

## Towards a More Inclusive Classics Live Presentation

Note to reader: the text here was delivered live during the workshop. It represents an addition to the pre-circulated material; that material focused on how I have taught a specific module, here, I reflect on some broader considerations about university-level teaching.

We've talked a little bit about decolonisation of the curriculum on a programme or departmental level but when preparing for this conference, I thought it might be helpful to reflect on some of my experiences in the classroom while teaching what I, at least, consider a module which contributes to efforts to decolonise the curriculum. I discussed that module at length in the pre-circulated material, so I won't bore you with my module plan again – even with its pretty colours - instead, I just want to draw out a couple of key points.

The main thing that I wanted to stress is the need to think seriously about how students learn – this is true of all teaching, of course, but I think that it applies particularly to teaching topics that will be new to students. When dealing with traditional topics in Classics, students are usually building on existing skills – even if they developed those skills at school in subjects like English or History. I found that students didn't necessarily appreciate how their skills might transfer to types of evidence or places that they had never encountered before. I have found that building my modules around things like discussion and regular, short assessments allowed students to practice; this lets them recognise the way that they are improving, and it helps them develop their confidence.

Linked to this, decolonising the curriculum needs to go hand-in-hand with decolonising teaching – I don't want to be the straight, white, Oxbridge-educated man standing at the front of the class telling people what to think. University teaching needs to start focussing less on *content* or *knowledge* but on skills. Giving students the skills and confidence to put forward their own views inevitably makes the classroom experience more inclusive and diverse. There is obviously a balance to this – research-led teaching is, I think, integral to the university experience and can be hugely inspirational for students; but we need to balance our own interpretations, affected, as they are, by our own world views and biases, with those of others – scholars and students alike so that the classroom becomes a place of multiple perspectives and voices. The days of hour-long lectures should be consigned to history.

The second point I want to address concerns what decolonising the curriculum means and it fits into the point I made about why we should all teach Persia. There is a temptation, I think, to assume that “decolonisation” means doing new things and junking things that have been integral to the discipline for more than a century – maybe that's true, but it doesn't necessarily have to be. I am certainly conscious of the need to avoid alienating colleagues by implying that my research areas are somehow more valid for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century than theirs.

But one of the things that I've enjoyed about studying Persia, and specifically the relationship between Persia and the Greeks, is that it lies at the intersection of key scholarly theories – postcolonialism, orientalism, subalternism, etc. The topic therefore has helped me – and my students – understand different ways of approaching not only Classics, but also the world around us. How should we deal with Greek accounts of torture in the Persian Empire? Orientalism demands that we reject these as inventions designed to portray the Persians as barbarians; postcolonialism suggests that we should take these accounts of brutality seriously. Which is right?

This brings me to my final point, whose formulation is deliberately provocative – and I make it somewhat tentatively: from a Persian perspective, I'm not sure that we need to decolonise Classical Greece, we need to recolonise it. By that, I'm clearly not calling for a return to the days of Droysen

and Tarn – what I mean is that we should actively seek to disassociate the Classical Period from its later reception and, indeed, from the post-Alexander world. We should acknowledge that the impression of Classical Greece fed to us was constructed in an era of western colonialism by imperialists who saw the Greeks in a way that Greeks themselves may not have done. While we will certainly find examples of Greek exceptionalism in the pages of Classical authors, those passages actually look rather different when read not against two millennia of “western civilisation”, but against the backdrop of the Persian Empire. For lots of Greeks, the years from 550 to 330 were a scary and turbulent time; people like Herodotus and Aeschylus were not necessarily writing from positions of security and their work is, in many respects, a response to imperialism. Consequently, relatively small shifts in how we approach the material can give Classical Greece renewed value in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Yes, we might still be talking about dead white men, but by putting Greek history and culture into the broader context of the Mediterranean, and particularly the Persian Empire, we can teach traditional topics in innovative, exciting, and inclusive ways. Imagine, for example, how different Aeschylus might look if taught alongside the Book of Esther on a course entitled ‘Subaltern responses to the Achaemenid Empire’.

That is really an addition to the point I made about the value of studying Persia; the main thing I want to stress is the need to focus on building student skills and confidence. I hope that some of the things that I’ve picked up through experimentation and discussed in my presentation might be useful to some of you.

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June 2020