Asking the Best Questions About Epistemology

Adam Riggio, Royal Crown College

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My response to Jim Butcher's piece carries a little extra authority because, as Digital Editor, I approved its publication in the first place. I say this not to disavow the authority of my role, but to acknowledge it.

For a web platform's editor to have okayed and published a piece that he is about to critique explicitly, is an inherently problematic position. It was already an inherently problematic position to publish an essay that so directly critiques the priorities of post-colonial research in a platform that has become more explicitly allied with post-colonial research since I took over as editor.

Context: The Problem of Platforming

My own position as an editor who both approves and critiques is also difficult, thanks to an intriguingly awkward coincidence. I live in Toronto, where a well-heeled, prestigious intellectual debate series just hosted a high-profile conversation between David Frum and Steve Bannon over the future of Western politics.

Frum, the former speechwriter and policy developer for George W. Bush, was and remains a vocal advocate for spreading democracy by the barrel of a rocket launcher, as he was when he wrote the famous "Axis of Evil" speech for Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address. He took the liberal, progressive side, contrary to Bannon's advocacy of open nationalism.

Protestors outside the venue during the event, who faced disproportionate violence from police and security guards, were primarily motivated by a principle with which I largely agree: No Platform.

No Platform is the refusal to cede your venue to people advocating particularly violent or exclusionary ideologies. The principle considers that there are two reasons for refusing a platform for people to air these views. One is that ceding a platform lends dignity, respect, and prestige to morally repugnant ideas. The other is that it shifts the popular limit of politically and morally acceptable discourse so that what was widely considered extremist 15 years ago (using democracy promotion as an excuse to invade a country of millions on fraudulent pretenses, as Frum did) as perhaps a touch conservative but not that bad.

The No Platform principle, however, is all-too-often depicted as an expression of cowardice, fragility, or weakness of the personalities and principles of those who refuse platforms. This disingenuous image suggests, when its proponents do not state explicitly, that progressive moral and political values are weak because they cannot stand up to the challenge of debating an opposing viewpoint.

It is, however, nationalism and similar ideologies based on authoritarian domination that erodes democratic institutions and enforces violent caste / race hierarchies, that are the genuinely weak ones. Such ideologies do not gain adherents through genuine reason. They instead play on resentment and disingenuous insults about opponents, including resentments

of the historically marginalized, to seduce people with feelings of natural superiority and displays of power to control and suppress people who are different than they are.

The Scope of a Claim to Be Universal

I open my response to Butcher's article with this prologue, so that you can understand why a common reaction to his piece is to wonder why he was given a platform to begin with. The common progressive reaction to critiques of post-colonial theory such as Butcher's is to deny them the legitimacy of a platform.

I was okay with the publishing of Butcher's piece because, despite and because of its flaws, it remains a valuable misunderstanding of post-colonial thinking. Butcher's essay displays a common initial reaction of many Westerners to post-colonial challenges to the scientific and educational institutions and traditions that emerged from Europe's Enlightenment period.

He is in good company, such as Rebecca Goldstein and Steven Pinker. He is also in bad company, such as Jordan Peterson, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and Richard Dawkins.

Butcher's fundamental philosophical error is mistaking a challenge to the Enlightenment tradition's own specific claim of universality for a challenge to the very possibility of universality in knowledge. Here is an example from my own philosophical influences that I hope will contribute positively to explain this point.

That James Madison himself was a slave owner does not invalidate the philosophical strengths and concepts of his Federalist Papers. That he wrote the most philosophically insightful Federalist Papers likewise does not invalidate the moral and political violence of his having owned slaves or conceived the infamous and grotesque "three-fifths compromise" that precisely quantified the institutional sub-humanity of American slaves for census and taxation purposes.

European powers' military-economic imperialism in the Atlantic slave trade and their colonization of the Americas fuelled European industrialization. European industrialization fuelled the growth of European scientific enterprise. The Enlightenment project began when this colonization process was already a century underway.

Popular morality that dehumanized Africans as slavish and Indigenous as savage was largely shared by the main intellectual and political leaders of the Enlightenment. The claims to universality of those who began the Enlightenment tradition were already corrupted by the ethical / political presumption that such universality required conformity to the specifically European (or Western) approach to universal knowledge.

Contemporary post-colonial research focuses primarily on demonstrating the falsehood of this necessity, the presumption that achieving the universal exclusively requires adopting the European-designed model whose crucible was the Enlightenment tradition.

