Critiquing coloniality, 'epistemic violence' and western hegemony in comparative education – the dangers of ahistoricism and positionality

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ABSTRACT

Claims regarding Western neo-colonial domination over scholarship in Comparative and International Education (CIE) have recently commanded much attention – for example in a 2017 special issue of the journal *Comparative Education Review* (CER) on the theme of 'contesting coloniality.' Stressing their marginal 'positionality,' the contributors to that special issue relate their critique to a narrative of 'epistemic violence' seen as underpinning 'Western' or 'Northern' hegemony in the CIE field and beyond. Adopting a historical perspective, I argue here that positing a dichotomy between a colonialist 'Western modernity' and a uniformly victimised 'non-West' is empirically unsustainable, and involves its advocates in propagating just the kind of essentialism and Eurocentrism that they condemn. I also argue that the centrality of 'positionality' and 'opacity' in postcolonialist or decolonial arguments, as expounded in the CER special issue, impedes meaningful and constructive scholarly dialogue. Scholarship in this vein threatens to divide the CIE field, undermine its wider credibility and distract from analysis of the pressing problems that confront us today. Comparativists need to balance critical scholarship concerning the implications of 'colonialism' with greater attention to the comparative study of its history.

Introduction

Social scientists and historians commonly describe the contemporary world as 'post-colonial,' even while emphasising colonialism's enduring influence on today's global order. 'Colonialism as a form of European world rule completed its historical cycle in the third quarter of the twentieth century,' writes Jürgen Osterhammel, before observing that 'the post-colonial world has retained forms of manipulation, exploitation and cultural expropriation, even if colonialism itself belongs to the past' (2005, 119). But what, precisely, are the connections between European colonialism and the forms of 'manipulation, exploitation and cultural expropriation' that should concern educational comparativists today?

Contributors to a 2017 special issue of *Comparative Education Review* (CER) offer one set of answers. Setting out to 'Contest Coloniality,' they argue that colonialism is intrinsic to a Western 'modernity project' of which 'comparative education has been an integral part'

(Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017, S13). This is evident, they contend, in the continued projection by western scholars of 'flawed and parochial understandings of modernity [e.g. World Culture theory]' on 'the rest of the world' (S4). They claim that 'the overwhelming and (under neoliberalism) *growing* authority of the global North alternative' in the post-Cold War period is ultimately attributable to the legacy of Western colonialism (S15). Western hegemony is further maintained through the structures that underpin scholarly discourse: journals, associations, job opportunities, research grants, overseas development funding and – not least – the English language itself. The overall effect is to marginalise non-Western voices, or accord them mere bit-parts in a drama framed by Western 'coloniality' – a concept that encompasses 'the global economy of knowledge created by worldwide empire,' and the 'universalist ontology and epistemology' that inform 'official knowledge' (S13).

It is important to challenge the lazy Eurocentrism of much mainstream Anglophone social science, not least in the field of Comparative and International Education (CIE). However, I argue here that the approach propounded in the 2017 CER special issue suffers from serious flaws. These arise in particular from reliance on highly generalising claims regarding the nature and significance of Western 'coloniality,' uninformed by any balanced comparative analysis of colonialism as a historical phenomenon. In thus neglecting history, and specifically the history of colonialism in Asian societies, the advocates for a 'decolonial' CIE risk reinforcing the very Eurocentrism they abhor. I substantiate this argument by outlining an account of the history of colonialism and its implications for education that accords fuller recognition to Asian experience and agency, drawing on the work of scholars such as Amartya Sen, whose challenge to Eurocentrism takes a radically different tack from that of the decolonialists.

I begin with a critical analysis of the 2017 CER special issue, which provides a relatively ambitious and comprehensive statement of the decolonial or postcolonialist approach to CIE scholarship, featuring some of its most prominent exponents. Since CER is a leading 'metropolitan' CIE journal which only rarely publishes entire themed special issues, it is significant to find one devoted to 'contesting coloniality.' In addition to an introductory article, this issue features: an analysis of the 'challenges of epistemic dominance in higher education' through a consideration of curriculum internationalisation (Stein 2017); a 'decolonial reading of global university rankings' (Shahjahan, Ramirez, and Andreotti 2017); an attempt to '[interrupt] the coloniality of knowledge production in Comparative Education' through analysing 'postsocialist and postcolonial dialogues after the Cold War' (Silova, Millei, and Piattoeva 2017); a discussion of divergent understandings of 'interculturality' and its educational implications, reviewing the experience of indigenous communities in the Andes (Aman 2017); a study of the 'pedagogy of absence, conflict and emergence' focusing on 'contributions to the decolonization of education from the Native American, Afro-Portuguese and Romani Experiences' (Tom, Suárez-Krabbe, and Castro 2017); and a reflection on 'enacting a decolonial praxis in teacher professional development in Pakistan' (Khoja-Moolji 2017).

Of central importance for all these contributions is the concept of 'location' or 'positionality.' 'The field,' states the introductory article,

> has given little attention to the politics of its own concepts about difference, the critical role
> that uneven power relations play in the constitution of its own comparative knowledge.

> Structural inequalities between the researcher and the researched, and between the home country of the researchers and the targeted countries, are constitutive for the very difference that CIE researches are to uncover. (Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017, S3)

Dominant 'Northern social theory,' they argue, reinforces this inequality through 'characteristic moves,' namely: claims of universality, the reading of social experience from the global centre, and a 'grand erasure' of colonial experience (S15). Setting out to counter what they term 'Euro-American' scholars' 'epistemic violence' or 'epistemic racism' (on which all cite the Argentine scholar Walter Mignolo), they commit themselves to 'epistemological diffidence through alternative textual practices and the reflexive discussion of the located nature of their knowing and the particular politics of knowing that they choose to advance' (Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017, S18). Comparative educationalists are exhorted to 'think otherwise' by striving to 'imagine education and research in international education beyond the confines of modernity and its violences' (Shahjahan, Ramirez, and Andreotti 2017, S68). This is not to be confused with mere incorporation of diverse voices within existing institutional or discursive 'frames,' dismissed as 'thin inclusion' (Stein 2017, S32). 'Thinking otherwise' means rejecting 'universalism' itself in favour of 'border thinking' (Silova, Millei, and Piattoeva 2017, S77), 'hacking' (Khoja-Moolji 2017, S154), or other subversive ploys designed to 'secure spaces for critically informed, socially accountable and multivoiced conversations about global justice and alternative futures' (Shahjahan, Ramirez, and Andreotti 2017, S69).

Many points advanced by these scholars will and should command broad sympathy. The global dominance of Western, especially Anglophone, institutions and perspectives warps educational scholarship, and needs to be challenged. Many indigenous groups have been cruelly marginalised in ways traceable to the legacy of colonialism – much of it 'Western,' though by no means all (see below). In so far as unreflective Eurocentrism or West-centrism narrows and impoverishes conversations about education, this is to the detriment of us all, whatever our 'position' vis-à-vis colonialism. Such narrowing was certainly exacerbated by Anglo-American post-Cold War triumphalism, which informed the disastrous neoliberal 'shock therapy' visited upon the former Soviet bloc during the 1990s. More broadly, the influence of consultants (predominantly, though not exclusively, 'Western') and the Global Education Industry associated with agencies such as the World Bank or OECD continues to skew educational debate and policymaking in formerly Communist Eastern Europe and Central Asia, as elsewhere (Auld, Rappleye, and Morris 2019). The promotion, by the OECD and others, of metrics for educational 'performance' has cramped debate over the fundamental aims of education, since these measuring tools are premised on a human capital paradigm and an instrumentalist vision of citizenship (see MGIEP 2017). These phenomena all demand urgent 'contestation,' and are indeed vigorously contested by numerous academic comparativists, 'Western' or otherwise.

