

# Decolonising politics: diversity is democracy

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## Manjeet Ramgotra

Politics is about who we are. How we communicate, how we fit into our communities and negotiate our shared political life and how we reflect where we come from. Politics is inherently diverse. The beauty of liberal democracy is that it has been capable of expanding its boundaries to include individuals of diverse backgrounds, cultures, gender, race, social class and outlook into public life. Or has it?

Liberal democracy was founded in the context of colonial empire. It was conceptualized and established by a fraternity of privileged white men who shared in equality and freedom but excluded women, people of colour and the working classes. Nevertheless, liberal democracy has had the capacity to reform. Even if with reluctance and resistance, it has opened institutional structures, produced laws that protect equality and create greater fairness and justice for all in society. At the same time, however, such reinvention spins itself back to beginnings and reasserts the power and privilege of those who embody its founding. Any headway

made to broaden democracy and include those on the margins is frequently set back by a desire to maintain an original vision.

Identity matters. Well-known political thinkers base their understandings of the political on identity and include only white men as participants in political institutions. In part, this is because these well-known theorists are men themselves. In the recent past, they have enjoyed often exclusive access to education and public positions of affluence. This is not to say that women and people of colour have not been present. From the margins of society, they talk back to power and contest exclusive social contract theories. However, their voices have been silenced and subjugated to that of the authoritative white man.

In most university curricula across the 'West', we do not always study the women and people of colour who comprise our bodies of knowledge. Rather we read the history of political thought from ancient Greece to our moment through the eyes and ideas of white male thinkers. The movement to decolonise the curriculum engages the voices of women and people of colour presents a wider depth of understanding regarding shared and inclusive political values of freedom, equality and fairness. Who produces knowledge and who should have a voice in the public space matters. Decolonising the curriculum [transgresses and bursts boundaries to better reflect the world in which we live.](#)

Two London libertarian platforms [UnHerd](#) and [The Academy of Ideas](#) have organized a debate that was initially on 'Is Rising Ethnic Diversity a Threat to the West?' Not surprisingly the title was contested and it has been rewritten to read 'Immigration & Diversity Politics: A Challenge to Liberal Democracy?' Both the original title and the shift are bigoted. They pit the West and liberal democracy against ethnic diversity, immigration and diversity politics. Moreover, the titles assume that the West is not ethnically diverse, that it is characterized by a particular type of liberal democracy and that the liberal democratic West stands apart from the rest of the world. In seeing immigration and ethnic diversity as a threat and a challenge, they construct a particular idea of what the West and

liberal democracy are in terms of race.

The term diversity includes gender and sexuality and in the question for debate, these are also now a perceived threat to 'liberal democracy'. The very terms of the debate are problematic because the ground on which they begin is bigoted. Moreover, two of the speakers at this debate have produced a study on '[the native-born white response to ethnic diversity](#)'. Their concern is with the threat to white people and the populist right backlash. They conveniently locate the causes of both of these in ethnic diversity and use the apparent authority of statistical data to make their case. Yet their question from the very start is deeply flawed and biased especially with regard to their positionalities and privileges.

The notion that white people are threatened by other ethnicities is itself a nonsense and very dangerous to even posit. We know that the extreme right which intersects with other disaffected classes is racist. So telling us that the populist right backlash is caused by ethnic diversity is nothing new. The deeper problem is what causes such insecurity and fear. This is more complex and is often reflected in the power structures that perpetuate certain views or understandings of what diversity and race are and how they measure up to the standard. Setting the terms of a public debate in such overtly biased terms perpetuates a particular standard based on patriarchal and neo-imperialist structures of power, which underpin an [old style of liberal democracy](#). Rather than celebrate the changes that democratic institutions might bring with regard to including diverse persons and reflecting the world in which we live, the speakers and creators of this event focus on a perceived threat that is constructed and perpetuated by the terms of the debate that associate ethnic diversity with fear.

I am a Londoner but was brought up on the Canadian prairies. My family migrated from India via Africa and Europe to settle in Canada. I have lived in Belgium, France and England. My outlook has always embodied the many cultural heritages I have lived in. At times, there are contradictions and conflicts, nevertheless my values and understanding of the world are

far richer given this diversity.

Although diversity – racial, sexual, class and disability – and the protection of minorities as against the majority centre ground is divisive and at times incommensurable, it does create a more just society. Diversity does challenge the existing liberal democratic seat of power. It presents a new and *more democratic* way of thinking politics and ruling. Changing the composition of who will rule changes what is on the agenda and the manner in which we structure our shared lives. The Equality Act and the protected characteristics would not exist without such transformation. Yet old school liberal democracy conserves the authority of privileged white men in which women and people of colour sometimes become acculturated and present the face of diversity while reiterating and preserving these power structures. Change needs to occur at a deeper level if we are to really transform how we think and legitimise authority.

The knowledge we teach that underpins political and social structures tends to be produced mainly by white men. Currently, we are uncovering voices that have contested white male thought throughout history. We teach these in our educational curricula not as add-ons but as theories that analyse political and social institutions, that examine oppression and injustice and that conceptualize more meaningful and egalitarian terms of participation. In my teaching practice, I have decolonised the political theory curriculum to include the theories of women and people of colour. I organise my courses according to core concepts that students learn to creatively construct their knowledge of politics. Core building blocks such as what is politics and what is power are examined from a variety of perspectives.

Students do not simply learn that a first conception of politics originated in Aristotle's thought. In considering who should participate in politics, I put Aristotle in conversation with the contemporary black American feminist, [bell hooks](#) who contests understandings that limit political participation. This allows students to compare ideas in their contexts and across time. They learn diverse thinkers deal with persistent questions in

varying manners and jargons. In my view, political theory is not about reiterating a historical narrative about liberal democratic progress; rather, it is about thinking creatively and critically about political ideas through drawing upon a variety of thinkers. Once we decolonise our minds and learn that knowledge is produced by a plurality of voices, then perhaps the voice of the educated white man will be one amongst many with no special claim to power based on class, gender and race.

It is foolish to think that identity and diversity politics are a threat to the West and to liberal democracy. Politics has always been about identity and where one is positioned in society. It is too easy to blame division on identity politics to reassert the position of the seemingly abstract liberal citizen constructed on the image of the white man. We are challenging the identity of the powers-that-be and tearing down the boundaries to hear the voices from the margins to create more democracy. A debate between individuals who share a similar positionality as defined by a liberal democracy that is blind to difference and that faults ethnic diversity and immigration is certainly one-sided and an exercise in maintaining the status quo.

*[Manjeet Ramgotra](#) is Senior Teaching Fellow in the Department of Politics and International Relations at SOAS.*

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