When Knowledge Weds Itself to Terror

This presumption of exclusiveness is false. Even given the concept in post-colonial theory of different knowledge traditions constituting "multiple worlds" or "plural worlds," the presumption of exclusiveness is false. Throughout his essay, Butcher presumes that taking differences in knowledge traditions to constitute multiple worlds of knowledge functions to exclude those worlds from each other.

The problem with Enlightenment traditions of science is not that they believed that universality in knowledge was possible. It was that they mistook the European approaches to knowledge as necessarily and exclusively universal. The European culture of science that descended from the Enlightenment was so economically and ideologically wedded to colonizing imperialism that the presumptions of what constituted properly universal forms of knowledge themselves justified the imperial enterprise.

The presumption of exclusiveness is the imperialist framework of thinking that post-colonial knowledge practices work to overcome. All the diversity of knowledge production methods in every non-Western culture was excluded from recognition as a legitimate method of knowledge production throughout the popular culture of Western societies. The British Empire was one of the worst offenders in its scale of influence around Earth, the intensity of its exclusionary rhetoric, and its ingenuity in building legal and military institutions to destroy and exclude all forms of knowledge that differed from the model of the Western Enlightenment.

In my own country of Canada, the Indian Act laws governing physical movement and removing political rights from Indigenous people created a residential concentration camp network in our Native Reserve system. This refusal of citizenship rights operated in concert with the national residential schools system, which forcibly separated Indigenous children from their families and communities, imprisoning them in boarding schools where teachers forced them through violence to forget their languages, cultural stories, and identities.

The United Nations recently declared, correctly, Canadian institutions of Indigenous governance to be machinery of a centuries-long act of genocide.

All of this was justified as the benevolence of English government educating Indigenous people to become proper citizens capable of learning at all. This is the intensity and seriousness to which European and broader Western institutions excluded ways of life from public legitimacy as knowledge producing cultures.

Misunderstanding "Decolonize"

In presuming that post-colonial thinkers themselves exclude all knowledge produced in scientific traditions and disciplines linked with imperialism-justifying ideologies, Butcher himself accuses post-colonial theory of colonialism.

Post-colonial thinkers who understand the fundamental point of post-colonial thinking do not consider their mission to exclude Western culture's knowledge production traditions and methods from legitimacy as European empires did to others. Such exclusion is itself one of the central methods and principles of the imperialism that post-colonial thinking aims to identify.

Given the pervasiveness of exclusionary or delegitimizing attitudes toward Indigenous knowledge traditions in many academic disciplines for so long, it is naïve of anyone to think that any decolonizing process would be simple. Every practice in a scientific discipline should be scrutinized ruthlessly.

No territory should be exempt from the search for which practices presume their own exclusive correctness. This includes conceptual development, empirical research and interpretation methods, the popular images of the discipline, and how the university departments where all this work takes place carry out their daily work, hiring, tenure and promotion decision processes.

Butcher can say that the Enlightenment concept of universality, conceived abstractly, includes a plurality of sources, traditions, and methods of knowledge. All that he may say will not repair actual, concrete practices.

Epilogue: Unseemly Rhetoric

Butcher unfortunately leans on several rhetorical devices to make his point that have been widely discredited, due to their frequently occurring in racist right-wing trolling culture. Here is the most stark example.

He refers to Martin Luther King's universally famous "I Have a Dream" segment from his speech at the March on Washington, to deride post-colonial theorists as themselves opposing genuine equality.

This has been a common tactic among the racist trolls of the United States at least since the 2012 murder trial of George Zimmerman. King's words were often used to invalidate anti-racist advocates as themselves being anti-equality, as the quote was the rhetorical centrepiece of an argument that they wished to refuse Zimmerman a fair trial.

It did not matter to the trolls that the trial's critics wanted us to explore, understand, and reject the ideologies that enabled Zimmerman to perceive Trayvon Martin as a dangerous threat to his neighbourhood, instead of a teenager being a jackass. King was quoted as a rhetorical means to use a superficial conception of equality to make more complex conceptions of equality appear hypocritical.

For Butcher to end his essay with such an appeal is, at best, terribly naive. Readers can easily imagine what it would be at worst. At worst, you need only consider what Steve Bannon and

people like him propagate throughout popular culture today. But I am sure that Butcher would not consider himself so malicious in his intent.

Contact details: serrc.digital@gmail.com

References

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