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# Critical internationalization studies at an impasse: making space for complexity, uncertainty, and complicity in a time of global challenges

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I reflect on the current state of critical internationalization studies, an area of study that problematizes the overwhelmingly positive and depoliticized approaches to internationalization in higher education. I note that, despite growing interest in this approach, there is a risk that critiques will circularly result in more of the same if we do not attend to the full complexity, uncertainty, and complicity involved in transforming internationalization. In an effort to continue this work, and clarify the distinctions between different approaches to critical internationalization studies, I offer two social cartographies: one of different theories of change in relation to internationalization, and one of different layers of intervention. Finally, I ask what kind of internationalization might be adequate for responding to today's many global challenges.

## KEYWORDS

Internationalization; critique; coloniality; global challenges; complexity; complicity

In 2011, Uwe Brandenburg and Hans de Wit published a piece provocatively entitled 'The end of internationalization'. By de Wit's (2016) own clarification, the piece was motivated less by a concern about the literal end of internationalization, and more by a concern about its increasingly instrumental focus. It was primarily a call to 'rethink and redefine the way we look at the internationalization of higher education in the present time' (Brandenburg and de Wit 2011, x). Indeed, rather than predict the literal end of internationalization, the piece marked a turning point in what would come to be known as 'critical internationalization studies'.<sup>1</sup> While the piece was hardly the first critique of internationalization to emerge, it was in this case articulated by two foundational scholars of the field of internationalization studies, accompanied by further articulations of concern from de Wit (2013, 2014, 2016) as well as another field leader Jane Knight (2011, 2014). Knight (2014) wrote of her concern that internationalization was 'losing its way', lamenting a shift from internationalization as a process rooted in 'values of cooperation, partnership, exchange, mutual benefits and capacity building to one that is increasingly characterised by competition, commercialisation, self-interest and status building' (76). At around the same time, various professional associations made efforts to articulate a principled defense of more ethical, values-driven approaches to internationalization in education (e.g. Association of Canadian Deans of Education 2014; European Association for International Education 2012; International Association of Universities 2012; International Education Association of South Africa 2014).

Only five years later, much has already shifted in the internationalization landscape. For instance, a more recent piece by Altbach and de Wit (2018) again forecasts the end of internationalization, but this time in a more literal sense than in the 2011 piece: 'What one might call "the era of higher

education internationalisation” over the past 25 years (1990–2015) that has characterized university thinking and action might either be finished or, at least, be on life support’. However, like the earlier piece, the authors are not actually writing a post-mortem on internationalization. Rather, they seek to raise a question: ‘Are we facing the end of internationalisation or can the negative trends [of the present moment] also provide new opportunities and a better focus for our efforts?’ In this article, in an effort to answer this question, I primarily offer a discussion of what I diagnose as the current impasse of critical internationalization studies. This diagnosis is linked to larger questions about the future of internationalization, in particular: *Can internationalization in higher education be adequate to the task of preparing people to respond to today’s numerous overlapping global challenges?*

With my research group, the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective, I summarize these many global challenges under five major categories:

- (1) The systemic colonial violence that underwrites the maintenance of the dominant socio-economic system (which is premised on invisibilized exploitation and expropriation);
- (2) The inherent ecological unsustainability of the dominant socio-economic system (which is premised on unending growth and consumption that ignores the biophysical limits of the planet);
- (3) The emergence of multiple unprecedented ‘wicked problems’, such as political instability, extreme weather, economic precarity, mass migration, the cancellation of civil, human, and labour rights, and a global mental health crisis (which are rooted in systemic violence and ecological unsustainability, but which represent exponential growth in the scope, scale, and intensity of these longer patterns);
- (4) The intellectual and affective difficulties of ‘imagining otherwise’ when faced with wicked problems (which is reinforced by a lack of stamina for addressing uncertainty and complexity, and perceived entitlements to autonomy, coherence, and control);
- (5) The imperative to ethically integrate the gifts of multiple knowledge traditions and practices, so that we might draw on what Santos (2007) calls an ‘ecology of knowledges’ to respond to these problems in ways that contribute to greater collective well-being (which is difficult to do given tendencies to seek overarching solutions, and to engage marginalized knowledges through appropriation, projection, or idealization)

In this article, in order to ask whether internationalization can be useful for addressing these challenges, I consider the impact of the several years of intensified interest in critical approaches to internationalization in higher education. While the leading scholars of internationalization cited above hardly initiated the critical turn in internationalization studies, their participation signalled its mainstreaming and subsequent institutionalization around five years ago. Thus, inspired by de Wit’s (2014) suggestion at that time that ‘internationalisation in higher education is at a turning point and the concept of internationalisation requires an update, refreshment and fine-tuning taking into account the new world and higher education order’ (97), I argue that today the *critique* of internationalization in higher education is at a turning point, and the concept of critique requires an update, refreshment, and deep questioning taking into account both the new world and higher education order *and* old colonial continuities.

