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Crafting Diverse, Inclusive, and Decolonized Military Leaders: Reflections on Decolonizing Professional Military Education

Malte Riemann and Norma Rossi

Abstract: Decolonizing as a project and practice has generated renewed attention since the global Black Lives Matter protests' demand for a far-reaching engagement with the structural racism prevalent within society. Civil-military relations have not been untouched by this. While calls to decolonize higher education (HE) are not new (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018), such calls have not yet found resonance in the professional military education (PME) domain. This is an important gap as military education institutions, similar to western universities, are key sites where "colonialism—and colonial knowledge in particular—is produced, consecrated, institutionalized and naturalized" (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018). In this paper we provide a rationale for the importance of decolonizing PME as well as the benefits for decolonizing teaching and learning in a PME setting by drawing on existing attempts developed to decolonize HE institutions. Though building on these, our decolonizing rationale links issues identified in relation to HE to the specific sensitivies of PME. Our argument unfolds as follows. First, we outline how we understand the process of decolonizing and how it relates to PME. Second, we explain how the armed forces benefit from decolonizing PME. Third, we look at two avenues in need of decolonizing: the curriculum and the educator. In our conclusions we reflect on the importance of decolonization for creating truly diverse and inclusive forces and its significance in crafting effective military leaders for the twenty-first century.

KeyWords: Decolonization; Professional Military Education; Racism; Leadership; Organizational Change.

Introduction

Decolonizing as a project and practice has generated renewed attention since the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests brought a range of inequalities and "the reality of racial disparities in the act of living into sharp relief,"[1] leading to the demand for a far-reaching engagement with the structural racism prevalent within society. Civil-military relations have not been untouched by this. The U.S. Army unveiled an initiative to promote diversity and inclusivity in the forces,[2] and General David Petraeus recently reflected in The Atlantic on his own military experience, legacies of systemic racism, and debates over symbols glorifying the Confederacy, arguing that "[t]he way we resolve these issues will define our national identity for this century and beyond."[3] While aspects such as the names of institutions or the replacement of statues have extensively been discussed within this debate, the importance of decolonizing professional military education (PME) has so far escaped attention. While calls to decolonize higher education (HE) are not new,[4] such calls have not yet found resonance in the PME domain. This is an important gap as military education institutions, like western universities, are key sites where "colonialism—and colonial knowledge in particular—is produced, consecrated, institutionalized and naturalized."[5]

In this article we aim at providing an opening for addressing this gap by outlining a rationale for the importance of decolonizing PME as well as the benefits for decolonizing teaching and learning in a PME setting. We do so by drawing on existing attempts developed to decolonize HE institutions.[6] However, as decolonizing teaching and learning "is not something that can be prescribed in advance,"[7] we are not aiming to provide a "how-to-guide," but rather focus on linking issues identified in relation to decolonizing HE to the specific sensitivities of PME. As such, this article aims to function as a conversation starter on a so far neglected topic within PME. To do so we raise two aspects deserving special attention: the curriculum and the educator. Drawing on our long-standing experience in delivering PME at various international military and security institutions, we argue that decolonizing will support the armed forces' self-understanding and increase its operational awareness, ultimately strengthening the ties with the very societies that the armed forces have sworn to defend and serve.

The analysis unfolds as follows. First, we outline how we understand the process of decolonizing and how it relates to PME. Second, we provide evidence of the importance of decolonizing PME by showing the positive effects such an endeavor has on the armed forces, military effectiveness, and civil-military relations. Third, and departing from this, we look at two probable pathways from which such a process of decolonizing can start: curriculum and educator. In our conclusion, we outline the importance of decolonization for creating truly diverse and inclusive forces as well as its significance in crafting effective military leaders for the twenty-first century.

What is Decolonization?

