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# Decolonising economics and politics curricula in UK universities\*

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores initiatives to decolonise the curriculum via two specific disciplines, namely Economics and Politics, both of which have tended to marginalise the study of race, empire, and colonialism and whose canonical thinkers are overwhelming white. By providing the first comparative analysis of decolonising initiatives in these disciplines, this article: investigates the extent to which Economics and Politics curricula in UK universities have been 'decolonised'; explores the factors which affect support for or resistance to decolonisation; and analyses the extent to which these factors share common roots in both disciplines. Our comparative method allows us to shed light on drivers of resistance that affect all disciplines alike and those that are rooted within specific disciplines. Using an audit of UK undergraduate courses and a survey of academics, we show that neither Politics nor Economics can plausibly claim to have made much progress in decolonising curricula. However, more progress has been made in Politics, and Politics staff are more informed about and less hostile to decolonising initiatives than Economics staff. We locate one of the reasons for this difference in the epistemological and ideological idiosyncrasies of the dominant neoclassical paradigm in Economics. We therefore argue that initiatives to decolonise the curriculum must take into account potential discipline-specific obstacles.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Curricula; decolonising; United Kingdom; economics education; politics education

## 1. Introduction

This article investigates the decolonisation of curricula in the disciplines of Politics and Economics. These disciplines are well suited to decolonisation: both require students to study a vast array of social, political, and economic institutions and phenomena and so have the potential to challenge existing preconceptions about the histories and legacies of colonialism. Yet, in both disciplines, the study of race, empire, and colonialism are marginal rather than central and their canonical thinkers are overwhelming white men (Ambler, Earle, and Scott 2022; Omar 2016). A comparative study of both disciplines can help illuminate drivers of resistance to decolonisation that affect all disciplines alike as well as factors that are rooted within specific disciplines. While there is some work on decolonising Political Economy (Baumann 2023; Mantz 2019) and Development Studies

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(Langdon 2013; Patel 2020) that crosses both disciplines, none of the existing literature provides the comparative perspective that this article provides.

The article has three main aims: (i) to investigate the extent to which Politics and Economics curricula in UK universities can claim to be 'decolonised'; (ii) to explore the factors which affect support for or resistance to attempts to decolonise curricula; and (iii) to analyse the extent to which these factors share common roots in Politics and Economics. To achieve these aims, the article draws on two pieces of original empirical research: an audit of undergraduate course and module descriptors from UK universities that seeks to establish how well (if at all) Politics and Economics curricula currently represent race- and colonial-related themes; and a survey of academics ( $n = 152$ ) who teach on Politics or Economics undergraduate programmes at UK universities, seeking information about the content of their teaching, knowledge of 'decolonise the curriculum' initiatives, and experiences of teaching race-related themes. We found that while neither Politics nor Economics have made much progress in decolonising, there are significant differences between the disciplines: greater progress has been made within Politics, and Politics staff are more open and less hostile to decolonising initiatives than Economics staff. Without disregarding the role of racist and (neo)colonialist attitudes in driving hostility to decolonising the curriculum, we argue that the differences between Politics and Economics that we found can in part be explained by reference to the epistemological and ideological idiosyncrasies of Economics, specifically the role of its dominant neoclassical paradigm. We therefore conclude that initiatives to decolonise the curriculum must be sensitive to discipline-specific obstacles.

Before we proceed, we will briefly describe our positionalities, which allow us to see certain injustices more easily than others but also no doubt create blind spots. All of us are based in the UK. Simon Choat is a white, British, male academic at a post-92 university who worked in a Politics department before being reluctantly redeployed into an Economics department; a political theorist by training and inclination, he is committed to decolonising in his teaching practices and has tried to share those practices through his research. Christina Wolf is a white, early-career heterodox economist at a post-92 university with significant parenting responsibilities; she grew up in former East Germany, which contributed to an interest in the consequences and manifestations of Nazi, Soviet, and US imperialism. Siobhan O'Neill is a mixed-race (Black African and white) woman personally and professionally committed to anti-racism. An early-career researcher, she completed her PhD in March 2023 at a Russell Group university and was finishing her thesis on the dynamics of race, racism, and whiteness in Higher Education, specifically in Politics, while working on this article. She grounds her research in Critical Race Theory, as well as engaging with Black Feminist and decolonial thought. In writing this article we worked collectively, having regular discussions to ensure that the study was guided by our collective theoretical and experiential knowledge and expertise.

