

DECOLONISING POLITICAL ECONOMY: PRACTICES AND HORIZONS

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There has been a recent surge of interest in decolonising economics, a ‘colonial turn’ in liberal economics (Ince 2024) driven by scholars crying out for change in the how and what of economics and education (Dutt *et al.* 2025; Muijnck and Tieleman 2021; Powell and Yurchenko 2025).

Yet, evidence of systematic ‘decolonisation’ of economics as a discipline is thin. One survey found that only about 1 percent of traditional UK economics courses discuss ‘race’, racism or colonialism (Choat *et al.* 2024). Neoclassical assumptions themselves have been identified as a key barrier to critical pedagogy and decolonisation, seeming to require a total reconfiguration of economics (Kvangraven and Kesar 2023). Ongoing trends towards commodification of higher education and restrictions of political expression by staff and students impose further political and practical obstacles to decolonisation (Dutt *et al.* 2025).

As teachers in the discipline of Political Economy at Sydney University, we have some insight into just how far there still is to go. In some senses, Political Economy has a fifty-year head start on this project. It built, from the ground up, an alternative departmental tradition of teaching, researching and ‘doing’ economics from that of neoclassical economics. Right from the beginning, classes stressed the confrontation of power (Butler 2009) and tutorials included ‘topics like imperialism and economic underdevelopment, the political economy of environmental problems, economic inequality, and race and gender’ (Stilwell 2019: 154). Yet, many of our key courses and texts continue to rehearse what might be called a monoculture of Northern theories of political economy, from Adam Smith to Milton Friedman, via Karl Marx, Thorstein Veblen and John Maynard

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Keynes. We have witnessed difficulties faced by students and staff seeking to teach and learn about colonial topics deemed controversial. Decolonising political economy is a process worthy of inquiry.

The largest conceptual issue regarding the ‘decolonising’ of political economy is its contradictory remit. Decolonisation can be defined, simply, as ‘the undoing of colonialism’ (Shahjahan *et al.* 2022). Taken as neither a metaphor nor a vibe (Bosch 2025; Curley *et al.* 2022), the origins of decolonisation are in real material contests for liberation by colonised peoples, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Even as it applies to universities, it demands a widespread dismantling of many core features of the university, as well as challenging epistemological groundworks of knowledge, and the supremacy of Northern theory in the geopolitics of knowledge (Connell 2006; Guerzoni 2020; Smith 2021). The process of intellectual decolonisation presents a ‘complex and daunting task’ (Battiste 2013: 186). Priyamvada Gopal argues that, despite the difficulty of these processes, decolonisation in the academy is also a ‘nonetheless modest endeavour’ (Gopal 2021: 880) in terms of its actual practices.

In the face of such contradictions, Guerzoni argues that Indigenisation should be preferred over decolonisation because ‘a complete realisation of de-colonisation is unlikely’, entailing ‘the complete re-structuring of the university, an institution inherently Western in its structures, hierarchy, pedagogy and ideology’ (Guerzoni 2020: 14). Indigenisation, the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives, staff, students, and governance, is a more honest and achievable task. While Guerzoni’s case for Indigenisation is in many ways important and necessary, the seeming impossibility of complete decolonisation need not require its rejection as a goal.

Our grappling with this contradiction between the radicalism of decolonisation and the modest work it entails for activist-scholars leads us to introduce the frame of *quotidian decolonisation*. This article outlines our framework for conceptualising the practices and horizons of decolonisation in the discipline of political economy, which exhibits contradiction between radical aspiration and structural limitation. We conceptualise ‘quotidian decolonisation’ as the everyday enacted practices by educators and students in order to challenge colonialism and racism as ongoing features of experience. Such practices do not pretend to deliver decolonisation, but rather to draw attention to what we actually do and therefore to render our practices legible to critique by colleagues, students,

and the community within a framework of anti-racism – as well as to invite contribution and reflection.

