Knowledge for Change

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Liberal Democracy and Its Racial Others in the Age of Trumpism: Why Decolonizing the University Matters

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Liberal Democracy and Its Racial Others in the Age of Trumpism:
Why Decolonizing the University Matters

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The resurgence of right-wing nationalism is today a worldwide phenomenon. From the Hindutva of the Modi regime in India to the electoral success of far right political parties in various European countries, a new political moment of xenophobia and chauvinism is taking hold in many parts of the world. I characterize this historical conjuncture as the age of Trumpism not because the Trump administration is unique but rather because it is paradigmatic of such trends. On the one hand, I view Trumpism as a continuation of long-standing structures of racism, and in turn, I view these structures as integral to liberal democracy. On the other hand, I interpret Trumpism as a rupture with previous formations of state power. In particular, I am concerned with the institutionalization of white racial domination in statecraft. Following Paul Gilroy (2000: 139), I argue that such statecraft must be seen as fascist in its tendencies, practicing "raciology" and legitimating its militaristic and masculinist power through "a stimulating world of signs to which racial difference [is] absolutely fundamental."

State violence against racial others is not new. But the age of Trumpism brings with it a new calculus of detention, expulsion, and even death. As I write this essay, the news has just broken that the Trump administration diverted $10 million from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to the detention and deportation programs of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Stanley-Becker 2018). The persistent

weakening of FEMA was evident as far back as 2005 in the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. This time, the attrition of the agency led to a new round of preventable, racialized death, specifically in Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. Such geographies of erasure and death are all around us, from the maritime borders of Europe to the northeastern territories of India. Migration scholar Nicholas De Genova (2016) describes the threshold of Europe thus: "The Mediterranean is a mass grave." In India, the Modi government is attempting to strip about 4 million people of citizenship in the border state of Assam. With the stated aim of identifying "illegal Bangladeshi migrants," often labeled "infiltrators" by Modi, these efforts include an updated national register of citizens from which "foreigners," or those whose documents are under question, have been expunged. Mobilizing long histories of Islamophobia, these forms of identification assert equivalence between illegal migration, terrorism, and religious identity.

In this brief essay, I wish to consider the role of the university in the age of Trumpism. In keeping with the theme of this important series, Knowledge for Change, I argue that research, pedagogy, and critical thinking, nurtured through ideals of academic freedom, have a vital role to play in challenging right-wing nationalism and its ideologies of hate. Such work is not that of liberal integration and assimilation. Instead, I draw inspiration from the black radical tradition and postcolonial thought to foreground the possibilities of a decolonized university. At the Institute on Inequality and Democracy (https://challengeinequality.luskin.ucla.edu/), at which I have the great privilege of serving as founding Director, we take up the mandate of organizing knowledge to challenge inequality and to expose and contest state violence. Building on the work of the institute, I highlight four modes of knowledge for change.

1. The Politics of Refusal: In the days following the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th President of the United States, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) issued a statement pledging support for the new president. It read: "The AIA and its 89,000 members are committed to working with President-elect Trump to address the issues our country faces, particularly strengthening the nation's aging infrastructure." The statement also included a call for unity: "This has been a hard-fought, contentious election process. It is now time for all of us to work together to advance policies that help our country move forward." Finally, the statement asserted the nobility of public interest, of being enlisted in the nation-building work of building infrastructure and of "the design and construction sector's role as a major catalyst for job creation throughout the American economy" (Johnson 2016).

The AIA statement was met with a barrage of criticism including a twitter storm under the hashtag #NotMyAIA. In previous writing, I have argued that the AIA position is an example of an "infrastructure of assent" and that these forms of assent to power are premised on certain ontologies of professional expertise such as neutrality and innocence (Roy 2017). Faced with rebellion in the ranks, the AIA eventually issued a second statement, one that emphasized that the AIA "will continue to be at the table and be a voice for the profession, especially when it comes to diversity, equity and inclusion" (Chow 2016). Indeed, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion is the new bureaucracy of liberal integration, prominent at our global universities. I argue that such statements of multicultural togetherness are insufficient in the age of Trumpism. Instead, what is needed is a politics of refusal or what we might think of as an infrastructure of dissent. I draw inspiration from the position taken by Jonathan Massey, now Dean of the Taubman College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Michigan, who rejected the AIA's various statements and instead insisted on non-collaboration and non-participation. Massey insists that there "is some work an architect must refuse."

