
Paul Hirst, liberal education and the postcolonial project

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ABSTRACT

Paul Hirst's defence of liberal education and his forms of knowledge thesis are likely to seem out of step with contemporary calls to decolonize knowledge by 'delinking' it from 'Western' Enlightenment traditions. In view of the decolonial challenge, and emphasizing too that Hirst's work should be located in its time, we consider the extent to which his account of liberal education still has a place in the postcolonial era. We outline Hirst's defence of liberal education and how it changed over time, and show how philosophy of education in the tradition in which he has been so influential departed from Hirst's account of liberal education, with some of these trends anticipating postcolonial imperatives. While there is a pressing need for attention to the significance of colonialism in philosophy of education, the discipline has moved on and diversified considerably over the last half century, including by developing more expansive conceptions of liberal education with the potential to contribute to the postcolonial project. Some elements of Hirst's defence of liberal education are compatible with the postcolonial project, but it would need adjustment to make it relevant to the postcolonial era. After addressing the postcolonial critique of liberal thought in general as complicit in colonialism, we conclude by assessing what contribution Hirst's conception of liberal education could make to the postcolonial project, noting a degree of openness to aspects of the decolonial project.

KEYWORDS: liberal education, forms of knowledge, Paul Hirst, postcolonialism, decolonization

INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION IN THE POSTCOLONIAL ERA

Amid current calls to decolonize education, academic disciplines in the West have been prompted to explore both the consequences of colonialism and their own

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possible historical complicity in past and present coloniality. In philosophy of education this task includes reflecting on the work of the discipline's most influential figures, as part of a wider deliberation about how that work stands in the post-colonial era and how it might need to be adjusted to address the effects of colonialism and meet current calls for decolonization. These calls are likely to include: critical scrutiny of conceptions of education and its aims and purposes; knowledge and ways of knowing; curricular content; pedagogic practices; institutional cultures; relations of authority; the modes (oral and written) and languages in which knowledge is expressed, taught, and assessed; and the socio-economic and political power structures reproduced in educational institutions.

Associated with what some call the London School (Ozoliņš 2021), Paul Hirst has been a canonical figure in the development of philosophy of education since the 1960s. Hirst's 'Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge' (1965, 1974a) is one of the most influential early exemplars of analytical philosophy of education but his defence of liberal education is likely to seem out of step with contemporary demands to address the legacy of colonialism and its ongoing influence on education. For Hirst, a necessary feature of knowledge is the existence of 'public criteria' that give objectivity to knowledge and in turn to the concept of liberal education itself. We suggest that his defence of liberal education as 'an education based fairly and squarely on the nature of knowledge itself' (1974a: 30), described in terms of forms of knowledge and distinct disciplines as a means to the 'comprehensive development of mind', liberal and not vocational, appears to run counter to attempts to reconceptualize education and its aims in a postcolonial era.

Hirst's forms of knowledge thesis is not reconcilable with articulations of decolonizing knowledge such as that of Mignolo (2011) for whom at least part of what decolonization seeks to achieve is a 'delinking' from 'Western' Enlightenment traditions in epistemology. Such delinking would be an act of epistemic disobedience resting on rejection of claims of universalism as well as the categorization of knowledge and the academy itself into its recognizable disciplines and fields. Although we discuss later a contrasting articulation of decolonization in education, a major point of contention between Hirst and decolonizers like Mignolo would be about the possibility of *objective* knowledge itself and indeed how widely any public criteria relating to assessing knowledge claims could be shared. This disagreement suggests irreconcilability of not just these alternative approaches to knowledge but about the concept of 'knowledge' itself.

In view of the decolonial challenge, and emphasizing too that Hirst's work should be located in its time, we will consider the extent to which his account of liberal education still has a place in the postcolonial era, in which appropriately recognizing and engaging with 'non-Western' experiences and practices is an urgent necessity. While there is a pressing need for attention to the significance of colonialism in philosophy of education, the discipline has moved on and diversified considerably over the last half century, including by developing more expansive conceptions of liberal education with the potential to contribute to the postcolonial project. Postcolonial thought expresses a widened conception of a

more global ‘public’ as well as a recognition of diverse conceptions of knowledge and education. It encourages a critical revisiting of canonical texts in all disciplines. While sceptical towards some versions of decolonization of education, we argue that although Hirst’s work represents a significant contribution to philosophy of education’s archive as an articulation of ‘liberal education’, it would need adjustment to make it relevant to the postcolonial era. Yet some elements of Hirst’s defence of liberal education are potentially useful.

