



Enslin, P. and Hedge, N. (2023) Decolonising higher education: the university in the new age of Empire. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, (doi: [10.1093/jopedu/qhad052](https://doi.org/10.1093/jopedu/qhad052))

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Deposited on 28 July 2023

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1 **DECOLONISING HIGHER EDUCATION: THE UNIVERSITY IN THE NEW AGE OF**
2 **EMPIRE**

3 Penny Enslin ORCID **0000-0002-6395-8588**

4 Nicki Hedge ORCID 0000-0003-1944-7630

5 School of Education, University of Glasgow

6

7 **Corresponding author contact details:**

8 Penny Enslin

9 12 Ferguson Avenue

10 Milngavie G62 7TE

11 Glasgow

12 penny.enslin@glasgow.ac.uk

13 077 5867 4462

14

15 **Keywords**

16 Capitalism, Marxism, neoliberalism, Empire, postcolonial education, rankings

17

18 **Conflict of interest statement**

19 The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

20

21 **Abstract**

22 Campaigns to decolonize higher education have focused mainly on decolonizing the
23 curriculum. Although the cultural features of colonialism and its material imperatives and
24 damage were both modes of colonial domination and exploitation, more attention has
25 been paid to the former in recent debates about education, and it tends to dominate
26 arguments about and characterizations of decolonization in higher education, by making
27 knowledge and the curriculum the central focus. We argue the need to attend not only to
28 the cultural consequences of imperialism and the damage to the self so thoroughly

1 emphasized in postcolonial and decolonial theory, but also to the material implications of
2 colonialism and the evolution of Empire, which has persisted in new forms since formal
3 decolonization. Decolonizing higher education and its institutions must also address new
4 forms of Empire which have colonized the university. We argue that unless the material
5 aspects of colonization and decolonization are adequately addressed, the university will
6 not be substantively decolonized. Indeed, so strong is the influence of late capitalism in
7 the form of neoliberalism on the contemporary university that its modes of practice are
8 likely to foster superficial strategies to ‘decolonize’ the curriculum instead of addressing
9 how capitalist structures and practices sustain current forms of coloniality. We discuss
10 how neoliberalism, exemplified in the use of global rankings, shapes the contemporary
11 university in today’s new age of Empire and we defend an approach to decolonizing that
12 widens the focus of current debates beyond decolonization of the curriculum, to which
13 we give qualified support.
14

15 **INTRODUCTION: UNIVERSITIES AFTER EMPIRE?**

16 Universities in the United Kingdom, in common with other institutions, are a product of Britain’s
17 imperial and colonial past and the resulting advantages still derived from the age of Empire.
18 Calls to decolonize higher education rest, with good reason, on the need to address that colonial
19 past and its enduring effects, but what does this require? Reaching agreement that universities
20 are imbricated in and beneficiaries of a colonial past—and understanding the consequent
21 advantages they enjoy—is an essential first step. Campaigns to decolonize higher education have
22 been focused mainly on decolonizing the curriculum. Yet there are also wider implications to
23 consider in addressing colonialism, including the emergence of neo-colonialism and newer,
24 contemporary forms of ‘Empire’. We will argue the need to attend not only to the cultural
25 consequences of imperialism and the damage to the self so thoroughly emphasized in
26 postcolonial and decolonial theory, but also to the material implications of colonialism and the
27 evolution of Empire, which has persisted in new forms since formal decolonization. Hence while
28 agreeing that there are compelling reasons to decolonize the curriculum, our interest here lies
29 primarily in the wider considerations that risk being ignored in the current overwhelming focus
30 on the curriculum. Decolonizing higher education and its institutions must address not only the

1 curricular legacy of colonialism but also those new forms of Empire which, we argue, have
2 colonized the university.

