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Rethinking the ‘Western Tradition’

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Abstract

In recent years, the ‘Western tradition’ has increasingly come under attack in anti-colonialist and postmodernist discourses. It is not difficult to sympathise with the concerns that underlie advocacy of historically marginalised traditions, and the West undoubtedly has a lot to answer for. Nonetheless, while arguing a qualified yes to the central question posed for this special issue, we question the assumption that the West can be neatly distinguished from alternative traditions of thought. We argue that there is fundamental implicit and explicit agreement across traditions about the most difficult of issues and on standards about how to reason about them and that the ‘West’ has demonstrably learned from within and without itself. But, we question the very viability under conditions of heightened globalisation and neo-colonialism of distinguishing between thought of the ‘West’ and thought outside the West. It is time to move beyond the reified assumptions that underlie the idea of ‘Western thought’, cast as an agent with a collective purpose.

Keywords: indigenous knowledge, blind spots and blank spots, neo-colonialism, Orientalism, capitalism

Introduction

In recent years, the ‘Western (or Northern) tradition’ has increasingly come under attack, in anti-colonialist and postmodernist discourses. Thus, the targeted tradition has on different occasions been labelled ‘mechanistic, materialistic, reductionistic, empirical, rational, decontextualized, mathematically idealised, ... ideological, masculine, elitist, competitive, exploitive, and violent’ (Aikenhead, 1997, p. 5, 1996, pp. 9, 10, 2001, pp. 11, 12). Similar attributes of the nature of ‘Western’ science and knowledge¹ (‘mechanistic’, ‘reductivist’, ‘exclusionist’ and ‘particularistic’; as opposed to the ‘holism’ of indigenous or traditional thinking and world views) are rehearsed by Russell Bishop (1998), Semali and Kincheloe (1999), Goduka (2000), and Fatnowna and Pickett (2002). In Glen Aikenhead’s characterisation of ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘First Nations knowledge of nature’, it ‘contrasts with Western scientific knowledge in a number of ways’:

- 'in their social goals: survival of a people *versus* the luxury of gaining knowledge for the sake of knowledge and for power over nature and other people';
- 'in intellectual goals: to co-exist with mystery in nature by celebrating mystery *versus* to eradicate mystery by explaining it away';
- 'in their association with human action: intimately and subjectively interrelated *versus* formally and objectively decontextualised';
- 'holistic First Nations perspectives with their gentle, accommodating, intuitive, and spiritual wisdom, *versus* reductionist Western science with its aggressive, manipulative, mechanistic, and analytical explanations'; and finally
- 'in their basic concepts of time: circular for Aboriginals, rectilinear for scientists' (Aikenhead, 1997, pp. 5–6).

Although Aikenhead's characterisation of the 'subculture of science' appears to be little more than caricature and tendentious demonisation, on a par with the essentialising nonsense of those who arrogantly dismiss the possibility of non-occidental contributions to knowledge and scientific research and inquiry, and despite his manifest romanticisation of the indigene, it is not difficult to sympathise with the concerns that underlie advocacy of historically marginalised traditions. The West has undoubtedly much to answer for. To begin with, significant quanta of Western knowledge, science, technology and 'rationality' have led to, or have had as a significant goal, the subjugation of nature and so far have been devastatingly efficient. The pursuit of nuclear energy, wholesale environmental degradation, deforestation and destruction of flora and fauna, factory farming of non-human animals for human consumption, vivisection, and genetic engineering and manipulation are deplorable and—indeed—irrational. Moreover, the marginalisation and inferiorisation of indigenous peoples' practices, skills and insights has, to a large extent, been arrogant and of similarly questionable rationality. The ravages and lingering consequences of colonialism, oppression and subjugation attest to the cruel efficiency of a vast number of Western (-sponsored) practices. Current attempts by economically, industrially and technologically dominant nations to (re)colonise or appropriate for commercial gain these practices, skills and insights are exploitive and contemptible. Finally, certain traditional streams of Western thought have underpinned colonial and neo-colonial educational practices and systems. Historically, these have lain at the heart of the cultural consequences of colonialism, in curricula that assumed the truth and greater importance of Western forms of knowledge, denigrating and marginalising so-called indigenous epistemologies and educational traditions.