I begin the article by briefly reviewing the area of critical internationalization studies. I then consider some of its potential circularities, in particular as this relates to continued colonial patterns that manifest in: paradoxes of institutionalizing critique (through the consumption of critique); romanticization of the past (through colonial amnesia); and desire for simple stories and solutions (through moves to innocence). Next, in an effort to emphasize the complexities, uncertainties, and complicities involved in critical approaches to internationalization, I offer two potentially complementary frameworks that make visible at least some of the multiple possibilities that exist for approaching internationalization in a critical mode. Finally, rather than offering a final answer my orienting question, I multiply it, concluding with a series of open questions that might orient the next era of (critical) internationalization studies.

## Critical internationalization studies – and its limits

The internationalization of higher education is commonly framed as a neutral and inevitable response to contemporary patterns of globalization (Altbach and Knight 2007; Khoo 2011). Internationalization has been deemed instrumental for preparing globally engaged students, producing relevant knowledge, and generating solutions for an ever more complex and interconnected world (Stein, 2017a). Mainstream approaches to internationalization are therefore characterized by the presumed innocence and importance of the ‘internationalisation imperative’ (Buckner and Stein 2019; George Mwangi et al. 2018; Suspitsyna 2015; Vavrus and Pekol 2015). Yet with the growth of internationalization has also come growing concern about its potentially harmful implications. Critically oriented scholars and practitioners increasingly problematize the overwhelmingly positive and depoliticized approaches to internationalization that tend to dominate in universities, and identify the continuation of enduring patterns of Eurocentric knowledge production, exploitative relationships, and inequitable access to resources.

Although, as George Mwangi et al. (2018) note, critical approaches are still marginalized in internationalization scholarship, an emergent strand of research about the ethics and politics of internationalization can be grouped under the broad umbrella of ‘critical internationalization studies’. Scholars and practitioners in this area warn that if individuals and institutions become increasingly interconnected, but power and resources are not redistributed and inherited patterns of relationship are not reimagined, then this may intensify existing patterns of inequality within an already uneven global higher education landscape. Despite broadly shared concerns, efforts to critically assess and reimagine the current orientation of mainstream internationalization are varied. Critical scholarship can be categorized in different ways – for instance, according to the theoretical framework or methodology employed, or the geographic region of focus. However, it is most common to group it based on the topic addressed – for instance, international student mobility and experiences (e.g. Guo and Guo 2017; Oleksiyenko, Cheng, and Yip 2013), internationalizing the curriculum (e.g. Lockett and Shay 2017; Stein, 2017), international collaborations (e.g. Adriansen and Madsen 2019; Omanga and Mainye 2019), global rankings (e.g. Amsler 2014; Shahjahan, Blanco Ramirez, and Andreotti 2017), (neo-)nationalism and (neo-)racism (e.g. Lee 2017; Lee and Rice 2007; Yao, George Mwangi, and Malaney Brown 2019), etc.

Reflecting on the emergence of critical ethnic studies, Mitchell (2015) suggests that ‘critique stages our sometimes mundane and sometimes extravagant desires to make a difference in the world’ (92). While this is not a problem in and of itself, there is nonetheless a need to be vigilant and attentive to what underlies these desires, and what efforts to fulfil these desires might unwittingly reproduce. Mitchell’s insights can be fruitfully, if imperfectly, translated to the context of critical internationalization studies. How might we be overestimating the impact our critiques, and underestimating the enormity of the problems we face? In order to unravel and unlearn the inherited hierarchies and separations that naturalize uneven global relationships, colonial representations, and resource inequities in higher education, we will need to go beyond quick fixes and look deeply and unflinchingly at the assumptions that we hold about ourselves and our institutions, and about how change is made. Critical approaches to internationalization offer a means of doing this work, but they can also become a means of deflecting examination of the difficulties of substantive change, including shifting our investments and desires away from the continuity of an inherently violent and unsustainable system. This means that it is crucial to ask to what extent critiques of internationalization can challenge this system. In the following section, I address some emergent circularities of critique that have arisen with the mainstreaming of critical approaches to internationalization. In particular, I highlight a persistent failure to reckon with both the enduring role of colonialism in internationalization, and relatedly, a failure to address complexity, uncertainty, and complicity in our efforts to address this colonialism.