Drawing on recent experiences teaching and working at the University of Sydney, and with a particular focus on teaching a first year unit on global political economy (ECOP1003) and a recent cross-institutional political education project, we assess these practices across four interconnected scales, which are parallel to those identified by Dutt *et al.* (2025). The first scale is the engagement with broader social struggles that seek to challenge the material impacts of racism and colonialism. Second is the challenging of institutional constraints of a university that is embedded in these processes. The third scale is the pedagogical practices that situate students and staff as solidaristic partners in that site of social contestation. And the fourth is the reconstruction of curricula to encourage the interrogation of the processes of colonialism of and through political economy. These four scales, which we see as operating in active interplay, form the four sections of this article.

We position ourselves neither as experts, nor passive observers, but as participants seeking to understand better what we are all doing. Our method is reflexive and experimental. We write as two early career white women who have worked together intellectually, politically, and collegially in a heterodox political economy department within the wealthy, sub-imperial, and settler-colonial nation-state of Australia.

We reject the paralysis that refuses to engage with these critical questions, yet we recognise that we are not passive observers of systems of colonialism. We do not pretend to offer a solution to ‘decolonisation’ as a destination that academic work delivers (Moosavi 2020). Instead, we are inspired by Gopal’s proposal for an ‘*anticolonial* university’ that ‘[pushes] towards the horizon of decolonisation’ (2021: 889). This does not mean that we lower our ambitions from decolonisation and seek instead some meeker aims. Rather, it means that we adopt a ‘critical and radical spirit of enquiry and action’ (Gopal 2021: 889); and that we seek to understand the university as a site of opposition, interrogation and contest, while recognising its limits.

Opposing imperialism and colonialism

Calls for decolonization that are not political and that are disengaged from real struggles are misinformed and ineffective at best and harmful at worst (Dutt *et al.* 2025: 213).

Decolonising curricula, classes, and the university is not done in isolation from the real contestation of colonialism and imperialism. Material solidarity with resistance, through protest movements in solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for instance, is the starting point. This involves not only regular protests against deaths in custody, child removals, and cultural and environmental destruction but also, for instance, our union delegation to the Pilliga, in solidarity with Gomerioi people struggling against Narrabri gas project in August 2023 (Barrett-McGuin 2024). Movements of decolonisation have typically not been peaceful, cerebral affairs, as pointed out by the figure most famously associated with decolonisation (Fanon 1965).

As academics and activists, the years since October 2023 have presented immense personal and professional challenges to how we live and work in the context of genocide in Gaza. It has raised questions about the university's relationships with global structures of imperialism and apartheid, and about the limitations on academic freedom in the context of a settler-colonial society allied to other genocidal states.

Indicators of the distance to be travelled are revealed in the University of Sydney's recent decision to re-affirm and preserve its investments in and research partnerships with the military. This decision was made against the recommendations of a review of the University's investment policy which received over 700 submissions from staff, students and the broader community. These submissions overwhelmingly and urgently demanded divestment and severing research ties with weapons manufacturers, expressing profound and grave concerns about the human rights impacts, and the distress, betrayal and disillusionment caused by the University's involvement in violence, including in Gaza (Thodey 2025). This is a stark reminder that colonial and imperial structures of the global political economy continue not merely as legacies but as ongoing processes, both within and beyond the university.

One key contribution of 'decolonising political economy' as a project is developing anti-colonial movements utilising the tools of political economy. A recent report by Francesca Albanese (Special Rapporteur on

the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967) indicated the urgent need for critical applications of political economy, when she outlined the ‘political economy of an occupation turned genocidal’ (Albanese 2025). Engaging in theories of settler colonialism and racial colonial capitalism, she outlined the connection between the economic function of ‘corporate entities’ and the brutality of genocide.

The Political Economy of Palestine reading group at the University of Sydney exemplified some of the possibilities and limits of this kind of anti-colonial practice. Convened across institutions and open to staff, students and the wider community, the group brought together academics, activists and community members to engage seriously with Palestinian political economy as a field in its own right. Readings stressed processes of settler colonialism and debates over its intellectual foundations (Aqiqi *et al.* 2023; Dana 2021; Sayegh 1965), the political economy of the Oslo accords (Hanieh 2021), the network of ‘resistance economies’ and the impact of Israel’s blockade on Gaza on class development (Tartir *et al.* 2021). This was not merely illuminating and clarifying but embodied a solidaristic ethos within the context of repression and fear about speaking and teaching about Palestine. Hearing directly from Palestinian academics provided a critical source of alternative voices, including for instance, new engagement with foundations of global political economy (Shalbak 2025).