## 2. Literature review

What exactly 'decolonising the curriculum' means in practice is a matter of ongoing debate, but we suggest that, at a minimum, it requires: acknowledgement and discussion of the colonial contexts within which theories and concepts have been developed and advanced; recognition that there are alternatives to Eurocentric knowledges, epistemologies, and pedagogies that were suppressed by colonial domination; and study of non-white and women thinkers, figures, and authors (cf. Choat 2021, 406). Although we use the term 'decolonised' in this article, we recognise that decolonisation is not simply a state or condition that can be arrived at or completed, but is rather an ongoing process, which will always be subject to further review and interrogation (Le Grange 2016, 5). We find helpful the work of scholars of decoloniality, for whom the 'coloniality of power' refers to the relations of power that developed from and within colonialism yet endure beyond the end of formal colonial structures and institutions (Quijano 2000). These include those relations of knowledge production which are the object of attempts to decolonise the curriculum (Maldonado-Torres 2006; Mignolo 2007). While anti-racism and decolonising are not the same thing, as

the decolonial critic Anibal Quijano (2000) has argued, race and colonialism are intimately linked, with the concept of race originating with colonial domination. As such, we would expect any decolonised curriculum to include critical reflections upon race and racism, and we view decolonising the curriculum as a significant element of embedding anti-racism within universities.

Different reasons have been offered for *why* we should decolonise curricula. First, there is an intellectual argument: students will not have a comprehensive and accurate overview of their subject if we exclude discussion of colonialism and race or teach only white thinkers and authors (cf. Mills 2015). Second, a multiculturalist argument that claims that ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity should be reflected in curricula – either for the pragmatic reason of improving the attainment of racially and/or ethnically minoritised students (Arday, Belluigi, and Thomas 2021; Singh 2011), or for the stronger, normative reason that students are harmed when certain cultures are presented as unworthy of study (Taylor 1994; see also Ambler, Earle, and Scott 2022).<sup>1</sup> Finally, there is what we term a democratic or anti-racist argument: decolonising the curriculum is a modest but necessary contribution to continuing efforts to free ourselves from colonialism, its legacies, and the continuing existence of neocolonial relations. Politics and Economics in particular have a potentially significant role to play here in challenging existing preconceptions and interrogating the history and legacies of colonialism, concerned as they are with the global distribution of power, wealth, rights, income, and resources – but also in reflecting critically on their own role in upholding colonial and neocolonial relations (see e.g. Charusheela and Zein-Elabdin 2004; Vitalis 2015).

Yet despite these strong normative arguments in its favour, efforts to decolonise have faced resistance. This can come from students: Edwards and Shahjahan (2021) explain the resistance of the majoritised student body to decolonising teaching practices by reference to past educational experiences and knowledge systems, psychological discomfort with shifting curricular emphases, and concerns over global labour market mobility (itself a reflection of economic hierarchies with roots in colonialism and imperialism). Obstruction can also come from university management, though this does not always take the form of overt hostility but rather of co-optation and dilution of the decolonising agenda: Doharty, Madriaga, and Joseph-Salisbury (2021) argue that widespread calls to decolonise our universities have further embedded rather than dismantled whiteness. Shain et al. (2021) show that even when management has strategically advanced grass-root-demands for decolonisation of curricula, such a strategic advancement can constitute a form of institutional taming, where some aspects of the agenda are superficially included, while shying away from structural reforms necessary to address coloniality in higher education (see also Hall 2021).

As some of the literature on decolonising Politics in particular has argued, decolonising initiatives can also face institutional and structural barriers. As Begum and Saini (2019) point out, efforts to decolonise are often led by scholars of colour, who – as well as being underrepresented and more likely than white staff to be on insecure contracts and in lower-paid positions (Advance 2022) – frequently find themselves in marginalised sub-disciplines and facing barriers and resistance within universities that are characterised by institutional racism and white privilege (see also Emejulu 2019; Joseph-Salisbury and Connolly 2021, 121; Saini and Begum 2020). These problems are exacerbated by the neoliberalisation of higher education, with overworked academics on precarious contracts poorly placed to challenge existing hierarchies of knowledge (McKeown 2022).

As well as reflecting on barriers to decolonising, scholars within Politics have also explored the meaning of decolonisation and its application to the discipline and its various sub-disciplines (e.g. Capan 2017; Getachew and Mantena 2021; Shilliam 2021; Zwiener-Collins et al. 2023). While the peer-reviewed literature on decolonising Economics is not yet as extensive, there is nonetheless increasing interest and a growing body of discursive, theoretical, and empirical work on decolonising Economics (e.g. Alves and Kvangraven 2021; Ambler, Earle, and Scott 2022; Kvangraven and Kesar 2022; Zein-Elabdin 2009). We will argue below that resistance to decolonising Economics is related to its disciplinary specificity, especially its paradigmatic monism, and on this topic there is a well-established literature. The methodological monism of Economics significantly shapes teaching (Guizzo, Mearman, and Berger 2021; Mearman, Guizzo, and Berger 2018b) and research (Chavance

and Labrousse 2018; Corsi, D'Ippoliti, and Zacchia 2018) and drives a systematic exclusion of alternative theoretical approaches (Aistleitner, Kapeller, and Steinerberger 2018; Aleksandar 2014), including resistance to initiatives to decolonise the curriculum (Kvangraven and Kesar 2022). Alternative theoretical and empirical approaches are systematically marginalised within Economics for epistemological (Chavance and Labrousse 2018; Fine 2009) and ideological reasons (Heise and Thieme 2016; Stein 2021). Neoliberal metrics and financial pressures have encouraged a hierarchisation of knowledge production across higher education as academics compete to publish in a handful of 'top' journals, reinforcing a narrow range of perspectives and stifling unorthodox and marginal forms of knowledge. Yet, as we will show below, such hierarchies are more likely to be accepted as a reflection of merit in Economics and less likely to be challenged. While student movements that emerged after the 2008 financial crisis have demanded greater realism and plurality in Economics, such movements have not broken these entrenched patterns of paradigmatic monism in research and teaching (Mearman, Guizzo, and Berger 2018a; Mearman, Guizzo, and Berger 2018b; Morgan 2015), and nor have calls for decolonising Economics curricula.