### *Paradoxes of institutionalization (consuming critiques)*

As noted in the introduction, the mainstreaming of critical internationalization studies has been evident not only in the scholarly literature but also in the realm of professional associations. For

instance, in their 'Accord on the Internationalization of Education', the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (2014) recognize both potential benefits and risks of internationalization, including the risks of: exploitative practices rooted in a profit-maximization model; systemic exclusion from participation; personal and social disruption; (neo)colonization, and compromised safety for participants in international activities. In response, they promote: economic and social justice and equity; reciprocity as a foundation for international teaching and research partnerships; sustainability; intercultural awareness, ethical engagement, understanding and respect; and equity of access to education, regardless of socioeconomic status or circumstance. The effect of this important intervention, and other calls for increased ethical accountability in the context of Canadian higher education, is made evident in some of the more recent international policies and planning documents of individual institutions.

To illustrate, I consider the draft international strategy of my institution, the University of British Columbia (UBC). I should note that I served on the staff, faculty, and student working group for the plan, which was only one of many campus constituencies consulted. However, here I comment only on the document itself, which we discussed at length as part of our meetings, but which I had no role in writing. In fact, the comments that I offer here echo those that I sent in response to a public request for feedback on the draft. On the website where the draft is posted, in the first bullet point under a list of what was learned from consultations with the UBC community, it is noted, 'You care about the social purpose of the university and an approach to global engagement that is anti-colonial and rooted in inclusion, humility, accountability, accessibility and collaboration for mutual benefit'. Although the word 'anti-colonial' is not used in the strategy document itself, it does note, 'We recognize our colonial past and present, our contribution to systemic inequities, and we commit to advancing global engagement that rests on a foundation of integrity, inclusivity, equity, accountability, mutual benefit and positive impact'.

On the one hand, these explicit recognitions of the university's complicity in colonialism – not only historically, but also presently – are rather remarkable for a document of this kind. On the other hand, these statements are followed up with no further discussion of precisely which activities make up this 'colonial past and present', and no elaboration of particular steps to address this coloniality in policy or practice. This is despite the fact that there are opportunities for such follow-through in the strategy itself. For instance, there is a stated intention to 'create a heatmap of current global engagement'. Part of this work could be a deeper consideration of the ethical dimensions (including challenges, successes, and failures) of existing international projects, partnerships and research. Although the strategy document could be strategically useful for those advocating for anti-colonial actions, it does not commit the institution to any specific set of activities or responsibilities for which it can be held accountable.

The webpage hosting the draft also notes that through campus consultations, it was learned that 'You believe in a UBC that embraces our full diversity – where the dichotomy of international versus domestic disappears, and all students contribute and have access to programs, projects and experiences that foster global citizenship'. In the strategy document, this notion of a disappearing dichotomy is absent, but it is nonetheless worth noting the limits of a discursive 'flattening' of national-status that is not accompanied by parallel shifts at the material level. For instance, UBC raised international student tuition by over 50% between 2015 and 2018, and the fees continue to rise. This equates to a tuition cost seven times more than domestic students (Zhao 2019), which reflects trends in the Canadian context more widely. As Usher (2018) notes, international student fees in Canada have steadily risen, in 2016–2017 making up 35% of all fees collected, compared to 19% ten years earlier. Meanwhile, as domestic fees have increased at around the rate of inflation plus 2% per year over the past 10 years, for international students the rate is inflation plus 4% per year (Usher 2018). It thus appears that, even as some institutions have deepened their consideration of the ethical dimensions of internationalization, in a purely material sense, the model of profit-maximization remains in place.

In sum, while the institutionalization of critique can have strategic benefits for those seeking change, it does not necessarily represent an unreservedly positive development, especially when

institutions or other organizations mobilize critique in tokenistic and selective ways. The effect can be to improve their public image and deflect further critiques, but without actually interrupting the continuation of colonial business as usual. In this way, consumption and instrumentalization of critique represents a furthering of colonial relations, and a possible barrier to future critiques of institutions that claim to be 'already doing it' (Ahmed 2012). Thus, with the institutionalization of critiques of internationalization we often see a process of appropriation and incorporation 'where alternatives are again rendered invisible precisely when they are voiced (but cannot be heard)' (Shahjahan, Blanco Ramirez, and Andreotti 2017; see also Ahenakew 2016).

