What does decolonisation have to do with the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity?

The relationship between knowledge and power is at the heart of any analysis of colonisation. This essay applies a Foucauldian framework of the power/knowledge relationship to the question of 'what does decolonisation have to do with the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity?'. In an interview with Droit (1975) Foucault stated, 'All my books . . . are little toolboxes . . . if people want to open them, to use this sentence or that idea as a screwdriver or spanner to short circuit, discredit or smash systems of power . . . so much the better.'[i] In particular, I use Foucault's 'tool' of the 'Order of Discourse' (1981)[ii]. Foucault breaks down the Order of Discourse into three stages:

First stage: Narrowing of one's field of vision. In order to establish a set of discursive practices based on exclusion of ideas that apparently do not fit.

Second stage: Establish authority and legitimacy. In order to establish who/what voices are heard.

Third stage: Map the parameters, usages and links. In order for a discourse to have clear borders of who/what is let in and out.

Whilst these stages are distinct, they are mutually constitutive and pivotal to the relationship between colonisation and the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity. I use a focus on content (what) and access (who) to reveal that the pedagogy and epistemology of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity gatekeeps entry into the study.

Decolonisation means returning colonised lands to an independent status through the withdrawal of the invader's rule. In a pedagogical context it is the shift from colonial, western-oriented systems

of thinking. Keele University characterises this as, ‘identifying colonial systems, structures and relationships, and working to challenge those systems’ (Keele University, 2018) [iii]. Here lies an inevitable tension of any decolonising project. The very language and ideas available to re-configure the power/ knowledge relations of imperialism belong to an Order of Discourse. Arguably any discourse of liberation from oppression within colonial structures ‘occupies an ambiguous position, as it is implicated in the narrative it criticises and it also stands above it in order to judge it’ (Caselli, 2005:105) [iv]. However, I argue that bringing the uncomfortable, complex and even complicit lens of decolonisation to the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity is precisely what will keep it alive, vibrant and productive as a creative site of relevant critical thinking.

In June 2020, America’s Society for Classical Studies asserted ‘the complicity of Classics as a field in constructing and participating in racist and anti-black educational structures and attitudes’ (Society for Classical Studies, 2020) [v]. Such identification of the institutional racism in classics confesses the intrinsic relationship between Classics and colonialism, revealing the exigency of decolonising its study. Here, the pillars of colonisation rest on the stages of the Order of Discourse. Firstly, narrowing the field through restrictive educational structures and attitudes. Secondly, activating the legitimacy of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity discourses by establishing who/what voices are heard. Thirdly, determining the parameters of who/what is included and excluded from the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity. Thus, regulating the scope and breadth of ideas and voices in the content and access to the research, scholarship and applications of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity studies. These issues are at the heart of the question, ‘what

does decolonisation have to do with the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity?' Here, the words of the post-colonial scholar Mohanty are pertinent:

> 'I am trying to uncover how ethnocentric universalism is produced in certain analyses [of the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity]. As a matter of fact, my argument holds for any discourse [of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity studies] that sets up its own authorial subjects as the implicit referent.' (Mohanty 2003: 21) [vi]

The study of classics was formally established in Britain in the 19th century, an era known as the age of new imperialism. Postcolonial scholars Viswanathan (1989)[vii] and Vasunia (2013)[viii] detail how Britain used the study of classics as a mechanism of colonial rule in India. Two points become clear, firstly that the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity was built on a colonialist framework, and secondly that the study was an instrumental methodology of colonialism. Under a Foucauldian lens these colonial manoeuvres used the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity to impose an Order of Discourse, which demarcated the coloniser and the colonised. Vasunia (2013:27)[ix] explains that Britons drew on Plato's narratives of classical Graeco-Roman civilization and used the identification of Alexander's invasions to establish authority and legitimacy of imperial hegemony. In regards to the third stage of the Order of Discourse, the development of colonial administration systems, epitomized by Indian Civil Service is an example of the mapping of the parameters, uses and linkages of discourse. Interrogation of the historical geo-political positioning of the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity reveals that this colonial legacy remains dominant. London Classicists of Colour contend that 'the structure and makeup of Classics as a study is very much still chained in by its 18th/19th-century origins, which is also connected to Western imperialism and Eurocentrism' (LCOC, 2021) [x].