3
4 Central to our argument is a long-standing dispute about how best to analyse and interpret
5 colonialism and its effects: by addressing its cultural features and their consequences, or by
6 focusing on its material imperatives and damage. Both were modes of colonial domination and
7 exploitation, but more attention has been paid to the former in recent debates about education,
8 and it tends to dominate arguments about and characterizations of decolonization in higher
9 education, by making knowledge and the curriculum the central focus. We argue that unless the
10 material aspects of colonization and decolonization are adequately addressed, the university will
11 not be substantively decolonized. Indeed, so strong is the influence of late capitalism in the form
12 of neoliberalism on the contemporary university that its modes of practice are likely to foster
13 superficial strategies to ‘decolonize’ the curriculum instead of addressing how capitalist
14 structures and practices sustain current forms of coloniality. Initially we will explore the tensions
15 between the competing cultural and material analytical strands and their significance in the next
16 section by offering an expanded construal of the forms of domination fostered by colonialism,
17 the kinds of power it created and continues to exercise. Secondly we will discuss how
18 neoliberalism shapes the contemporary university in today’s new age of Empire, illustrating our
19 discussion of the material advantages enjoyed by prosperous universities able to draw on their
20 competitive advantages with the example of competitive global rankings.¹ Our concluding
21 section defends an approach to decolonizing that widens the focus of current debates beyond
22 decolonization of the curriculum, to which we give qualified support. This approach requires
23 attention to the material and structural practices that maintain the dominance of wealthy
24 institutions whose competitive advantages are derived from the colonial era and sustained by
25 today’s geopolitical and economic environment. But first we contextualize our argument by
26 clarifying how we will use some key terms necessary to a discussion of decolonizing the
27 university, acknowledging that debates about postcolonialism and decolonization are commonly
28 characterized by robust contestation of some complex concepts.

29
30 Calling for ongoing analysis of the aftermath of the colonial era across a wide range of
31 themes (economic, political, cultural, psychological—and of course educational), postcolonial

1 thought in general is a broad and diverse project seeking to understand and address the histories
2 and consequences of colonization by modern European states, from the sixteenth century
3 onwards. At their most extensive in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century,
4 European colonial empires dominated large parts of Asia, the Caribbean, Australasia, Africa,
5 North America, Oceania and the Middle East, vying with each other for geopolitical advantage,
6 resources, and markets. Alongside the plundering of colonies' wealth, this era saw the imposition
7 of imperial military and administrative power, dispossession of indigenous people's land,
8 impoverishment, acts of genocide, famine, exploitation of labour including through slavery and
9 indentured labour, and the enforcement of trade on terms that favoured and enriched the colonial
10 powers. A key feature of the colonial era, with radical implications for education, was dismissal
11 of both local custom and the capabilities of colonized people, in a racist social order.
12

13 In the postcolonial era, following formal decolonization in the later decades of the
14 twentieth century, conditions of coloniality have continued to prevail in most countries. While
15 the postcolonial condition varies according to context, it characterizes not only past colonies, but
16 also the former imperial powers, whose diverse populations include migrants from former
17 colonies and from regions destabilized by colonialism and neo-colonialism, in ever-changing
18 forms of economic, political and social domination. Although the terms colonialism and
19 imperialism are often used interchangeably, we begin by noting Said's distinction:
20 "imperialism" means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating center ruling a
21 distant territory; "colonialism", which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the
22 implanting of settlements on a distant territory' (Said 1993: 8). Crucially, both terms have shifted
23 in meaning since the formal, political decolonization that took place following the Second World
24 War, which did not end relationships of domination but allowed new forms of coloniality to
25 emerge. While 'imperialism' refers most obviously to the creation of modern empires by
26 European powers during the modern colonial era, new imperial powers, such as post-Soviet
27 Russia and China, have emerged alongside the United States of America. Enabled by
28 accelerating globalization, powerful multinational companies and the global hegemony of
29 neoliberal capitalism, new and evolving forms of imperialism have emerged, which we associate
30 with 'Empire' and in which Western states have tended to actively support 'the construction of a
31 new Empire of capital' (Reid-Henry 2019: 163). In deploying the complex term 'postcolonial'

1 we reiterate that coloniality did not end with the achievement of political sovereignty by states
2 gaining independence in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Hence we use the term
3 ‘postcolonial’ with reference to the critical study of colonialism in all its aspects including the
4 persisting postcolonial condition, in which education is our primary interest. Articulating the
5 relationship between the postcolonial and the more specific concept of decolonization, both of
6 which can be described as anticolonial, we contrast the two largely in terms of their purposes.
7 While both emphasize the salience of knowledge as power, and postcolonial *analysis* is more
8 inclined to acknowledge hybridity, decolonization as a more programmatic *strategy* places
9 greater emphasis on identity, resistance and revolutionary action in combatting coloniality.ⁱⁱ