Yet the group operated, necessarily, in the margins: outside formal university structures, in unpaid time, sustained by small networks rather than institutional promotion. For one of us, this work ran alongside the demands of completing a PhD. These constraints are not incidental. They reveal how the ‘cultural re-tooling’ that Connell (2006: 263) identifies as essential to decolonisation is systematically made difficult, dependent on individual commitment and even temerity rather than structural support.

This experience shows the institutional constraints on decolonisation. Academic freedom to discuss contemporary colonial violence is constrained through surveillance, institutional consequences, and what amounts to a chilling effect on political speech. Uncovering the rich tradition of Palestinian political economy required moving in the adjacent spheres to the formal university structures, with the further unpaid labour possible only for those able to make additional time.

Challenging institutions: structures, challenges and limitations

What if we conceptualised an anticolonial university that pushed towards the horizon of decolonisation rather than a 'decolonised' one? (Gopal 2021: 889)

Universities have long operated as bastions and reproducers of privilege (Dutt 2025: 196-8), and there is no inherent quality of the discipline of political economy that contradicts this. The very first iteration of political economy at the University of Sydney was in the mid-nineteenth century. The first exams and lectures in political economy in the 1850s and 1860s were to address 'the pressing want of our age', necessary to produce colonial administrators and especially valuable in quelling that 'internecine conflict between labour and capital' (Woolley, 1861: 20-1). The exam questions addressed the effects of trade union organisation and the relationship between rent and profits, but issues of invasion and land theft were avoided.

To what extent then have we broken with the ambitions of 1850s political economy? Echoes of this conservatising function of university education appear in today's governmental calls to deliver 'Job Ready Graduates' with marketable skills and, so long as the global economy is bound up with colonial projects, those graduates will become a part of a colonial economy. Are we educating (neo)colonial administrators for the Twenty-First century? It is not lost on us in this context that the current Political Economy department, originating in a remarkable protest movement of students and staff in the 1970s, counted among its protagonists the current Prime Minister of Australia.

This is not a matter of original sin but of an *active process*, which involves ongoing commercialisation and managerial governance in universities (Cahill and Irving 2021; Connell 2019). As Bannerji argues, neoliberal universities function as 'packaging units for commodified knowledge' (Bannerji 2024). What capacity do these institutions really have for contributing to 'the whole social structure being changed from the bottom up' (Fanon 1965: 27)?

Gopal encourages us to recognise institutional limitations of the university and the impossibility of arriving at an end point, but to forge ahead anyway. This involves disputing, contradicting, dismantling, re-organising, and contesting existing power structures and inequalities built

by and through colonies. It is ‘necessarily critical and interrogative while also, as such, reparative, both in the sense of fleshing out that which is partial, and of transforming harmful conditions’ (Gopal 2021: 887).

Here we highlight two key challenges, one philosophical and one practical. The first is the intellectual labour required to practically challenge and question European ‘epistemological authority’. Gopal raises fundamental epistemological and ontological questions posed by decolonisation in its broadest sense (2021: 880). Similarly, Dutt and their co-authors argue that a decolonial approach to economics assumes that there is a connection between the social and political structures of colonialism and dominant epistemologies (2025: 187). What would it mean to fundamentally unsettle ‘the definition of knowledge itself– including what and how we come to know’ (Gopal 2021: 880)? This draws into question Europe’s authority to decide what constitutes reliable knowledge.

Second, how does the structure of the corporate university and consumer-driven education undermine the possibility of decolonising as a ‘profoundly unsettling’ (Gopal 2021: 884) process. Of course, the philosophical and the practical constraints we observe in the contemporary university are interrelated. While the epistemological authority of European thought poses a significant barrier to decolonising scholarship and teaching which should not be underestimated, this intellectual challenge can barely be attempted due to the practical constraints. Limitations on political speech, expression and action, for both students and teachers, chill essential discussion and action. Increasingly precarious and lean industrial conditions leave little space for the intellectual endeavour demanded by decolonisation.