### ***Romanticizing the past (colonial amnesia)***

As is the case with many critiques of higher education in general, many critiques of internationalization remain trapped within a horizon of hope that positions a previous era as a golden age. Refusing the neoliberal lie that 'there is no alternative', these critiques turn to the past for resources to defend non-neoliberal possibilities, which can lead them to romanticize these earlier eras without seeing the problems they also created. This results in the continued invisibility of the colonial logics that orient not only mainstream internationalization, but many critical approaches to internationalization as well. In the critical vein, this tends to take the form of a romanticization about the post-World War II/Cold War era of internationalization.

According to Trilokekar (2015), the period from 1945 to 1960 was a 'Golden Age' of international education in both the US and Canada. It is by now common-place to describe a marked shift between internationalization based on 'aid' during the post-World War II/Cold War era to internationalization based on 'trade' in the present. For instance, Johnstone and Lee (2014) lament that 'since the 1990s there has been a shift in Canada's policy from a pursuit of world peace and social justice to the imperial "center and periphery" dichotomy that characterizes neocolonial globalization with monopolies of wealth, knowledge and power' (212). From the perspective of a critique of the move from 'aid to trade', a firm distinction is maintained between North-South educational relationships premised on aid and those oriented by economic interests, with a noted preference for the former. However, if at one level contemporary marketization represents a significant shift from the post-WWII/Cold War approach, it is also necessary to consider to what extent these earlier approaches were indeed more benevolent.

Many have pointed to the fact the international higher education during this era was largely oriented by Cold War rivalries (which included many intermittent 'hot wars') and competition for dominance and influence in the Global South, in particular competition between the US and its allies, and the USSR and its allies. Indeed, according to de Wit (2002), 'North-South relations dominated internationalization strategies in higher education in the period from 1950-1985' (12). For instance, McCartney (2016) argues that in Canada, international student policy of this era was tightly bound up in the government's concerns about 'Canada's changing place in the world', specifically, its 'role in the Cold War and its emergence as an international economic power' (4). The welcoming of international students was rooted in an anti-communist desire that students would return to their home countries as vectors of capitalism generally, and of Canada's national economic interests specifically. Thus, the stated aims of treating international students as aid recipients are rooted in instrumental national interests. These aims also tend to belie a paternalistic presumption of colonial *noblesse oblige* to transmit supposedly universal knowledge and skills from the Global North to the Global South (Stein and Andreotti 2016).

Ultimately, there is much to be lamented about recent developments in relation to internationalization over the past few years, in particular, intensified marketization through the soldification of an educational credential export market (Andreotti, Thiago, and Stein 2018), and the growth of xenophobia in many popular host countries like the US and the UK (Rizvi 2019). However, in some ways concerns about the 'decline' of internationalization appears to be a thinly veiled concern about a potential declining advantage and dominance of Western higher education. In particular,

there is decreasing certainty that there will be a perpetual pool of international students willing to pay exorbitant prices to study in Western institutions. One can find, for instance, numerous news articles about institutions seeking to ‘diversify’ their international student ‘markets’, as a buffer against potential declines in enrolment. When the previous eras are not evaluated with an adequately critical lens, particularly one focused on colonial relations, but rather a Euro-centred nostalgia, it becomes easier to uncritically frame the perceived risk of ‘decline’ in the West as a collective, universally-experienced loss.

As Bolsmann and Miller (2008) contend, internationalization is ‘a continuation of former imperial and political connections that have evolved into financially beneficial markets and sources of income for western universities’ (80). However, there is a sanctioned ignorance of the history of colonial relationships in internationalization that is often reproduced in the romanticization of the post-World War II/Cold War era. Thus, proposed solutions or alternatives to existing problems and arrangements of internationalization will risk reproducing harm if they fail to fully account for the colonial history, and to fully transform the enduring colonial dimensions, that shape internationalization. That being said, we cannot simply say that current forms of internationalization are an extension of earlier eras of colonialism, and leave it at that. We must ask about the specificities of the current context, including by addressing the complexities and uncertainties that have developed. If Altbach and de Wit (2018) are indeed correct that we are ‘seeing a fundamental shift in higher education internationalisation’, then ‘that will mean rethinking the entire international project of universities worldwide’.

