

Decolonising the spaces of geographical knowledge production: the RGS-IBG at Kensington Gore

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Abstract: In this commentary we draw focus on the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) at Lowther Lodge, Kensington Gore, to discuss the prospect of decolonising in the spaces geographical knowledge production. We propose a focus on the spaces of geography that can exclude and marginalise and serious engagement with the discomfiting question of whether violent colonial histories should be both so

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prominent and silent in the spaces of geographical knowledge production.

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We were fortunate to be invited to the excellent RGS-IBG Annual Explore weekend in November 2018 to speak on 'Decolonising Field Research'. The talk was received well by an audience comprising mostly explorers, expedition leaders and physical geographers and presented an opportunity for debate on colonialism and geographical practice that focuses on the 'natural' or physical environment (see Baker et al., under review). For human geographers, of course, this debate is vibrant and by now quite mature; since the 1990s postcolonial perspectives have brought focus on geographers' complicity in the cartographic and intellectual production of a world open to European domination (e.g. Godlewska and Smith 1994; Livingstone 1992). This work marked an important turn to postcolonialism in geography and, more recently, a commitment to decolonising geographical practice (see Radcliffe 2017). Recalling our talk at Explore, in this short commentary we to draw focus on the event's venue, the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) at Lowther Lodge, Kensington Gore, to discuss the prospect of decolonising in the spaces geographical knowledge production.

The RGS-IBG has been integral to furthering a post- and de-colonial agenda in geography. Its flagship journals have led the way: in the mid-nineties *Area* provided a forum for critical reflection on the presence of geographers in the postcolonial south (e.g. Sidaway 1992), and continues to bring to readers postcolonial perspectives on the discipline and praxis (e.g. Griffiths 2017; Noxolo 2017). *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* has similarly provided a platform for postcolonial geographies, publishing research articles from post- and de-colonial perspectives (e.g. Griffiths 2018; Jazeel and McFarlane 2010) as well as a recent section of interventions around the theme 'Decolonising Geographical Knowledge' (e.g. Legg 2017; Radcliffe 2017). Deepening the Society's engagement in this area, the 2017 RGS-IBG Annual International Conference, held at Kensington Gore, was orientated around a Chair's Theme of 'Decolonising Geographical Knowledges: Opening Geography out to the World' (for a commentary see Esson et al. 2017). The Explore event was yet another RGS-IBG initiative that was significant for furthering debate on decolonising geographical practice among explorers,

expedition leaders and physical geographers. Ethics, privilege and positionality were thus at the forefront of people's reflection on field practices at Explore.

The space in which these discussions took place, however, is one where geography's complicity with empire is implicitly – and explicitly in places – celebrated. While this might be known to many, it is important to explicate how the Royal Geographical Society's space at Kensington Gore embodies colonial history. This was readily clear as we spent time walking around the building in search of content that would animate the discussion we intended to provoke at Explore. In the impressive collection of older issues of *The Geographical Journal* in the Members' Room, for instance, we read a 1927 review of how geographers can better map the diamond fields of West Africa so that they might be realised as the region's 'most important economic resource' (Gregory 1927, 147). From a nearby shelf, to give another example, we browsed a copy of *Remaking Africa* (1961), a volume that celebrates the 'thrilling exploits' of a type of geography that 'opened the vast continent of Africa' and its 'people of the veil' to, it is claimed, 'civilisation' (Heseltine 1961, 3). Such geographies, it will be obvious to contemporary readers, render parts of the world vulnerable to violent extractive practices and are replete with the damaging Orientalism and Othering that pushes along so much regressive and right-wing politics around the world today.

We might have stayed in the Members' Room and found many more examples but we were keen to draw attention to selected items from the RGS-IBG Collection on the ground floor. In the Map Room hangs a portrait of John Hanning Speke with the inscription 'discoverer of the Victoria Nyanza 1859'. Speke's "discovery" captured the imagination of a generation of geographer-explorers and is chronicled in his *Journey of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (1863). Speke's *Journal* is notable also for his 'theory of conquest of inferior by superior races', which he explicates in chapter 9: 'it appears impossible to believe, judging from the physical appearance of the Wahuma they can be of any other race than the semi-Shem-Hamitic of Ethiopia' (1863, 123). For men like Speke this was just about as complimentary as one could be towards the 'natives': the Hamites (or descendants of Ham) were 'designated as early culture-bearers in Africa owing to the natural superiority of intellect and character of all Caucasoids' (Sanders 1969, 528). The foundations of racial difference between Hutu and Tutsi groups were thus laid and Speke's 'Hamitic Hypothesis' would become a logic of colonial governing and the setting to years of conflict that led to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda (see Eltringham 2006).