### 3. Materials and methods

To explore the conjunction of cross-disciplinary drivers of resistance, such as student or management resistance, and factors that are idiosyncratic to specific disciplines, this article draws on two pieces of empirical research: (i) an audit of all UK Politics and Economics degrees offered by UK Higher Education Institutions and (ii) a survey of academic staff who teach on Politics and Economic programmes. This approach allows for a systematic mapping and comparison of how universities portray Economics and Politics courses to prospective students and how staff teaching those courses think about decolonising.

The audit was conducted in July 2021 for courses beginning in 2021/22 and covers all undergraduate course and Level 4 (first-year) core module descriptors of Politics and Economics degrees offered in the UK to establish the extent to which they cover colonisation, race, and/or related themes. While some empirical research has already been undertaken into the extent to which Politics curricula have been decolonised, it is more limited than our research either in the number and type of institutions examined (Williams 2019) or the sub-disciplines examined (Choat 2021). No such mapping currently exists for Economics.

We searched UCAS (the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) for Politics and Economics degrees and chose one Politics degree and one Economics degree (or in some cases two, as explained below) from each institution that offered such degrees. If Politics degrees were not offered as a stand-alone degree, the search was narrowed down to the course with the largest focus on Politics and its related sub-disciplines at each university, e.g. Politics and International Relations, or the Open University's 'Social Sciences (Politics)' degree. For Economics courses, we included Economics single honours, Economics joint honours, Economics majors (but only chose the first if multiple options were offered), and PPE in the event that there was none of the preceding (Highlands & Islands). If an institution offered both a BA and a BSc Economics, both courses were included. We excluded courses with Economics as a minor, Business Economics courses, and new courses starting in 2022/23. In total, the audit covers 98 Politics courses and 354 Level 4 core Politics modules and 98 Economics courses and 492 core Economics modules.

For each course, we examined the online course descriptor and the module descriptors for the core or compulsory Level 4 modules. We searched for any mention of themes related to colonialism and its legacies and persistence, including imperialism, slavery, and the Civil Rights Movement. We recognise the limitations to this methodology: online descriptors cannot fully convey the way courses and modules are taught in the classroom, so the absence of these themes does not necessarily mean that a course or module is not decolonising; conversely, the presence of these themes in descriptors does not guarantee that a course or module is decolonising, not least because colonialism and race can be taught in racist ways. Nonetheless, online descriptors are important indications

of what is taught, especially because such descriptors are used to inform students of (what are claimed to be) the essential elements of courses and modules. Given the rarity with which such themes are even mentioned – as we shall shortly demonstrate – their inclusion more likely than not reflects a conscious attempt to acknowledge and engage with the decolonisation agenda. Finally, it is because online descriptors are only one, limited source of data that we have also used a survey to explore further the contents and contexts of teaching.

Each of the courses and modules audited were coded according to three categories:

1. *Significant*: an explicit and strong reference to race, colonialism, or related themes.
2. *Some*: race, colonialism, or related themes are mentioned in passing.
3. *None*: courses and modules that make no mention at all of race, colonialism, or related themes.

The survey randomly sampled staff teaching on UK HE Politics and Economics degrees from two separate sample frames – one for Politics and one for Economics – following a cluster sampling approach (Cardão-Pito 2016; Till and Matei 2016). The two sample frames were constructed based on the alphabetical lists of all UCAS-listed UK higher education institutions that offer a Politics and/or Economics undergraduate degree. We sampled clusters of *all* staff listed on the staff pages of Politics/Economics departments in *every third institution* in our two sampling frames.

The cluster sampling technique allowed us to sample all Economics/Politics staff at one institution. Where Politics or Economics were part of a larger department – such as Sociology and Politics or Economics and Finance – only members of staff listed as teaching on the Politics or Economics courses were sampled. If this distinction was unclear from the staff profile page, we sampled the entire department. To exclude staff not teaching on Politics/Economics courses, the survey included a question ‘do you teach on a Politics/Economics degree’, which if answered ‘no’ would end the survey.