We begin in the next section by outlining Hirst’s defence of liberal education and how it changed over time, then proceed to show how trends in philosophy of education in the tradition in which he has been so influential disagreed with Hirst and departed from his account of liberal education, with some of these trends anticipating postcolonial imperatives. The discussion will then briefly address the postcolonial critique of liberal thought in general as complicit in colonialism, followed by consideration of Mbembe’s call for decolonization, in higher education. We conclude by assessing what contribution Hirst’s conception of liberal education could make to the postcolonial project, noting a degree of openness to aspects of the decolonial project.

Before proceeding further, we clarify the meaning we attach to some key terms, as well as the context in which our argument is located. In its broadest sense, postcolonialism, the study of colonial occupation, dispossession, appropriation of land and commodities, is a term that ‘identifies the experience of foreign political, cultural, and economic domination as a salient issue and draws attention to the legacies of this history in the present’ (Kohn 2010: 203). This ontological heritage goes to the very being of the colonial subject and is ‘legitimized by the idea of race’ (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 267). Postcolonial thought uses a contested set of concepts, starting with the ‘post’ in ‘postcolonial’, which of course we use without implying that colonialism ended with the achievement of political independence by former colonies. While the British Empire, the largest in modern history, was formally wound down in the decades that followed World War II, its enduring effects—political, economic, social, cultural, and educational—are features of the postcolonial condition, of persisting coloniality. So too is the emergence of new forms of colonialism evident in the neo-colonialism of ongoing domination by former Western imperial powers, as well as the rise of newer powers with ambitions for regional and global dominance and the formidable but largely unaccountable power of global corporations. Given the many and persisting harms of colonialism, within the wider body of postcolonial thought the term decolonization refers to calls to proceed beyond analysis to anti-colonial resistance, to actively undoing colonial practices. Kohn (2010: 209) suggests that while ‘post-colonial theory is associated with the issues of hybridity, diaspora, representation, narrative, and knowledge/power, theories of decolonization are concerned with revolution, economic inequality, violence and political identity’. Yet because of variations within both sets of intersecting theories, the relationship between postcolonialism and decolonization defies a straightforward articulation and we will identify an account of decolonization as a postcolonial strategy that could accord with some features of Hirst’s liberal education.

Just as there is diversity among postcolonial theories, so too colonial practices varied, both within the colonies of different modern European colonial empires, and within the British Empire, whose own colonial legacy differed to a significant extent across its diverse regions, in Africa, the Indian subcontinent, the Caribbean, Australasia, and the Middle and Far East. We write from the context of Britain (as authors at a Scottish university that was a beneficiary of empire and slavery, which it has recently sought to address (Mullen and Newman 2018)). Decolonizing the Scottish curriculum both in higher and compulsory education requires that we contend with the legacy of empire and Scotland's role in it as part of the United Kingdom), in a time of reflection and soul-searching about the consequences of colonialism and the current debate about decolonizing education, but Hirst wrote the works for which he became best known in the earlier era of transition from Empire to Commonwealth, during the final stages of political decolonization which left many former colonies in states of ongoing economic dependency and political instability. Post-war migration from ex-colonies was by then under way, and immigration from across the former Empire has dramatically changed the composition of British society, as one of many postcolonial contexts. These are factors that Hirst could not be expected to have addressed. Writing as we do in this more recent context, debates and decisions about addressing colonial legacies in education should, of necessity, take place with reference to context.

PAUL HIRST'S DEFENCE OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

Hirst is perhaps best known for his influential essay 'Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge' (Hirst 1965), revised and further developed in *Knowledge and the Curriculum* (Hirst 1974a, b). Ozoliņš (2021) notes that Hirst's writings demonstrate a willingness to reconsider his own conception of a topic. Hirst's work is in that sense, 'to be treated as a work in progress' with Hirst himself open to radical revisions of his views (Barrow and White 1993: 3). This is demonstrated in the revisions made to his account of liberal education and his conception of forms of knowledge between his seminal 1965 paper, its inclusion in his 1974 collection, and the later revision of his position in the 1993 chapter 'Education, Knowledge and Practices'. Barrow and White (1993: 8) observe of the 1974 collection that 'the stimulus his writings on liberal education have given to others... transcend the boundaries within which he worked'. We similarly look to Hirst's work as a stimulus for considering how liberal educators may respond to the postcolonial moment in order to further transcend these boundaries.