### *Seeking simple stories and solutions (moves to innocence)*

A specific set of moralized framings has emerged within the critical internationalization literature, which I summarize as narratives oriented around ‘3 Vs’: victims (i.e. those defined by their marginalization); villains (i.e. those defined by the harm they cause); and victors (i.e. those defined by their heroic resistance to oppression and their fight for greater equity). It is vitally important to identify and denaturalize how racial, economic, national and other power structures as well as individual choices strongly shape how people are unevenly positioned in relation to processes and policies of internationalization in higher education. At the same time, the landscape of internationalization is incredibly complex and power is multidimensional, meaning that this kind of simplistic framing is inadequate for understanding all of the forces at play. In the context of internationalization, individuals may be marginalized in some ways, *and* advantaged in others.

Apart from an overall erasure of these complexities of complicity, there are at least three limitations of the ‘3V’ framing. First, it frames people as one-dimensional and thus does not allow space for the complex personhood of the most marginalized. According to Gordon (1997)

Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society’s problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward ... complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people’s lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning. (4–5)

Instead, the 3Vs either defines marginalized people by their traumas (as victims), or presents them as heroic protagonists (victors) who are tasked with undertaking transformative institutional change toward greater justice for the benefit of all.

Second, the 3V framing is often articulated out of a desire to identify and align oneself with the ‘victims’ and/or the ‘victors’ as a means to avoid confronting one’s responsibility in harm (and possibly seeing oneself as a ‘villain’). Third, and relatedly, this framing masks the fact that within the colonial-capitalist global landscape of higher education, no ‘purely’ innocent position exists – even among those who are structurally excluded or marginalized (Mitchell 2015). Simply having a critique of a problem does not inoculate one from being part of the problem, and being marginalized in one



way does not preclude one from being complicit in others' marginalization. As Shotwell (2016) notes, 'complicity carries differential weight with our social position', yet no matter who we are 'we are not, ever, pure. We're complicit, implicated, tied in to things we abjure' (6). To assume otherwise grossly underestimates the scope and scale of the challenge of undoing the effects of hundreds of years of colonial violence in and on higher education. None of this is to say that greater equity is not worth fighting for; but on another level, seeking justice within an inherently ethically compromised system that is only made possible through ongoing racialized exploitation and expropriation, and ecologically unsustainable practices of capital accumulation, will always be a limited horizon of justice.

Finally, there is a need to problematize the desire not only for simple stories but also simple solutions. DiAngelo and Sensoy (2010) respond to the common request that they provide a checklist or other ready-made answers for how to enact multicultural education by emphasizing that this would not be an effective or sustainable means of interrupting inequality. Instead, this requires an ongoing practice and the ability to: appreciate the importance of complexity and socio-historical context when it comes to responding to any particular situation; cultivate sensitivity to ongoing patterns of inequality that have become naturalized habits, and develop the stamina and courage to address these patterns when they are reproduced; commit to continuous learning (and unlearning); and approach this work with humility about one's ignorances and self-reflexivity about one's complicity in harm. I find this framing useful for addressing the limits of critical approaches to internationalization that are always accompanied by prescriptive solutions.

None of this is to say that immediate action is not important for reducing harm, but rather that a more nuanced, long-term approach is also necessary. Part of the reason this may be perceived as less desirable is that simple solutions are perceived to be a faster way to restore one's sense of innocence from complicity in harm (Jefferess 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012), and easier than doing the difficult, uncomfortable work of unlearning one's investments in harm. Beyond the desire for innocence, there is often also: (1) a desire to *know precisely what to do* (i.e. a desire for intellectual certainty, which is rooted in the colonial sense that mastery of/over knowledge enables one to better describe, predict, and control the world); and, (2) a desire to *be the one to do it* (i.e. a desire for moral authority and 'goodness', which is rooted in a colonial sense of entitlement to lead, adjudicate what is just, and to be redeemed through the virtuousness of one's actions). Together, this sense of intellectual certainty and moral authority provide a sense of security that buffers one from potentially seeing and sensing the full extent of the problems that might otherwise fall under the umbrella of critical internationalization studies. Yet to address the coloniality of internationalization will require that we stay with uncomfortable feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, and equivocal authority, and it will require that we not only *do* things differently, or even just *think* about them differently, but that we actually learn to *be* differently. In order for this to be possible, we will likely need to disinvest from the desire for specific and immediate outcomes from the process of change, letting go of the desire to remain in control of the process itself, and dispensing with the search for assurances that we will remain the same.