The survey was carried out from October to December 2021. In total, the survey was sent to 1,010 members of staff in Politics and to 745 members of staff in Economics departments. In total, we have received 152 responses, of which 62 from Politics and 90 from Economics staff, i.e. 6% and 13% response rate respectively. The low absolute number of respondents leads to less precise, but still valid, estimates of population attitudes. However, the high confidence intervals meant that further disaggregation by relevant characteristics such as gender or racial identity was not statistically significant. Nevertheless, the comparison between Economics and Politics, the main purpose of this research, remained possible and statistically significant at 95% confidence for all questions.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Audit results

The audit revealed that neither in Politics nor in Economics have there been any far-reaching advances in terms of incorporating race, racism, and colonialism as a core part of the undergraduate curriculum in a way that would be visible to prospective students. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the vast majority of UK Politics and Economics courses and modules make no reference at all to themes of race, racism, and colonialism. The situation is, however, considerably worse for Economics degrees and core modules, where only 1 out of 98 Economics courses and 5 out of 492 Economics modules made ‘some’ reference to race, racism and colonialism (see Table 1). By contrast, 20 out of 98 Politics

**Table 1.** Economics audit.

	Significant	Some	None	TOTAL
Economics courses	0	1	97	98 <sup>a</sup>
Economics modules	0	5	478	492

<sup>a</sup>From 89 institutions – both BA and BSc Economics included from institutions that offered both

courses and 39 out of 354 L4 core Politics modules made ‘some’ reference and 1 out of 98 Politics courses and 7 out of 354 L4 Politics modules made significant reference to themes related to race, racism, and colonialism (see [Table 2](#)).

#### 4.2. Survey: openness and familiarity

Similarly, the survey revealed that Politics staff were more knowledgeable about the decolonising agenda, less hostile, and more likely to integrate aspects of decolonising practices in their teaching than Economics staff. For instance, as can be seen in [Figure 1](#), when asked whether they think it is important that Politics/Economics curricula include discussion of and reflection upon race, racism, and colonialism, 92% of Politics staff responded favourably (i.e. ‘yes’) against only 56% of Economics staff. When asked to what extent they are familiar with attempts and initiatives to ‘decolonise the curriculum’ and to what extent these guide and inform their teaching practices, 90% of Politics staff responded positively (i.e. ‘to some extent’ or ‘to a great extent’) against only 67% of Economics staff. On the question whether enough has been done to decolonise the curriculum, Politics staff were significantly more likely to respond ‘not enough’ (66%) than Economics staff, of whom only 44% deemed not enough has been done.

Expressions of support from both Politics and Economics were driven by three different factors, which reflect the normative reasons for decolonising identified in the Literature Review above (the intellectual, multicultural, and democratic/anti-racist arguments). First, respondents deemed the inclusion of colonialism, race, and race-related themes and knowledge produced by scholars from the Global South as indispensable for understanding political and socio-economic dynamics:

Given that those are both some of the most important factors structuring world politics, empirically speaking, and some of the most pernicious, it’s pretty self-evident. (Politics, Q11)

These are central issues for understanding political and social conflicts, and political and social history, in nearly all countries of the world (Politics, Q11)

Because the existence of racial inequalities is something (like the business cycle or unemployment) that needs to be explained within the discipline (Economics, Q 11)

Economics risks becoming irrelevant at best or a retrograde discipline at worst if it does not engage with the important issues of the day and this is one of them. (Economics, Q11)

A second theme was the need to reflect the diversity of the student body:

Given the diversity of the student body, the students benefit from seeing a diverse curriculum and identify with it more (Politics, Q11)

As a university and cohort with a high proportion of BAME students I want to ensure that our curriculum is as diverse as possible (Economics, Q11)

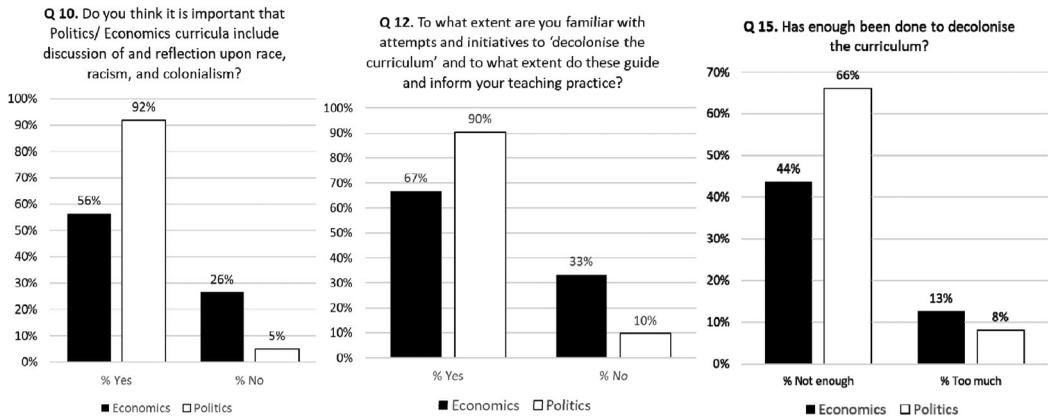
Third, there was recognition that knowledge is hierarchically reproduced, reflecting colonial geographies and racial inequalities, and that the status quo contributes to the reproduction of material inequality. Significantly, this theme only emerged among Politics respondents:

Because it is fundamental to hegemonic knowledge construction. (Politics Q11)

