Time and race in history education

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Calls for histories of migration, Black British experience and colonialism to be taught in schools need to be heeded. However, it is not enough to add neglected topics and silenced voices to the curriculum. Rather, we need to teach schoolchildren how to question the dominant temporalities of the way we speak about history, and in particular to question the notion that there is a continuous and separate 'island story' that characterises British history.

Following the death of George Floyd in May 2020, global protests against state violence, structural racism and white supremacy have brought necessary attention to the wilful acts of forgetting that have shaped public understandings of the past. In the UK, at Black Lives Matter demonstrations organised to express transatlantic solidarity against state violence, young activists have drawn attention to the historic roots of race inequality in Britain, and called for forms of institutionalised racism – exacerbated by conditions created by the Coronavirus pandemic – to be confronted and dismantled. Debates about Britain's colonial legacy have continued in the months since the statue of Edward Colston, a slave trader, was removed from a plinth and dumped in Bristol's harbour. This action was the unexpected culmination of years of campaigning by local groups to have the statue removed, after petitions and appeals had fallen on deaf ears in local government. In the months afterwards, many of the UK's civic and learning institutions have started heeding calls to look

inwards, at the names of the benefactors of the slave trade, eugenicists and architects of empire that are etched on their own buildings, plinths or street signs. A significant conversation about Britain's cultural values is in process. How can we, as a nation, purport to believe in equality, fairness and human rights, when the names of people who have been part of a centuries-long system of violence against black lives are honoured in our institutions? How can we reckon with the legacies of colonialism which have shaped British wealth and establishments? How can we ensure the long history of African-descended people in Britain is not marginalised in school lessons, or erased from national memory?

In response to sustained calls for Britain to reckon with its imperial legacy in a substantive and meaningful way, a Conservative and far-right backlash has grown. The Conservative think tank Policy Exchange has recently launched a monitoring project called History Matters, which 'confirms that history is the most active front in a new culture war', and tracks institutions which have taken steps to remove statues, rename buildings or update university curricula.[1] History certainly does matter, and it is important to acknowledge that British history has long been politicised in public spaces, public memory and in school education. History is not a fixed and static entity, and it is misleading to construe it as one. History is continually contested and redefined, and the prisms through which we interpret historical facts, construct narratives, or even understand epochs of historical time, are grounded in shared values, lived experiences and social constructions of meaning. What do we want our national myths and our national history to be? While historical facts and evidence are fixed, the narratives we choose to tell depend on how we want to define ourselves as a nation.

Calls for greater attention to be paid to Britain's colonial history and the legacies of slavery are certainly not new. Wendy Williams, author of 2020's Independent *Windrush Lessons Learned Review* into Home Office conduct, has argued that the Windrush scandal 'was in part able to happen because of the public's and officials' poor understanding of British colonial history, the history of inward and outward migration, and the history of black Britons'.[2] This observation echoed an earlier finding from the report of *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* in 1999, which advocated for amendments to the National Curriculum 'aimed at valuing cultural diversity and preventing racism'.[3] The Runnymede Trust, Britain's leading independent race equality think tank, has issued a number of reports over the past two decades pointing to the importance of history education reform, and the implications of this work for our understandings of British identity, citizenship and belonging.[4] The Runnymede's work has roots in the anti-racist and anti-colonial political coalitions of the mid-twentieth century. Priyamvada Gopal, in her recent book *Insurgent Empire*, has shown that British dissent to the project of imperialism has a long history, one that stretches back to the nineteenth century and was influenced by rebellions and acts of resistance in colonies, though this history has often been obscured.[5]

Britain has a history problem; public memory is riddled with contradiction and denial. There is both an imperial amnesia about the painful and enduring consequences of British imperialism, and a postcolonial melancholia for an empire lost.[6] A YouGov poll conducted in 2019 found that 32 per cent of the public thought the British Empire was 'something to be proud of', with a further 37 per cent expressing neutrality on the issue, and only 19 per cent 'ashamed' of the imperial past.[7] Misunderstandings about the past have huge ramifications in the present; without understanding Britain's long history of migration, it can be easy to dislocate people of colour and minoritised communities from the centre of Britain's national story. Claire Alexander and Debbie Weekes-Bernard have observed that Britain's schools 'have been a key site of struggle for racial, ethnic and religious equality for over 50 years ... and an ideological battleground for competing ideas of Britishness'.[8]

