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CULTURE REVIEW

Against Western Civilisation

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Cultural Studies Against Western Civilization: Racialising Politics of Knowledge

Knowledge is currently being shaped by the tension between two powerful forces. On one hand, we see intense competition within global markets by post-secondary education and research providers, served by corporate academic publishers and data-analytic services such as academia.edu and Google scholar. On the other hand, universities are being shaped at a local level by political movements of nationalism, white supremacy and protectionism. Transnational solidarities appealed to and produced by these movements are sometimes referred to as ‘the Anglo Sphere’, and its members are charged with the mission of protecting and promoting the values of ‘western civilization’.

Cultural studies were forged last century by workers’ movements, civil rights and Indigenous activism, second wave feminism, and post-colonial independence movements. The discovery of death camps after the defeat of Nazi Germany revealed an industrial scale of genocide in the heart of ‘civilized’ Western Europe. It was many decades afterwards that settler-colonial states, including Australia and Canada, would acknowledge the genocidal function of residential schools and children’s homes in Australia and North America. The testimony of survivors recorded in *Bringing Them Home* (1997) and the *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (2015) exposed the human rights abuses enabled by state policies of ‘protection’ and ‘assimilation’.

Early cultural studies scholars were acutely aware of the xenophobic underbelly of cultural projects which cited processes of civilization and progress as their justification. Later in the twentieth century, this skepticism towards western civilization as a racial ideology seemed to dissipate. Cultural studies were variously reabsorbed into established academic disciplines of sociology and anthropology, ‘post-racial’ and ‘post-feminist’ studies of social identity, technocratic

studies of power and governmentality, or a 'high' tradition of cultural theory whose terminology is impenetrable to outsiders.

While cultural studies continue to thrive as a critical intellectual force in the global South and within critical Indigenous scholarship around the world, many white scholars in Europe and the nations built on its settler-colonial states failed to predict the revival of a toxic, gendered, ideology of western civilization and to prevent it from re-establishing a genocidal mission within our societies and universities. I am not being hyperbolic. A growing transnational subculture of young white men in Europe and the settler-colonial states prepared to murder strangers in the name of 'Western civilization' attests to this.

In Australia, private funding channeled through conservative political forces has spawned university courses dedicated to 'Western civilization' within cash-strapped humanities and social science faculties. A racialised scholar in Australia in one of the affected universities offering these courses expressed bemusement in a recent conversation with me. After noting flurries of outrage this development had sparked among the white people who form the majority of academic staff in their faculty, they asked me: 'haven't the humanities and social sciences *always* formed part of a western civilizational project?' While I would agree in many ways with this assessment, there seems something especially insidious about current moves to reinstall or to shore up western civilization as the centre of our disciplines. At stake, among other things, is the education of the coming generation of scholars and citizens.

To illustrate the epistemological and institutional challenges that we face as cultural studies researchers, I share some anonymized feedback from anonymous reviewers who recently rejected a proposal for research *instigated* by Indigenous youth leaders. Indigenous youth produced the terms of reference and ethics documents for the research, the academic team featured a respected Indigenous researcher from a nearby community, and strong mentorship from a local Indigenous organization. The proposal was submitted after two years of preparatory work conducted with youth and academic researchers in universities, high schools and in the urban community where the Indigenous youth leaders reside.

Notwithstanding extensive documentation of these relationships in the proposal, one anonymous reviewer felt that the research did not involve the youth as co-researchers. They feared, moreover, that the research might cause further damage to an already marginalised group. Another reviewer – from outside Canada - found the proposal's use of the term 'genocide' to be 'offensive' and disputed the accuracy of referring to Canada as a 'settler state'. They also wanted us to know that, in their country, our proposal would be evaluated as *Indigenous engagement not research as such*.

The bodywork and arts-based facilitation, which over several years had successfully enabled youth to collectively generate research questions and ideas, was condemned by another reviewer as a 'lack of coherent methodology'. The youths' requirement for control over data generated from workshops and over publications produced by academics at each stage of the research process, was interpreted by another reviewer as 'a lack of clear outcomes'.

The Western civilizational framework informing these reviews seems clear. Indigenous communities can either be *given* knowledge (through financial support like scholarships) or they can be *engaged* with by non-Indigenous knowers. This places the Indigenous knowledges (from which youth draw resilience and understanding to form their research questions) beyond the scope of academic recognition and support. Reciprocal and negotiated ethical relationships are treated as suspicious and discouraged. Instead, non-Indigenous researchers are expected to go to their communities to extract data and return with analyses and spurious 'answers' to their

‘problems’, ‘challenges’, and ‘issues’. Consenting to this unilateral model is apparently the only way that Indigenous youth can be recognized as ‘co-researchers’.

The problem is not just that methodologies, research questions, objectives and outcomes are treated as universally valid and equated with ‘science’. They are also used to attack research initiatives from specific sites and from people who not only want to better understand their experience, but for that understanding to be applied within wider knowledge communities – including the ‘global university’. The university from which I submitted the application to support the research of Indigenous youth was a leader in eugenics research from 1928 and facilitated programs of sterilization and institutionalization of people with disabilities continuing into the late 1970s. During this period, residential schools were systematically stripping Indigenous children of their language, cultural values and ceremonial knowledge to promote their more rapid assimilation into Canada. The youth who developed the research proposal continue to be affected by the traumatic experiences of their grandparents and parents, institutionalised to remove perceived obstacles to Canada’s agricultural and industrial ‘development’.

The promotion of Western civilization frameworks within a market driven construct of the ‘global university’ is likely to embolden non-Indigenous researchers to remain uneducated and unmoved by urgent questions arising from local histories and nationally specific political agendas. As cultural studies researchers working within nations identified with an ‘Anglosphere’, it is our responsibility to remember and to educate our students and colleagues about the systemic, institutionalised violence which anchors and is obfuscated by ideological projects of civilization.