Connell points to the significant costs to perturbing the dictates of ‘northern theory’, which include ‘the very heavy commitment of time involved in cultural re-tooling’ and ‘risks to professional credibility’ (Connell 2006: 263). Workload intensification means that many university teachers have almost no time for activities other than teaching and teaching-related preparation and administration. Teachers employed on a casual basis typically have no entitlement to time for either teaching reflection or research. Early career academics are increasingly employed on teaching-intensive contracts which might provide an ostensible 20 percent allocation of time for research, but under-counting of hours required for teaching means that, in practice, research must be done in unpaid time (Goodman *et al.* 2023; Dados *et al.* 2019).

Even where university teachers find the time and space to engage in the critical and collective reflection required to challenge colonial assumptions and epistemologies, there is shrinking political space in which to put these reflections into action. At the University of Sydney, for example, recent policy changes prevent teachers and students from engaging in political speech, organising and attending demonstrations and exhibiting political materials such as banners, posters and flags (Schwartz 2024). These constraints, which are mirrored by the repression of political speech by the federal and state legislatures, render meaningful decolonisation an even greater challenge.

Finally, there are recurrent failures to meet union-negotiated employment targets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and widely reported measures of structural racism faced by First Nations and other staff. These represent a critical block as regards transformation of knowledge. While we regard it as a general responsibility to challenge racism, the failure to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic and professional staff provides an obvious limit to the degree that disciplines can ever be said to have been ‘decolonised’.

Recognising that decolonisation as a practice must also be connected to ‘broader anti-colonial, anti-racist and anti-imperial struggles in society’ (Dutt *et al.* 2025: 201) means that escalating restraints of political freedom and action for students and staff alike must be contested if this agenda is to have any significant purchase. An understanding of the university itself as a site of struggle, including union struggle over hiring practices, permanency, the structure of academic labour, and academic freedom, provides an important alternative framework for considering pedagogy.

Critical pedagogies and an ethos of solidarity

When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess [...] Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow (hooks 1994: 21).

One key ingredient in challenging institutions is incorporating students not as passive receptacles receiving information, but rather as social and political actors with interests, motivations and beliefs that may align with or contradict those of decolonisation. In the context of the dynamic

contestation described above, decolonisation of political economy does not consist in merely serving students a more refined diet of readings.

The assessment of conflictual social relations outlined in sections 2 and 3 may seem to suggest an ‘oppositional’ pedagogy in which teachers position themselves overtly against the dominant modes of thought. Such a ‘defamiliarising’ classroom sees teachers assert counter-hegemonic positions inside and through their position of authority as teachers (Marcroft 1990: 69). Yet navigating these social contradictions through the reassertion of hierarchy has usually been avoided. Rather, scholars propose critical pedagogies (Darlaston-Jones *et al.* 2014; Freire 2014), or what bell hooks has called ‘engaged pedagogy’ (hooks 1994: 13), which emphasise dialogic and empathetic classrooms.

A ‘relational approach’ has increasingly been recognised as central to decolonial pedagogy (Shahjahan *et al.* 2022: 87), encouraging reflexivity and understanding knowledge as co-produced via teaching and learning. Recent scholarship has proposed an emphasis on active rather than passive learning, and teaching practices that draw connections between the curriculum and students’ lives and experiences (Muijnck and Tieleman 2021: 118-9). These are familiar and firmly held practices in our discipline, yet not an assured path to creating liberatory classrooms. There are tensions between positions of relative authority and counter-hegemonic political attachments; and between supporting and challenging students.

As teachers, these tensions require negotiating a position between offering authoritative guidance through the literature and scholarship based on our expertise, while also acknowledging the limits of our expertise and experience, to facilitate collaboration with students. This is particularly important in our context, where Australia’s place as a provider of international education in the Asia-Pacific means that our students bring a wealth of alternative economic thinking and contexts into our classrooms.