11 **THE POSTCOLONIAL CANON AND THE MARXIST RESPONSE**

12 Across the range of theories that comprise the postcolonial and the decolonial, opinions diverge about
13 what to take as their starting-point. A tendency to place the major emphasis on the cultural rather than
14 the material aspects of imperialism and colonialism can be traced to the foundational influence of
15 Edward Said. Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) were instrumental in
16 defining postcolonial studies in Western universities, in which literary and cultural studies have
17 dominated. Drawing on Foucault’s persuasive claim that knowledge and power are closely
18 related, Said’s analysis of orientalism as a discourse deployed for ‘dominating, restructuring, and
19 having authority over the Orient’ and as a ‘systematic discipline by which European culture was
20 able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily,
21 ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period’ (Said
22 1978: 3) has been a considerable influence on the preoccupations of critics of colonialism.
23 Said’s attribution of orientalism to Karl Marx’s writings (p. 153) is a partial explanation for the
24 relative neglect of the Marxist tradition in postcolonial theory.ⁱⁱⁱ Nonetheless, while Marx himself
25 did not develop a systematic theory of colonialism, resistance against colonial rule
26 understandably took inspiration from his critique of capitalism. Marx’s description with Engels
27 in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) of capital’s ‘constant revolutionization of production and its
28 uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions’ (Marx and Engels 1967: 83) was as pertinent
29 to the colonial world as it was to Europe. So was their description of the spread of capitalism in
30 search of a world market.

31

1 In their response to postcolonial theory's neglect of the significance of capitalism's global
2 impact, Marxist approaches to the study of colonialism have also criticized the postcolonial
3 tendency to view imperialism and colonialism as cultural categories. Lazarus has identified as a
4 category error the inclination to depict imperialism in 'civilizational terms' rather than in relation
5 to the historical dynamics of capitalism (Lazarus 2011: 3). Lazarus rightly comments that Said's
6 treatment of imperialism 'makes comparatively little of the fact that it centrally involves the
7 imposition of a particular mode or modes of production and specific regimes of accumulation,
8 expropriation and exploitation in the form of extraction of surplus value, commodification and
9 the generalization of commodity production, and so on' (p. 10). This includes forced assimilation
10 of societies not previously characterized by the capitalist mode of production into capitalist
11 markets and class relations, wage labour and private ownership. The enforced incorporation of
12 colonial economies into what became a capitalist world order that still favours the colonial
13 powers not only transformed social relations in colonial societies. European colonialisms, which
14 varied in technique and forms of domination and control, all 'produced the economic imbalance
15 that was necessary for the growth of European capitalism and industry.... [W]ithout colonial
16 expansion the transition to capitalism could not have taken place in Europe' (Loomba 1998: 4).
17 Furthermore, as Puri observes, globalization was 'pioneered by empires' (Puri 2020: 18). Pro-
18 market capitalism is indebted to the imperial era to such an extent that, for Fanon, as Loomba
19 notes, modern Europe 'is literally the creation of the Third World' (Loomba 1998: 46, citing
20 Fanon 1963: 76-81). In other words, the labour and wealth of colonized people was used to
21 create the wealth and domination of the colonial powers.

22 Chibber's sharply worded criticism of postcolonial theory's neglect of—if not hostility
23 toward —Marxist theory traces this to the influence of poststructuralism. He adds that alongside
24 the transformation of economies in the colonial and postcolonial world by the spread of
25 capitalism, 'many of their non-economic institutions have been changed to accommodate to its
26 logic' (Chibber 2014: 68). Our own interest in these institutions, which we will address later, lies
27 in how education has been subjected to the ongoing but evolving logic of capitalism. Like
28 Chibber, we acknowledge the achievements of postcolonial theory's contribution to anti-
29 colonialism, for example in bringing the literature of the global south to the fore and in
30 countering Eurocentrism. Yet we endorse his criticism of the tendency in postcolonial thought to
31 reject the insights of Marxist theory 'in favour of one in which individuals are entirely

1 constituted by discourse, culture, customs, etc.’ (pp. 73-4). However, in taking this stance we
2 resist the idea that addressing the legacy of colonialism in education demands that one chooses
3 between the material or the cultural analytical focus, sharing instead Bartolovich’s conviction
4 ‘that Marxism and “postcolonial studies” have something to say to each other’ (Bartolovich
5 2002: 1), despite scant dialogue between them. These interrelated but distinct perspectives are
6 both needed but, as Loomba (1998) observes, the two perspectives have tended to develop
7 separately.

8
9 In considering the topic of decolonizing the university we set out to work with the
10 tensions between a Marxist perspective on colonialism and postcolonial theory’s preoccupation
11 with the cultural, noting Loomba’s (1998) caution against inflating the significance of the
12 cultural effects of colonial rule while underestimating the effects of colonial political and
13 economic institutions. We will return to this complex interrelationship later, after discussing the
14 continuities between colonial education and the current condition of the university.