Far from occupying the margins of contemporary debate in the CIE field, critiques of Eurocentrism increasingly abound, the major exponents including several contributors to this special issue. One landmark in this respect is the 2012 CER article, 'Between Faith and Science,' by Carney, Rappleye and Silova, which performs a valuable service in forensically dissecting the claims of 'World Culture theory' for the normative status of Western experience. Both that paper and Rappleye's work on American overseas educational aid-as-neo-imperialism are cited in the introduction to this collection (S12). From 2015 onwards,

Rappleye and Komatsu have also co-authored several papers on themes ranging from Western stereotyping of Asian education (e.g. Komatsu and Rappleye 2017) to what they (with Silova) portray as the malign consequences of Western 'dominant independent self-hood' (Komatsu, Rappleye, and Silova 2019). On many points, such analysis exhibits a strong affinity with neo-Marxist critiques of 'hegemony' long advanced by scholars such as Michael Apple (see Lim and Apple 2016). But critical scholars of decoloniality take pains to dissociate themselves from the Eurocentrism of Western thinkers from Marx to Foucault (Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017, S4). For them, culture is at least as significant as class to the task of tracing the contours of oppression in the modern world. The book *Southern Theory* by Raewyn Connell (2007), a co-editor of the CER special issue, stands as a notable manifesto for this approach – calling for a new 'principle of unification' for the social sciences (223), involving 'recognition,' 'respect' and 'an educational process' on a 'world scale,' 'because the metropole too must learn – at least as actively as the periphery' (224).

However, by embedding their specific criticisms in an anti-Western meta-narrative, drawing extensively on the theoretical apparatus of postmodernist 'deconstruction,' advocates of decoloniality in CIE enter dubious territory. What does it mean to talk of the 'West', 'North', 'Anglo-West', 'Euro-America' or the other terms they use interchangeably? In so far as 'the West' can be seen as a coherent political, cultural or 'epistemic' category, how accurate or meaningful is it to equate Western influence with 'colonialism,' or to represent 'colonialism' as intrinsically 'Western'? Or does such an approach risk mirroring and exacerbating the sort of cultural 'essentialism' that these scholars deplore? Crucially, do the value judgements that inescapably inform CIE or other social science scholarship inevitably dissolve into arguments about 'positionality' – specifically the researcher's 'positioning' vis-à-vis the 'colonial' West? And if so, what are the implications of this?

I address these questions here first of all by reviewing the arguments advanced in the CER Special Issue. To borrow their terminology, I outline their key rhetorical 'moves' (a useful concept for purposes of dissecting an argument). I then subject these to a detailed critique, dealing first with the characterisation of 'the West' and 'Western thought,' the apparent equation of Western influence with 'epistemic violence,' and of universalism with 'Eurocentrism.' Turning specifically to the concept of colonialism, I question the historical accuracy of portraying this as an exclusively 'Western' practice. To illustrate the problems such an approach entails for educational debate, I then discuss the history of the region with which I am most familiar: East Asia. To conclude, I analyse the dangers posed by anti-Westernism and an excessive focus on 'location' or 'positionality' for CIE as a field, and indicate the urgent need for an alternative approach that eschews any crude West–East (or North–South) dichotomy.

Moves and counter-moves

While the CER contributors ascribe the 'hegemony' of 'the global North' over CIE and the broader social sciences to various 'moves' (Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017, S15 – see above), their own depiction of CIE as a field in thrall to pervasive, malevolent and distinctively 'Western' forms of 'coloniality' itself involves a series of rhetorical manoeuvres. Identifying these is a first step to assessing the validity of their arguments.

An initial move relates to the definition of 'the field'. Highlighting the position of the World Congress of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES), they depict this as

characterised by 'uneven power relations' amongst member societies. (The WCCES' representativeness is open to question, but it has also recently been riven by conflicts with a bearing on the present theme – as I note in the conclusion to this article.) Rightly pointing to the parochially Eurocentric flavour of many established accounts of the CIE field, Takayama et al posit a link to the Original Sin of its founding fathers, in particular Isaac Kandel. Invoking the China specialist Ruth Hayhoe, they state that 'comparative education has been an integral part of the modernity project of the West' (S13). They then trace its genealogy from colonial developmentalism, through post-war modernisation theory, to neoliberal reformism today.

This narrative frequently elides distinctions between CIE as an academic pursuit, and policy-oriented educational comparison as practised by the OECD, the World Bank or various think-tanks. For example, Silova et al point to negative stereotyping of education in postsocialist Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in numerous 'policy documents and research studies' (S81), but most of the studies cited in evidence are by the OECD. Drawing on personal experience they show how, for the OECD, 'the defining feature of an "expert" is based on nationality,' in a way that not even Western training can allow those born in the former Soviet sphere to overcome (S83-84). However, it is unclear why we should take the OECD as representative of the 'mainstream' of Western CIE scholarship. They do not cite Robin Alexander's weighty and highly-regarded monograph *Culture and Pedagogy* (2000), which offers an account of Russian primary schooling far removed from the negative stereotyping attributed to Western scholars. And the field is positively crowded with work critiquing the OECD's use of comparative data (for recent examples, see Andrews et al. 2014;[1] Morris 2016; MGIEP 2017; Grey and Morris 2018; Auld, Rappleye, and Morris 2019). The OECD's output represents neither the diverse views of Western academic educationalists, nor of the members of WCCES constituent societies. But implying that it does is one move that lends credence to the anti-Western case.

Is this, though, an exercise in anti-Westernism? Takayama et al disavow the aim of 'dividing paradigmatic Anglo-European comparativists and other comparativists in the global peripheries' (S19), while Silova et al call for an 'understanding of coloniality … as multilayered, interconnected and present in all societies' (S89). However, their decolonial master-narrative is premised, in what constitutes a second move, on a vague and divisive system of categorisation. It is relevant to note the importance attached to classification by Mignolo, regarded as an authority on coloniality by all these authors, who argues that 'epistemic racism' is built on 'classifications and hierarchies,' and that 'those who classify always place themselves at the top of the classification' (quoted by Silova, Millei, and Piattoeva 2017, S84–S85).[2] The categories deployed in the special issue include the 'West', 'Anglo-West', 'Anglo-Europe' and 'global North.' Each of these terms has different connotations, which are not clearly spelt out. The 'West' presumably encompasses Western Europe, North America and settler-colonial off-shoots such as Australia, but does it extend to Japan or Eastern or Southern Europe? 'Anglo-West' or 'Anglo-Europe' reference the English-speaking world, apparently excluding non-European societies, while leaving ambiguous the status of non-English-speaking Europeans and their settler-colonial heirs (e.g. in Latin America). The 'global North' is a more encompassing category, distinguishing so-called 'developed' from 'developing' countries. But it seemingly excludes Russia and the post-socialist societies of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, presented here by Silova et al as

victims of Western 'coloniality.' Deploying these terms interchangeably helps to unite disparate papers under the rubric of 'contesting coloniality.' The result is a target for the 'decolonial' argument that is large, diffuse, and readily distinguishable from a 'periphery' defined by shared experience of oppression or marginalisation. The 'hierarchies' associated by Mignolo with 'coloniality' are thus inverted, with those classified as victims implicitly assigned moral superiority over the perpetrators.

These perpetrators are in turn associated, in a related third move, with a uniformly 'colonial' cultural or civilizational unit conceived in highly essentialist terms. The 'dominant global imaginary,' argues Stein, is a 'racialized ordering of humanity' whereby 'the white/Euro-descended subject's "civic-humanist, rational self-conception" is constituted against a racialized "irrational/sub-rational Human Other"' (2017, S29). Post-war attempts to 'incorporate official refutations of racialism and colonialism' are dismissed as mere ploys to disguise the 'recasting' of 'colonial logics' through development projects framed as a means to help the non-West 'catch up' (S30). The object of catch-up is a 'Western modernity project' 'constituted' by the 'logic of coloniality,' so that 'colonial patterns of power' continue to define 'culture, labour, intersubjective relations and knowledge production everywhere' (Silova, Millei, and Piattoeva 2017, S75). 'The globalizing reach of this [Western] imaginary over the past six centuries,' has meant, Stein argues, 'that wherever one is situated within its colonial divisions, it is not possible simply to "opt out" of its unevenly distributed repressive, disciplinary, and biopolitically productive effects' (2017, S31). In other words, the supreme, inescapable and essential characteristic of the modern West is its 'coloniality.'

This claim that the modern West is intrinsically 'colonial' is twinned with a fourth move: the depiction of 'colonialism' or 'coloniality' as uniquely 'Western' (or 'Anglo-European,' etc.). This equation is so taken for granted by the contributors that they hardly bother to spell it out, let alone defend it. When Shahjahan et al refer to 'imperial powers (whether Spanish, Portuguese, British and [sic.], later on, American),' their use of brackets reflects this assumption that 'imperialism' or 'colonialism' are axiomatically Western (2017, S52).