Calls for history curriculum reform in schools have gained greater urgency thanks to the Black Lives Matter movement.[9] Other youth-led movements, including The Black Curriculum, Fill in the Blanks and The Advocacy Academy, as well as history teachers dedicated to reforming their own teaching practice within the current curriculum framework, are leading crucial conversations about how the history curriculum could better help students to understand Britain's multi-racial and colonial past. The Black Curriculum has called for education in black history at all learning stages, and has created learning resources for teachers and parents;[10] the Runnymede Trust's #TeachRaceMigrationEmpire campaign has both organised a letter writing campaign to MPs and schools, and produced a free access digital resource, hosted by the Institute of Historical Research, which connects teachers and learners to historical documents and materials that can be used in classroom teaching and research.[11]

However, to adequately reform the history curriculum, we need to do more than add histories of Black British experience, stories of migration and the history of empire to the existing curriculum. We also need to teach students how understandings of 'race' and 'blackness' have been contoured and governed by colonial modes of thinking from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and that these concepts are not fixed, but shift through time. We must advocate for black history to be included within the existing curriculum framework, and for that framework itself to be recast, rethought and reconsidered. In doing so, we can ensure students gain a richly contextualised understanding of Britain's place in global history, and the legacies of Britain's colonial past which continue to shape the politics of the present.

Re-visioning the national history curriculum

The first aim of the current National Curriculum in England, published in 2013 during Michael Gove's tenure as Education Secretary, is to teach students to 'know

and understand the history of these islands as a coherent, chronological narrative, from the earliest times to the present day'. [12] Gove announced his intention to refashion history education in schools at the Conservative Party Conference in October 2010 along exactly these lines, with the aim of creating a 'connected narrative' that gave centrality and primacy to Britain's 'island story'.[13] In this party conference address, Gove couched his desire for education reform in nationalistic terms; he expressed his concern that children were growing up 'ignorant of one of the most inspiring stories I know – the history of our United Kingdom'.[14] Historian Richard Evans, writing in the *London Review of Books* in 2011, said of this 'Tory interpretation of history' that Gove, working with populist historian Simon Schama, was creating a history curriculum through a deliberately nationalist lens, one laden in self-congratulation and reliant on the Whig interpretation of history – 'a theory exploded by professional historians more than half a century ago'.[15] Peter Mandler observed that this nation-focused narrowing of the history curriculum could deprive young people 'of one of the principal "lessons of history" – that people did things differently in other times and places'.[16]

The National Curriculum has been criticised for its divisive portrayal of Britishness. At issue is not only that the revised history curriculum places Britain at the centre; it is that it does so through an essentialist, primordialist and exclusionary conceit. The 'island story' of Britain has so often been rendered and imagined as a largely white, Anglo-centric one, ignoring the meaningful contributions of migrants and peoples of diverse ethnicities who have shaped the history of the United Kingdom. This 'story' implies that Britain has sat apart from the rest of the world, ignoring the ways it has been deeply embedded and involved in the world as a colonising power, and the ways that categories of Britishness, British identity and British citizenship were constituted far beyond the island nation, in the Caribbean, North America, Africa, the Indian subcontinent, Hong Kong, Singapore and Australasia. Paul Gilroy has rightly criticised the use of island-focused language to describe and represent the British nation, particularly language rooted in a biological imaginary such as 'the island race' and 'the bulldog breed'. This encourages a kind of nationalism that blurs concepts of race and nation, allowing the nation to be imagined with a pre-migration, exclusively white past.[17] These imaginings obscure a long history of migration to and from the British Isles that extends into the ancient world, and ignore the blurred lines between nation, empire and colony during the height of Britain's imperial power. They create an expectation of whiteness as a feature of an imagined 'indigenous' Britishness, and ignore the long history of Britain's relationship with the world, marginalising transnational histories.