Decolonization is a contested concept involving "a multitude of definitions, interpretations, aims and strategies."[8] Initially, decolonization referred to the process that led to the undoing of colonial rule over subordinate peoples and territories. Some scholars, most notably Tuck and Yang, therefore insist that "decolonisation is not a metaphor" and "decolonisation" must therefore refer to the repatriation of indigenous life and land.[9] But "to argue that decolonisation must refer solely to the repatriation of settled land is to overlook other forms of colonialism."[10] Colonialism goes very much beyond the specific historical materiality of western conquest and subjugation; rather, it involves the very ways in which the modern world has been constituted and hierarchically ordered in ways that still shape the present. Knowledge has been central to this process of ordering. As "colonisation is more than physical,"[11] in that it determines whose knowledge is privileged, decolonizing is also about confronting how European imperialism, colonialism, inequality, and racism shape and have shaped sciences, philosophies, societies, and our modern world in general.

Despite a multiplicity of perspectives on decolonizing, we argue that PME needs to be most concerned about two central aspects, both relating to the link between colonialism and knowledge, or, in Nandy's words, colonialism which "colonizes minds."[12] First, decolonizing is about "unsettling," which involves "denaturalizing and historicizing the

colonial present—that is, the ways that colonial relations continue to organize everyday contemporary life."[13] This entails developing an understanding of how colonialism has only ended formally and to engage with its profound contemporary legacies. Second, the center of the process of decolonizing is not erasure but, in the words of Chilisa, "recovery and discovery."[14] As such, what decolonization calls for is the "[r]ecognition of various forms of knowledge and knowing."[15] This entails a strong awareness of the power-knowledge relations at play in the ways in which our understanding of reality is produced and the ability to acknowledge those forms of knowledge that have been excluded or marginalised. These two dimensions are directly relevant to PME's central aim: imparting knowledge and fostering the ability to engaging critically and flexibly with contemporary realities by drawing on a multiplicity of perspectives.

Despite these two key dimensions, however, it is important to note that "there is no single way to approach decolonization; and different communities require different support, strategies, and conversations."[16] As such, decolonizing PME can mean many things and cannot be achieved without effort. Decolonizing requires a sustained and serious commitment within the organization, a determination to challenge received wisdom, and most importantly, need not be understood as a "one-off" exercise. As Tuhiwai Smith reminds us "[d]ecolonization is a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels."[17] Decolonization therefore needs to be understood as a process that is riddled with starts and stops, addressing aspects at different levels before proceeding further. In this sense, the process of decolonizing challenges the very linear logics informing western ideas of progress, instead embracing a much more non-linear and fragmented instantiation. Yet, when done seriously and continuously, decolonizing PME can become a powerful signal of the armed forces' intent to no longer ignore its colonial past, to be conscious of legacies of systemic racism, and to show efforts of making changes.

Why The Need for Decolonizing PME?

Prior to outlining two key pillars from where a decolonizing approach to PME can depart, it is important to consider why it is important to decolonize PME and what benefits it yields. Three key dimensions stick out. The first concerns the military organization itself, especially its relation to "diversity, equity and inclusion," which, in the words of Lieutenant General Gary Brito of the U.S. Army, needs to become "an integrated part of how we do business in the Army."[18] As King has recently argued in an analysis of the British Army, decolonizing will help "to integrate racial and ethnic minorities more effectively"[19] so that the armed forces more closely reflect the diversity of British society. Yet, he notes, while the British Army's efforts seem "sincere," existing elements within current "British military culture," such as its institutional structure and existing discriminatory social practices, impede such efforts.[20] As PME is directly engaged with developing knowledge and understanding, it can be a crucial tool for challenging and transforming cultural and structural obstacles toward effective anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practices within the organization. The effects cannot be underestimated as

"more inclusive organizations are better able to attract and retain talent."[21]

The second dimension speaks more broadly to military effectiveness, where PME is widely regarded as an important factor to improve such.[22] In the words of Holder and Murray, "the history of military innovation and effectiveness in the last century suggests a correlation between battlefield performance and how seriously military institutions regarded officer education."[23] Decolonizing PME becomes especially pertinent for the armed forces' need to work effectively within multinational settings. Such operations require complex interoperability. And here, effective interoperability, which is seen as crucial in enhancing legitimacy,[24] has a crucial "cultural" dimension[25] and, as "cultural variables" in multinational coalitions, "can affect mission outcomes."[26] The problem of "cultural interoperability" not only matters at the political-strategic level but also invests the tactical level, as often "tactical units bear the brunt of interoperability demands."[27] From this perspective, it is essential that PME teaches military personnel of all ranks how to relate to and work with partner nations by being aware of possible intercultural frictions as well as their own positionality with regards to existing historical and contemporary colonial legacies.