### **Addressing complexity and uncertainty with social cartography**

Rather than offer a revised critical framework from which to approach internationalization, or declare the end of critical internationalization studies and abandon it, I propose that learning to work with and through complexity, uncertainty, and complicity will be vital for any effort to prepare ourselves and our institutions for today's many complex global challenges. Here, I offer two different social cartographies intended to pluralize existing approaches to critical internationalization studies; then I consider how they overlap within a single matrix. Social cartographies are maps of multiple ways of framing a shared issue of concern – in this case, internationalization. This enables those who engage the maps to trace implicit political and theoretical investments and assumptions of the different approaches, to better understand the relationships between different approaches, and to



more fully appreciate the possibilities and limitations that each can produce (Andreotti et al. 2016; Paulston 2009).

Unlike representational mapping, which claims to capture every existing possibility, social cartographies emphasize particular dimensions and de-emphasize others; they can also map absences as a means of gesturing towards possibilities that are viable, but currently unimaginable or unintelligible to most people. The resulting map is always partial and provisional, and in this sense, invites further engagement and an endless practice of critical conversations rooted in humility about one's own assumptions about the root causes and possible solutions to shared problems. Thus, social cartographies are produced with the assumption that any practical decisions or solutions that are derived from engaging with a map will be situated, limited, and strategic, rather than universal. Because of this, cartographies can serve as useful tools for scholars and practitioners who are seeking to meet the immediate challenges of their context, without collapsing the complexity and uncertainty inherent to the challenge at hand – and thus, without foreclosing the possibility of dissent and future revisions.

The first cartography maps *three different theories of change* that can orient critical internationalization studies: liberal, anti-oppressive, and decolonial. The second cartography maps *three different layers of intervention* – specifically, intervening at the level of doing, thinking, or being. In creating these cartographies, I draw on and revise some of my earlier cartographies of internationalization in order to offer a more succinct view of both the available and invisibilized possibilities for (and limitations of) reimagining internationalization (see Stein 2015, 2017a, 2017b; Stein, Andreotti, and Suša 2019; Stein et al. 2016).

### **Three orientations to critical internationalization studies**

The first and the most dominant approach to critical internationalization studies seeks to reframe 'internationalization for the global public good'. This approach tends to draw on *liberal theories of change* that address inequality through expanded opportunities and access, and address bias through greater awareness, representation, and intercultural understanding. This is generally the approach taken by leaders of the internationalization studies field in their critiques of a shift toward a more instrumental, commercial, and competitive approach, as outlined in the introduction of this article. Generally, this shift is framed in relation to an earlier era of internationalization in which, according to this narrative, the emphasis was about development and capacity building in the Global South. The emphasis here is on adjusting dominant policies and practices to ensure a 'balancing of cost, quality, and access' (Knight 2014, 79), and creating a welcoming environment that embraces and celebrates the diversity of international students and faculty. This approach is captured in the example of efforts to orient internationalization toward achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 (e.g. International Association of Universities, 2017). It tends to emphasize abstract notions of (in)equality and exchange, and to minimize questions of injustice and exploitation. Questions that go unasked in this approach to internationalization are questions such as: who gets to determine what constitutes the global public good, and how do 'development' projects tend to recentre Western knowledges and Western ideas of 'the good life' in ways that silence marginalized communities and contribute to greater ecological destruction and economic exploitation and expropriation (Ziai 2019)?

The second approach is that of 'internationalization for global solidarity', which tends to identify and address problems of: exploitation by seeking redistribution; competition by seeking collective action; silencing by speaking truth to power; and epistemic inequality by seeking to centre marginalized knowledges. This approach is oriented by various *anti-oppressive theories of change* that problematize racism, capitalism, sexism, nationalism, etc., such as those drawn from anti-capitalist, transnational feminist, and post-colonial theories. The critical approach described by George Mwangi et al. (2018) captures this theory of change well: 'Critical research promotes transforming the status quo, rectifying injustices and inequities, and understanding power relations to illuminate

oppression, exploitation, and marginalization'. Overall, this approach is much more concerned than the global public good approach to directly address historical and ongoing power inequities on a global scale – including political, economic, and epistemic power. In this approach, it is believed that internationalization can serve as a means of empowering marginalized individuals and communities toward making systemic change if the available resources are mobilized strategically. One example of this approach is the Scholars at Risk network, which 'works to protect threatened scholars and promote academic freedom around the world'. Another example could be student protests that emerge on campus when international student tuition fees are raised at rates much higher than domestic student tuition to protest this inequity. Despite the systemic critique of this approach, it nonetheless assumes that existing institutions can be reformed to achieve greater global justice through internationalization efforts.