By selecting classroom examples that highlight the contribution of students’ own funds of knowledge (González *et al.* 2005), we have found it useful to intentionally flip axes of power and oppression in the classroom. Selection of examples that provide counterpoint to ‘Northern theory’, such as pairing debates of Post-Fordism with 996 debates in China (controversy about working 9 am to 9 pm six days a week), or Dark Emu debates, allow minority students to share their expertise and knowledges and develop the class. Yet, with an approach that encourages students to bring themselves and their experiences more fully into the classroom,

recent scholarship has also turned our attention to the problems arising from asking our students to speak about and think about personally difficult subjects. This is particularly questionable in relation to those students who are racially oppressed and for whom talking about these experiences in a classroom may evoke distress. In our context, where we have so many international students and vast inequality of access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, these problems all come to bear (Cabiles 2025; Zipin 2009).

Moreover, reflexivity requires that we be *led* by the questions and problem situations presented to us by students, now including large numbers of international students whose very presence raises questions about the role of universities in the global political economy and its inequities (Angus 2009). If we regard the process of decolonising as a liberatory one that challenges existing power structures and inequalities, including those between teachers and students, within the student body, and outside the classroom, we need to limit the tendency for already empowered students to dominate. We can also create platforms for expression of views about existing inequalities. For instance, a wave of interest in questions of radical feminism in mainland China has led to vibrant classroom debates on social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya 2017).

Attempts to develop liberatory pedagogies are, of course, fraught, imperfect and never complete for various reasons, in no small part because classroom practices are necessarily bound up in the processes outlined in the earlier sections of this article. Students can only be invited to join a journey – a ‘permanent spirit of inquiry’ – that may suggest a wider confrontation with the real limitations presented by the institutional and industrial structure of the university. Perhaps most important of all is simply to promote an ethos of solidarity between students and staff, treating students not merely as recipients of (perhaps decolonised) knowledge, but as social and political actors with interests, motivations and beliefs that may align with or contradict those of decolonisation.

The curriculum: Critical historicisation

Those who are researching Indigenous knowledge must understand both the historical development of Eurocentric thought and the Indigenous contexts (Battiste 2013: 186).

Epistemological questions are central to the process of decolonising political economy (Smith 2021). Yet, as Battiste suggests, the questioning of presumed ways of knowing entails neither a collapse into relativism nor a reassertion of absolute knowledge (Haraway 1988). Decolonising curricula by merely ‘adding and mixing’ Indigenous perspectives has been rightly derided (Crisp 2026).

Critical historicisation names our current method of grappling with this tension, by pairing key ideas in political economy, a discipline tied into the processes of capital accumulation – and therefore written from imperial centres – with more critical readings that situate these processes within the colonial and imperial structures they presume. Gopal proposes an approach to decolonising the university which reckons not only with Europe’s imperial endeavours, but also with the ways in which those endeavours constituted Europe itself and its relations with post-colonial states today (Gopal 2021: 878-9). At the University of Sydney, this is a central theme of ECOP1003, a first-year political economy unit focused on the organisation and integration of the global economy.

Over the last few years, collaborating on the teaching and pedagogical development of this unit, we have introduced a number of new topics and authors. The unit opens with an explicit recognition of the imperial project that drove the establishment of capitalism as a global economic system. The work of Kojo Koram (2023) is critical here, reflecting Gopal’s view that Britain’s colonies made, and continue to remake, the British economy in specific, materially observable ways. Some of the examples Koram explores include the global organisation of taxation, labour migration and borders, the structure of multinational firms, and the operations of transnational finance – all key topics in ECOP1003.

The histories and legacies of colonialism are a constant motif throughout the unit. We explore various theoretical lenses to explain the systemic inequalities between colonised and coloniser, providing a foundation for understanding many contemporary political economic phenomena (Rodney 2018; Singer 2012; Wallerstein 2004). The work of Fanny Pigeau and Ndongo Samba Sylla (2020) reveals how legacies of French colonialism are baked into contemporary monetary relations in Central and West Africa, as well as the European Union. Utsa Patnaik (2021) reveals the financial drain imposed on India during more than three centuries of British domination, laying a basis to revisit the history of development in

colonised and colonising economies, as well as contesting the global distribution of economic resources today.

