange of people and ideas between cultures and nations mean that many contemporary thinkers do not fit easily into preconceived geographical categories: are, for example, Amartya Sen, Gayatri Spivak, and Kwame Anthony Appiah 'Western' or 'non-Western'?

This cultural exchange and dependency, moreover, is not merely a recent phenomenon: there is a subterranean and disavowed history of 'Western' thought that occludes, for example, the role of Islamic philosophers in transmitting and developing ancient Greek and Roman texts during the Middle Ages (and the fact that those ancient Greeks and Romans had more in common with North Africa than they did with Northern Europe) (Allais 2016; Park 2013). Even if one insisted, for whatever reason, that students should study only North American and European thinkers, we can still point to numerous non-white thinkers who could be included on the syllabus but whose work has tended to be suppressed or ignored (Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and so on).

Finally, an all-white curriculum is problematic because it does not reflect the diversity of the student body that we are teaching, especially at a university like Kingston, which has a high proportion of BME students. If such students are asked to read only white thinkers, this may reinforce a preconception held by BME students that political theory is not for 'people like me' and it may affect engagement and attainment. Moreover, an all-white and/or all-European curriculum obviously does not reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the global population: given increasing cultural exchange in a globalised world, introducing students – regardless of their ethnicity – to non-European thinkers and ideas can play an important role in 'foster[ing] transcultural competence in our students' (Leslie 2007: 108).

Decolonising the curriculum

In an attempt to redress the domination of white thinkers in the teaching of political theory, in 2016/17 I made changes to Kingston University's Modern Political Thought module. This is a two-semester, 22-week module that is compulsory for all second-year undergraduates enrolled on the Politics joint honours and Politics and International Relations single honours degree courses (and an option for joint honours International Relations students, joint honours Human Rights students, and History students). It has two points of summative assessment: a 1,500-word essay and a 2-hour unseen exam. Although the module was revised every year, until 2016/17 the syllabus remained relatively static: beginning with Machiavelli and ending with Rawls, students were introduced to the canonical thinkers of modern political thought, through whom we addressed some of the central questions of moral and political philosophy (how should we act? How can we live together? Why do we need a state?) and analysed core political concepts (freedom, justice, equality, democracy, etc.). Only one of the thinkers addressed was a woman (Wollstonecraft, who was given a single week in contrast to the two weeks allotted to most of the male thinkers); all were white and all except Rawls were European. Although the module summary claimed that students would be 'asked to think about why and in what ways women and non-white people have been excluded from both political theory and political and educational institutions', in practice critical reflections on gender and race were limited. In addition to the week on Wollstonecraft, there were weeks on Marx, the family and gender (the key reading for which was an extract from Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*) and on Rawls, justice and gender (with a reading from Okin's *Justice, Gender, and the Family*). Engagement with questions of race was largely absent.

For 2016/17, the module summary, curriculum content, and reading lists were changed in order better to foreground the issues of gender and race. The first semester was titled 'The Classics', with a week each dedicated to Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Burke, Kant, Mill, and Marx; in the second semester – 'Beyond the Classics' – weeks were dedicated to: Nietzsche; postmodern political thought; sexism in modern political thought; feminist political thought; feminism and Marxism; racism in modern political thought; black political thought; animals in modern political thought; Rawls; and Hayek. From the very start of the module, students were asked to consider the exclusions, marginalizations, and misrepresentations perpetuated by the canon and how the ways in which the universalist, emancipatory, or cosmopolitan aspirations of particular thinkers sit in tension with their more or less explicit sexism and racism. Hence as well as covering the arguments, theories, and concepts conventionally associated with canonical thinkers, students were introduced to neglected but important elements of their writings and lives, such as Locke's personal links to the slave trade or Kant's insistent racism. Emphasis was also placed on the colonial contexts of most of

the texts. Whilst the works of all the thinkers of the first semester were critically interrogated, there was acknowledgement that sexism and racism manifested themselves to varying degrees in those works: for example, we examined the coexistence in Mill's work of racist dismissals of non-European societies with critiques of slavery and proto-feminist support for female emancipation, and explored Marx's ambivalent attitude towards British colonialism in India. Students were thus dissuaded from proffering 'vulgar historicist' interpretations (Losurdo 2014) which assumed that, for example, support for colonialism and slavery was universal until the late-19th century (and hence which could dismiss the racism of Kant, for instance, on the basis that everyone in Kant's day was a racist).