Oddly, given that one of the co-editors is Japanese, non-Western forms of colonialism are almost entirely ignored in the special issue. Japan's own notoriously brutal colonial project receives only one oblique reference. This comes when Kandel is attacked for failing to support a Taiwanese student of his who sought to critique an official Japanese report on 'Education in Formosa and Korea' (Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017, S11). Invoking this instance of non-Western colonialism thus serves merely to buttress the case for recasting one of the field's Western founding fathers as an archetypal colonialist. Neither Japanese 'coloniality' nor the related ethnocentricity of mainstream Japanese culture and scholarship – past and present – are otherwise acknowledged.

The agenda of contesting a 'coloniality' construed as uniquely Western leads to further lapses in historical accuracy. With respect to Soviet Russia, Silova et al assert that 'even though state-sanctioned racism under socialism employed racial technologies and expertise to differentiate spaces and populations through their contrasting propensities to life and death, these followed less the lines of racial "othering" apparent in former colonies' (2017, S77). While recognising that in the days of the USSR 'Russia functioned as an imperial centre that spread its norms and models to the peripheries' (S91), they nonetheless present Soviet power as somehow less colonial than its 'Western' counterpart. Elsewhere

in the special issue, Tom et al acknowledge that the dividing line between colonialism and its victims also runs *through* 'Northern' societies, writing that 'coloniality can be observed in the power the Global North (the white United States and Western Europe) exerts over the Global South (regions such as Asia, Africa and Latin America, regarded as "underdeveloped" or "developing countries," *and racialized populations in the Global North*)' (2017, S125, my emphasis). But the essential dichotomy stands – between 'the West' (or 'North') as a malevolent hegemon, and its victims, defined primarily in ethno-cultural terms, wherever they are.

Finally, this generalised dichotomy underpins a fifth move, linking the ethical standing, authenticity and legitimacy of researchers to their 'location' vis-à-vis 'the West'. Identifying themselves as 'critical scholars of color' (2017, S51), Shahjahan et al highlight their 'multi-layered positionality as visible minorities, having ties to countries labelled as "Third World" and working with dissenting perspectives mostly in white settler contexts' (S58). Tom et al take aim at an 'epistemic racism' seen as extending to 'the addition of some selected "other" scholars, histories or events into Eurocentric scholarship without engaging with their conceptualizations, critiques and consequences.' They associate this tactic with 'scholars and educators … who pretend to have transcended the problems of racism and coloniality,' but 'continue to enjoy and defend the privilege of epistemic perspective' (2017, S127). 'White perspectivity,' they continue, 'upholds itself as self-justified educational practice' (S127), necessitating what Khoja-Moolji calls an emphasis on 'brown bodies as central to knowledge production' (2017, S152). 'Colonial imaginaries of purity and authenticity' must be abandoned, proclaim Tom et al, but this does not entail 'a priori rejecting notions of purity and authenticity stemming from "other" onto-epistemological groundings' (S141). Invoking divisive and essentialising forms of categorisation in the cause of contesting Western coloniality is thus apparently permissible, if it is authentically rooted in 'subaltern epistemic locations' (Khoja-Moolji 2017, S152).

Several contributors demonstrate awareness of the difficulty of characterising as subaltern the 'location' of scholars based in prestigious Western universities, some holding influential positions in the CIE field. As of now (2019), two of those featured in this special issue sit on the Advisory Board of CER, while another is on the editorial board of *Comparative Education*. Silova is currently Vice-President of CIES. She and her co-authors acknowledge that 'depending on particular circumstances, … we may be positioned as Western "experts,"' or 'as non-Western "others" whose expertise is limited to explaining the local context through particular analytical frames' (2017, S93). Again citing Mignolo (himself based at Duke University), they declare their intention to 'work within and against dominant forms of knowledge production by carrying the "wound" of coloniality … , but resisting efforts of self-emancipation from the experience of domination that works for, and not against, integration into the same hierarchy' (S97). If this seems confusing, it is apparently intentionally so, since they assert 'our right to … opacity' (S93). In the same vein, they call for 'border thinking, … where being is "rooted in irremovable contradictions – neither here nor there or both here and there at the same time"' (S93). The import of this seems to be that those from 'subaltern' backgrounds who find themselves working within the structures of 'Western' privilege need to ensure that their scholarly agendas remain defined by consciousness of the epistemic 'wounds' inflicted by the West on the non-Western core of their identity.

A note on my own 'positionality'

A white, male, public school-and-Oxford-educated British scholar who ventures into a debate framed in these terms is clearly entering a minefield. Individuals such as myself have indeed enjoyed manifold privileges within global academia and beyond. These privileges are related to a web of structures and assumptions that can be termed 'Eurocentric,' as well as to legacies of colonialism. In my early career, I benefited from my family's position in Hong Kong as British rule was winding down. There is more to the Vickers backstory: Irish Catholics here, an Indian ancestor there, working-class Liverpool grandparents, a Jewish great-grandfather, not to mention years spent in China as a lowly educational functionary. I now live in Japan with my Japanese wife and children, working for a Japanese university, where my foreignness entails a complex mix of marginalisation and advantage. But privilege there certainly has been.

What, though, is the precise significance of a scholar's personal 'location' for any claims to serious attention from their peers? Silova et al are right to stress that biography, autobiography and 'self-ethnography' are potentially valuable resources for Comparative Education. It is worth recalling that many of the field's early leaders, such as Nicholas Hans, were refugees or exiles from notably repressive regimes. However, there is an important line to be drawn between biography (or autobiography) as a research tool or resource, and the biographical statement as a certificate of victimhood, granting its holders a privileged voice in particular conversations. It is hard to read the racialised language in the CER special issue without wondering under what circumstances the contributors would consider a 'white' European scholar entitled to debate 'coloniality'.[3] Their representation of the significance of positionality, invoking race, religion and geography, implies the legitimacy of judging scholarship not so much on the basis of what is argued as of who is doing the arguing. The notion that racial, geographical or civilisational labels neatly divide humanity between the 'subaltern' and 'metropolitan,' and that 'subalternity' in itself confers a kind of moral authority, are deeply problematic. I return to this issue, and its implications for Comparative Education as a field, in my concluding section.

Before that, however, it is important to consider the empirical basis for the assumptions underpinning the 'moves' outlined above. If 'Western' modernity is uniquely associated with 'coloniality,' encompassing 'epistemic violence' against uniformly victimised 'non-Westerners', then assertions of non-Western 'positionality' may appear more defensible. But do these claims stand up to historical scrutiny? Is it plausible to entertain a neat division of the world between victims and perpetrators of 'colonialism' or 'epistemic violence'?

Ethnocentrism, coloniality and 'Western' modernity

The strongest charge levelled by the CER contributors concerns the 'Eurocentrism' of mainstream Anglophone academia. 'Eurocentrism' has undeniably been pervasive not just in the Comparative Education field, but across academia more generally. Typically underpinning this is a conviction of Western exceptionalism – the belief that features typically ascribed to 'Western modernity' by its cheerleaders: democracy, capitalism, the valuing of individual liberty, the rule of law, notions of 'human rights' and of 'progress' itself, are gifts from the West to the world. It is this raft of assumptions that the historical anthropologist Jack Goody has labelled *The Theft of History* (2006).

Goody's point is that none of these concepts is in fact the unique product of post-Renaissance Europe; they have emerged at different times in various guises in multiple societies. Moreover, the forms they took in Europe (and later America) often owed much to cross-cultural influence. For example, the crucial Arabic influence on humanist thought in medieval and early Renaissance Europe is still widely overlooked (as Takayama et al note in their volume introduction). It was in the Muslim-ruled regions of the former Roman Empire that the secular-humanist learning of classical Greece was preserved, elaborated and mingled with influences from India, Central Asia and elsewhere, before finding its way back to Christian Europe. Much later, the vision of a rational, ordered, secular Chinese empire, run on ostensibly meritocratic lines by officials recruited through competitive written examinations, inspired luminaries of the European Enlightenment, including Leibniz and Voltaire.