Universities have been reproducing racist structures for centuries and racist encounters do not stop at the gates. It is vital that all students of politics understand and engage with these themes. (Politics Q 11)

**Table 2.** Politics audit.

	Significant	Some	None	TOTAL
Politics courses	1	10	87	98
Politics modules	7	39	308	354



**Figure 1.** Familiarity with and openness to decolonising agenda.

In addition, the qualitative responses revealed much more dismissive responses from Economics:

It is a load of Derrida post-structuralist neo-Marxist rubbish which undermines the pedagogic value of the curricula. (Economics, Q11)

I think decolonization should not be a priority, it seems to me to be invented to keep some people busy. (Economics, Q24)

The effort to decolonise the economics curriculum seems to be an illiberal, anti enlightenment woke fad, driven by political activists from outside the discipline (Economics, Q 24)

I am disgusted by such a survey; I have to vomit (Economics, Q 24)

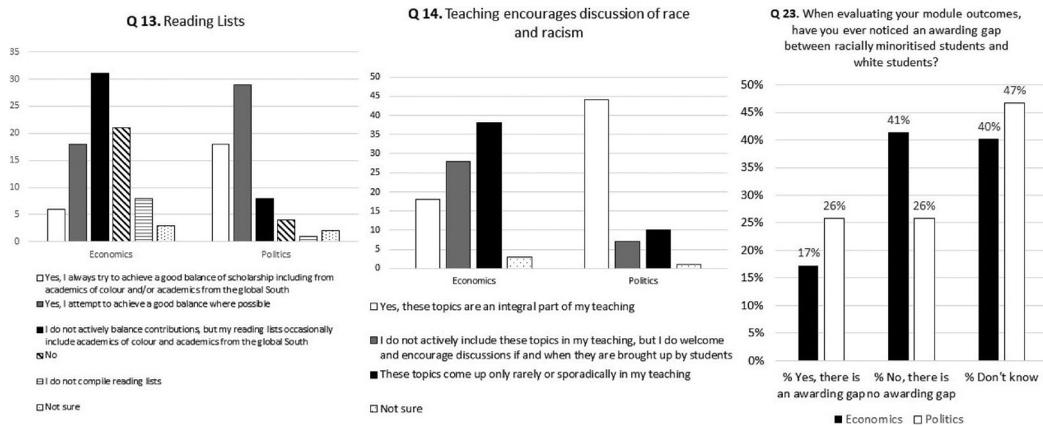
By contrast, the most sceptical response from Politics was much more measured, which consolidates the quantitative finding that there are statistically significance differences between Politics and Economics respondents regarding openness to and familiarity with decolonising themes:

Race, racism and colonialism are important but so are many other issues that need to be thought about in the social sciences. I see no reason to privilege them over others, such as class, inequality or human rights and freedoms. (Politics, Q11)

#### 4.3. Survey: teaching practice

The survey further asked respondents about a few relatively modest decolonised teaching practices, which again revealed statistically significant differences between Politics and Economics staff. For instance, as [Figure 2](#) shows, when asked whether their reading lists include work from academics of colour and/or academics from the Global South, Politics responses were skewed towards more affirmative options of 'Yes, I always try to achieve a good balance' and 'Yes, I attempt to achieve a good balance where possible' while Economics responses were almost symmetric around the neutral option 'I do not actively balance contributions, but my reading lists occasionally include academics of colour and from the Global South' and also included a higher proportion of responses indicating 'No'.

As seen in [Figure 2](#), when asked whether teaching encourages discussion of race and racism, the vast majority of Politics respondents (71%) indicated that 'Yes, these topics are an integral part of my teaching', while responses from Economics staff were skewed towards 'These topics come up only rarely or sporadically in my teaching' (42%). The differences on reading lists and inclusion of race and race-related themes were again statically significant at 95% confidence level.



**Figure 2.** Teaching practice.

When asked where the teaching of race, racism, and colonialism fits into the curriculum at their university – e.g. whether it takes place in optional or core modules or is embedded throughout the curriculum – further significant differences emerged from the qualitative responses of Economics and Politics respondents. Economics respondents indicated that, with few exceptions, such themes are limited to a few subject areas such as development, labour economics, or history of economic thought, and even there are very limited in scope, or are limited to optional modules:

Very little apart from modules on development economics. I occasionally mention the East African monetary union (Economics, Q 16)

In past in labour economics and development economics. Unfortunately we do not offer economic history where this might also come up. (Economics, Q 16)

On optional modules addressing specifically questions of diversity or inequality (Economics, Q16)

By contrast, responses from Politics staff indicated more concerted effort to achieve improvement while recognising limits to what has already been achieved:

Everywhere. We have a Decolonising the Curriculum Working Group including students and staff. It surveys the curriculum of every module run by the Department and makes recommendations accordingly. We have made a lot of progress over the last ten years, but still have a distance to travel. (Politics Q 16)

There's been an institution-wide effort to address these issues in our teaching. However, these efforts have often remained at the level of module/curriculum design, and have not been complemented by structural reforms to address wider inequalities among staff and students. (Politics Q 16)