In the Main Hall, pride of place is afforded to Earl Curzon of Kedleston, a prominent figure of the Society in its formative years. Curzon received the Patron's Medal in 1895 before serving as the Society's President from 1911 to 1914, during which he oversaw – with 'splendid

vision', as an RGS-IBG history of the building puts it (Price Williams 2012, 2) – the move to Lowther Lodge. Curzon is also a prominent figure in British colonial history in India where he was Viceroy from 1899 to 1905, a period in which parts of central and western India were decimated by famine when Curzon became known for his hardline policies on relief. As the historian Mike Davis has written, the question of relief was not about shortage, but about quelling calls for reform and maintaining dominance, to that end 'Curzon would become the architect of a brilliantly organised famine', a 'late Victorian Holocaust' (2001, 164). In the same room hangs another notable figure, that of Henry Morton Stanley who claimed the Congo Basin for Belgium. Stanley reveled in the violence he inflicted in this part of Africa, luring groups to a forest opening or beach before ordering his men to open fire in the belief that in the 'Dark Continent', 'the savage only respects force, power, boldness and decision' (Stanley, quoted in Driver 1991, 155). Leopold II's subsequent and murderous rule over that part of Africa brought the deaths of around 10 million people (Hochschild 1999). Henry Morton Stanley was a brutal man who, in the worst respects, can stand shoulder to shoulder with both John Hanning Speke and Earl Curzon of Kedleston.

In this way, our space at Kensington Gore embodies colonial history. Even at its most benign it is an embodiment of a specific geography, one that produces the world to be explored and exploited by heroic geographers. At its most malign the building embodies and even celebrates the worst kinds of colonial violence. This is not abstract; even in this brief survey there are clear links between the production of geographical knowledge to blood diamonds in Western Africa, mass starvation in India, genocide in Congo and Rwanda and the racist Othering that underpins all manner of hateful politics and military intervention.

So far we have not revealed anything new. All of this information has been known by geographers since at least the 1990s. The context is new, however. Decolonising academia is happening apace, and is being taken up – welcomingly – by many whose work has not before considered colonial legacies. It is perhaps time, therefore, that the Society began a debate around how to decolonise the representation of geography in an important space for geographers in the UK and around the world. There is a precedent: in the 1990s a move to recognise women's roles in the Society (Bell and McEwan 1996) preceded a later initiative (RGS 100+ in 2013) to include more women in the images around Lowther Lodge. Change has been incremental – women are still woefully under-represented – but some dialogue has taken place. In a similar vein, Felix Driver's work (2013) on the RGS-IBG Collection made its 'hidden histories' of colonial exploration visible in a 2009 exhibition and an RGS-IBG-hosted website.¹ Almost ten years later

¹ <http://www.hiddenhistories.rgs.org/>

after these histories became less hidden, it would seem timely to revisit and further the discussion with renewed impetus; for if it means anything that a portrait hangs on a wall – and if it is not an explicit celebration – it is a slow and silent hand-wringing.

We have no answers, and we are certainly not calling for an anachronistic approach that might actually effect further erasure of violent colonial histories. Instead, we might consider how representations are framed and look to parallel debates: one cannot visit the Elgin Marbles without also being aware of the Greek government's and British Museum's respective claims; and the Rhodes Must Fall movement provides a similar example to those raised here. While we look to these cases, we must do so also with the recognition of the particularity of the discipline; geographers are now more diverse than ever, and they are engaged in more equitable exchanges with participants and collaborators all over the world. How it might feel to walk around Lowther Lodge as, for instance, a visiting Congolese scholar, or a Punjabi descendent of communities decimated by famine? The rarefied air of the Main Hall and Map Room may not be the welcome space we would wish for such visitors, let alone, for the often marginalised people whose lives are the focus of so much geographical research. From here, we might too (re)consider the other spaces of geography that can exclude and marginalise – immediately to mind are the visa-dependent and costly conferences of (especially) the AAG and Oxford Geography's recent (and internally contested, see Weale & Elgot 2018) celebration of an ex-Home Secretary who threatened racialised groups with the "go home or face arrest" campaign – and turn to ourselves and ask the discomfiting question of whether violent colonial histories should be both so prominent and silent in the spaces of geographical knowledge production.

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