Understandings of what Britain, as a nation, is, and who is or is not British, are certainly at stake in discussions about the defining or redefining of the history curriculum.[18] The Diversity and Citizenship Curriculum Review undertaken in 2007 under Sir Keith Ajegbo argued that greater historical understanding would

nurture within pupils the skills to participate in an 'active and inclusive democracy'.[19] A good history education, one that encourages critical thinking and fosters skills in historical interpretation, is an essential part of a lively, participatory democratic system. A history curriculum that fails to contextualise Britain's layered and complex history of migration, or the shifting boundaries between nation and empire in the not-too-distant past, ultimately fails to account for how Britain came to be a diverse, multi-ethnic, multi-faith state in the present day. Such erasures or simplistic renderings of history can be manipulated to legitimate xenophobic, exclusionary and racist politics. They can also make people of colour and members of migrant communities feel invisible within, or tangential to, a homogenised national story.

Claire Alexander, Debbie Weekes-Bernard and Joya Chatterji have made several substantive, research-led interventions to ongoing debates about the Govian history curriculum. Their 2015 Runnymede Trust Report, *History Lessons: Teaching Diversity in and Through the National Curriculum*, called for the creation of a national curriculum that 're-imagin[es] British history and identity to recognize the central role of diverse communities in its formation'. [20] The story of Britain endorsed by the national curriculum currently positions migrants, black and minority ethnic and minority religious communities 'at the margins of the nation' rather than seeing them as an integral part of 'our island story'.[21] Furthermore, the current curriculum encourages 'a unilinear narrative of national destiny',[22] one that locates Britain within a grand master narrative of progress.

In the context of these criticisms, recent studies have pointed to a strong demand from students of all backgrounds and all learning stages for history teaching to reflect a broader range of voices.[23] There are certainly some opportunities for intervention and reform within the current curriculum. As Katharine Burn, Vice-President of the Historical Association, has pointed out, flexibility in the legislated guidelines at some learning stages opens possibilities for the histories of diverse voices to be included in school history lessons.[24] For example, Key Stage 2, outside of its statutory focus on Viking raids and Anglo-Saxon justice, allows 'a local history study' and a study on a theme in British history 'that extends pupils' chronological knowledge beyond 1066'. A similar provision exists at Key Stage 3, which also allows some flexibility in choosing examples and topics connected to the history of 'ideas, political power, industry and empire' from 1745-1901 (although this first mention of the British empire on the curriculum excludes the colonisation of Ireland, North America, parts of the Caribbean and the East Indies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). While there is a statutory requirement to teach the history of the Holocaust at Key Stage 3, there is unfortunately no similar requirement to teach about Britain's role in histories of genocide, extinction, subjugation and repression. At GCSE and A-level, teachers are far more restricted in their options than at earlier learning stages, and reliant on curricula shaped by the major exam providers. OCR published the first GCSE paper on Migration to Britain in

2016, and Pearson/Edexcel has recently announced the addition of a new migration topic to their History specification.[25]

The Conservative Education Minister, Nick Gibb MP, often points to the flexibility within the existing curriculum as a means to deny the necessity of further curriculum reform.[26] It is true that teachers interested in adding diverse histories, voices and ranges of experience to the history curriculum work with each other to build a further case for change, and to share knowledge and resources to develop their subject knowledge.[27] However, research has shown that teachers often avoid subject areas that they consider 'controversial', or areas where they feel they are lacking in training or experience. A 2019 survey of teachers found that 78 per cent of respondents wanted more training on migration, while 71 per cent wanted more training on empire.[28] A recent letter to *The Times* supported by the Runnymede Trust, Royal Historical Society, Stephen Lawrence Research Centre, the Institute of Historical Research and the Historical Association called for the foundation of a centre for education on the history of migration, empire and belonging, on the model of the Centre for Holocaust Education at UCL.[29] Teachers need training to be able to teach histories that have been marginalised, silenced and hidden from view.

However, the curriculum should not only be reformed by a process of addition. The structure of the curriculum, and particularly its interaction with concepts of time and race, needs to be thoroughly rethought. Reframing the curriculum to make Britain's migration stories central rather than peripheral will complicate the contrived simplicity and teleology of the Govian curriculum.

