

HPSM MPhil Student  
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### Why Decolonize HPS Matters to Me

Decolonize History and Philosophy of Science matters to me because decolonial thinking undergirds the critical questioning particularly pertinent to our discipline: the suspicion of universality, the peeling away of modern “facts” taken as a given. To understand modern science as a colonial project that often exploits “others” in its construction of knowledge—and subsequently, to decolonize both science and the study of science—is to be sensitive to power and politics in the past, and thus, the present. To me, it is impossible to do critical history and philosophy of science without a decolonial perspective.

This commitment to critical scholarship is also immensely personal. As with many others in history and philosophy of science, I was training to be a scientist when I stumbled upon history. Growing up in Taiwan, my interest in biology was the ticket to higher education in the US; I wanted to get as far as possible from home and becoming really good at science was the only way I knew how. My need to leave Taiwan thus became tied to my need to be a scientist; they became even more tightly bound when that plan succeeded.

My encounter with history was the result of contingency (a word historians, I soon found out, loved): I had an empty afternoon during a first week of coursework, walked into a random history class, and decided to stay because the professor hilariously failed to explain an idiom involving prosciutto (“*avere il prosciutto sugli occhi*”; to have ham over your eyes; to not see the truth). Here, my scientist self learned that what had seemed eternal—sexual difference, the precarity of women, the desirability of whiteness—was a result of history, very often a history of violence and exploitation, both implicit and explicit.

And, as with the best of humanities education, as I trained to grapple critically with the present, I became more attuned to my own present and the construction of my identity. Through going back in time, struggling through dense theoretical texts about the co-constitution of sexuality and race in European empires, an awareness of my own gender, my race, and my sexuality crystallized. The imperial white masculinity that was constructed in constant relation with the poor, non-white, perverse, and non-male was not only still evident in the media, even on campus, around me, history could also explain how marginalization was still ingrained despite such knowledge of power differentials. Working through the politics of the past allowed me to see how I was still structured by them; understanding history became a way of learning to be more sensitive to myself.

It was the most difficult for me to turn “back home” and engage historically with East Asia. I embraced my femininity, non-whiteness, and queerness, albeit not always with ease. Yet turning to China and Taiwan required me to grapple tangibly with “decolonize HPS” in my *personal* history. The identity I built up at home was that of a scientist, itself inextricable with the urge to find myself abroad; but looking back from the US as a historian forced me to confront the construction of that identity and to problematize my yearning to leave Taiwan—and, too, the ultimate privileging of my US “historian self” over my Taiwanese “scientist self.” I resented the epistemological colonization of Western science over East Asian actors in histories of East-West encounters, but even more so, the

historiographical and personal pity that would sometimes well up in accounts of their striving for Western “modernity” and “excellence” while attempting to stay true to themselves—I hated it because I could recognize those conflicting tendencies in myself.

Yet this discomfort is precisely what propels decolonial, critical thinking; for me, it is what history of science attempts to capture. At what point does unease meld into ease and then into assumption? How does the contingent become the universal, and, in the process, encase relations of power? Attempts at answers are important historically and historiographically, but, for me, also ways of making sense of myself and our present. Decolonize HPS matters to me because it conceptualizes science, and even knowledge—on social and personal levels—as products of histories forged through contestation and politics. In other words, it insists that what we know about ourselves is never, and can never be, innocent.