How deep-rooted, then, is ethnocentrism in European culture, and to what extent is this a peculiarly Western trait? Eurocentrism certainly pervaded the Cold War West, and received a further boost from the 'End of History' triumphalism of the 1990s. But contributors to the CER special issue perceive 'six centuries of Western epistemic violence' (e.g. Stein 2017, S42, S31),[4] implying that Eurocentrism is intrinsically bound up with a peculiarly violent and arrogant spirit that has gripped the West since the age of Columbus, if not before.

Like much else about their arguments, this view perhaps reflects an 'America-centric' preoccupation with the Western hemisphere. The decimation of native peoples across the Americas following the European conquest certainly involved grotesque and extreme violence, whose after-effects are still with us. But did this usher in an era in which Western violence, 'epistemic' and actual, was both globally dominant and allied to a uniquely virulent brand of ethnocentrism?

Viewing history from the eastern end of Eurasia, this seems highly doubtful. Contemporary Chinese historians typically date their country's 'Century of Humiliation' from the Opium Wars of the 1840s. Leaving aside the debate over the precise role of Western aggression in Qing China's decline (see Cohen 1984), this narrative reflects the huge shock that defeat by the British delivered to elite *amour propre*. As Wang Zheng observes (2012), this was magnified by a supremely ethnocentric conceit: the belief in the normative status of Chinese civilisation, and its moral and material superiority over 'barbarian' societies. That conviction was understandable: half a century before the Opium Wars, when the first official British Embassy was haughtily rebuffed by the Emperor Qianlong, China accounted for around a third of global GDP (Stuenkel 2016, 67).

When, then, did Eurocentrism become prevalent or pervasive? Shortly before the British humiliation of China, in India Macaulay penned his notorious 'Minute on Indian Education' of 1835, recommending the prioritising of English-medium instruction since 'a single shelf of a good European library' was worth 'the whole native literature of India and Arabia'.[5] Exhibit A, perhaps, in any rogues' gallery of Western 'epistemic' arrogance. However, such Eurocentric condescension was less prevalent a century earlier, when European visitors were inclined to be overawed by the splendour and sophistication of the Mughal Empire at its height (Osterhammel 2018). Rather, it evolved along with the changing nature and extent of British involvement in Indian society. For example, the attitudes to Indian culture of the late eighteenth-century judge and orientalist scholar, William Jones, were immeasurably more complex, nuanced and respectful than those of Macaulay

(Mukherjee 1968). Osterhammel dates 'the rise of Eurocentrism' to the early nineteenth century (2018). The eighteenth century was 'an age of balance between little Europe and big Asia'; it was only in the nineteenth century, he writes, that 'we enter a different world: a dichotomous world of … refinement versus primitivism' (482), or of science versus superstition.

If the global dominance of triumphalist Eurocentrism is rather less than six centuries old, what of its 'epistemic' implications and uniqueness? I shall have more to say about both in the following section, but here it is pertinent to make two points: one concerning Eurocentrism's epistemic content; and the other its 'colonial' reach.

Ethnocentrism can take multiple forms. Postcolonial writers associate 'Eurocentrism' with celebration of the manifold and unique contributions of Western science and civilis-ation to the modern world. But this 'imperialist' or 'paternalist' Eurocentrism has its mirror-image in an 'anti-paternalist' variant, whereby 'Eastern societies are granted conditional agency and are unable to auto-generate or self-develop' (Hobson 2012, 6, cited in Stuenkel 2016, 52). 'Anti-paternalist' West-centrism, like its 'paternalist' counterpart, emphasises the centrality of Western agency, but views it as overwhelmingly malevolent.

That mindset, in turn, fuels efforts to 'demonize an idea by erroneously calling it Western' (Stuenkel 2016, 52), something most of the CER contributors do with respect to 'colonialism', 'neoliberalism' and 'capitalism' (e.g. Stein S27) – though, significantly, not socialism.[6] Other postcolonial writers extend this treatment to notions such as democ-racy, science and human rights, though the CER group seem ambivalent on this score. While imputing Western origins to concepts they evaluate negatively (especially colonial-ism), they implicitly endorse values such as academic freedom, while seeing them as tainted or distorted by Western power. However, claims of 'epistemic violence' indicate a logic of 'anti-paternalist Eurocentrism,' since they involve asserting the imposition by the West of constraints on the capacity of non-Westerners to think independently or critically.[7]

The special issue article on global university rankings (GURs) exemplifies such ascription of Western origins to disparaged ideas or practices, and of Western agency to their disse-mination. Shahjahan et al rightly point up how 'pressures to conform to a largely arbitrary and Anglocentric set of performance indicators' have warped higher education (S55), but ignore the agency of non-Western elites (and consumers) in promoting such indicators (see below). Claiming that most arguments for reform of GURs 'ask only for a change of game rules rather than for game change' (S64), they disregard critiques of metrics by numerous Western scholars from Andreski (1972) to Wolf (2002), Sandel (2012) and Muller (2018).[8] Having portrayed the fetish for metrics as peculiarly 'Western,' they relate it to the dominance in 'the academy' of an 'onto-epistemic grammar' that 'intellec-tualise[s] existence [and] prioritise[s] logical coherence and argumentation' (S59).

If a dysfunctional Western episteme is to blame, it follows (logically) that non-Western cultures may offer healthier alternative visions. We are therefore offered insights from the Dagara people of northern Ghana, who give prominence to 'elders' and 'ancestral knowl-edge,' believe that 'the material is just the spiritual taking on form' (S57),[9] and view with scepticism the 'restlessness' of Westerners and their naïve faith in 'progress' (S62). The Dagara, we are told, may thus 'be concerned' about our capacity to 'promote deep exis-tential learning and sustained collective well-being' (S65). However, the contrast between Dagara ethics and those underlying GURs does not demonstrate that Western

culture *in toto* is inherently or uniformly instrumentalist and antipathetic to sustainability. Observations concerning the distortions of metrics and the unsustainability of a competitive, individualist ethos are commonly made by Western educational researchers and organisations such as UNESCO (Morris 2016; MGIEP 2017). Invoking indigenous African wisdom in this context serves primarily to posit a spurious and essentialising contrast between sagacious, holistic non-Western traditions and intrinsically dysfunctional 'Western modernity.'

The underlying implication is that 'Westerners' and 'non-Westerners' inhabit radically divergent epistemic universes to begin with – or at least did so in some idyllic age before the non-West was blighted by Western colonialism and 'epistemic violence'. But do (or did) they? Rejecting claims of 'some radical dissonance between "Western" and "Eastern" (or generally non-Western) thinking,' the Indian scholar Amartya Sen writes that 'there are many differences in reasoning within the West, and within the East, but it would be altogether fanciful to think of a united West confronting "quintessentially eastern" priorities.' Instead, he argues, 'similar – or closely linked – ideas of justice, fairness, responsibility, duty, goodness and rightness have been pursued in many different parts of the world' (2010, xiv). This, however, is precisely the kind of dichotomy presented by the discussion in the CER special issue of 'coloniality' as a quintessentially Western quality. Here the contributors fall into the 'trap' that Goody identifies when he remarks that 'a hidden ethnocentric risk is to be eurocentric about ethnocentricity' (2006, 5).

A characteristic shared by this 'anti-paternalist Eurocentrism' with the 'paternalist' variety is to exaggerate, for better or (in this case) worse, the impact of Western influence. But in Asia, even during the height of Western dominance in the 'long nineteenth century', 'the real story,' according to the historian John Darwin, 'is one of Asian persistence, and not of Asian defeat' (2008, 496; cited by Stuenkel 2016, 55). Most notably, China not only maintained its statehood in the face of the Western onslaught, but emerged from the 'century of humiliation' with its imperial borders largely intact. Even the British Raj, despite its enormous and enduring influence on the political geography, governance and societies of modern South Asia, operated largely through forms of indirect rule, involving manipulation rather than obliteration of indigenous culture.