In his initial account, Hirst draws a sharp distinction between liberal and vocational education. Hirst is clear that whatever liberal education is, it is not vocational, purely scientific, or a specialist education in any way. Reacting to what Hirst saw as the use of 'liberal education' as a slogan, he argued that whatever 'vagaries' there have been in the concept's use, it is 'the appropriate label for a positive concept'. For Hirst at least, liberal education is an education based 'fairly and squarely' on the nature of knowledge itself (Hirst, 1974a: 30). In 'Liberal Education and the

Nature of Knowledge', Hirst argues for the necessity of liberal education and the centrality of knowledge to this project (Hirst 1974a: 51) (he is clear, however, that a liberal education is not *all* there is and forms 'only one part of the education a person ought to get'). As Hirst puts it, in the first place liberal education is concerned with the 'comprehensive development of the mind in acquiring knowledge' and is aimed at 'achieving an understanding of experience in many different ways' (p. 47). For Hirst it is through knowledge that we come to know the nature of things, and this is important to living the 'good life' as well as developing one's mind. Liberal education is about both how we understand ourselves and how we ought to live 'individually and socially' (p. 30). Therefore Hirst, as Schilling (1986) details, uses the term liberal education in two ways: first, to designate what he thinks are the fundamental aspects of a total education for the development of rationality and understanding experience; second, to draw a distinction between the purely intellectual and other aspects of education such as the moral, physical, and technical. In making his argument, Hirst (1974a) references the classical Greek understanding of a liberal education and argues for its reinterpretation in light of more modern conceptions of knowledge. This restatement of liberal education without its 'original philosophical backing' as Hirst puts it, 'requires a universal, incontrovertible principle' on which to ground his account of liberal education (Schilling 1986: 2). Hirst finds this universal, foundational principle in rationality. He argues that there are a limited number of ways which are not 'ultimately reducible' to one another in which human beings can exercise their rationality (Hirst 1974b: 84). In attending to these we can sketch out 'forms of knowledge' which provide structure to all thought and which are the 'complex ways of understanding experience' that are 'publicly specifiable' and gained through learning (p. 38). For Hirst, the forms of knowledge are 'distinct ways in which our experience becomes structured round the use of publicly accepted symbols' (p. 44). They are, therefore, both public embodiments of general human experience and the materials for developing the rational mind. The school curriculum need not, for Hirst, consist of separate subjects. Indeed, learning may be organized in a variety of ways that aim to introduce students, as far as possible, 'into the interrelated aspects of each of the basic forms of knowledge' (p. 47). It is mastery of these forms of knowledge that is key to the development of rationality and, therefore, a crucial aim for liberal education (Schilling 1986).

Importantly, as Ozoliņš (2021: 859) outlines, knowledge for Hirst must be accessible to everyone and consequently liberal education requires 'individuals to be educated in the different modes of thinking required in the different forms of knowledge'. Crucially, 'it is a necessary feature of knowledge as such that there be public criteria whereby the true is distinguishable from the false, the good from the bad, the right from the wrong' (Hirst 1974a: 43). Indeed, it is these criteria which, he argues, give 'objectivity to knowledge', and, by extension, give 'objectivity to the concept of liberal education' (p. 43). As Hirst contends, the possibility of objectivity seems to rest on a 'fair degree' of stability of judgment and agreement between people (1974b: 94). Indeed, it is this stability and 'near universality' of

significant features of human nature and the human situation that is crucial here. It is important to note that Hirst (95) argued that while values and judgments made in one society may not be translatable into the conceptual schemes of others, this was itself ‘no denial of intelligibility’. Indeed, it is these ‘common features’ of human experience that lead Hirst to reject claims that major forms of thought from different communities should be considered mutually incomprehensible. This idea of objectivity and, indeed, the universal principle of rationality upon which Hirst sought to ground liberal education would be areas of considerable contention for many post-colonial scholars. However, and significantly, in emphasizing the public nature of knowledge and meaning upon which his conception of education rests, we may see some of the seeds for ‘transcending the boundaries’ within which Hirst worked.