15 16 **FROM COLONIAL EDUCATION TO THE NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY**

17 The injustices of colonialism were many, with education prominent among them. Coloniality in
18 education has reflected all three aspects of injustice delineated by Fraser (1997, 2003, 2005):
19 misrecognition, maldistribution and misrepresentation. In its dismissiveness of the indigenous,
20 colonial education’s palpable failure to recognize the worth of the literatures, bodies of
21 knowledge and languages of the colonized was its most obvious injustice. Emblematic of this
22 failure of both recognition and representation, though not characteristic of all colonial
23 educational practices, has been Thomas Macaulay’s much-quoted remark that the entire body of
24 literature written in Indian and Arab languages was not worth ‘a single shelf of a good European
25 library’ (1835, cited in Evans 2002: 270). However, looking beyond this blatant failure of
26 recognition, although provision of schooling varied among different colonies and in its
27 availability to indigenous people and to settler populations, it was not only often alienating for its
28 recipients but also poorly resourced. Both during the imperial age and now, vast inequalities in
29 expenditure on education are clearly a material injustice, a maldistribution of resources. Colonial
30 education’s chief purpose was to serve the colonizing powers’ interests, primarily their labour
31 requirements (Carnoy 1974), largely for unskilled and poorly paid work. Even missionary

1 education was motivated, in addition to its declared ‘civilizing purpose’ of conversion to
2 Christianity, by the imperative to establish ‘new economic and social organizations’ (Carnoy
3 1974: 128) that served the establishment of capitalism.^{iv} Furthermore, if perhaps less obvious in
4 purpose, dismissal of the indigenous culture as inferior to that of the metropolitan power served
5 the purpose of showing that the evident *material* achievements of the colonizing power were
6 derived from the knowledge evident in its literature, philosophy and science (Viswanathan
7 1987). Relatedly, Loomba notes the interdependence of ‘economic plunder, the production of
8 knowledge and strategies of representation’ claiming that: ‘Specific ways of seeing and
9 representing racial, cultural, and social difference were essential to the setting up of colonial
10 institutions of control, and they also transformed every aspect of European civil society’
11 (Loomba 1998: 97).

12
13 Although some ancient centres of learning pre-dated modern colonialism, colonial
14 universities were few in number, established relatively late in the colonial era (Peters 2019) and,
15 like schools, they were instruments of empire. By contrast, metropolitan universities acted as
16 instruments of colonial power by studying and cataloguing colonized people, collecting their
17 artefacts and scientific materials. Many older universities acquired wealth from the colonies
18 through endowments funded by colonial trade and slavery (see, for example, Colbert 2022), and
19 we will return to this issue later.

20
21 Suggesting that all universities the world over, Cairo’s Al-Azhar apart, ‘stem from the
22 same historical roots—the medieval European university’, Altbach notes that European
23 university models were imposed on much of ‘the non-Western world’ by colonial powers, with
24 non-colonized nations also adopting a Western academic model (Altbach 2007: 122; Altbach and
25 Viswanathan 1989). This, for Alatas, exemplifies academic imperialism, analogous to political
26 and economic imperialism, which started, he argues, with the ‘direct control of schools,
27 universities and publishing houses by the colonial powers in the colonies’ (Alatas 2003: 601)
28 with academic neo-colonialism maintained today ‘via the condition of academic dependency’ (p.
29 602). Such dependency is highlighted in Abrokwa’s claim that, despite the autonomy of post-
30 independence African universities, ‘still almost all of them continue to adhere to the academic
31 systems and structures left by the colonialists’ (Abrokwa 2017: 218).

1 Furthermore, since the 1970s, most universities in both the former colonies and within
2 the metropole have fallen under global neoliberal influences materially and culturally, with
3 respect to knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy, learning and assessment and systems and
4 organization. If anything, globalization has intensified forms of coloniality in the era following
5 formal decolonization, increasing global inequality which, for universities, starts from an uneven
6 playing field precisely because of ‘postcolonial or postconflict situations’ that point to ‘a
7 different geopolitical position’ (Bagley and Pronto 2014: 8).