But in contemporary India, China and other parts of Asia, it has been convenient for elites to invoke the dichotomy of Western colonialism and indigenous victimhood, and attribute various ills to continuing Western 'hegemonism.' It also suits autocrats to dismiss notions such as 'democracy,' 'human rights' and 'civil liberties' as alien Western ideas wholly or partially incompatible with 'Asian values' – the sort of argument Sen dubs the 'Lee thesis' (after Singapore's former leader, Lee Kuan-yew) (Sen 1999). The same tactic helps disguise or distract from homegrown forms of ethnocentrism, often allied to projects of internal colonialism that feed off, parallel and, in many cases, predate Western legacies. Highlighting and critiquing these forms of non-Western 'coloniality' is particularly urgent at a time when China's government, for example, is blaming its problems in Hong Kong on a mixture of past indoctrination and present interference by 'Western colonialists' – all the while imposing an ever more stringent form of neocolonial domination on restive populations from Xinjiang to the shores of the South China Sea.

Civilising missions and 'epistemic violence' – Western and non-Western

The CER contributors argue that Western cultural or intellectual influence on the 'non-West', since it often takes place in a context of power imbalance, should be construed as 'epistemic violence.' But there are a number of problems with this view. First, it blurs the important distinction between actual violence and the so-called 'epistemic' variety (see discussion of China below). This example of 'concept creep' ironically echoes the virulent identity politics of the contemporary USA (Lukianoff and Haidt 2018). There, conflating speech acts that some might construe as insulting, demeaning or even mildly objectionable with acts of 'violence' has fed a culture of victimhood and 'safetyism' that threatens open academic debate. In deploying the term 'epistemic violence' with such enthusiasm, the contributors thus evince a mindset peculiarly prevalent at the core of the contemporary 'West,' in the USA.

A second problem relates to how or where to draw the line between the exchange of ideas and the deployment of culture as a tool of political dominance. Even when cultural influence is clearly allied to the pursuit of political or economic control, as it frequently has been, does this necessarily imply loss of agency on the part of those borrowing or adapting 'foreign' ideas? For example, are anti-colonial activists invoking 'Western' discourses of democracy or liberty mere dupes of Eurocentric 'epistemic violence,' or witnesses to the cross-cultural appeal of such ideas? Indeed, is not the reality of that appeal – for example, in societies such as Hong Kong and Taiwan today – a reflection of the fact that such ideas are not intrinsically or uniquely 'Western' at all?

It is relevant here to distinguish between active 'civilising missions,' often allied to colonising projects, and other forms of cross-cultural interaction. Pursuit of a 'civilising mission' does not necessarily involve actual 'violence'; indeed, the whole point of Gramsci's concept of hegemony is that it underpins a subtle form of control that renders resort to violent force unnecessary. It is nonetheless certainly the case that educational or propaganda campaigns associated with 'civilising missions' have often been deployed alongside more violent means of enforcing colonial control. And the missionaries of 'advanced civilisation' are invariably animated by assumptions of superiority over a relatively primitive or barbaric 'other.' The CER contributors are right to note that such attitudes have been widely prevalent in the modern 'West,' and that much work in the field of Comparative Education reflects this (though far from all of it).

But neither colonialism nor the attitudes associated with it constitute a peculiarly 'Western', 'Northern' or 'Anglophone' pathology. Claims to the contrary rely on a vague, but nonetheless oddly selective, definition of coloniality. The Cold War, with its rival blocs pursuing their own brands of modernisation theory, could be seen as a high watermark of Eurocentric 'epistemic' dominance. However, as we have seen, the Soviet bloc is essentially spared the charge of coloniality in the CER special issue (Silova et al, S77). It is odd that scholars so invested in the notion of 'epistemic violence' should ignore or downplay the Soviet regime's wholesale reform of languages and scripts across Central Asia, the attendant purging of historical narratives and literary canons, suppression of religious texts, and assertion of Russian linguistic supremacy (Slezkine 2000). The educational achievements of Communist states were impressive, but education and cultural policy was allied to a divide-and-rule nationalities policy, and the ultimate imperative of ensuring ideological conformity and political control. Soviet thinking on 'the nationalities question'

was also profoundly influenced by colonial ideas regarding the governance of 'backward' peoples (Slezkine 2000; Hirsch 2005). Elsewhere too, notably in China, Communist regimes inherited large, multi-ethnic states, and in governing them proceeded to borrow and adapt elements of Soviet practice (Harrell 1996; Vickers 2015).

Does such borrowing mean that Communist or other non-Western 'civilising missions' should be seen as derivative from a Western template? Should they, as some have argued, be seen as 'secondary civilising missions' (Osterhammel 2006a), resulting from a process of 'socialisation' whereby non-Western states adopted Western ideas and practices, including the *mission civilisatrice*, as part of efforts to conform to the norms of a Western-dominated global order (Suzuki 2005)?[10] Are manifestations of non-Western 'coloniality,' then, properly interpreted as coerced responses to the challenge of Western hegemony – as reactive instances of 'epistemic violence' motivated by self-defense? If this were the case, then downplaying, if not denying, Soviet, Chinese, Japanese and other non-Western forms of colonialism might be justified.

But the historical evidence suggests otherwise. Writing on 'education and empire in southwest China' during the eighteenth century, Rowe observes that mid-Qing 'Chinese assumptions of a civilizing mission' differed little 'from those of Europeans in, for example, nineteenth-century Africa.' He concludes that 'in this as in other respects, the Chinese got there first' (1994, 420). When it came to the theory and practice of colonialism, the Chinese actually stood in no need of what Hevia terms 'English lessons' (2003). Indeed, over the past twenty years a whole school of historical scholarship, the 'New Qing History,' has argued that China's last imperial dynasty should be seen as a major player in a Eurasia-wide movement of imperial expansion, rather than simply as a victim of Western imperialism (as it became in the nineteenth century). Osterhammel appears to have abandoned the concept of the 'secondary civilising mission' with respect to Russia and China (2006b), following his reading of Perdue's magisterial study of the Qing conquest of Central Asia, *China Marches West* (2005) (see Vickers 2015). And just as European colonialism was associated with both condescending disparagement and romanticisation of 'primitive' indigenes, Teng (2005) shows very much the same tropes at work in 'Qing colonial travel writing' on Taiwan. Such research has prompted comparative historians increasingly to view colonialism and imperialism as global, rather than uniquely Western, phenomena (see Nikolaidis, Sebe, and Maas 2015).

Indeed, forms of colonialism and attendant 'civilising missions' are evident almost wherever one looks in 'pre-modern' Asia. Analysing the centuries-long attempts to extend ethnic Viet, Burman or Thai (not to mention Chinese) dominance over the 'relatively autonomous, self-governing communities' of Southeast Asia's upland territories, Scott writes that 'internal colonialism, broadly understood, aptly describes this process' (2009, 12). This phenomenon preceded and survived the period of Western colonial rule across much of this region, which in Burma and Indochina was largely parasitic upon the 'colonialist' projects of preceding regimes, even as it radically intensified them. Following independence from Western rule, post-independence elites in turn redeployed techniques honed by their former colonial masters as they sought to control ethnically diverse border or upland regions. As Goscha observes, it is 'often the case in the imperial chapters of world history' that 'the colonized borrow heavily from their former colonizers' (2017, 254) – whatever the ethnicity or 'location' of the latter (Chinese, European, Soviet, etc.).

This was eminently the case in Vietnam, which experienced a short-lived occupation by Ming China in the early 15th century (1407–28). Following that episode, leaders of the Dai Viet state adopted both military technology and 'statecraft' from China, 'willingly entering a China-centered East Asian civilizational world that placed Confucian-minded states … in a superior cultural position vis-à-vis their "uncivilized" and "barbarian" neighbours' (455). This gave them 'a powerful ideology to justify a *mission civilisatrice* outside their current borders' (455). The Viet continued to invoke this ideology as they encroached on territories to the south and west in subsequent centuries. In the early nineteenth century, the powerful emperor Minh Mang 'required the Cham and Cambodians to dress like the Vietnamese, eat like the Vietnamese, and learn Vietnamese' (460). Following the arrival of the French later that century, 'the "colonizers" were not always one monolithic bloc, racially or economically' – there were times when French and Vietnamese settlers 'joined forces' (468). As French rule crumbled, Viet Communist elites learnt from their Soviet and Chinese comrades how to adapt socialism to the re-legitimation of 'pre-existing multi-ethnic empires' (473). In Vietnam today, not France but China is portrayed as the first and greatest of Vietnam's 'colonialist' oppressors, as state-mandated textbooks and museums narrate 'an ancient tradition of resistance reaching back 2,000 years' (485; see also Salomon and Ket 2009).