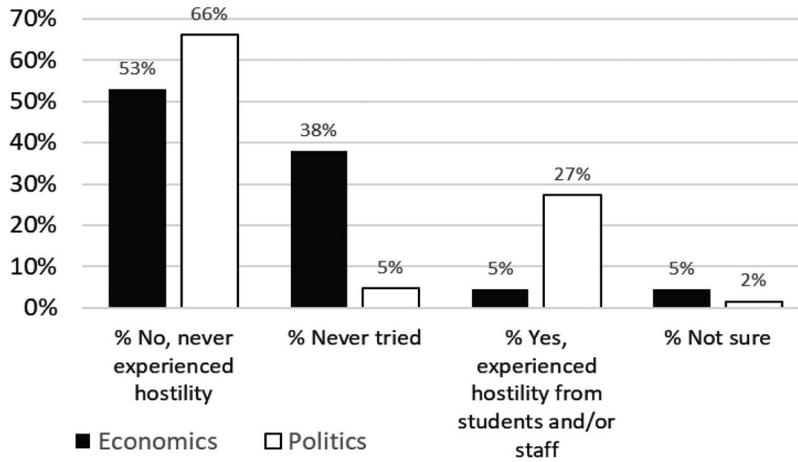
A student-led report was published into the extent to which modules were decolonised. It highlighted continued white male dominance on the reading lists. Every staff member has been encouraged to diversify and decolonise their modules and integrate questions of race and colonialism into each one. (Politics Q 16)

## 5. Discussion

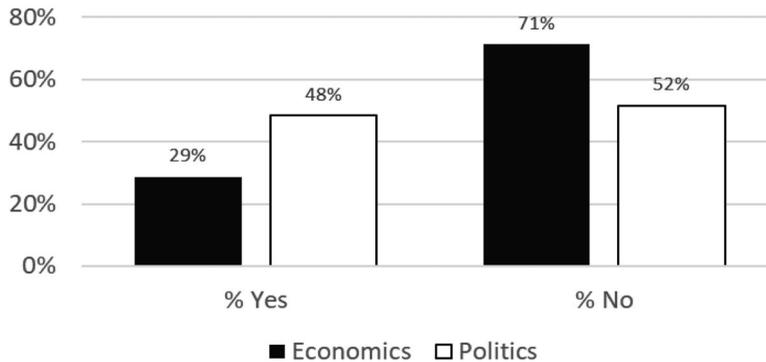
### 5.1. Explaining the differences

The survey included questions aimed at identifying whether resistance to decolonising might be driven by negative reactions from students and/or colleagues or could be explained by a lack of training. However, neither of these two are significant explanatory factors of the differences between Politics and Economics in the survey.

If you have tried to include race-related themes or topics in your teaching, have you ever faced any hostility or resistance from staff or students?



Have you ever received any formal or informal training in relation to the teaching of race-related themes, building an inclusive curriculum, or decolonising the curriculum?



**Figure 3.** Resistance from staff and/ or students and training.

As [Figure 3](#) shows, the majority of Politics (66%) and Economics (53%) respondents never experienced hostility or resistance from students and/or staff. If anything, more Politics respondents experienced hostility/resistance from students, with 27% of respondents indicating that this was the case against 5% of Economics respondents – though this may be because fewer Economics respondents have tried to include race-related themes.

More Politics respondents indicated that they have received formal or informal training on building decolonised and/or inclusive curricula (48% in Politics against 29% in Economics). However, the qualitative responses of those Economics respondents having received training revealed that such training was perceived as a top-down agenda and ultimately counter-productive:

The higher-ups are pushing this agenda on everyone. They mention demands such as certain percentages of 'minority' authors, without considering if it makes any sense ... People wonder how to exactly 'decolonise' a curriculum, without teaching becoming a farce. (Economics, Q16)

We are now being told both must feature in every module, including time series analysis, or we will no longer be permitted to teach it. (Economics, Q11)

This agenda of racial justice in curricula does more harm than good. Unfortunately, because it relies on top-down one-size-fits-all measures, it will become farcical when implemented. (Economics, Q 24)

Institutional racism and white privilege are, undoubtedly, factors in resistance to decolonising the curriculum. But what needs to be explained in our survey data is why Economics academics seem more resistant than Politics academics. Our clustered sampling approach means that the Politics survey was not necessarily sent to the same institutions as the Economics survey – but it is unlikely that those institutions that received the Economics survey happened to be more institutionally racist than those which received the Politics survey. It is also noticeable that the proportion of racially and/or ethnically minoritised staff is higher in Economics than in Politics: 12.1% of UK academic staff in Politics and international studies identify as BAME, compared to 19.5% of UK academic staff in Economics and econometrics, which is the second-highest proportion among all non-SET (Science, Engineering, and Technology) subjects (Advance 2022). Given that about 13% of the UK population aged 16 and over is from a ‘minority ethnic background’ (Uberoi and Burton 2022, 4), racially and/or ethnically minoritised UK staff are underrepresented in Politics and overrepresented in Economics. 21% of respondents to our Politics survey reported that they belonged to a racially and/or ethnically minoritised group, while 25% of respondents to our Economics survey reported the same. In his report for the UK Political Studies Association and British International Studies Association, Hanretty (2021, 18–9) notes that not only is the proportion of BAME staff lower in Politics and international studies than in Economics, but also that, compared to Economics (and indeed to other cognate social sciences), there are relatively fewer BAME staff at senior levels in Politics.