Chronology, time and race in history education

The idea that British national history should be framed as a 'coherent, chronological narrative' may seem, at first glance, like a natural way to recount a history. Start at the beginning, tell a story of connected events, explain how Britain came to realise its present incarnation. But framing the whole of British history in this way relies on an exclusionary set of assumptions. It is a mode of historical thinking underpinned by ideas of evitability and progress; a linear narrative that encourages a teleological sense of national destiny.[30] We are so accustomed to thinking about time in this way that it is not always obvious that there are alternatives or that our habitual understanding of time itself has both a past and a history.

The history curriculum relies on an understanding of historical time that is rooted in an era of colonisation and conquest, when ideas of racial difference were used to create structures of discrimination and repression. In recent years, historians have been reflecting on the ways time is understood within and across cultures. This 'temporal turn' has been led by contemporary artists, anthropologists and postcolonial theorists, and can be found in works of cultural, political and postcolonial

history.[31] As Dipesh Chakrabarty has shown, it is necessary to put ideas of modernity, progress and civility into historical perspective, and not take these positions as normative.[32] The ways we draw lines across eras of time is artificial, and shaped by a desire to order and classify. But comparative studies of western/subaltern and modern/pre-modern societies allow us to appreciate that understandings of both history and time are not fixed qualities, but ones that vary between cultures. For example, in the nineteenth century, Victorian culture became suffused with linear and progressive imaginings of modernity and historical time, as a rejection of cyclical patterns associated with a pre-industrial past.[33] Our understandings of both history as a subject discipline and what it means to be 'modern' owe a great deal to Enlightenment thinkers, who used these concepts to demark lines of difference between 'civilised' and 'uncivilised' nations. Putting a society's relationship with the past into its own historical context can help us to understand the language, symbols and geopolitical currents that influence the articulation of a national culture. By attempting to layer different experiences and understandings of the past, we can take a 'heterochronic' approach to history, one that moves away from binary classifications of human experience and knowledge, and the sense that there is one, singular, normative way for a society to be structured and ordered.

A heterochronic approach means looking at layers of time; it is the understanding that time is constructed and experienced in different ways across history. If the teleological history of the Govian curriculum can be best drawn or represented as a single line, stretching and progressing to an inevitable end point, then a heterochronic history would look like a network of different lines and shapes, some stopping and starting, some moving in different directions, some adapting and overlapping. These overlapping lines represent different systems of knowledge, cultures and belief, and reveal an interconnected world. In practical terms, within the curriculum, a heterochronic approach to history would move students within a key stage between units of study rooted in different times, places and contexts, to develop an appreciation of stories of continuity and change within and beyond Britain. It would also allow a more reflexive study of history as a literary and cultural form, and the ways the past and present interact in our politics, in our family histories, and in our oral traditions and rituals of memory.

Race is not a fixed category either; it is a construct that shifts through time and across spaces. As Stuart Hall put it: 'Race is a cultural and historical, not biological, fact – … race is a discursive construct, a sliding signifier'.[34] Race is one of the great classificatory systems of difference that operate in human societies; it is the centre of a hierarchical system that produces difference.[35] To describe race as a shifting category that is culturally constructed is not to deny that race is an operative category of power in British society that has tangible, real-world effects. It is important for both history teachers and their students to understand how race as a category has been culturally and historically constructed in order for students to question the

assumptions and structural positions that have bolstered racial inequity.[36] We must do more than add diverse histories to the curriculum for this reason; diversifying the curriculum without teaching students to understand that race is a social construction and historical process ultimately leaves pupils without the knowledge they need to make sense of the world around them.

Our understandings of race, as an organising category in society, also owe a great deal to Enlightenment concepts of modernity. As Enlightenment thinkers defined the modern age, they did so by creating new categories of order, hierarchy and power. They worked to define a new era of human thinking, rationalism and representative government, one divorced from monarchy, the idea of divine-right absolutism, and rooted in scientific method. But Enlightenment thinkers also drew lines between who did or did not belong in this new world they were creating – who was civilised or barbarous. Roger Darnton has shown that Enlightenment thinkers codified a system of knowledge and a hierarchy of understanding where whiteness and maleness became the apogee of power. As such, white men became the ultimate purveyors of doctrines of civility to bodies that were cast outside this structure of privilege.[37] It is for this reason that Enlightenment thinkers did not find it antithetical to advocate for democratic rights in white nations, while simultaneously legally codifying black bodies as subhuman. This architecture of knowledge enabled systems of colonial authority and violent repression to flourish as the natural course of 'civilisation', as acts of imposing 'order' on 'chaos'. These overtly colonial structures of knowledge remain with us in the way they inform our ideas about time.