In his later work in the collected volume *Beyond Liberal Education* (Barrow and White 1993), Hirst proposed a revised account of liberal education, seeds for which were evident even in the seminal 1965 paper (Ozoliņš 2021). In detailing his new position Hirst also reflected on and distanced himself from the ‘rationalistic approach’ characteristic of the London School (Hirst 1993). What such an approach failed to acknowledge for Hirst was the crucial nature of human wants and desires and how these may drive the direction of education (Ozoliņš 2021). Philosophy of education, Hirst explains, was born, or re-born, ‘under the spell’ of the analytical techniques dominating British philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s and a form of hard rationalism (Hirst 1993: 184). As Hirst suggests, both of these ‘spells’ have subsequently been broken, with the character of and scope of philosophy of education changing significantly. One of the key features of this change is in a shifting understanding of the central concept of education. For Hirst, we must shift from seeing education as ‘primarily concerned with knowledge’ to seeing it as ‘primarily concerned with social practices’ (p. 184).

In light of this Hirst considers the notion of liberal education he previously argued for as being ‘misconceived in certain important respects’ (1993: 196). Gone is the primacy of reason above all else, and ‘the great mistake’ of the rationalist approach in seeing only theoretical knowledge as properly significant in ‘determining both the ends and means of rational practice and thus of the good life’ (p. 193). In his revised view it was practical knowledge that was considered more fundamental than theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge being ‘basic’ to any clear grasp of the proper significance of theoretical knowledge (p. 197). However, this was not an argument merely about the priority of practical knowledge for Hirst but, rather, an argument for the priority of ‘personal development by initiation into a complex of specific, substantive social practices with all the knowledge, attitudes, feelings, virtues, skills, dispositions, and relationships that that involves’ (p. 197). It is these practices that Hirst considered as constituting a ‘flourishing life’ and also the proper focus of education. In his later writings Hirst would continue to emphasize that education should be seen as an initiation into specific social practices, reflecting as he did in his earlier work the belief that knowledge and meaning was public. This, as Ozoliņš (2021: 861) suggests, was entirely consistent with his earlier view and the London School claim that education involves an initiation into a form of life. What

changed was the recognition that this involved a much greater variety of things such as ‘actions, knowledge, judgements, criteria of success, values, skills, dispositions, virtues, feelings’ that made more obvious the communal aspect of education (Hirst 1993: 195).

Looking towards possibilities for addressing the postcolonial turn, we might begin here by considering the extended quote from Michael Oakeshott with which Hirst concludes ‘Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge’ (1974a). Here Oakeshott suggests that education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the ‘skill and partnership’ of a public conversation. To attain this, we must learn to recognize the voices and the proper occasions of utterance as well as the necessary skills and dispositions appropriate for this conversation. It is this conversation, Oakeshott (1962: 199) concludes, that ‘gives place and character to every human activity and utterance’. Hirst asks us to consider these ideas more figuratively than perhaps Oakeshott intended, and we might consider a call for a widening of this figurative (and literal) conversation and its participants in the context of liberal education as a way to consider how liberal philosophers of education may take the postcolonial seriously.

In the years following the publication of ‘Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge’, developments emerged in philosophy of education that are relevant to the present discussion, some of them disagreements of substance with Hirst and others about the major themes and methodological approach of Hirst’s work. Philosophy of education after Hirst’s most influential publications took on a range of wider preoccupations beyond Hirst’s conception of liberal education. Philosophy of education was, by the 1980s, already moving on from the heyday of conceptual analysis, and its practitioners were both methodologically more expansive and more inclined to first-order arguments about education and its aims. Furthermore, among them there was no shortage of arguments in disagreement with the substance of Hirst’s work, including some who developed liberal thought about education and its aims in different directions. Critics within analytical philosophy of education were quick to dispute the classification of disciplines in Hirst’s forms of knowledge thesis (Watt 1974). Hirst’s stipulation that liberal education does not have extrinsic purposes was questioned by Bailey (1984) for whom a liberal general education involves pupils in intrinsically worthwhile ends, though: ‘Intrinsically worthwhile activities may turn out to be useful for other purposes’ (1984: 29). Bailey preferred to defend the liberating potential of education as aiming to achieve ‘liberation from the present and the particular’ (p. 26). More hard-hitting responses came from critics who took the work of Hirst, together with that of Peters, as both representative of a liberal account of education and, partly because of their use of conceptual analysis (Hirst and Peters 1970), as defences of the status quo, an expression of class interests. Harris argues that Hirst and Peters: ‘...managed to “justify” in their collected works every aspect of the social and educational *status quo* that might serve the interests of those wishing to preserve the *status quo*, and to present those as rational, logical and disinterested’ (Harris 1980: 31).