The third and final approach that I review here is one of 'internationalization otherwise', which is generally oriented by de-/anti-/post-colonial, abolitionist and Indigenous critiques. I summarize this being oriented by *decolonial theories of change*, but notably, one may use some of the same critiques in this approach as in the anti-oppressive approach. However, the conclusions that are drawn from these critiques differ considerably between the two approaches. In particular, decolonial theories of change emphasize that systemic forms of domination are not just material and epistemic, but also ontological – that is, they sanction particular modes of existence, and foreclose others. Compared to anti-oppressive theories of change, decolonial theories of change are not prescriptive of what or how change should happen. That is, while decolonial, post-colonial, abolitionist and Indigenous critiques and practices are understood to be useful for recognizing enduring colonial patterns, asking difficult questions, and gesturing toward other possibilities, to seek within these theories a prescriptive (re)solution would be to route them back into the same set of colonial entitlements that they challenge. The emphasis is thus not on achieving any particular shift in policy or practice but rather on a form of internationalization that might prepare us to surrender our learned sense of superiority and separation, and affirm our radical interdependence with and responsibility to each other and the earth itself. This theory of change is only just emerging, and so while there are undoubtedly examples, they are generally activities happening in the 'cracks' of existing institutions or programmes, and thus are not readily visible or perhaps even recognizable as internationalization.

### **Three layers of intervention in internationalization**

There are three primary layers in which one can make change in relation to internationalization (see Andreotti et al. 2018; Stein 2019 for a more detailed examination of these layers). The first layer is methodological, in which change is enacted through making shifts to inherited forms of practice and policy making and implementation. The emphasis is on shifting the means of accomplishing a set of tasks or goals more effectively or efficiently, without shifting the task or goal itself. The overall orientation is of *doing things differently*. In the context of internationalization, this kind of intervention might be about things like shifting how international admissions are determined at the institutional level, or how federal immigration policies assess international student visa applications. Note that the actual direction or intended outcome of these kinds of intervention will be determined by other factors – in particular, the theory of change that is orienting those who are making the intervention. This is the case for all of the layers of intervention that I will review in this section. One can conceivably intervene in any of these three layers in relation to any theory of change – and vice versa – which is why I offer examples of the kinds of questions that one might ask the intersection of different theories of change and different layers of intervention in Table 1.

The second layer of intervention is epistemological, in which questions are raised about the politics of knowledge, including whose knowledge is considered valid and valuable, and what different possibilities emerge when we create space for not only doing things differently, but also *thinking about things differently*. This means not only rethinking how change is made, but also the intended outcome of the change itself. One might therefore ask where and how a particular idea of change was

**Table 1.** Example questions at the interface of different theories of change and layers of intervention in the context of higher education internationalization.

	(Neo-)conservative (Internationalization to retain/ restore power)	Neoliberal (Internationalization for profit)	Liberal (Internationalization for global public good)	Anti-oppressive (Internationalization for global solidarity)	Decolonial (Internationalization otherwise)
Methodological (level of doing)	How can we enhance screening and tracking processes for international students to ensure national security?	What recruitment practices can increase the enrolment numbers of international students?	What kinds of trainings can ensure that staff and students develop (inter-) cultural competency?	How can we recruit and retain more nationally, economically, and racially diverse students and faculty?	What kind of pedagogical exercises could show the limitations of both mainstream <i>and</i> critical approaches to internationalization?
Epistemological (level of knowing)	How can we ensure internationalization does not lead to the devaluation of Western knowledges?	What do university graduates need to know to compete in a global knowledge economy and labour market?	How can we encourage faculty to include more diverse texts and authors on their course syllabi?	How can we address inequity across all areas of the institution (admissions, curriculum, etc)?	How can we learn to discern, distinguish between, and value equally, that which is known, unknown, and unknowable?
Ontological (level of being)	How can we ensure that the presence of international students/faculty does not threaten the integrity and continuity of 'our' values, knowledge, and way of life?	How can we transform the purpose of higher education to ensure that we meet research innovation and training needs of global businesses?	How can we ensure that students feel connected to and responsible for communities beyond their immediate contexts (on a global scale)?	How can we ensure that other ways of being are not simply included in the institution, but also valued, centred, and rewarded?	How can we denaturalize the presumed supremacy of and desire for Western higher education, and ethically encounter other ways of knowing and being?

derived, who and how it was decided that this idea would dominate rather than another possibility, and what would be required to shift dominant frames of reference. These are more systemic, politicized, and contextual questions than are asked in an intervention focused on doing things differently – questions about who decides, in whose name, and for whose benefit. In the context of internationalization, this kind of intervention might consider things like what should be taught in international student orientations, and what instructors should consider when they want to enhance the international dimension of their courses.