Nonetheless, there may be serious misconceptions and indeed biases at work in the unqualified targeting of 'the Western tradition'. We, the authors of this article find binary opposition often useful, for reasons of conceptual clarity, amongst many other things. In this case, however, we reject the 'binaries' involved in the topic set for the special edition of this journal. We do not buy into the 'problem' as it is posed here. However, our responses to the questions posed for the special issue ('Does the Western tradition have the intellectual resources to overcome its philosophical blindnesses?'; 'Can it learn from, by, despite, itself?'; 'Does it have the capacity to learn from other traditions?') are reservedly affirmative, and we have distinct considered

intuitions regarding the resources (of the tradition in question) required for this kind of learning. However plausible the charge of ‘philosophical blindness’ may sometimes be, there are several considerations that it would be foolish to ignore. Firstly, like its critics, Western thought is diverse and no longer neatly distinguishable from alternative traditions. There are no easy boundaries between ‘the West’ and ‘the rest’. Secondly, despite disagreement, there is a shared implicit assumption among all *plausible* views of the possibility of discussion and argument about even the most difficult ontological, epistemological and ethical issues. Thirdly, there appears to exist basic agreement on some standard of good and bad reasoning about ontological, epistemological and ethical matters in education, as in other areas of public concern and intellectual life. Fourthly, thought in the West has demonstrably both produced searching internal critique and also engaged with criticism from without, although such boundaries have become increasingly porous. Finally, we argue, fifthly, that a preoccupation with putative Western ideas as a target for resistance in contemporary educational theory mischaracterises contemporary neo-colonial forces and their significance.

Of ‘Blind Spots’ and ‘Blank Spots’

As has been evident in the discussion of Aikenhead above, many friends of the ‘subaltern’ pit their preferred orientation against a straw-person that is swiftly and summarily dispensed with. This kind of move also informs common invocation of the Western tradition’s ‘philosophical blindnesses’. Referring to ‘two generic forms that ... ignorance can take’ (Wagner, 2003, p. 16), Jon Wagner claims that ‘blind spots and blank spots are at the core of *all* research endeavours’ (Wagner, 2003, p. 19):

All scientists [including philosophers and educational researchers] operate in a world defined by what they think and know to be true. What they don’t know well enough to even ask about or care about are their *blind spots*. What they know enough to question but not to answer are their *blank spots*. The same phenomenal categories are alive for nonscientists as well, and in some ways the particulars of those categories for scientists and nonscientists have much in common. (Wagner, 2003, p. 16; emphasis added)

Lesley le Grange, following Wagner, refers to blank spots and blind spots as ‘two kinds of ignorance produced by *Western* knowledge systems’, in particular (Le Grange, 2004, p. 69; emphasis added), especially in their hegemonic domination vis-à-vis ‘marginalised epistemologies’ (Le Grange, 2004, p. 70) and ‘indigenous ways of knowing’ (Le Grange, 2004, p. 71).

Critiques of Western knowledge by feminists, sociologists of knowledge and post-colonialists operating within Western research traditions could be interpreted as shifting *blind spots* to *blank spots*—critiquing Western ways of knowing [is] now becoming part of the dialogues and conversations of Western scholars. This reflexive response is encouraging and opens up spaces for greater recognition of indigenous knowledges. However, the Western cultural archive produces blind spots, aspects that *Western scholars will not know enough about or care about*. (Le Grange, 2004, p. 74; emphasis added)

It would appear, then, that Le Grange's view, more or less explicitly, involves a negative response to the questions guiding the theme of this special issue of EPAT. In the context of the present discussion, he seems to acknowledge too little here and rules out the possibility of further engagement.

It is a common sociological sleight of hand to observe that the position authors critical of 'other'/'subaltern' ways of knowing or science traditions

is disturbingly devoid of self-reflexivity. There is no evidence of a consciousness of how their race and class positions them, and of how the Western discourses they have taken up in their educational journeys (have) dispose (d) them to work in particular ways, and also of the blind spots their ways of researching/writing create. (Le Grange, 2005, p. 137)

It is not unusual for those who are critical of politically correct stances and of glorification of the indigene or aboriginal to be accused of manifesting 'imperialist tendencies' (Le Grange, 2005, p. 128), of race- and class-based prejudice.

However plausible the charge of 'philosophical blindness' against the 'Western tradition' may sometimes be, and from a historical perspective has often been, there are nonetheless several considerations that it would be foolish to ignore.

How the West was Never 'One': The Responses

1. Like its critics, Western thought is diverse and no longer neatly distinguishable from alternative traditions. The 'Western tradition' is not (any longer) characteristically or paradigmatically the 'Enlightenment tradition' or the 'analytical tradition'. It incorporates a multitude of different philosophical perspectives and traditions: pragmatism, interpretivism, phenomenology and hermeneutics, critical theory, the different kinds of feminism and postmodernism, and critical realism, to name only a few. These perspectives and traditions are characterised not only by an openness and proximity to (self-)critique (we return to this point below) but also by brisk and tireless 'border crossings'.