The third dimension concerns the centrality of civil/military relations in democratic settings. Broadly, decolonization is linked to processes of democratization, specifically in its potential to challenge structural barriers to substantial equality and access to social, political, and economic rights. As the armed forces are key institutions within democratic states, they cannot be excluded from the societal debate on decolonizing. This becomes even more pertinent when armed forces face the risk of being called to directly intervene in these, as, for example, in the case of former U.S. president Donald Trump threatening to deploy U.S. military personnel in a response to the anti-racist protests that followed the killing of George Floyd.[28] Such actions raise questions on the boundaries of executive power as well as the function and limits of the armed forces in the domestic space. PME's engagement with questions of race, structural inequalities, discrimination, and their historical legacies are thus central in fostering a democratic spirit within the forces so as to contribute to the health of democracy.

The above considerations offer evidence of two aspects. First, decolonization plays a crucial role in the armed forces' ability to fulfil its role, both domestic and abroad;[29] and second, PME is a crucial component in this process via its direct link to knowledge, understanding, and ultimately the culture of the organization. In what follows we consider some initial aspects from which a decolonization strategy for PME can depart.

Curriculum: A first point of entrance is the curriculum, as curricula development has always been and continues to be a key concern for educators.[30] The recent moves toward decolonizing the curriculum can be seen as a continuation of the 1990s focus on an "inclusive curriculum"[31] and began to acquire greater force in the early 2010s precipitated by the Malaysian conference on "decolonizing the University"[32] and the Rhodes Must Fall movement originating

at the University of Cape Town and subsequently mirrored at the University of Oxford.[33] Key learning points pertaining to PME can be drawn from these wider efforts made in HE.

First, curricula in PME should look out for the worldviews these enable. This means questioning the identity and location of writers, and what they write, and how. Sabaratnam captures this issue: "Would we find it acceptable if the writings and teachings on the situation of women and gender relations were done almost exclusively by men? How would this influence the kinds of perspectives presented?"[34] This point refers to the broader issue of positionality, questioning how the author's specific role, identity, and relations influence the process of knowledge production.[35] PME should therefore pay specific attention to positionality in teaching. For example, in studying conflicts, conflict management, and stabilization, it is essential to consider the different knowledges produced by actors from "outside" the conflict and those of local stakeholders living within conflict-affected communities.[36] With regards to the latter, Mwambari invites us to reflect on which local knowledge is included and which excluded, stressing the importance of capturing the knowledge of marginalized voices, such as local translators.[37]

Second, decolonizing the curriculum needs to engage with the lack of representation of underrepresented groups. The content of the PME curriculum in great parts reflects and maintains a "West is Best" perspective that represents a white, western intellectual tradition as a universal form of knowledge. Decolonizing the PME curriculum therefore necessitates acknowledging a multiplicity of perspectives and multi-centric knowledges that asks students and instructors to extend their knowledge beyond white authors and non-white token figures such as Sun Tzu and Kautilya, who themselves are mainly read through Eurocentric eyes. Due to this, non-western perspectives are kept marginal, serving "commodified representations of the other,"[38] rather than aiding the learning process by challenging the normative categories through which we understand and construct reality. This is an especially important consideration as decolonizing the curricula must not be reduced to "adding" non-western authors and perspectives while subtracting "western" ones. It is about opening our frames of references to alternative voices and viewpoints beyond Eurocentric biases. Indeed, today's so-called "wicked"[39] problems cannot be solved by relying on one perspective or one method of investigation, requiring instead a plurality of theories and methods.