Although the task of decolonising is often left to racially and/or ethnically minoritised staff, we cannot assume in advance that such staff will necessarily be more open to or enthusiastic about decolonising (cf. Joseph-Salisbury 2020, 7); indeed, racially and/or ethnically minoritised staff can be complicit in reproducing white privilege (Pechenkina and Liu 2018). Moreover, as one of the very few studies of ethnic diversity among Economics academics in the UK notes, the relatively strong (and improving) record of Economics in recruiting racially and/or ethnically minoritised staff compared to other disciplines conceals a more complicated picture: ‘there are large differences in representation across different ethnic groups’, with Black staff in particular underrepresented relative to their proportion of the UK population (although this is true of other subjects as well); the proportion of non-white staff is much higher among non-UK nationals than UK nationals, such that ‘[e]thnic diversity among UK academic economists is primarily driven by bringing in individuals from abroad’; and women are significantly underrepresented in Economics as a whole and within almost every ethnic group (Advani, Sen, and Warwick 2020, 2, 10, 12). Nonetheless, given that the Economics staff in UK universities are more likely to identify as racially and/or ethnically minoritised than their Politics counterparts – and are more likely to be in senior positions – and given that a higher proportion of respondents to our Economics survey than to our Politics survey claimed to belong to a racially and/or ethnically minoritised group, the greater resistance to decolonisation from Economics than from Politics staff in our surveys cannot straightforwardly be attributed to white privilege or white ignorance. We also do not think that the resistance can be explained simply by reference to disciplinary-specific sources of institutional support: if anything, such sources of support seem fewer in Politics, where there do not seem to be equivalents of groups such as The Black Economists Network or Diversifying and Decolonising Economics (D-Econ).<sup>2</sup> Nor can we explain the differences between Politics and Economics *simply* by reference to the possession of racist and (neo)colonial attitudes, as this would only beg the question of why Economics staff would seem to possess more racist or (neo)colonial attitudes than Politics staff. As such, we contend that there are discipline-specific reasons that explain the greater resistance of Economics staff: first, the epistemology of what is nowadays the dominant body of theory within Economics; second, a greater readiness within Economics to accept the hierarchical organisation of knowledge

and its reproduction. Our point is not, of course, that racialised hierarchies and forms of discrimination are irrelevant to the hostility to decolonising within Economics, but rather that there are disciplinary-specific epistemological factors that shape attitudes within Economics towards racialised hierarchies and to colonialism and its legacies more generally.

Understanding the significance of the dominant epistemology within Economics requires an appreciation of some of the discipline's historical dynamics and development. Following the battle of methods (*Methodenstreit*) with the German historicists in the 1880s, the marginalist/neoclassical school slowly but steadily established itself as the dominant scientific paradigm in Economics. Marginalist epistemology is strictly based on *deductivism* and *ahistorical methodological individualism*. These two core tenets have several important implications, first among which is a claim to neutrality (Kvangraven and Kesar 2022), as neoclassical theory builds on supposedly universal and value-neutral axioms such as the utility-maximising individual (*homo economicus*) (O'Sullivan 2019).

Second, the epistemological foundations of neoclassical economics eventually led to a claim to universality and an explosion of applications (Fine 2009). Indeed, marginalist principles have been applied to an ever wider field of social scientific enquiry in a process termed 'economics imperialism' (Fine and Milonakis 2009), in which neoclassical principles colonised the subject matter both within the discipline of Economics and increasingly in other social sciences.

These claims to value neutrality and universality embodied in the discipline are reflected in qualitative comments by Economics respondents to our survey, portraying the view that everything that needs to be explained can be done so within the confines of marginalist analytical tools – and hence without the need to decolonise. For example, when asked to outline where the teaching of race, racism, and colonialism fits into the Economics curriculum at their university, one respondent replied:

Thankfully, it does not. We are teaching methods of analysis and techniques. Economics and Finance as disciplines may be applied to many areas. (Economics Q 16)

Third, whilst applications of marginalist principles exploded within the discipline and beyond, subject content shrank, because the aggregation of optimising individuals to the economy as whole required countless conceptual and theoretical reductions. More generally, with the advent of marginalist economics, the subject matter of Economics shifted away from the dynamics of socio-economic change to individual decision-making. As a result, collectivist/holist, historical, and social elements were gradually taken out of economic analysis. The marginalist principle of methodological individualism implies a relationship between agency and structure which, by definition, excludes structural determinants of social outcomes such as structural racism, reducing the economy to a mere aggregation of individual decisions formed in isolation from all social (other than market) relations (Fine and Milonakis 2009, 109ff).