He asks: "Would you design Trump's wall? How about a border station for his Homeland Security Department? A conversion therapy clinic?" Massey concludes that "withholding our labor is architectural agency in one of its strongest forms." (Taylor-Hochberg 2016).

2. Make reparations: The talk of social justice animates many quarters of the global university. In some ways, social justice has become a new knowledge brand, serving to make the case for the value of universities. But a commitment to social justice requires a critique of the ways in which powerful universities are part of the very structures of racial capitalism that faculty and students wish to dismantle. Put another way, our modes of liberal education, and even critical thinking, are embedded in disciplines that, for the most part, have been forged in the crucible of colonialism and imperialism. Yet, academia often proceeds with a convenient amnesia regarding such histories.

In the United States, there has recently been critical reflection on the troubled inter-relationship between the establishment of universities on the one hand and indigenous colonization and slavery on the other hand. From Brown University's Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice to the Harvard and Slavery initiative, it is clear, as Wilder (2013: 11) has argued, that "the academy never stood apart from American slavery," that it was "the third pillar of a civilization built on bondage." In addition to benefiting from the wealth and labor of the slave trade and colonial settlement, "scholarship produced in many higher education institutions also provided ideological support for racial, colonial, and imperial subjugation" (Stein 2016: 170; see also Chatterjee and Maira 2014).

I see the age of Trumpism as an urgent call to rethink what Derickson has called the "unbearable whiteness" of our disciplines and to decolonize the imperial university.

Following Lipsitz (1995), I conceptualize whiteness not merely as ideology but rather as a system of programs and policies that ensure racial exclusion and consolidate white unity. Lipsitz appropriately calls this "the possessive investment in whiteness." It is important to emphasize that such questions of whiteness cannot be reduced to white privilege. As Bonds and Inwood (2016: 715) argue, what is at stake is white supremacy "as the foundation for the continuous unfolding of practices of race and racism within settler states." Whiteness, they note, "is constituted in and through the bodies, property, land, and labor of people of color and continues to animate structural inequalities long after the first seizure of indigenous territory or the final slave has been freed" (Bonds and Inwood 2016: 722).

If we are to decolonize the global/imperial university, then we must take account of how our disciplines and professions constitute a possessive investment in whiteness. For example, my discipline, urban planning, is complicit in the production of landscapes of racialized segregation. Much of modern urban planning was devised in the context of European colonialism, with experimentation in the spaces and on the bodies of colonized others. My call for reparations is an acknowledgement of these histories. It is an insistence that disciplines and professions, as well as the university as an institution, has to take accountability for specific practices of harm.

3. Knowledge as Accompaniment: Some of the most important efforts to decolonize knowledge have unfolded in recent years in South Africa. Addressing these movements, philosopher Achille Mbembe (n.d.) argues that decolonizing the university must create "a right to belong" which is not about tolerance or assimilation but rather about "ownership of a space that is a public, common good." Mbembe calls for "the rearrangement of spatial relations" as well as for "pedagogies of presence." Mbembe imagines a "pluriversity," committed to "epistemic diversity." But unlike liberal ideals

of diversity, he argues that epistemic diversity must be embedded in rightful presence and in relationships of solidarity with communities.