The third and final layer of intervention is ontological, in which the focus is not about doing or thinking differently, but rather about *being differently*. Concerns here relate to the nature of existence, including the nature of time, space, relationships, language, knowledge, and other taken for granted categories and senses about what is relevant, real, possible, and desirable – and what isn't. Often these kinds of interventions are working toward not just making changes within an existing system, but total system change – that is, an entirely different system. In relation to internationalization, interventions in this layer might relate to shifting peoples' sense of global interdependence, or asking what alternatives appear possible before considering the possibility that there are alternatives that are viable but invisibilized within the existing system.

Before concluding this section, there are a few things to note about the approaches I have described and mapped, including both the theories of change and the layers of intervention. First, they are not exhaustive of all possible approaches to internationalization, just some of the most common. Second, none of these approaches are mutually exclusive – indeed, a single institution or even person might have elements of their work oriented by more than one or even all of these theories of change or layers of intervention. Each approach can be mobilized differently depending on the context and what is possible in that particular time and space. Finally, I note that in addition to the three theories of change reviewed above, for [Table 1](#), I have also added (neo-)conservative and neoliberal theories of change in order to illustrate through comparison the different kinds of questions that one might ask from different (not just critical) approaches.

## Concluding questions

In this article, I have asked whether internationalization in higher education can be adequate to the task of preparing people to respond to today's numerous overlapping global challenges. I have suggested that we need to answer this question in light not only of the limitations of mainstream approaches to internationalization, but also of the common circularities of critical internationalization studies. I concluded that most available solutions, horizons of hope, and tools of critique are not adequate to the task that is demanded of us by the present and its many global challenges. However, rather than offer an alternative approach to internationalization that would be able to adequately meet these challenges, I invited deepened engagements with the complexities of critique, and the circularities that often arise in efforts to make positive change. Ultimately, we will need different kinds of research and conversations about internationalization, conversations that can open up a space in which we can admit to ourselves and to each other that the problems we face are enormous, and in which we can ask earnestly how we got here, why we keep repeating circular colonial moves, and how we might experiment with ways to interrupt this circularity without assuming we know how to do it.

To conclude, inspired by Scott's (2004) call to rethink not only the answers but also the questions that animate critical scholarship so that we might be more responsive to the particular challenges of the current conjuncture, I pose several questions that might enable us to be more attentive to the many local and global challenges that we face in the present in order to pluralize possible futures, without losing sight of the past and the history through which we arrived here:

- How might critiques of internationalization be circularly reproducing the same colonial logics that we seek to interrupt? Can we offer a critique that does not reproduce these logics, given issues of (un)intelligibility and the difficulties of imagining otherwise?

- What kind of critical interventions in internationalization would be relevant, rigorous, and impactful in the current context, particularly given dispersed knowledge authorities and increased competition for epistemic space and attention (Bauman 2001)?
- How can critical interventions attend to the complexities and complicities of internationalization, instead of seeking simplistic narratives and solutions?
- How can we ensure that in seeking to decenter the West we do not simply propose a new centre that will repeat underlying colonial patterns of hierarchy and universality?
- How might (often unconscious) colonial investments in, desires for, and perceived entitlements to things that come with internationalization (e.g. increased funding, increased research opportunities) contradict intellectual critiques of the potential harms of internationalization? What kinds of practices and pedagogies, in addition to critique, could interrupt these investments, desires, and perceived entitlements?
- Should critical internationalization studies scholars abandon struggles over the meaning or purpose of internationalization, and simply conduct internationalization by another name? Or should we strategically utilize the name of internationalization and reframe its meanings for projects that contest mainstream institutional goals?
- How can we fight for more equitable and ethical internationalization in the present, knowing that our critiques will likely be co-opted, and that higher education itself is subsidized by violent and unsustainable (local and global) practices?
- Some climate change scholars have argued that we may still be underestimating the risks involved in climate change, and may have less time than we think until we face climate collapse (e.g. Bendell 2018; Spratt and Dunlop, 2017). While it is impossible to say for sure, if this even a possibility, then what approaches to internationalization could help us prepare ourselves and others for this possible near future?

## Note

1. I credit Dr. Amy Metcalfe with coining the term 'Critical Internationalization Studies'.

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