We take Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978/2003) as exemplifying several of our claims about Western thought. This foundational postcolonial text is not merely a devastating expose of the ways in which this thread in post-Enlightenment Western thought managed Orientalist representations of the Oriental as other, as an expression of the power of the coloniser over the colonised. Describing himself as 'speaking both as an American and as an Arab' (Said, 1978/2003, p. xxvi), Said wrote as a Palestinian but from within the Western academy, drawing on the ideas of a range of Western scholars that included Foucault, Gramsci and—ambiguously—Marx. With *Orientalism* now widely acknowledged, not least in the West itself, as one of the most shameful episodes in the history of Western learning, this text and the postcolonial literature that has burgeoned since its publication surely constitute evidence that the West, if there is still or ever was such an intentional entity, can and has learned from historical errors, overcoming such blindnesses. Globalisation of academic exchange and discourse, with scholars and ideas crossing geographic and intellectual borders with increasing ease and frequency, prompts the question of how any area of global

thought could possibly learn by itself any more. None of these observations should be taken as assuming that sites of Western thought have yet sufficiently accommodated non-Western thought or that critique of Western traditions of thought is yet complete.

2. Despite disagreement, there is a shared implicit assumption among all *plausible* views of the possibility of discussion and argument about even the most difficult ontological, epistemological and ethical issues. For one thing, this explains why many views are articulated in implicit or explicit conversation with theoretical adversaries. In ‘implicit conversation’, one has the adversaries ‘in mind’: these range from straw persons dispensed with in an easy and swift demolition job (a move that would not make one’s own, favoured position any stronger; for examples of this strategy, see Aikenhead, 1997, pp. 5–6, 1996, pp. 9, 10, 2001, pp. 11, 12) to imagining and carefully dealing with the strongest possible opposition to one’s stance (a move that is often arguably likely to strengthen the latter; see, for example, Carr, 2006, pp. 151–154).² ‘Explicit conversation’ concerns engagement with (and usually opposition to) views that have actually been articulated by ‘real’ theoretical opponents (e.g. Carr, 2006, p. 151; Le Grange, 2005, p. 137). For another, the confidence placed in the possibility of discussion and argument about difficult philosophical issues in education (as in other areas of inquiry) is exemplified in the writings of those who criticise ‘traditional research epistemologies’ of the ‘Western world’ on the grounds of Western educational researchers’ ‘preoccupation with neutrality, objectivity and distance’, and who then go on to argue the case for indigenous people’s ‘participation in the construction, validation, and legitimization of knowledge’ (Bishop, 1998, pp. 200–201). While these sorts of exchanges (that characteristically happen at conferences on indigenous knowledge systems, ethnomathematics and the like) often assume the form of ‘preaching to the converted’, the deeper intention is surely to win over a few converts from the other camp. In other words, more often than not, the aim of this kind of argumentation is to make a compelling (impersonal, objective, universally valid) case for one’s favoured position.

3. There appears to exist basic agreement on some standard of good reasoning about ontological, epistemological and ethical matters in education, as in other areas of public concern and intellectual life. Whatever else may be said about the practical effectiveness of philosophy of education, it is surely true that serious and committed philosophical thinkers and practitioners of most if not all persuasions are ‘committed to following through the implications of rational argument and ... impersonal rational principles (commitment to truth, impartiality, respect for evidence and the like)’ (Carr, 2004, p. 56). It is surely also true that they would like their arguments and principles to appear uncorrupted ‘by a combination of irrational influences such as political expediency, vested interests and established power’ (Carr, 2004, p. 56).

Whether or not these considerations have a peculiarly ‘Western’ origin, they are ignored by ‘other traditions’ and approaches to education that might be based on them, at the peril of the latter.

4. The Western tradition is not only diverse and increasingly overlapping with others. Indeed, much of the critique of the worst of western thought has come from within the ‘West’. As Le Grange concedes, citing the contributions of sociology of

knowledge, feminist scholarship and postcolonial thought, extensive critique of 'Western ways of knowing' (Le Grange, 2004, p. 74) has taken place within the traditions of Western research. To these examples can be added Critical Theory's extended and often searing criticism of the intellectual tradition of Enlightenment modernity, exemplified in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's description of the world under western modernity, as 'disaster triumphant' (1979, p. 3). Instead of liberating human beings, they argue, instrumental reason is irrational, culminating in Nazi death camps and a capitalist system that commodifies through the market, including and especially in the culture industry.

While such critiques were written from within the West, however, and as postmodern and postcolonial critique grew, they have become less easy to locate in relation to a clear intellectual and geographical context. Said's work not only crosses borders, critiquing Orientalism by exposing its failings and drawing in postcolonial understandings while emphasising hybridity, warning against characterisations of cultures as distinct, homogeneous and monolithic. Said also advises against the assumption (which lies of course at the heart of Orientalist thinking) that terms like 'Orient' or 'West' are ontologically stable, as both are fictions, products of human effort, organised and open to manipulation. Said himself declares a preference for careful analysis and critique aimed at understanding as against knowledge that is 'part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation, belligerency and outright war' (Said, 1978/2003, p. xix) and 'bursts of polemical, thought-stopping fury that so imprison us in labels and antagonistic debate whose goal is a belligerent, collective identity rather than understanding and intellectual exchange' (Said, 1978/2003, p. xxii).