Discourse is a vehicle that transports ideas, including visual artistic methods. Here, I show how the Order of Discourse is performed via artistic representations of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity. Integral to our understanding of Graeco-Roman worlds is archaeology. However, all it takes is a visit to your local museum to see the flawed, western emphasised representations of the ancient world, notably the whitewashed portrayal of ancient statues. In contrast , ancient literature used the medium of colour to portray the ancient world through intricately illustrated physical form. Homer's description of Athena amplifying Odysseus' beauty illustrates this: 'He became black-skinned again and the hairs became blue around his chin' (Homer, 16.175) [xi]. So why are images of marble antiquity overwhelmingly white when evidence suggests that they were brightly polychromatic? A Foucauldian response points to the power/knowledge relationship. In white western imperialist contexts, the 'production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures' (Foucault, 1981:52) [xii]. I contend that the whitewashing of these artistic representations of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity is a procedure of colonising the content and access to its study. Initially, according to Melfi, the 'idealisation of white marble [was] an aesthetic born of a mistake' (Melfi, 2021) [xiii] as a result of natural erosion gradually wearing away the paint. However, in the age of neoclassicism, the misconception was used to facilitate 'fetishisation of racial whiteness' (Kennedy, 2017) [xiv]. Such 'fetishisation' pervades the works of the proclaimed father of art history, Winckelmann who used the example of the Apollo of the Belvedere to equate whiteness with beauty: 'the whiter the body is, the more beautiful it is' (Winckelmann, 2006:195) [xv]. This was in spite of the plethora of both the newly found contemporary evidence provided by the rediscovery of Pompeii and established historical evidence namely in Euripides' Helen, Helen references the way in which 'you [can] wipe colour off a statue'[xvi]. Regrettably, this fantasy of white monochrome statues in conjunction with its

associations of superior beauty, morality and purity endures today and as such ‘modern art viewers . . . make the same associations in real life’ (Ikhumen, 2019) [xvii] causing the same colonial conclusions as Winckelmann to be consciously and/ or unconsciously drawn. The point is that ‘Vision is always a question of the power to see . . .Vision requires instruments of vision; an optics is a politics of positioning. Instruments of vision mediate standpoints’ (Haraway, 1988:289) [xviii]. Under the lens of Haraway, the question of what does decolonisation have to do with the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity provokes the following questions: what instruments (textbooks, language, representations, scholarship) of vision are available and legitimated? How does positionality regulate the power to see (i.e., access for people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act, 2010 including class and forced migration)?

The discourse of democracy illustrates how what we see is produced by where and how we are positioned. ‘The Athenians gave us our modern system of government’[xix]. Those were the words of the United Kingdom's prime minister in his Greece vs Rome debate against Mary Beard. His defence of and reference to Athenian Democracy reflects contemporary politicians’ idolisation of ancient Athenian governmentality. In her Guardian article, Beard characterises such idolisation as a ‘modern political fetish . . . for Athenian democracy’, which ‘airbrushes out the less appealing aspects of Athenian democratic culture’ (Beard, 2006) [xx]. Indeed, Cartledge argues, that Classical Athens’ ‘democracy’ was a political ideology far removed from notions of modern democracy[xxi]. It was an exclusive network which prohibited the input of women, slaves, the μέτοικοι and those whose parents were μέτοικοι[1]. Aristotle, in his politics, alludes to a reason for this by illustrating the Greek belief that Barbarians (non-Greeks) were inherently inferior: ‘the barbarian and the

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[1] Regularly translated as ‘resident aliens’. They are similar to the modern concept of immigrants but did not qualify as citizens.

slave were by nature one', 'put among barbarians no distinction is made between women and slaves, because there is no natural ruler among them' (Aristotle, Davis, 1905:1.2) [xxii]. In this context, Athens was not a glamorous hub of democracy, rather it 'was an imperialist, anti-immigrant society convinced of its own superiority because of its ethnic purity' (Kennedy, 2019) [xxiii]. Here, colonial legacy echoes of 20th century slogans, 'No Irish, No Blacks, No dogs' resound.

A fitting example of such imperialism is demonstrated in Athens' reputed golden age under the rule of Pericles in 5th century BCE. A period attributed with Athens' augmenting democratisation. Often neglected is that this emerging shift was resultant and contingent on the subjugation of allied city states under the guise of the thalassocratic Delian league which, by 445/446 was rightly entitled the Athenian Empire. Significantly, Athens stripped their allied states of any form of identity, independence or voice. There was the annual obligatory Φόρος (foros – payment, tribute), the use of military presence (garrisons) to prevent rebellions, The Clearchus' Coinage Decree[2] and the demarcation of the city as merely 'πόλεις ὅσων Ἀθηναῖοι κρατοῦσιν – the cities which the Athenians rule', stripping the allied city states of any identity removed from Athens. Evidently, the romanticised narrative of Athenian democracy is dangerous because it not only turns a blind eye to the oppressive nature of the system, but it actually encourages it through the unhinged praise.