Third, what perspectives and experiences do our readings exclude? In the field of security, for example, the global south's perspective on world events has largely been marginalized. We see this clearly in discussions of World War II, where "racial and colonial dimensions, including the roles played by black troops in the United States and colonial troops in Britain"[40] are greatly ignored. Indeed, when it comes to war in general, we rarely focus on accounts of war from non-western perspectives. When done, however, it has often been with a focus on "weaponizing cultural knowledge" or understanding the enemy better. Both attempts have been affected by strong orientalist tendencies,[41] which extend beyond the domain of war and can also be observed in "operations other than

war." These low-intensity interventions tend to be framed in the global north/west as forms of development work, conflict prevention, or humanitarian aid, with little attention to non-western, underprivileged voices. Instead, a decolonizing approach passes through questioning the very idea of the "west" and its constitution. This requires a sustained engagement with the "west" not as a fixed and reified entity but rather as a category of thought which has always been subject to change.[42] From this point of view, decolonization is, therefore, foremost a process of immanent critique that grapples with the constitution of what we consider the "west." As such, decolonizing the curriculum "isn't simply about removing some content from the curriculum and replacing it with new content—it's about considering multiple perspectives and making space to think carefully about what we value."[43] Moreover, decolonizing needs to question the primacy of the western-centric narrative, which purports the west as the sole producer of universalizing principles from which normative superiority is then derived. For example, Grovogui shows how the very idea of universal human rights is not an exclusively western creation, as non-Europeans have put forward "multiple formulations of ethics that sought to ennoble human existence through enforceable standards akin to human rights" which are "coeval to western practices and institutions."[44]

A decolonized curriculum, therefore, requires a dislocation of knowledge, a questioning of authors, locations, and positionalities, as well as an appreciation of marginalized voices.

Educators: Educators themselves provide a further point of entrance for thinking about decolonizing PME, as decolonization must "necessarily, involve an explicit exercise of the decolonising of ourselves because self-decolonisation is a necessary foundation for collective decolonisation."[45] And here self-reflection becomes a key aspect as it provides educators with the opportunity to become more aware of their implicit "West is Best" bias toward western theories, methodologies, and practices.[46] That these still dominate PME is no surprise given PME institutions' historical legacy tied to colonialism. Becoming more self-reflexive allows educators to realize how they themselves are implicated in the very system they attempt to transform.[47] A way to achieve this is self-location, by which educators become aware of their own positionality, the limits of their knowledge, and the inequalities and injustices which form part of their everyday experiences.

Furthermore, as Grioux points out, it is imperative that educators understand "how difference is constructed through various representations and practices that name, legitimate, marginalize, and exclude the cultural capital and voices of various groups" and that "a pedagogy of difference needs to address the important question of how the representations and practices of difference are actively learned, internalized, challenged, or transformed."[48] For educators this means understanding relations of power and other dynamics within the classroom that enable some voices and silence others.

As such, PME must embrace a very different function if compared to military training. While both contribute to forming military professionals, the latter is a structured top-down

approach, providing instruction and best practices. It is a form of knowledge that affords limited variation from accepted standards; simply put, assembling a rifle will have fixed procedures that must be instructed, learned, and reproduced. Education can have a much less hierarchical and one-directional formulation. Here, the space for alternative ways of imparting and producing knowledge can be explored. For example, storytelling can be a powerful tool for facilitating new openings. This is especially useful in teaching a multinational environment characterized by a multiplicity of backgrounds and experiences. Drawing from our own experience, in teaching the effectiveness, legality, and ethics of drone strikes it is often crucial to manage a delicate interaction between UK cadets with abstract knowledge of this issue, and international cadets that might have direct experience with this issue. In this context, the use of storytelling becomes an effective teaching method to facilitate classroom discussions on this sensitive issue and to challenge pre-conceived ideas. By sharing their personal stories, students are no longer passive consumers of knowledge, as is often the case in the highly hierarchical structures of the armed forces, but become producers of knowledge themselves. Educators can invite students to become such by creating a dialogical environment in which normalized understandings can be upset through the encounter with intimate experiences. The effective use of storytelling, however, requires the educator to develop a familiarity with this pedagogical tool, as well as an attention to the sensitivities involved in sharing intimate stories. A recent piece by McDowell and Cook outlining what they call "storytelling thinking" offers some important actionable steps to develop such skills.[49]

