

## **Decolonizing science**

One of the big trends of the 2020s has been the call to 'decolonize' things, especially academic disciplines. The word has many possible meanings, many about inclusion of all people as students, and inclusion of works from many different cultures as being deemed worthy of study in a core undergraduate degree. Calls for decolonization of science can be difficult to interpret or apply: there is nothing obviously colonial about relativity or quantum mechanics or gene transcription or electromagnetism, for example: these things just are, and apply to all people and all places equally and always have. There is one sense in which I do strongly support decolonization of science, but it is not an angle I have heard from anyone else. So here goes....

When trying to describe a life in research, I often use a metaphor of exploring unknown lands. I suspect that even this metaphor is now politically incorrect, as readers may think I have in mind some regrettable expedition involving pith helmets, rifles and a fixed idea of European superiority: actually, in my own mind the metaphor reaches back to childhood explorations, landing a dinghy somewhere and setting off with a friend to sketch a map of creeks and possible dens or good conker trees. But the objection is partly valid, because there are two ways of exploring, and I would love to see one disappear.

There are explorers, whether they investigate a literal landscape of grass and mud or a metaphorical 'landscape' of causal interactions within living cells, who tread lightly. They see and record what is there, publish, and move on to the next unknown, fuelled by the joy of discovery. The landscape gets mapped, understanding grows and, perhaps, the understanding is used for good. There is nothing particularly 'colonial' in that: nothing that elevates one set of people or subjugates another.

Alas, there are also explorers who seem obsessed with planting flags, with pushing forward into an unknown and proclaiming, with all the force they can muster, "*This is my territory*". They name things they find there in an arrogant way, certain they understand them completely, although usually they don't and the name later becomes a nuisance, referring to a misunderstood function. They also work hard giving talks and publishing reviews to try to carve their ownership of the little piece of a



little field in big, ugly capital letters, and spend their time on grant panels and publication reviewer panels and conference panels trying to keep trespassers off 'their' land. They do this even when the 'trespassers' might bring the skills needed really to make sense of it all.

If decolonizing science will mean putting a stop to this sort of behaviour (as well as other good things talked about more often), I am all for it.

Jamie Davies, Edinburgh, February 2023