And what of Japan, which the CER contributors exclude from their account of 'coloniality'? There is an extensive literature on Japan's colonial civilising mission in early twentieth-century East Asia (see Takeshi and Hashimoto 2007). Taiwan became from 1895 the first modern Japanese colony (leaving aside the complex case of Okinawa), and a model for later colonising projects in Korea, China and Southeast Asia. Japanese colonialism went through several phases, with a period of relative tolerance of 'native' cultural distinctiveness during the 1920s (in both Taiwan and Korea) succeeded in the 1930s by an uncompromising programme of assimilation or *douka* (同化) (Chen 2019, p. 5; see also Ching 2001). The education system was thoroughly 'Japanised,' and use in schools of Taiwanese or Korean languages penalised. As Japan's invasion of China ramped up in the late 1930s, so too did the campaign of thought control. 'Recalcitrant Koreans,' writes Cumings, 'had "impure" ideas winnowed out of their heads by totalitarian methods of interrogation until they were ready to confess their political sins in writing and join groups for those who had "reformed their thoughts"' (1997, 177).

It may be objected that all this is irrelevant to a discussion of 'coloniality' post-World War II, when a defeated Japan was itself transformed into an American client state. But ethnocentrism remains powerfully implicated in the consciousness today of Japan's 'unique' victimhood and denial of its violent imperialist past (Hashimoto 2015). This has profound implications both for contemporary educational practice and scholarly research. The school curriculum still purveys a vision of Japaneseness that ignores or marginalises 'minorities,' notably the descendants of colonised peoples (Koreans and Chinese) (Tsuneyoshi 2018). Meanwhile, those who write critically about Japan's history of colonialism and militarism, particularly if they touch on issues such as the 'comfort women' system of wartime sexual slavery or the Nanjing Massacre, risk marginalisation or outright harassment from right-wing ideologues (on the 'comfort women' issue, see Mamiya 2015).

However, such risks are relatively trivial compared to those facing opponents of homegrown 'coloniality,' or just plain oppression and discrimination, elsewhere in Asia. In India, advocates of minority rights confront an ascendant *Hindutva* ideology that asserts (often

violently) Hindu superiority while portraying other cultures or religions as 'alien' legacies. Little wonder that Amartya Sen bemoans the relationship between anti-Western nativism and attacks on civil and political rights such as academic freedom: his effort to re-establish Nalanda University, inspired by the ancient and cosmopolitan Buddhist tradition of higher learning, has been sabotaged by Hindu nationalist hostility (Dutt 2019). But for an especially stark illustration of the inaccuracy and danger of equating 'Western modernity' with 'coloniality', we can look further east – to China.

Education, power and violence – the case of China

China's status as a victim of Western colonialism has always been a central plank of the Chinese Communist Party's legitimating narrative, and with considerable historical justification. But as we have seen, locating China on one side of a simplistic victim-perpetrator dichotomy with respect to colonialism is unsustainable. So long as the country remained grindingly poor, questioning Chinese claims to historical victimhood may have seemed pointless, even tasteless. But the spectacle of a more prosperous, socially complex and assertive twenty-first-century China challenges us to reassess stereotypical narratives of Chinese victimhood. Perhaps this helps to explain why so much of the scholarship highlighting China's own role as a colonial power (some of it referenced above) has emerged only within the past two or three decades.

What might be termed 'epistemic' control of political life and public discourse, often enforced through violence, is a hallmark of Communist regimes everywhere. This is eminently the case in China today, with the most egregious oppression practiced against the indigenous populations of the far West: Tibetan and Uighur. In Xinjiang, draconian repression of expressions of Muslim belief and use of the Uighur language has been enforced in part through sophisticated digital surveillance techniques. Upwards of one million ethnic Uighurs have been arbitrarily detained in 're-education' camps, where compulsory instruction in Mandarin is a key component of the penal regime (Economist 2018; Tiezzi 2019). 'Epistemic violence' in contemporary China is more than just a metaphor.

The elaboration of the Chinese state's apparatus of control, extending to education, is apparent well beyond Xinjiang. Demonisation of 'the West' is central to the official strategy. Since 2015, universities have been instructed to restrict teaching and discussion of 'Western thought,' with ideological uniformity more strictly enforced through classroom surveillance and use of student-informers (as well as through the longstanding compulsory classes in 'Politics' or Marxist theory). Jokes amongst Chinese academics that 'Western thought' must encompass the ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin have worn thin, especially since a clampdown began in 2018 on student-organized Marxism societies at elite universities, for heresies such as advocating workers' rights (Yang 2019). Meanwhile, a sweeping revision of the school curriculum has witnessed recentralization of control over textbooks for politically sensitive subjects such as Chinese language, history, 'morality' and civics (Vickers 2019).

Identifying a colonialist 'West' as the supreme target of critical scholarship is thus to occupy an ideological 'location' highly congenial to China's authoritarian regime. Confronting mainland dissidents or Hongkongese protestors demanding democracy or civil liberties, it suits Beijing to portray them as dupes or stooges of 'Western imperialism.'[11] Consciousness of this danger led the editor of a volume on the formation of social

science disciplines in China to write that 'contemporary calls for the nationalization of the social sciences ... seem unduly defensive and retrogressive' (Dirlik 2012, 30). While acknowledging 'the cultural legacies of Eurocentrism,' Dirlik argues that 'efforts to make the social sciences Chinese make sense only if they are accompanied by simultaneous efforts at their globalization' (31). The Taiwan-based Hongkongese anthropologist Allen Chun goes further, dismissing 'indigenous discourse' as 'predicated on the misleading illusion that theory is culturally Western'. 'The call to indigenize social theory is ... an oxymoron,' he writes, 'because social science as we know it today is itself an abstraction rooted in concrete and local social experience' (2012, 277). And the Taiwanese scholar Kuang-Hsing Chen, whose critique in *Asia as Method* (2010) of 'the Northern-centred global economy of knowledge' is praised by Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell (2017, S15), emphasises that analysis of 'the deimperialisation question' should extend to 'Japanese colonial violence' and 'the oppressive practices of the Chinese empire' (197) – an aspect of his argument that the CER contributors do not cite.[12]

Chinese, Taiwanese and Hongkongese scholars thus debate the history and role of the social sciences with an awareness that arguments for the unique malevolence of 'Western modernity' are grist to the Communist Party's mill. China's rulers enthusiastically subscribe to a worldview premised on the division of humanity into discrete and incommensurable 'civilisations,' since this enables inconvenient liberal values more easily to be portrayed as 'alien,' and advocacy of them ascribed to illegitimate Western interference. The same worldview bolsters spurious claims for the essential ethical superiority of 'Chinese' over 'Western' culture, as manifested in recent official sloganeering over Chinese 'Ecological Civilization' (Hansen, Li, and Svarverud 2018).

Bizarrely, in view of its record in Xinjiang, Tibet and elsewhere, the Chinese regime's assertion of ethical superiority has extended to the practice of intercultural tolerance. In May 2019, a 'Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations' was convened in Beijing, with President Xi Jinping calling in his opening address for 'discarding arrogance and prejudice, deepening the understanding of differences in civilizations, and advancing inter-civilizational exchanges and dialogue' (quoted in Tiezzi 2019). In remarks clearly aimed at America, he declared that 'it is foolish to believe that one's race or civilization are superior to others,' and 'disastrous' to seek to 'willfully reshape or even replace other civilizations.' The fact that China's leadership feels able plausibly to position itself as a champion of tolerance in the international arena is largely attributable to the still widely prevalent belief that racism and cultural prejudice are distinctively 'Western' pathologies.

As for capitalism – that other pathology on which much critical scholarship has trained its guns – our contemporary, if arguably crumbling, global neoliberal consensus, which the CER contributors ascribe to the malign operations of 'Western modernity,' straddles any putative East–West (or North–South) divide.[13] Beijing has been at the forefront of moves to deploy market-based methods in the administration of public services, including education, if always with the hard backstop of ultimate Party control (Vickers and Zeng 2017, Chapter 9). The 'tyranny of metrics' (Muller 2018) that has intensified with the global spread of neoliberal 'New Public Management' is a pale imitation of Chinese practice. Soviet precedents have had a lasting influence in this respect, but so too has imperial China's legacy of centuries of bureaucratic governance.