5. There are wider implications than this to Said's cautions about simplistic binaries between thought that is supposedly of the West and of the rest. The 'blind spots' that arise from focusing too heavily on 'the classical period' of the society or language that is being studied, fixing them 'for all time, for ontological reasons that no empirical material can dislodge or alter' (Said, 1978/ 2003, p. 70), has further consequences, to which we now turn.

Conceptions of 'thought' as fixed geographically and in time can imprison us in analytical categories that overemphasise ahistorical conceptions of colonialism and culture. Arif Dirlik argues that preoccupation with the cultural legacies of colonialism distracts attention from what is distinctive about contemporary colonialism: 'its relationship to capitalism' (Dirlik, 2002, p. 428). This lends exaggerated importance to the past and promotes obliviousness to how power has been reconstructed by globalised capitalism.

Dirlik observes how the relationship between coloniser and colonised has tended to be understood in Manichean terms, as opposed to one another, cast in terms of race, underplaying the cultural entanglement between the two, bound together in a structural dialectic; and how Third World voices have demanded that the psychological and cultural aspects of colonialism be recognised, thus shifting the analytical emphasis away from 'the economic and political to the cultural and the personal experiential' (Dirlik, 2002, p. 431). So political economy has ceased to mediate in questions of culture (Dirlik, 2002, p. 432).

Globalization returns us to a condition where once again it is capitalism, rather than colonialism, that appears as the major problem. The avoidance of this question is a serious problem of contemporary postcolonial criticism which, focused on past legacies, is largely oblivious to its own conditions of existence and its relationship to contemporary configurations of power. It also ignores the ways in which its interpretation of the past may serve to promote, or at least, play into the hands of a globalized capitalism. (Dirlik, 2002, p. 440)

No doubt indigenous people in postcolonial contexts have suffered marginalisation and oppression. However understandable the assertion of non-Western, indigenous values and epistemologies as a response to the cultural alienation caused by colonialism, overemphasising this fact can distract from recognition of the full range of such marginalisation and oppression. Colonialism's consequences are also material, in the form of growing international and intranational poverty. Furthermore, at the same time as capitalism's self-reinvention has brought former colonies into the global economy, postcolonial critics are themselves now inserted into the global intellectual elite, drawing on practices of critique largely drawn from 'Western' intellectual traditions of criticism located within traditions of cultural nationalism no less Western in origin. Particularly in education, resistance to the lingering effects of colonialism that focuses too strongly on cultural marginalisation distracts critical attention from the destruction primarily wrought by neo-liberalism, ineffectually fought by reversion to epistemic and moral traditionalism. Addressing human needs through education—including by widening policy, curricula and pedagogy with ways of knowing beyond the worst of the historical West—requires critical attention to the power and influence of global capital, the ongoing destruction wrought by industrial technology, the harnessing of education to the production of labour power to serve the interests of capital and the attendant subversion of education through the imposition of business-inspired models of management of education on its organisation.

Furthermore, and crucial to possibilities for resistance to global capitalism and its increasing influence on education global capitalism is no longer geographically confined to the West. On the contrary, with the decline of Europe and the rapid rise of Eastern giants, although the knowledge that historically underpinned Western science and technology and so their destructive effects may have been Western in origin, capitalism is hardly just 'Western' any longer (Dirlik, 2002, p. 444).

Conclusion: Beyond 'Western Thought'

While arguing a qualified affirmative answer to the key question of whether the Western tradition can overcome its blindnesses, we have acknowledged both those historical blindnesses and their destructive consequences. But, emphasising the diversity of thought in the West and its imbrication now in globalised flows of ideas that belie assumptions about geographical exclusivity, we have argued that Western thought has drawn on resources from within and without to learn, but by no means by itself. Yet, where we have used the term 'Western thought' for the sake of argument, we find this reified category no longer useful; it mistakenly assumes too

that there could be a collective Western agent with both a unified sense of themselves and a collective purpose that includes a coherent single stance towards other forms of 'thought'. As long as vanguardist postcolonial leaders and intellectuals pursue a politics of resentment, in terms that Said warns against, we will remain distracted from the most virulent forces that threaten global well-being, not least in its educational systems.

Notes

1. While the concern in the examples provided here is almost exclusively with science and knowledge, and scientific epistemologies, a wider survey must surely also include political theory, anthropology, historiography, literature, aesthetics and ethics.
2. Wilfred Carr anticipates three sets of compelling responses to his postfoundationalist argument, and he attempts to defend his position against each of these, with varying degrees of success.

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