8
9 As both former and new neo-colonial powers no longer confined to the West exercise
10 changing forms of domination, so new forms of less tangible Empire have been fostered, with
11 neoliberal capitalism a near-universal presence as a contemporary form of coloniality and with
12 ‘Empire’ resting on ‘the global market and global circuits of production’ (Hardt and Negri 2000:
13 xi). As the influence of global corporations increases, so too commodification and consumer
14 culture have taken hold, not least in universities. While vast inequalities in expenditure on
15 education are, as a maldistribution of resources, a persisting material injustice, universities under
16 global neoliberal influences are complicit in the continuation and intensification of coloniality.
17 Neoliberalism as the contemporary realization of both colonialism and capitalism is exemplified
18 in higher education in the form of competitive global rankings^v and the related quest for global
19 ‘excellence’, both of which amplify systems and structures remaining from a colonial past.
20 Moreover, rankings encourage a mimicry of systems and structures designed to bolster a very
21 limited number of ‘top’ universities to the detriment of the majority and, particularly, to the
22 detriment of institutions on the periphery. Such mimicry, labelled ‘mimetic isomorphism’ by
23 Lee and Naidoo, points to institutions internalizing ranking metrics, with those in the global
24 south ‘more susceptible to this global pressure of mimicry for the sake of legitimacy and
25 visibility’ (Lee and Naidoo 2020: 87). Premised on Mignolo’s (2011b) geopolitics of knowledge,
26 Shahjahan and Baizhanov suggest that global university rankings both project a ‘universality of
27 quality and excellence’ and reproduce ‘colonial knowledge/power relations’ (Shahjahan and
28 Baizhanov 2023: 261). Noting that ‘HEIs, nation-states, faculty, and students, particularly from
29 zones that are marginalized, nevertheless willingly join this “rankings” academic olympiad’ (p.
30 263), Shahjahan and Baizhanov apparently concur with Lee and Naidoo (2020) that the global
31 south is not passive with respect to educational development.^{vi} Complicity with global rankings

1 is not, of course, limited to universities the world over but extends, and may be mandated by,
2 national governments with some states aiming for their universities to be recognized as ‘world-
3 class’ (Barnett 2020: 16) and with rankings doing ‘some of the work of governing for the state,
4 as a proxy for creating knowledge-economies’ (Robertson 2022: 433).

5 Against this backdrop, universities commonly proclaim global responsibility and models
6 of partnership that increasingly suggest commitment to decolonization. Yet, at the heart of
7 university life are what Shahjahan and Morgan describe as ‘the psychosocial and transhistorical
8 colonial conditions that construct and perpetuate the competition fetish in HE’ across the world
9 (Shahjahan and Morgan 2016: 94-5). Accordingly, universities in the UK deemed to be leading
10 institutions, already advantaged by wealth and power accrued during the colonial era, are
11 complicit in perpetuating a zero-sum game via rankings located in international comparisons and
12 competition for funds, acclaim and high fee-paying international students apparently attracted to
13 our institutions by our global ranking scores. Shahjahan and Morgan encourage the adoption of a
14 ‘coloniality lens’ to appreciate inequalities in the rankings competition, returning us to our earlier
15 point that both individual universities and different countries are inequitably located
16 geopolitically, on an uneven playing field (p. 106). Of the top 10 universities in the 2023 QS
17 World University Rankings^{vii} five are in the USA, four in the UK and one in Europe. This
18 reinforces Kamola’s claim that what he terms the ‘scramble to “globalize” ’ privileges
19 universities from the USA, Europe, and ‘English-speaking advanced industrial countries’
20 (Kamolo 2011: 148-9). A decade after Kamola’s call to question the imperatives of
21 demonstrating that they are ‘world class’ or ‘global’ institutions by embracing notions of
22 excellence detached from the contexts in which they operate, universities across the world
23 continue to strive for status via comparative competitive measures which perpetuate historical
24 advantages and disadvantages (p. 162). Aptly, Da Wan suggests: ‘If the colonialism of the 19th
25 and 20th centuries forced locals to be subservient through guns and warships, universities and
26 academics are now brought to their knees by global university rankings ... derived from crude
27 and easily manipulable data’ (Da Wan 2021). Noting how damaging such rankings are for
28 universities in postcolonial countries like Malaysia, Da Wan is critical of the one-size-fits-all
29 rankings framework driven by ‘for-profit companies and prescribed to universities around the
30 world to meekly adhere to, regardless of their purpose or location’ (Da Wan 2021). Observing
31 that this rankings framework, or template, ‘embodies the cultures, values, lives, and economic

1 interests not of everyone, but tiny national elites in a handful of countries’, Marginson agrees
 2 that competition rewards those already advantaged, with global rankings favouring ‘large,
 3 comprehensive research universities’ (Marginson 2021: 7). We are not convinced that devoting
 4 resources and energies to climbing global rankings enables universities, including some of those
 5 located in countries which were former imperial powers, to flourish in ways that might enable
 6 them to serve their local constituencies and needs.^{viii} Echoing our earlier point on mimicry, Gadd
 7 states:

8
 9 As newer entrants soon realize, unless they have the natural advantages of already
 10 highly ranked institutions (old, large, wealthy, ‘white,’ ‘Western,’ English-speaking
 11 research intensives ...) their chances of displacing such organizations is very low.
 12 Thus, if they are unable to create a comparable university, their only option is to
 13 create a similar looking surrogate. (Gadd 2021: 2)