One of the most compelling arguments for the content and access to the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity to be decolonised is revealed in the concept of the barbarian. Here I show how the Order of Discourse of the barbarian function to re-produce 'established and outsider' dynamics (Elias and Scotson 1994) [xxiv]. Enduring discourses of the 'barbarian' speak to power/knowledge

[2] This involved inflicting a universal coinage amongst all allied city states. Anyone found to be producing other coinage was punished.

tactics that regulate entry, voice and legitimacy based on hierarchical elitism. I argue that just as the barbarians of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity, the implications of the Order of Discourse of 'barbarian' are far-reaching for equitable access to the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity. The label 'barbarian' derives from the ancient Greek 'βάρβαρος' (barbaros). 'βάρβαρος' was originally an impartial onomatopoeic linguistic criterion to describe those who did not speak Greek, characterised by the 'bar-bar' sound of their language[xxv]. Indeed, one might be forgiven for drawing contemporary comparisons with the 'bar-bar' accents of working class, northern UK and forced migrant sounding English. Back in antiquity, the shift to its derogatory overtones was not until the Graeco-Persian wars in which 'βάρβαρος' corresponded to the Persian enemy. Barbarism became analogous with rivalry and opposing barbarians was equated to rivalrous enemies. To illustrate this shifting meaning, in the Iliad, Homer only uses the term 'βάρβαρος' once in a non-derogatory style to describe the Carian language[xxvi]. However, in Aeschylus' 'The Persians', a post Graeco-Persian war tragedy recounting the Persian defeat at Salamis, the Persian army are repetitively referred to as 'barbaric' and demeaningly represented as exotic and alien. Aeschylus describes the Persians' outlandish dress, peculiar language (exhibited with exaggerated vowel sounds when addressing Darius) and foreign religious practices of prostration. Such portrayal of the 'βάρβαρος' reflects modern disparaging connotations of 'barbarian' denoting brutish, uncivilised peoples that legitimate discourses of 'Othering'. Vereschagin's series of paintings called ' barbarians' propagates colonial principles of the Russian empire, depicting the newly conquered populus of Turkestan as inferior and devious. Additionally, Morgan's 'Ancient Society' supposes a line of human progress from savagery through barbarianism to civilization.

Pre 18th century there was a long history of working class people studying classics[xxvii]. However, presently classical Graeco-Roman antiquity and classism go hand in hand. The relationship between class and the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity is indisputable given the etymology and history of the study. The study of classics derived from the Latin *classicus,* an adjective which denoted ‘belonging to a highest citizen class ’ and the assumption that these classes would produce the finest categories of literature[xxviii]. Evidently, the study was built on the elitist premise that those of higher classes were intellectually superior and is therefore intrinsic to elitist principals. This tradition of elitism and the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity continues to this day, significantly with the requirement of knowledge and qualifications in classical languages to be eligible to study classics in higher education. In an environment where only two percent of all state-maintained schools (the majority of these being selective) enter for Latin A-level, such prerequisites are a discriminatory obstacle for those without the privilege of the private education system and ‘as it stands [are] a form of gatekeeping’ (Hunt and Holmes-Henderson, 2021) [xxix].

In conclusion, I use Žižek’s metaphor of an ‘ideological quilt’ (1989:85) [xxx] to draw the threads of my argument together. I have shown that the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity is a patchwork of ideas and practices, which when stitched together re-produces discourses of colonisation. This ideological quilting finds legitimacy in 19th century British fabric of study of classics and colonial rule of India. It is interwoven with the whitewashing of representations of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity, the airbrushing of Athenian democracy and laced with derogatory linages of ‘βάρβαρος’.

Confronted with the question ‘what does decolonisation have to do with the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity?’ Foucault would advocate ‘overturning the traditional question’ (1969:118) [xxxi]. Rather than focussing on a plea for greater inclusion in the content and access to the colonial constructions of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity studies, Foucault turns our critical analytical gaze to the actual conditions within the study. Put simply, it is not an issue of why working class people from Black, Asian and racially minoritised heritages are underrepresented in the content and study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity, nor a question of creating strategies to uplift them. The question is what is it about the condition and situation of the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity that is problematic. This essay demonstrated that the answer lies in the relationship between colonisation and the study of Graeco-Roman classical antiquity.

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