At the Institute on Inequality and Democracy, we seek to rethink the relationship between powerful universities and marginalized communities. We conceptualize these communities as sites of racialized dispossession and as bearing radical proximity to the university. Rejecting conventional models of university-community relations (for example, knowledge transfer or public service), we argue that communities at the margins of knowledge-power relations can reconstitute the epistemological foundations of academic disciplines. Such an approach shifts the role of the university in social change from observation to accompaniment. As Tomlinson and Lipsitz (2013: 10) have argued, "accompaniment recognizes the inescapably and quintessentially *social* nature of scholarship and citizenship" (emphasis in original). Drawing on the practice of accompaniment as conceived by Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador in the 1970s and on the deployment of *konesans* and *balans*, in the 1980s and 1990s, by the Lavalas movement in Haiti, Tomlinson and Lipsitz call for equity-oriented, collaborative research with social movements and community-based organizations. In particular, they reposition academic disciplines as "*action*" to address suffering (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 2013: 14, emphasis in original). For examples of such action-oriented theory and pedagogy, take a look at *Encountering Poverty: Thinking and Acting in an Unequal World*, a book I co-authored with colleagues at the University of California, Berkeley, where we created a curriculum concerned with critical poverty studies and praxis.

4. Reconstruction: On the day after Trump's election, I walked into my classroom not knowing how to explain the historical moment at hand to my students. I was teaching a core graduate course, Histories and Theories of Urban Planning. I carried with me a single book, W.E.B. Du Bois's (1935) magisterial text, *Black Reconstruction in America*.

That book provides an unmatched analysis of racial separation, whiteness, and much more. It is also, as Robinson (1983: 196), has noted, "a theory of history." For me, *Black Reconstruction in America* is also a treatise of hope. It is a vision of collective futures rooted in the black radical tradition. In the weeks that followed, my graduate students went on to create and implement a new curriculum and pedagogy which they called "abolitionist planning" (https://challengeinequality.luskin.ucla.edu/abolitionist-planning/). Du Bois was an important guide for us, especially his notion of black or radical reconstruction.

The age of Trumpism demands, with some urgency, a politics of distribution focused on the state. Of course, in many parts of the world, especially in the United States, liberal democracy has proven itself hostile to public infrastructures of welfare. The dismantling of the welfare state and the expansion of the warfare state took place in the heyday of liberal democracy. But the institutionalization of white supremacy in state power and statecraft requires a bold counter-imagination of resistance and reconstruction. It requires practices of redistribution.

Radical reconstruction, as Du Bois notes, was fundamentally about the redistribution of land as a necessary corollary to emancipation. Needless to say, such land confiscation and redistribution, what in the case of the global South we would call land reforms, never took place in the United States. Instead, as Du Bois demonstrates, the "counter-revolution of property" ensured the consolidation of white racial domination through new regimes of racial terror. But dreams of reconstruction persisted. Du Bois (1935: 485) was thus to write: "It is quite possible that long before the end of the 20th century, the deliberate distribution of property and income by the state on an equitable and logical basis will be looked upon as the state's prime function." The state that Du Bois dreams of is built through an uprising, the "uprising of the black man" (Du Bois 1935:

100). For Du Bois, such uprising was most evident in the "desire for schools" and the "organized effort for education." Freed slaves, he shows, were intent on creating public infrastructures of education, "on a permanent basis, for all people and all classes" (Du Bois 1935: 525). It was this demand that "planted the free common school in a part of the nation, and in a part of the world, where it had never been known."

Such visions of redistribution and reconstruction are apparent today in the bold and detailed platform of the Movement for Black Lives and its call for reparations, economic justice, the end of police power, and much more (https://policy.m4bl.org/). As Kelley (2016) argues, this is a "remarkable blueprint for social transformation…a *plan* for ending structural racism, saving the planet, and transforming the entire nation — not just black lives" (emphasis in original). In the age of Trumpism, such plans not only challenge white supremacy and white nationalism but they also articulate a vision of justice that defies liberal inclusion. At its core, such a vision rests on an epistemological project that eschews whiteness. I view this as homework for the university: what will be our role in radical reconstruction? How will we participate in the redistribution of wealth and power? On what terms will we produce knowledge for change?

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