What it means to 'decolonise the curriculum' is a question with multiple interpretations, reflecting the vibrancy of an expanding movement for change in education.[38] But a move to decolonise certainly includes adopting pedagogies that make visible the structures of colonial authority and colonial thinking that have shaped British society and education.

What can a decolonised history curriculum look like? It would reject simplistic renderings of the British past fixed on an island story, or teleological narratives of progress. It would allow space to reckon with structures of white supremacy, colonial violence and slavery, as well as the legacies and consequences of British imperialism. And it would tell a richly complex story about the global networks, diasporas and migrations that have shaped contemporary Britain. It would teach students that race, history and our place in a global community of nations are not fixed, natural or inevitable; they are mutating concepts that need to be understood through the lens of historical context. It would teach the importance of transnational approaches to understanding the past, and the ways that the movement of peoples, ideas and resources between nations has shaped world events, rather than centring history on one nation. And it would take a heterochronic and heterogenous approach to education, that focuses on a multiplicity of voices and perspectives (across axes of race, class, gender and sexual identity), juxtaposing different eras and

epochs rather than encouraging students to think that history is governed by inevitability. It would acknowledge that time itself has a history and that we do not have to think in straight lines.

It is essential that children are taught to reject an assumed fixity about the properties of history itself as a part of their civic education. History is created and recreated. It is salvaged, and rescued. Statues come down. Buildings are renamed. New voices and experiences come to light. New interpretations allow us to expand our understandings of both the past and the present.

On 18 September 2020, the youth-led activist group Fill in the Blanks announced that Labour's Shadow Education Minister, Kate Green, 'is unequivocally committed to mandating the teaching of colonial history for all secondary school students'.[39] Keir Starmer has since announced his commitment to 'a diverse curriculum' that teaches schoolchildren more about Black British history.[40] This is a significant and important commitment, and one that is desperately needed to address gaping deficits in the current History curriculum. However, it is essential that this commitment is to the creation of a history curriculum that unpicks and exposes the structures of colonial thinking, colonial authority and colonial time that are operative within the current curriculum, shaped by teleological ideas of progress and framed through white experiences. A process of re-visioning that thinks beyond the moral and intellectual limitations of the Enlightenment project of modernity is urgently required.

Britain and America have each been tipping into what could best be described as a 'post-Enlightenment' era in recent years, a process that has fractured the body politic and seen the rise of oppositional movements in reaction to the demise of the former system of order. One aspect of this has been the rise of a 'post-truth' politics, divorced from 'the age of reason' in the basest terms. This has fanned the rise of a wave of political populism and opportunism, twisting objective facts and realities to suit anti-immigrant narratives, denying the existence of climate change, manipulating media to entrench polarisation in public opinion, and encouraging the proliferation of conspiracy theories. Another is a heterogenous movement dedicated to preserving some of the foundational principles of the Enlightenment, particularly ideas of freedom, equality and democracy, while working to ensure that these principles are applied evenly and without discrimination, through the rejection of racist, discriminatory and exclusionary structures, and an active participatory politics. This movement has rejected the binary thinking embedded in the mentalities of Enlightenment philosophers, and is motivated by a commitment to racial, gender and climate justice. In order for democratic values, human rights and ideas of fairness and equality before the law to thrive in a participatory democracy, we badly need a history curriculum that can support young people with the knowledge they need to develop into engaged citizens, through teaching the critical skills necessary to see past simplistic narratives of inclusion and exclusion, and equipping them

with the ability to interrogate nationalist propaganda and post-truth narratives. Particularly as Britain looks to reset its relationship with the world after departing the European Union, it is vital that our nation provides a history education that looks beyond its navel, beyond the comforting familiarity of the Blitz myth and the Tudor era, and offers a comprehensive examination of the histories of race, empire and migration that questions the existence of a linear 'island story'.

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Notes

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