Far from slavishly following 'Western' practice in the 'ranking' of educational performance, Chinese officials have played a pioneering role. In their 'decolonial reading of

university rankings,' Shahjahan et al neglect to mention that the earliest university league table, the *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (AWRU), was established in 2003 by Shanghai Jiaotong University (Luxbacher 2013; Hazelkorn 2016, 272). And Chinese participation in the OECD's PISA tests followed intense courting from PISA officials desperate to involve the world's largest education system in their measuring enterprise and willing to bend the rules to ensure it. The outcome was test results for Shanghai of dubious validity, and a clear propaganda victory for China's Communist regime (see Vickers and Zeng 2017, 322, 328–343). In this scenario, determining whether the 'hegemonic' boot fits a 'Chinese' or 'Western' foot is, to say the least, a complex exercise.

Indeed, a good case could be made for seeing higher education marketisation, and the associated league tables, less as cunning ploys for extending Anglo-Saxon global hegemony than as symptoms of a naïve faith in market forces that renders Western universities acutely vulnerable to external subversion and dependence on overseas student flows. League tables are avidly consulted by the Chinese students whose fees are vital to the finances of many universities, and threats from Beijing to blacklist institutions or countries strike terror in the hearts of finance directors (Smyth and Hancock 2018). While the extent of Beijing's direct influence is unclear, Chinese students overseas have often sought to police discussion of China on foreign campuses (see He 2015). Meanwhile, as state funding for higher education has been slashed in many countries, more institutions have established Confucius Institutes, offering China-related courses designed and taught by teachers dispatched from China. The generous but short-term nature of the funding gives Chinese stakeholders considerable leverage. And pressure can be less subtle, too, as in the case of the scholar Anne-Marie Brady, subjected to an insidious campaign of intimidation following publication of her analysis of Chinese influence in her native New Zealand (Roy 2019).

None of this justifies the substitution of demonisation of 'the West' with an equally unbalanced demonisation of 'China'. The point is to underline the inaccuracy of portraying the drive to subordinate or marginalise other cultures or communities as a peculiarly Western compulsion. The same applies to the complicity of education and educational scholarship in such endeavours. Across much of Asia today, it is Chinese rather than American power that presents the clearest neo-colonial threat to diversity and autonomy in the educational field and beyond.[14] No comparative analysis of 'coloniality' (or 'hegemony') can ignore this.

Conclusion

The 'Contesting Coloniality' special issue of CER makes an important contribution to furthering debate, by making visible key moves in the decolonial argument so that these can be subjected to the kind of critical commentary attempted here. This importance is heightened by the fact that these moves reflect a growing fashion in CIE scholarship, especially in discussions of colonialism or hegemony, for assertion of universal or highly generalised theoretical claims with insufficient regard for comparative history. It is therefore to be hoped that the critique of Comparative Education offered in the original CER special issue, taken together with the reservations I outline here, will point to fruitful new lines of inquiry, while reaffirming the healthy complexity of conversations within our field.

The central flaw in the argument advanced by the CER authors stems from an apparent lack of awareness of contemporary scholarship on the comparative history of imperialism and colonialism. Criticism of the Eurocentric assumptions that inform much mainstream social science is certainly warranted, as is critique of the excessive influence exerted by institutions such as key journals based in North America or Europe. However, when critical arguments rely on selective and historically flimsy claims for the uniquely colonial quality of modern Western culture, the risks are twofold: firstly, and fundamentally, actually to sustain or reinforce Eurocentrism by deflecting the critical gaze from non-Western societies and the patterns of oppression ('colonial' or otherwise) therein; and secondly, by the same token to weaken or discredit the case for a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to the comparative analysis of education.

The empirical and theoretical flaws of this approach are intertwined with the problematic language in which its arguments are typically couched. Historical and anthropological scholarship on East Asia and other regions amply demonstrates that colonialist or neo-colonialist attitudes and strategies of domination are not and have never been a Western monopoly. But decolonial theory posits the more or less uniform victimhood of non-Western 'others,' deriving claims for the moral superiority of 'authentically' indigenous perspectives. Debating the validity of such claims is complicated by an emphasis on 'positionality.' Readers are exhorted to judge an argument less by standards of evidence or logic (often portrayed as camouflaging a Western 'will to power') than on the basis of the writer's self-identification or 'positioning.' The language of 'epistemic violence,' 'secure spaces,' 'epistemological diffidence,' 'border thinking' and 'location' suggests an image of the critical scholar as revolutionary guerrilla, valiantly sniping at Western hegemony from his or her marginal redoubt. In so far as this reflects a desire for a more just, tolerant and sustainable society – one that values diversity as a resource for mutual learning – it is admirable. However, if we seek to combat oppression, in the educational sphere or beyond, it is incumbent on us to pick our enemies, and our language, carefully. Aiming a blunderbuss at the supposedly illegitimate or self-serving 'universalism' of 'modern Western social science,' while ignoring how calls for indigenisation and 'authenticity' are used to legitimate highly oppressive regimes across Asia and elsewhere, is to risk undermining those universal social and political values (freedom of expression, civil liberties, rule of law) upon which critical scholars themselves rely.

An embrace of 'opacity' or 'epistemological diffidence,' advocated by several of the CER contributors, threatens to be similarly self-defeating. While they share an admiration for the Argentine theorist of 'decoloniality,' Walter Mignolo, the work of his brilliant compatriot, the writer, poet and essayist Jorge Luis Borges, is far worthier of attention. Borges' famous fondness for 'labyrinths' and the paradoxical was combined with a sharp eye for gratuitous obfuscation and circumlocution (see, for example, his story *The Aleph*, in Borges 1998, 274–286). Offering his own critique of the fashion for opaque jargon in mainstream social science, the émigré Polish sociologist Stanislav Andreski wrote acerbically that 'one of the pleasures obtainable through recourse to confusion and absurdity is to be able to feel, and publicly to claim, that one knows when in reality one does not' (1974, 95). 'Opacity' in imaginative literature may intrigue or entertain, but in interpreting and explaining unfamiliar societies, cultures and

education systems, comparativists especially ought to write in clear, accessible language. And while all social scientists can understand the lure of the sweeping generalisation, we should generalise with extreme caution, especially when categorising large swathes of humanity.

Borges' earliest collection of stories is entitled *A Universal History of Iniquity*. This appeared in 1935, when there were already rumblings in both East and West of the conflict that would soon engulf Eurasia. Implied in his title was a truth painfully obvious to many contemporaries: that iniquity is indeed universal. The conflicts of the mid-twentieth century starkly illuminated another truth: that iniquity in the modern world, especially (though not only) that associated with totalitarian societies, often consists in essentialising and de-humanising 'the other'. Hannah Arendt – a thoroughly Eurocentric thinker, but one who addressed, in 'totalitarianism,' a theme with global ramifications – wrote of how, through 'the murder of the moral person in man,' totalitarian systems transform their citizens into 'living corpses' capable of any outrage (2017, 591). But ironically, in the very act of attacking essentialism as applied to 'non-Western' cultures, the CER contributors propagate an essentialised view of 'the West' itself. Iniquity in the form of coloniality is in their account attributed solely to Western modernity. This view is both inaccurate and dangerous.

The irony in this approach extends to the attribution of agency. Claims to champion the dignity of subaltern, 'non-Western' actors are in fact undermined by assertions of their uniform victimhood. This reproduces the very Eurocentrism that 'decolonial' scholars quite rightly seek to challenge. In fact, privilege and victimhood have many dimensions, by no means all traceable to the 'phenomenon of colossal vagueness' that is colonialism (Osterhammel 2005, 4). One group or individual can plausibly be portrayed as victim, or perpetrator, or both, depending on context and perspective. Were post-war German civilian refugees from Eastern Europe, or Japanese civilians fleeing Manchuria, victims or perpetrators? Or today, is a privately-educated, English-speaking, upper-caste South Asian scholar more accurately to be seen as privileged or under-privileged, in terms of access to power ('epistemic' or otherwise) within South Asia or the global academy? 'Location' or identity are not reducible to neat labels or discrete categories. As the Anglo-Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah emphasises, according dignity and agency involves recognising that our identities are not just socially given, but also actively chosen. Culture is 'a process you join, in living a life with others,' and 'the values that European humanists like to espouse belong as much to an African or an Asian who takes them up with enthusiasm as to a European' (2018, 211). The same applies with respect to value systems we have reason to regard as iniquitous, such as those associated with colonialism or neoliberalism.