While we find Harris’s critique over-stated, he makes an important point, and we agree that, with the benefit of subsequent poststructuralist, feminist, and

postcolonial perspectives on the relationship between education and power, Hirst's work is strikingly apolitical. With a similar vehemence to Harris, Martin found Hirst's forms of knowledge theory 'narrow and intolerant' in its focus on the development of mind, ignoring emotions and feelings as well as vocational training, ill-equipped to 'solve real problems in the real world' (Martin 1981: 44)—injustice included. Martin's call for a new paradigm that would embrace the social and political implications of the curriculum was soon addressed in various first-order contributions to the application of liberal thought to the aims of education. Gutmann (1987) argues for a central place for political education in the curriculum in a liberal democracy, while Patricia White's (1984) defence of political education in the tradition of liberal democracy addresses power and domination, both of which have emerged as key postcolonial and decolonial themes. Subsequent work, much of it under the influence of Rawls's theory of justice and his political liberalism (Rawls 1971, 1993) developed the liberal educational ideal with a central emphasis on autonomy and citizenship (Levinson 1999), frequently by attending closely to moral education and to addressing the presence of different conceptions of the good life, to the implications of religious and cultural diversity (McLaughlin 2008). However imperfectly achieved in educational policy and practice and despite their ongoing contestation among liberal theorists, these concepts and preoccupations have moved some distance from Hirst's more narrowly focused conception of liberal education. They are also amenable to postcolonial and decolonial applications, even if not intended at the time by their authors. Yet despite these potential commonalities postcolonial thought tends to be sceptical about liberal ideas.

POSTCOLONIALISM, LIBERALISM, AND DECOLONIZING EDUCATION

Postcolonial and especially decolonizing stances are likely to be dismissive of both liberalism in general and of liberal conceptions of education. However, setting aside for the moment the extent to which Hirst's defence of liberal education could have a place in a conception of education suited to the postcolonial era, its contrast with colonial education is stark. While provision of schooling varied both across different colonies and also according to its availability to indigenous people and to settler populations, the primary purpose of colonial education was to serve the colonizing powers' interests, particularly their labour requirements (Carnoy 1974). Poorly resourced and largely alienating for its recipients, colonial education's 'content, language, and conceptions of knowledge were both unreflectively European and dismissive of indigenous culture, languages, knowledge, and traditions of upbringing and education' (Enslin 2017: 2). Missionary education in Africa was motivated by a 'civilizing purpose' that involved conversion to Christianity and to 'new economic and social organizations' (Carnoy 1974: 128). Notorious in its association with colonial education yet not representative of all colonial educational practices is a remark by Thomas Macaulay, one of John Stuart Mill's fellow apologists for the

colonization of India, that the entire body of literature written in Indian and Arab languages was not worth ‘a single shelf of a good European library’ (cited in [Evans 2002](#): 270).

Like colonial rule, colonial education was illiberal, a tool of colonialism. Colonial curricula and educational practices, for both indigenous and settler populations as subjects of the Empire, certainly did not reflect the application of liberal thought and, like mass education in Britain, did not remotely match the conception of liberal education that Hirst was later to formulate. Yet any attempt to speculate about the possibility of a role for liberal thought in discussions about postcolonial education is likely to run up against a standard objection from within postcolonial thought: that liberal ideas are inextricably implicated in colonialism. Pitts observes that ‘the evolution of liberal thought coincided and deeply intersected with the rise of European empires’ ([Pitts 2010](#): 216). [Parekh \(1994\)](#) goes further, attributing to liberalism in Britain the role of an ideology that set out to legitimize colonialism, epitomized in Mill’s defence of individual liberty alongside his illiberal dismissal of Eastern societies. But Pitts points to the complexity and range of liberalism as ‘a complex ideology whose exemplars share family resemblances rather than any strict doctrine’ ([2010](#): 218). Hence [Sartori’s \(2006\)](#) observation that liberal theory itself developed a complex critique of the East India Company and of imperialism. Yet although thinkers from outside European and American thought also ‘adopted and adapted liberal language and categories for reformist or avowedly anti-imperial ends’ ([Pitts 2010](#): 218), there is scepticism within postcolonial thought, and even more so from a decolonial perspective, towards liberal ideas (see [Iverson 2002](#) for an account and defence of postcolonial liberalism).