14
 15 While the rankings’ criteria for success are designed to exclude all but those institutions
 16 already able to meet them, they are poor proxies for quality. Moreover, and, as Gadd
 17 cautions, even if that were the case, there is evidence that ‘successful outputs are largely a
 18 product of a university’s inputs: their age, wealth and geography’ (p. 4). Global rankings,
 19 part and parcel of the neoliberal capitalist university, are in direct tension with an agenda
 20 that seeks to decolonize. If neoliberalism is ‘... understood from a global and world-
 21 historical perspective as a political construction and a hegemonic project that aims to
 22 concentrate power and wealth in elite groups around the world’, then it is in tension with a
 23 decolonial imperative seeking to ameliorate the injustices and inequities of the past (Hahn
 24 2008: 144). Against this backdrop we now conclude by asking how the challenge of
 25 decolonization in higher education should be understood, particularly by the wealthier,
 26 privileged universities located mainly in parts of the globe that benefitted materially from
 27 colonialism and whose educational traditions and practices remain globally dominant. Our
 28 own positionality as British academics demands this emphasis on the obligations of
 29 universities in countries whose gains from colonialism are reflected in the global
 30 dominance of their universities.

31

1 CONCLUSION: DECOLONIZING THE UNIVERSITY

2 If, as we have suggested above, universities are institutions driven by a capitalist imperative,
3 with neoliberal globalization ‘mapped onto previous racial and colonial (imperial) discourses and
4 practices’, then any moves to decolonize ought necessarily to begin from an acknowledgement of
5 this as a point of departure (Chakravartty and Ferreira da Silva 2012: 368). The imperial and
6 colonial past and its ongoing legacy is both material and cultural—and decolonization requires
7 that both be addressed. Writers like Bartolovitch maintain that colonialism cannot be analysed
8 separately from capitalism and insist on the inseparability of cultural analysis from ‘questions of
9 political economy, in and outside the metropole’ (2002: 4). Yet activism aimed at decolonization
10 in higher education continues in the main to target the cultural, largely in the form of the
11 curriculum.^{ix}

12 It is unsurprising that decolonizing initiatives to reform the university curriculum have
13 focused largely on demanding drastic remedial action against the egregious injustices of
14 colonialist misrecognition and misrepresentation perceived in that curriculum, especially when
15 this requires a reckoning with racism. Hence a focus on decolonizing the curriculum is
16 necessary; but it is not, we contend, sufficient.^x At its best decolonizing the curriculum in British
17 universities ought, obviously, to ensure that all students develop an informed and critical
18 understanding of the history of Empire and colonialism, and of how it continues to shape their
19 world. They should, too, have an understanding of the historical trajectory of the disciplines they
20 study, of how the subjects they study may have been implicated in colonialism, and of how they
21 can now contribute to decolonization. A critical reconsideration of the canonical texts in all
22 academic disciplines and programmes is needed. Universities, of all postcolonial institutions,
23 ought to be well placed to train their critical resources on every part of their work. But this
24 should include both the ‘commodity’ they offer—their curricula—as well as an
25 acknowledgement and evaluation of the coloniality of their own neoliberal state.

26 Of course, curricula and institutional practices that reflect and represent only the
27 experiences and interests of those who have benefitted from Empire and that fail to recognize the
28 effects of colonialism are both unjust and educationally unsound, ignoring questions about who
29 is represented and how, and what is studied and how. Yet, it is essential to bear in mind Gopal’s
30 reminder that colonization ‘was lethally material in aim and purview’ and that it has a
31 consequential material afterlife (Gopal 2021: 884). Hence striving for justice in postcolonial and