Thus, a key challenge for educators is to develop within students and themselves an open-mindedness toward reflecting on their own positionality and assumptions. This is specifically important for white students and educators that find themselves implicated in perpetuating white supremacy despite their best intentions. As Trepczynski notes, there are "thousands of white people who consider themselves aware of the pain racism can cause, and who could never imagine themselves inflicting it—but then do."[50] The role of the educator in decolonizing the student body is therefore in no way designed to make students feel guilty, but to instill an awareness for this issue and to foster a spirit of self-reflexivity. But as pointed out above, this needs to be accompanied by an introspective move by educators themselves, as this provides the ground for passing on such forms of self-reflexivity to the student body.

Conclusion

This article made the argument for decolonizing PME. We first outlined how we understand decolonizing and related it to the specific sensitivities of PME. We then showed the beneficial effects decolonizing PME can have on the military, its operational effectiveness, and wider civil-military relations, before ending with two suggested avenues (the curriculum and the educator) from which an approach to decolonizing PME can depart. Our suggested avenues are by far not the only paths, but we see these as two central pillars. Furthermore, both aspects can be immediately addressed, as educators can begin questioning their own positionality, the way they teach, and integrate additional perspectives into their curricula. Other aspects can follow, first the student body but also

dimensions such as a decolonization of architectures and symbolic structures. Future research could engage with these aspects, but also, more importantly, begin developing actionable steps for the implementation of a decolonization strategy. Here attempts made in HE could function as an inspiration and offer guidance,[51] as can the increasing scholarly work on the subject.[52] Regarding the latter, Tran's TRAAC model (Teaching Approach; Relationship; Activity and Assessment; Content) might provide fruitful actionable steps due to its guided questions, which allow educators to not only "explore core aspects of teaching and learning including the design process, implementation of activities, and the interaction between staff and students," but also to "reflect on their own position and perspectives, as well as those which they have incorporated into their teaching."[53]

"Decolonizing PME" is thus a multifaceted process that necessitates a sustained and continuous effort, making it important to reminding ourselves that it is not a "one-off" exercise. Understanding the history of colonialism, its existing structural legacies, and its relation to prevailing forms of structural racism to tackle conscious and unconscious biases as well as structural disadvantages within the military is, of course, difficult. Cultural traditions and entrenched social structures often take time to embrace new lines of thinking and convincing individuals of the benefits of decolonizing PME beyond aspects of "military effectiveness" will not be easy—indeed, calling for future research on best practices of how to do so—as it necessitates a delicate balance that avoids reaffirming established cultural and social structures. As such, it cannot be expected that PME institutions will find perfect fixes. But it is important to take steps toward unpacking the impact of colonization on the military if we are serious about valuing diversity and making the armed forces more reflective of contemporary society. Although western militaries have been making significant steps in this direction, valuing for example diversity within ranks, both in terms of gender and ethnic background,[54] efforts to create armies which are more diverse and therefore truly representative of society are bound to fall short without efforts to decolonize.

The shift in consciousness decolonizing PME can instigate will also have direct effects on the development of leadership skills that positively impact the work on issues of equity, diversity, and social justice. Indeed, as Getlaf and Osborne have shown, leaders conscious of decolonial approaches are more prone to value respect for differences, inclusiveness, equity, and social justice, and are furthermore using their influence to enact these values within their organizations.[55] This can have highly positive effects on the workforce by increasing diversity, which will positively contribute to address issues of recruitment and retention. Additionally, such leaders would move away from established paradigms and draw on global and intercultural perspectives to find novel solutions to the complex problems twenty-first century leaders face. Last, decolonized leaders will increase military effectiveness in multinational settings due to an increased understanding of their own positionality and the acknowledgment of non-Eurocentric forms of knowledge.

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Disclaimer: The authors are listed in alphabetical order and contributed equally to this work. The views expressed in this work are entirely their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the British Army or the UK's Ministry of Defence.

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