Pursuing her earlier critique of the forms of knowledge, [Martin \(1993\)](#) takes Hirst to task for advocating forms of knowledge that represented Western, white culture and experience while excluding the lives, perspectives, and voices of young people in racially and ethnically diverse societies like the USA. This objection is equally apt to education in Britain and its former colonies and arguments of this kind have since burgeoned in the postcolonial literature. That a postcolonial reassessment of education in this postcolonial context is overdue is not in dispute, but what does this require? We return here to Kohn’s explanation of the difference between the postcolonial and decolonization. Decolonization, on this account, points to a process of resistance, of action to combat coloniality. In one of its strongest and most prominent expressions, decolonization, as mentioned in our introduction, requires the anti-colonial displacement in education of Western forms of knowledge and their replacement with the indigenous knowledges of the global South—with a different *epistemology*.

Like [Bridges \(2019\)](#) and [Horsthemke \(2020\)](#), we find claims that there are ‘different epistemologies’ implausible, though they are unsurprising in view of the enormously destructive injustices of colonialism as an assault on the material well-being, agency, and subjectivity of colonized people. We do see a necessary place for provincializing or decentring ignorant epistemological pronouncements like Macaulay’s dismissal of non-English literatures—and also in curricula to the extent that they should reflect the diversity of traditions and experiences increasingly

present in educational discourse and in classrooms. Furthermore, knowledge and understanding are enhanced by seeking out ‘alternative accounts and interpretations ... generated by people who stand in different positions and relationships within the social structures that provide the context for our enquiries’ (Bridges 2019: 506). Such different perspectives should have a place among claims to knowledge and educational practices that are subject to critical evaluation alongside all others—as against the ‘automatic validation or justification’ of their objectives and content in the interests of redress for injustice (Horsthemke 2020: 4). Postcolonial perspectives on knowledge are likely to be deeply sceptical towards the very idea of objectivity, so prominent in Hirst’s early account of liberal education, which reflected the ideas and debates of his time. While we share such scepticism to an extent, we agree with Schilling’s (1986) observation that the positivist epistemology on which Hirst’s early account of liberal education rested demonstrated a construal of rationality to which non-positivist alternatives have since been developed. Furthermore, if the very possibility of objectivity is ruled out completely, a slide into relativism seems inevitable. This would render impossible a widened conversation across difference that might permit a weighing up of competing claims to knowledge and the evidence proffered in their support.

Yet possible decolonizing approaches to addressing the legacy of colonialism in education are not exhausted by the option of replacing a hegemonic ‘Western’ epistemology with ‘alternative epistemologies’. Writing about university education in the context of Africa and of South Africa in particular, Mbembe’s insistence on epistemic diversity emphatically rejects any assumption that the ‘consciousness and cultural heritage’ of Africa could be ‘merely an extension of the West’ (2016: 35). Instead, African culture, languages, and literature must be made central (though Mbembe includes European languages spoken in Africa).

... part of what is wrong with our institutions of higher education is that they are ‘Westernized’ ... in the sense that they are local instantiations of a dominant academic model based on a Eurocentric academic canon ... that disregards other epistemic traditions ... that tries to portray colonialism as a normal form of social relations ... rather than as a system of exploitation and oppression. (Mbembe 2016: 32)

Mbembe’s approach to epistemic diversity, however, allows for a significant degree of hybridity without necessarily abandoning the idea of ‘universal knowledge for humanity’, while embracing it through a strategy of dialogue between different epistemic traditions that is open and horizontal, ‘with the aim of creating a less provincial and more open critical cosmopolitan pluriversalism—a task that involves the radical refounding of our ways of thinking and a transcendence of our disciplinary divisions’ (p. 37).