In the second semester, we challenged the presuppositions and assumptions of modern political thought more systematically, using Nietzsche as a bridge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the modern and the postmodern, and introducing women and non-white authors (with readings from Pateman 1988, de Beauvoir 1997, Davis 1981, Mills 1998, and Collins 2000). This structure – with, for example, a week each on racism in modern political thought and black political thought – was introduced to dissuade students from viewing women and non-white authors as somehow secondary to or parasitic on the canon, by demonstrating that these authors have both *criticised* the canon and offered their own unique visions of politics that act as *alternatives* to the canon. In this way, students were asked to think about how the conceptual innovations of these authors – patriarchy, sex/gender, intersectionality, white supremacy, postcoloniality, etc. – can be used both to interpret the canon (exposing its racism and misogyny) and to move beyond it (cf. Pemberton 2011). This included calling on students to think about how best to respond to the canon in the light of these critiques: should canonical thinkers be rejected as irremediably racist and sexist, or can their theories and concepts be used selectively, applied in different ways, or even repurposed for feminist and anti-racist ends?

Decolonisation must be considered an ongoing process, and whilst these changes to the curriculum can be considered a move in the right direction, their limitations are arguably indicated by the fact that the other five key readings in the second semester were written by white men (with selections from: Nietzsche 1968; Rorty 1991; Singer 1990; Rawls 1971; and Hayek 2014). For 2017/18, I continued to try to diversify the curriculum, introducing readings from Preciado (2008) and Mies and Shiva (2014) in place of Rorty and Singer. Two notable limitations remain, however. First, the structure of the module tends still to sanctify the canon ('The Classics'), presenting other (non-male, non-white) thinkers as deviations from the canon. While my changes democratise the canon (bringing in forgotten and suppressed voices), they do not deconstruct the canon itself (cf. Stuurman 2000), and hence arguably leave in place the idea that political thinking is the province of great men (sic). Second, whilst I brought in women and African-American thinkers – and latterly

thinkers from the Global South – there was no engagement with alternative traditions such as Islamic or Chinese political thought. This was primarily a consequence of practical limitations: put simply, I know nothing about Islamic or Chinese political thought and did not feel I had the time adequately to familiarise myself with the material. Given that many of my students are themselves Muslim, there would be a significant element of incongruity and discomfort were I, as a white British man of Christian background, to teach students about Islam. More broadly, there is a tension between the desire to offer research-informed teaching and broadening the curriculum (not to mention the conflicting demands of teaching, research, and administration in institutions which are increasingly bureaucratic and workload-heavy). The answer may be to find different ways of teaching, ones which put less emphasis on the ‘expertise’ of the lecturer and reframe teaching more as a dialogue between lecturer and student.

Consequences and reflections

Assessing the impact of the changes is not easy, and certainly not easily quantifiable. Feedback from module evaluation questionnaires suggests that students have appreciated the changes, and many students made specific reference to the changes in their qualitative feedback (e.g. in response to the question ‘The best things about this module are...’ students answered: ‘diverse curriculum’; ‘learning about political thinkers who aren’t white’; ‘the wide range of topics covered, e.g. feminism, animal rights, black thought’). Informal feedback from students confirms the MEQ results.

In principle, the impact of the changes of BME student attainment can be measured, using the BME attainment gap data described above (in ‘Contexts’). Since 2014/15, Kingston University has collected module-level data. At module level, the BME attainment gap is calculated simply by reference to the relative proportions of white and BME students achieving a 2.1 or 1st (and not using the VA score). In 2015/16, Modern Political Thought had an attainment gap of -3.1%: the 40 BME students who took the module got an average grade of 57.2%, while the 48 white students got an average grade of 60.3%. Compared to other undergraduate Politics modules, this gap was not especially high (the worst performing module had an attainment gap of -14.7%; the best – a Level 6 module on the politics of the Middle East – +5.2%). Moreover, some of this gap can be explained by differences in entry qualifications and hence differences in expected results (factors which are not included in the calculation of the module-level attainment gap data). Of the cohort who graduated in 2017 – hence, the same cohort who took Modern Political Thought at Level 5 in 2015/16 – 68% of BME students were expected to achieve a good degree and 71% of white students were expected to achieve a good degree: i.e., there was a 3% gap in expectations (based on differing entry-level

qualifications). In other words, it could be said that in 2015/16, BME Modern Political Thought student were conforming roughly to expectations.

Module-level data for 2016/17 has not yet been released, and so I cannot yet assess the impact – if any – of my changes on BME attainment. Even if, however, the changes made no effect – or even if they worsened BME attainment – they would still have been worth making (and further pursuing) for the moral and political reasons outlined above (in ‘Why it matters’). This, of course, is not to say that the attainment gap is unimportant, but that it may need broader changes to be addressed. In the end, the specific curriculum changes that I introduced may be to the benefit of white students as much BME students, given that it is more likely to be white people who need educating about the history of colonialism.

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