1 decolonial education also needs to go beyond the *cultural* and to address the past and enduring
2 injustices of colonialism as a *material* practice. Fraser (1997, 2003) has located the prominence
3 of struggles for recognition in the context of the late 20th century post-socialist decentring of
4 class in favour of difference, despite the growth of economic inequalities and the influence of
5 neoliberal forces.^{xi} Fraser's treatment of recognition and distribution as interrelated dimensions
6 of justice is particularly relevant to our analysis of postcolonial justice in education. We contend
7 that a predominance of claims for recognition in demands for decolonization of the curriculum
8 can obscure the crucial dimension of redistribution, while also risking reification of devalued
9 identities through what Jansen describes as a 'retreat into indigenization' (Jansen 2019: 62).
10 Jansen's caution here refers to South Africa, as a context in which calls for decolonization of the
11 curriculum are a response to the cultural injustices of both British colonialism and apartheid.
12 Making a related critical point, Gopal warns that succumbing to the 'temptation to advocate for a
13 seemingly expansive but potentially misleading model of equal and separate "alternative" or
14 "plural" knowledges' risks repeating the errors of colonialism (Gopal 2021: 891). Ironically,
15 observes Gopal, refusing to engage with other influences and cultures that include those of
16 former colonizers is 'a consequence of colonialism itself' (p. 894). So our agreement with the
17 calls to decolonize the curriculum is qualified by the rider that unconditional affirmation of
18 marginalized cultures will not be conducive to critically addressing the consequences of
19 colonialism in higher education. It may also distract from the task of pursuing distributive justice
20 necessary for attending to the material injustices of the postcolonial global condition of higher
21 education. A further potential cost of an overwhelming focus on cultural difference at the
22 expense of material commonalities is that such an approach to decolonization conceals common
23 interests between descendants of colonized subjects of the Empire and the British working class
24 as well as other precarious groups who similarly derive no benefit in their everyday lives from
25 being citizens of a former colonial power. By contrast, the metropolitan and postcolonial elites
26 derive their prosperity from the material benefits of Empire and a globalized economy in which
27 distributive injustice is a structural feature within and between nation states.

28 Emphasizing the salience of material inequality, Fraser (1997, 2003) rightly argues that
29 redistribution, alongside recognition, with which it is intertwined, must be at the heart of
30 deliberations and decisions about global justice. Such redistribution raises the probability that
31 restitution is owed to countries and universities that have been and still are on the receiving end

1 of colonial and neo-colonial inequalities. Many leading universities are now engaged not only in
2 initiatives to decolonize their curricula but also in wider programmes of restorative justice. For
3 example, the University of Glasgow commissioned a report on its benefits from slavery (Mullen
4 and Newman 2018) and, as a result, has committed £20m to its reparative justice initiatives,
5 which include scholarships, fellowships, research and teaching about historical and modern
6 slavery, a commitment to racial diversity among its staff and students, renaming its buildings and
7 spaces, and a partnership with the University of the West Indies. Harvard University has
8 similarly acknowledged the role of slavery in its development as a leading global institution. The
9 report on *Harvard and the legacy of slavery* (2022) commits Harvard to a \$100m programme of
10 initiatives—monetary and non-monetary. Prominent among these are engagement with and
11 support for descendants’ communities, partnerships with Black colleges and universities as well
12 as non-profits and local educational institutions, visiting appointments, and developing
13 knowledge and curricula about the university’s links with slavery.

14 Such initiatives are, of course, both necessary and welcomed as contributions to
15 decolonizing the university. Yet in reporting about them universities risk succumbing to the
16 competition fetish and their desire to be ‘world leading’, thus arguably diluting efforts to
17 decolonize the university materially and culturally. By definition, not all universities can be
18 world-leading and so, in this new age of Empire, when such initiatives pursue decolonization on
19 the one hand while striving to demonstrate their leading position on the other hand, they may
20 reveal their own continuing colonization. Asking how academic life might be decolonized,
21 Kerrigan and Nehring (2020) point to capitalist hierarchies of class and race as obstacles,
22 contending that decolonizing the university requires fundamental structural as well as discursive
23 change, with its process ‘necessitating engagement with and a challenge to the structures of
24 academic capitalism’ (Kerrigan and Nehring 2020).

25 While much remains to be done, cultural and discursive decolonization is under way. The
26 deeper issue at stake is to what extent comparatively wealthy universities are willing to act on
27 their privileged position in the global higher education order. This could start with a suitably
28 critical appraisal of their participation in competitive rankings, as well as other neoliberal tools
29 that further their dominance. However, Da Wan cautions that while universities continue to pride
30 themselves on their intellectual prowess, they appear to have lost the ‘basic ability to question
31 how such important measures of performance and quality can be computed based largely on

1 reputational surveys and without statistical basis' (Da Wan 2021). Turning a 'coloniality lens' on
2 the landscape of neoliberal universities today not only reveals inequalities amplified by globally
3 competitive rankings to the particular detriment of previously colonized countries but equally
4 deleterious inequalities for universities in all nations if they are not 'winners' in the very serious
5 game of rankings.