For Mbembe, however, it may be too late to reform the university and he emphasizes the unequal power relations between core and periphery at play globally in higher education, shaped by globalization and the market. Commodification and systems of neoliberal control mean that decolonization requires disrupting a cycle that turns students into customers, consumers of education. The market, he observes, ‘is the

antithesis of non-racialism' (p. 38). This observation is of course also applicable to neoliberal colonization of education in 'the West'.

Mbembe would undoubtedly be wary of any attempt to align his arguments with the liberal education espoused by Hirst, which is not our intention. However, there is much here that is instructive for the postcolonial project in philosophy of education in Britain, not least Mbembe's arguing the importance of changing the iconography and public spaces of universities so that all students can feel at home. Calling for equal distribution of 'the capacity to make disciplined enquiries into those things we need to know', his well-aimed critique warns that 'decolonizing knowledge is ... not simply about de-Westernization' (Mbembe 2015). Furthermore, the Western archive should neither be relied on nor is it exclusively the property of the West.

CONCLUSION: HIRST, LIBERAL EDUCATION, AND THE POSTCOLONIAL PROJECT

We conclude our assessment of Hirst's work by returning to the question of the extent to which Hirst's account of liberal education still has a place in the postcolonial era. It is not our intention to force together Hirst's defence of liberal education and an account of decolonization like Mbembe's, written some 50 years apart in different times and contexts. There are some obvious differences, not least of them Mbembe's nuanced critique of the West and its association with colonialism. Instead, we note both differences and some shared preoccupations and stances. A commitment to transcending disciplinary divisions (Mbembe 2016) has echoes of Hirst's claim that liberal education based on the forms of knowledge did not need to be subject-based. For Hirst, liberal education may take the form of, for example, interdisciplinary projects so long as the appropriate link with the forms of knowledge was maintained. On the face of it, the idea that education should in some way be based on knowledge seems uncontentious. However, knowledge claims are likely to be contested and, as discussed earlier, Hirst's idea of objectivity and the universal principle of rationality on which he initially sought to ground liberal education would be contested by many postcolonial scholars.

Yet in emphasizing the public nature of knowledge and meaning upon which his conception of education rests, there is a starting point for 'transcending the boundaries' within which Hirst worked. Hirst's reference to the existence of 'public criteria' whereby the true is distinguished from the false as the source of objectivity lends itself to acknowledging and accommodating a range of publics, according to context. So too does his extension of Oakeshott's metaphor of a conversation, in which he envisages education as initiation into the dispositions and skills needed for a public conversation, which has the potential for a widening of participants and styles that deliberation about a liberal postcolonial education would require. Both authors refer to the role of knowledge in understanding ourselves and would share

the view that the social practices learned through education contribute vitally to the possibility of a flourishing life.

Perhaps for reasons that differ, both postcolonial and Hirst's liberal perspectives on education have critical reservations about how vocational education might be prioritized in that both would share an opposition to the contemporary neoliberal colonization of education. Yet a postcolonial liberal education, which awaits a full articulation, could well make a place for forms of vocational education that promote development and access to employment in former colonies while still addressing the consequences of colonialism. (Such employment would by no means be confined to unskilled labour of the kind favoured for native populations by colonial authorities during the colonial era and would include a wide range of skills and roles.) This applies as much to providing opportunities for equal access to fulfilling and secure work in Britain. This was not, however, an interpretation that Hirst himself expressed and despite the shifts in his later work from a primary focus on *knowledge* to *social practices*, which could recognize their diversity, his treatment of liberal education remains vulnerable to Ozoliņš' (2021: 861) criticism that it assumed that there was a 'relatively uniform society into which someone could be initiated'. In fairness though, Hirst accepted, as Barrow and White (1993: 9) note, that 'conceptions of the good, and therefore the goals of education, will vary between groups and societies'. Moreover, education is not simply a matter of immersion in substantive practices and involves 'critical reflection' on these practices and the wants they may aim to satisfy. Hirst allows that views on what constitutes a flourishing life can also differ, and this could be a starting point for a revised conception of liberal education that addresses the postcolonial challenge. In Britain as a singular postcolonial context this would of necessity begin with an acknowledgement of the traditions, languages, and literatures of its diverse population and a radical reconsideration of how that population is represented in curricula. A further urgent requirement would be to ensure that the history and consequences of colonialism and of enduring coloniality at home and abroad are studied.

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