What, then, are we to make of the traction that totalising anti-Westernism appears to be gaining within the CIE field? On one level, this may tell us more about the state of campus politics, and politics in general, across contemporary America and the broader 'Anglosphere', than about the wider world. The worldview that the CER contributors espouse, even as they strain at the shackles of Western epistemology, is redolent of America's peculiarly racialised identity politics. And notwithstanding claims to marginal positionality, the increasingly widespread currency of such arguments in North American and Anglophone CIE circles reflects their status as an emergent orthodoxy that in key respects mirrors the very ethnocentrism it rejects.

Although the ideas in the CER special issue are presented as challenging both the scholarly mainstream and a wider neoliberal or neocolonial establishment, the seriousness of this challenge is doubtful. Exhortations to embrace 'opacity' or to 'think otherwise' in the name of 'contesting coloniality' imply no coherent programme, and suggest an overwhelmingly negative agenda. Meanwhile, far from risking ostracism, the contributors can expect warm endorsement of their views from regulars at the major international conferences. For many in the CIE community in North America and beyond, sweeping critiques of Western 'hegemony', 'coloniality' and so forth hold a strong appeal; it is those seeking to question the balance or accuracy of such theorising who risk opprobrium. As Merquior wrote of Foucault, Derrida and their postmodernist or 'deconstructivist' followers, their 'skepsis', 'highly placed in the core institutions of the culture it so strives to undermine,' has come to constitute an 'official marginality' (1991, 160).

The potential – and actual – consequences of this are troubling. Takayama et al call for the WCCES in particular to embrace the agenda of 'contesting coloniality,' but one conclusion to be drawn from recent events is that this is already happening, with damaging consequences for civility within the Comparative Education field, and for the wider credibility of its scholarly output.[15] Reducing scholarship to the projection of the scholar's own positionality can only lead to fragmentation and irrelevance. To quote Merquior again (paraphrasing Hilary Putnam), 'to demote rationality, in a relativist way, to a mere concoction of a given historical culture is as reductionist as the logical positivist's reduction of reason to scientific calculus' (160). What he calls the 'Elixir of Pure Negation' (159) is an intoxicating brew, but it is unlikely to inspire coherent or constructive contributions to addressing the pressing problems of our age: climate change, poverty, inequality and the ethical crisis that underpins them all.

Indeed, it is very likely to do the opposite. The neoliberal cadres of the OECD or World Bank, along with nationalist autocrats from Beijing to Budapest, will be more than happy for 'critical scholars' to fulminate against a vaguely-defined 'West' while embracing 'epistemological diffidence' (Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017, S18). As one critic of 'postmodernism' has put it, the promotion of 'epistemological pluralism,' combined with rejection of any 'settled external viewpoint,' means that, 'so far as real-life ongoing politics is concerned,' postmodernists, along with de-constructivists, decolonialists and their ilk, tend to be 'passively conservative in effect' (Butler 2002, 61). If 'decoloniality' promotes a balkanisation of the Comparative Education field into identity-based cliques that prize 'opacity,' the risk is that in practice this will only serve to buttress the *status quo*.

What is urgently needed instead is a rebalancing of the field towards an engagement with the comparative history of colonialism and imperialism.[16] Challenging unreflective Eurocentrism is important, not least in helping to jolt self-styled liberal progressives out of any lingering, ill-founded complacency. But when it involves ahistorical, anti-Western essentialism, decolonial discourse actually threatens the respect for our common humanity necessary to effective scholarly collaboration across cultural boundaries. In the face of the manifold crises today confronting our educational institutions, societies, and the very planet upon which they subsist, we need constantly to remind ourselves that the capacity for evil, or just plain stupidity, is a quality that unites us all, and resolve to confront it together.

Notes

1. This open letter is an excoriating critique of the PISA process signed by no fewer than 83 educationalists, most of them Western academics.
2. Although, if this were an iron law, we might expect England and the USA to top the OECD's PISA rankings.
3. Nor is this a purely hypothetical matter: in 2018, a response to my critical review of a volume on the politics of education in Asia accused me of 'positioning' myself as 'the legitimate voice of critical Asian scholarship' in disregard of my own 'language- and race-related privilege,' and thus of attempting to set myself up as 'a modern viceroy of sorts' (Vickers with response from Apple et al. 2018, 342–344).
4. The same chronology is implied by Shahjahan et al's listing of 'imperial powers' beginning with Spain and Portugal and ending with America (S52). The articles by Aman and Tom et al on Western hemisphere instances of 'coloniality' imply the same chronology (dating back to Spanish and Portuguese colonisation of the Americas). In the cases of Silova et al, Khoja-Moolji and the volume introduction, the chronology is rather vaguer. Takayama et al follow Ninnes and Burnett in tracing back 150 years the history of CIE and its failure to 'problematise' its 'engagement with an "Other"' (S3). But the Eurocentrism informing the field's development is implicitly associated with the legacy of 'Western Enlightenment' (S12).
5. The full text of Macaulay's 'Minute' can be viewed on Columbia University's website: http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html (accessed February 21, 2019).
6. An exception to this is the emphasis of Silova et al on the 'transnational' origins of neoliberalism, which they see as 'developed through … transnational dialogue in heterogenous networks of economists from West and East' (S89, see also S96). But this is in tension with their account of an essentially 'Western' coloniality and the significance of their own 'non-Western' positionality. Moreover, 'East' for Silova, Millei, and Piattoeva (2017) seemingly references formerly Communist Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union rather than the societies and cultures of Asia.
7. One implication of such arguments is to impute truly Promethean insight to those non-Western thinkers who do manage to penetrate the veil of Western hegemonism.
8. Though published after the special issue, Muller's is the latest in a long line of critiques of metrics and rankings by prominent Western scholars.
9. The beliefs attributed to Dagara culture (such as respect for elders) do not seem radically alien to Western thought as such – unless one takes a very narrow and/or jaundiced view of what constitutes Western thinking.
10. For further discussion of the significance of modern Japan's efforts since the late nineteenth century to 'escape Asia,' and the implications for the country's 'epistemic position,' see Kim (2009, 2016).
11. In 2006, the historian Yuan Weishi published an essay in the magazine *Freezing Point* (冰点) criticising the standard narrative of Chinese history fed to schoolchildren as unbalanced and liable to poison young minds with hatred against 'the West'. He portrayed a generation 'raised on wolf's milk' (吃狼奶长大). The magazine was promptly shut down, and Yang himself punished. (See https://www.secretchina.com/news/gb/2006/02/17/141877.html).
12. Chen rather optimistically (and inaccurately) assigns the phenomenon of Chinese imperialism to the 'pre-modern' past, though he notes (in an epilogue) the continuing salience of 'Han Chinese racism.' While far more nuanced in his treatment of imperialism and ethnocentrism (especially in Asia) than most CER contributors, Chen shares both their preoccupation with 'positionality' vis-à-vis a rather essentialised West, and related problems in conceptualising or explaining non-Western agency.
13. Though we should note that Silova et al. acknowledge the 'transnational' origins of neoliberalism, even if they fail to reconcile this with other aspects of their argument (see note iv).
14. At the *World Social Science Forum* in Fukuoka in September 2018, Kasit Piromya, former Foreign Minister of Thailand, discussed Confucius Institutes and the work of the Chinese

Communist Party's United Front Department in supervising the activities of Chinese students overseas. He also noted Beijing's support for Thailand's military regime, and Chinese endorsement of a chauvinist discourse of Thai 'uniqueness' used by military elites to reject the appropriateness for Thailand of 'Western' democracy and civil liberties.

15. The WCCES recently splintered under the presidency of Carlos Alberto Torres (2013–2016), whose conduct was informed by a visceral anti-Westernism, sometimes expressed in blatantly divisive language – as those who attended the meeting of the WCCES Executive held in Beijing in August 2016 can attest.

16. Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003) elegantly put the case for comparative history in CIE, but their call seems to have gone largely unheeded.

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