Qualitative survey responses from economists strongly reflect this restriction in content and the associated premise that the economy can be explained without reference to collective, social, and historical contexts, including colonialism and racialised and racist hierarchies:

[R]ace is irrelevant for mathematical rules. (Economics, Q11)

[R]acism, should fall in sociology I thought, economics should be about trade-offs, marginal benefit and cost and optimization (Economics, Q11)

Economics curricula should focus on economics, unless the topic of race is relevant to the discussion. Reflections upon race, racism, colonialism, etc., are important and usually belong in curricula from history and sociology. (Economics, Q11)

It is not relevant to the material being taught. (Economics, Q11)

In contrast to Economics, in Politics there is greater and more open acknowledgement of the disagreements within the discipline over both subject matter and methodological approaches. The

current UK QAA (Quality Assurance Agency for UK Higher Education) Subject Benchmark Statement for Politics and International Relations, for instance, notes not only the broad scope of the discipline but also the variety of its methodologies and the contested nature of its boundaries (QAA 2023, 3–4). There is nonetheless at the core of the discipline common agreement that the study of Politics is about power: as the QAA (2023, 4) Statement puts it, ‘analyses of who gets what, when, how, why and where are central’ to Politics. While the study of colonialism, race, and racism can therefore be marginalised (as we have shown), it is harder for Politics academics to echo their Economics counterparts in explicitly and openly claiming that colonialism – a set of power relations and structures that arguably more than any other has been central to the modern world – falls outside the scope of the discipline. The centrality of analyses of power, justice, conflict, and identity to Politics, and the impossibility of analysing these concepts and themes without reference to colonialism, was emphasised by many of our Politics respondents:

Politics is the study of power, and power is innately racialised and governed by colonial logics. (Politics, Q11)

You cannot talk about power without reflecting upon race, therefore you cannot talk about politics without the same reflections. (Politics, Q11)

It’s difficult to see what the point of politics would be if politics scholars failed to discuss a paradigm case of enduring injustice. (Politics, Q11)

Independent of the epistemological foundations of the discipline of Economics, the qualitative survey results also revealed a greater readiness of Economics respondents to accept hierarchies in the (re)production of knowledge as a reflection of merit. As suggested in the Literature Review above, hierarchical structures govern knowledge production in both Economics and Politics, and the increasing use of metrics to determine research excellence has reinforced such hierarchies as well gate-keeping of what is deemed ‘acceptable’ knowledge (Ambler, Earle, and Scott 2022; McKeown 2022). Yet these hierarchical structures of knowledge production are not challenged in the same way by Economics respondents as by Politics respondents. Instead, qualitative responses of Economics staff are often based on the implicit notion that these hierarchies reflect merit:

[A]ll scholars should be equally evaluated, not because they are white or non-white, they should be judged only based on the merit of their research. (Economics Q 11)

[M]y reading lists contain references to the seminal/interesting papers, some of which are by authors in the global south/ethnic minority. But this is not the criteria by which I chose these papers, rather that these were the most appropriate papers to include. (Economics, Q16)

One of the most important ideas that I teach (infinite horizon dynamic programming) was an African American, so I give a bit of his biography in the class, and have asked students to volunteer to develop this more. But I chose this maths topic for its usefulness, not because of who invented it. (Economics, Q16)

Apparently, the thinking is that teaching economics means including any names one wants in the curriculum, without regard to relevance or the history of contributions. (Economics, Q 16)

## 5.2. Implications

We have argued that one plausible explanation for the greater overt resistance to decolonising from Economics than from Politics staff can be found in the epistemological and ontological differences between the disciplines. Economics is unique among social sciences in the degree to which it is dominated by a single scientific paradigm. The leading scientific paradigm – neoclassical/marginalist economics – builds on epistemological foundations which make a claim to universality, and which has in the past led to the systematic marginalisation of alternative theoretical and empirical approaches even before any calls emerged to include epistemes from the Global South. Furthermore, the subject matter of the discipline has reduced substantially. Economics respondents portrayed a strong belief that the economy can be explained without reference to collective, social,

and historical contexts, including race, racism, and colonialism. By contrast, it is harder for Politics to claim openly that race, racism, and colonialism fall outside the subject, and a wider variety of epistemological approaches co-exist within Politics. If resistance to initiatives to decolonise the curriculum are to be overcome, therefore, it is vital that attention is paid to the specific histories and dynamics of different disciplines: barriers to decolonising exist not only in the form of resistance from management, staff, or students, nor simply from structural and institutional impediments, but can also arise from dominant ideological and epistemological traditions within specific disciplines. While we have presented *one* possible explanation for the hostility to decolonising found within Economics in particular, there are undoubtedly other possible reasons which would be fruitful areas of future research.

## Notes

1. While Advance HE and the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency use the term 'BAME', we will prefer to use 'racially and/or ethnically minoritised', unless referring to another source which uses alternative terminology.
2. See <https://www.tben.co.uk/> and <https://d-econ.org/> respectively (both last accessed 10 September 2023).

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