Contemporary public debt crises provide a lens through which to examine entrenched global economic inequalities (IMF 2025; Roos 2019; UNCTAD 2025). Persistent debt burdens and disproportionately high interest rates capture post-colonial economies in a cycle of repayments which undermine their capacities to finance basic services and, most importantly in the current context, essential climate adaptation. The nexus of financial debt burdens and the climate debt of major emitters brings the brutal legacies of colonialism into sharp relief (Perry 2021).

In addition to these topics that spotlight the operations of colonialism and neocolonialism, we further seek the critical historicisation of the political economy canon. In this practice, we think it important to be honest about the historical foundations of the discipline, while also recognising its limitations. We build on the legacy of PE at Sydney which has long queried the ‘neutrality’, ‘objectivity’ and ‘value-free’ assertions of mainstream economic theory. In ECOP1003, we use the work of scholars such as Matthew Watson who highlights the historical context of Ricardo’s comparative advantage theory, including the realities of Britain’s relationships with Portugal and its colony in Brazil (Watson 2017). Other instances are the work of Ha-Joon Chang (2003) and Eric Helleiner (2021) who both offer historicisations of Nineteenth Century infant industry arguments that are pertinent to debates today about industry policy and the role of the state in development. Helleiner (2021), in particular, critiques the western-centrism of PE’s usual approach to the topic of economic nationalism by revisiting neglected thinkers such as Sun Yat-Sen and Henry Carey.

We also use Joe Collins’ (2022) work to challenge the extractive and productivist bias that drives even critical PE approaches to the ‘resource curse’ in economic development. This is of particular importance given that the climate crisis is driving a new wave of green extractivism (Archer and Calvão 2025; Riquito 2025).

Finally, we have extended and built upon feminist critiques. For instance, we recently introduced the work of Premilla Nadasen (2017) who challenges some racialised and heteronormative assumptions underpinning Arlie Hochschild’s global care chains theory.

Horizons and conclusion

Warnings about superficial engagements (Moosavi 2020) should not paralyse us from taking actions of ‘quotidian decolonisation’. Decolonisation does not (simply) mean changing our curricula, or even changing our universities, but is about confronting racism and power in society. For Gopal (2021), the ‘anticolonial university’ is a horizon rather than an achievable end result. Despite the potential in political economy as a discipline, there are ongoing tensions between radical aspirations and broader structural constraints.

Decolonising political economy surely has much to offer. Linda Tuhiwai Smith opens her *Decolonising Methodologies* with a discussion of theories of imperialism propounded by Hobson and Lenin (Smith 2021: 21). Debates over these real processes of decolonising knowledge, universities, societies, and the world economy are proper to our discipline and the areas of study to which we must contribute.

Decolonising political economy requires simultaneous work across curriculum content, pedagogical practices and struggles that challenge our institutions. As indicated in this article by examples from ECOP1003, critical historicisation can recentre the discipline around colonial and imperial political economy, showing the need for ongoing work and restructuring. Our pedagogical practices show how dialogic engagement with diverse student knowledges enacts decolonisation in classroom interactions, though never without tension or risk of reproducing inequalities. The institutional rigidities and realities, which include suppression of academic freedom, political expression and constraints on research time, reveal how material conditions can foreclose radical aspiration and remind us to lift our horizons.

Popular political education projects, like the Political Economy of Palestine reading group, sitting alongside the university’s structures and making use of some of its resources, aim to create times and spaces for the ‘cultural re-tooling’ proposed by Connell (2006: 263), as well as challenges to learn and ‘teach the teacher’. Wider dynamics that deepen and popularise this kind of engagement – and ensuring early career researchers have the time to engage in this kind of labour – are central to our vision. So too is the process of winning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment targets and standing against structural racism within the university.

Our account of quotidian decolonisation highlights the contradictory position of attempting the decolonisation of knowledge that is itself structured into dynamics of global accumulation. This critical reflexivity is reason for modesty for anyone attempting the task of decolonising political economy. Yet Francesca Albanese's analysis makes clear that the theories and tools of political economy are urgently needed in the current conjuncture. Whether political economy can help decolonise the world, and be decolonised itself in the process, is a question for us all.

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