6
7 Competitive global rankings and their commodification of narrow measures of quality
8 represent a way of thinking at odds with the idea of the decolonized university many would wish
9 to defend. Concurring with Ball (2012) that universities ought instead to defend a public service
10 ethic grounded in an understanding of the power relations that now enmesh us, we suggest that
11 Ball's recommendations for understanding the neoliberal university can complement a critical
12 analysis of today's neo-colonial configuration of that institution. Hence what Ball calls a
13 'necessary precursor to the possibility of free and critical thought in the neoliberal university',
14 will, with respect to decolonizing, entail a critical awareness of the neoliberal in which
15 commodification, competition and a largely fiscal valuation of staff and students pertains (Ball
16 2012: 26). Accordingly, decolonizing the university would extend well beyond curricula reform to a
17 critique of the university's material and structural practices, exemplified here in (but not confined to)
18 our discussion of global rankings, which maintain the status quo of wealthy institutions (themselves
19 often the beneficiaries of colonialism) while doing nothing to enhance either the quality or social good
20 of those failing to score in the top 100. So too, and viewed through a coloniality lens, universities
21 in the United Kingdom could, for example, critically re-evaluate their construals of
22 'internationalization' by abandoning the charging of premium fees to students from countries
23 that were British colonies.

24
25 The ongoing hierarchical ranking of institutions renders decolonizing the university both
26 a broader and deeper challenge than a decolonized curriculum. It demands a critical
27 understanding, drawing on both postcolonial and Marxist theory, of how the cultural and the
28 material features of colonialism and neo-colonialism are intertwined. If the privileged and
29 dominant universities are to really decolonize, the necessary starting point is to recognize
30 themselves as agents of Empire that derive ongoing and unjust material advantages from the
31 colonial era and its neo-colonial aftermath. Decolonization thus also demands a critical re-

1 evaluation of the institutional *culture* that frames not only their curriculum but also their wider
 2 teaching, research and administrative practices. On its own, curriculum reform is too narrow a
 3 strategy and is destined to result in mere tinkering at the edges. Moreover, curricula reform alone
 4 is endangered by the risk that managerialist strategies for such decolonization are likely to take
 5 the form of displaying accountability by superficially evidencing demonstrable and ‘measurable’
 6 outcomes, which, in turn, are likely to be competitively marketed to ensure that universities are
 7 rewarded with higher global rankings. If the university is to be fundamentally decolonized,^{xii} it
 8 will need both a cultural and a material shift that is motivated less by striving to maintain
 9 competitive advantage and more by striving for greater global equality and justice, in which
 10 universities regain their purpose of providing education as a public good of benefit to both local
 11 and global constituencies.

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ⁱ This is not primarily a paper about global university rankings; rather these are discussed as evidence in support of our central philosophical argument for conceptualizing decolonization of universities by paying equal attention to *material* as well as cultural aspects of the legacy of colonialism.

ⁱⁱ This distinction is drawn differently by Kohn, for whom ‘post-colonial theory is associated with the issues of *hybridity, diaspora*, representation, narrative, and knowledge/power’, while ‘theories of decolonization are concerned with revolution, economic inequality, violence and political identity’ (Kohn 2010: 209).

ⁱⁱⁱ Said objected, with some reason, to Marx’s attribution of ‘oriental despotism’ to India, in arguing that Indian feudalism would not produce a bourgeois revolution and needed the impetus of British rule. In fairness to Marx, he was also critical of British rule in India. (For further discussion see Kohn 2010, pp. 205-206.) While our focus in this paper is centrally on tensions between canonical postcolonial theory as expressed by Said and the additional insights of Marxist concepts, we note Mignolo’s insistence that Marxism too is located ‘in the colonial matrix of power’ (Mignolo 2011a: 281).

^{iv} Colonial universities and schools were also sites of resistance.

^v Other ways in which the power of neoliberalism is enacted in universities include use of precarious contractual employment, accelerated by the strategy of firing and rehiring staff, and reducing expenditure on benefits like pensions.

^{vi} This is not, of course, to suggest that there is no resistance to global rankings—see, for example, Lloyd & Ordorika (2021).

^{vii} We refer here to QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) but other global rankings include the THE World University Rankings and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU).

^{viii} There are ongoing attempts to offer alternative rankings (see, for example, Hazelkorn and Gibson 2017).

^{ix} For an illuminating analysis that co-locates the cultural and the material elements of the decolonization project in universities, see Mbembe (2016).

^x We interpret the curriculum broadly, to comprise all student engagement with the institution: lectures, readings, seminars, as well as study of their discipline, and what is examined, recorded and documented—alongside the informal curriculum that comprises the university’s rituals, and its public and commemorative spaces and artifacts, like statues and the names of buildings.

^{xi} Our own use of the term ‘representation’ refers less to democratic participation than to how difference can be unjustly depicted in colonial discourse.

^{xii} We do not address in our contribution to this special issue on decolonizing the curriculum those approaches to ‘decolonization’ that would call for the decentring of ‘Western knowledge’, which we leave to other authors.