

Towards a tika political science: Restoring balance, reflecting our context

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This article is a rejoinder to Annie Te One and Maria Bargh's article published in The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education in 2023, "Towards a Fairer and More Tika Political Science and Politics: Are Political Science Programs Equipping Students Adequately for Aotearoa Realities?" (vol. 52, no. 2).

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Restoration (like colonisation) is also a process, not an event, and it will require a change of mind and heart as much as a change of structure.

There will of course be difficulties: such transformations must confront the implacability of a power unjustly taken.

It will require courageous wisdom to change, and some will say it is impossible and unrealistic.

But when the ancestors crossed Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, they overcame what seemed impossible and realised that courage is simply the deep breath you take before a new beginning.

– Moana Jackson, "Decolonisation and the Stories of the Land"
(Jackson, 2021)

Introduction

The Eurocentrism and colonial origins of fields like anthropology and political science are well established. Some disciplines have begun to reckon with these legacies, but New Zealand political science has been largely silent. In "Towards a Fairer and More Tika Political Science and Politics: Are Political Science Programs Equipping Students Adequately for Aotearoa Realities?",¹ Annie Te One and Maria

¹ As per Te One and Bargh's definition, *tika* means "the 'correct' way to do something when grounded in Māori values" (2023, p. 2).

Bargh place a vital and pressing challenge before all of us who teach political science in Aotearoa New Zealand, which remains by and large “a monocultural field” rather than “a fair or true depiction of the political landscape of Aotearoa” (2023, p. 13).

In this rejoinder, we draw from our own experiences as scholars of political science and international relations, and reflect on how Te One and Bargh’s critique mirrors realities we have observed, and in which we have also been complicit. We reflect on specific experiences, through vignettes below, as well as overall patterns within our institutions that demonstrate the “everyday political whiteness” (Ambikaipaker, 2019, p. 275) that continues to shape New Zealand academia at large (Waitoki et al., 2024) and political science in particular. Everyday political whiteness is not just an abstract concept but a lived experience, visible in how institutions function and knowledge is legitimised, and whose voices are centred. This dynamic is especially significant when examining how academic disciplines respond – or fail to respond – to decolonisation and their inherent provincialism. From our various positionalities and academic roles across the country, we confirm the accuracy of Te One and Bargh’s account and emphasise the need for political science programs to respond with meaningful collective action to change how we practise our discipline in this place.

Our experiences and reflections

Everything I try to do within my university turns white: a feminist conversation to build a collaborative space becomes a white feminist research project, an idea for a course titled “Imperialism, Colonialism and Patriarchy” is apparently too niche and it becomes (the less pointed) “Politics of Culture and Power”, an effort to centre Indigenous knowledge and expertise in hiring unravels the delicate peace with my colleagues. “I do not know how to be useful at the university where I work!” becomes my refrain. And then I begin starting the courses I teach with readings from Māori and Indigenous studies conversations on education to get the students to turn their attention first to the university, the place within which they are asking big questions about the world and themselves. I ask the students but also myself every semester, do you know where you are? With this, I am learning together with the students how to be in this space as ourselves, to learn how to study international politics as ourselves.

I was raised in Aotearoa New Zealand and returned in 2003 after gaining my doctorate in Australia. I walked into a predominantly international relations-focused role where courses, like those in Australia, were based on American textbooks, and examples from the European Union and the United Kingdom abounded. I was broadly aware of this Eurocentrism, but the consequences of this were not especially real to me until a new colleague joined the faculty more than 10 years later and gently asked about the centring of these examples and the consequences for those standing on the edges of this mainstream. Moreover, it is only in the last few years that I realised that I had not even thought to acknowledge that Aotearoa New Zealand’s foreign policy was first represented by Māori, nor that Māori continue to play significant roles in the international arena through economic, cultural and political connections beyond the reach of the state. I have missed whole worlds in my rendering of global politics, and my students, and myself, were and are poorer for it.

I was primarily trained outside Western European and Anglo-sphere academic contexts. I am also not a native English speaker. When I entered a global academic context, I soon realised that it was often far from a space where the respectful and equitable exchange of ideas

happens. When discussing the region where I am from (which was often taken as a case study in international relations), I am still in disbelief when I see academic texts that focus on the region without referring to scholars from the region or documents in languages of the region, which leads not simply to difference in perspective, but sometimes factual incorrectness in the scholarship. However, the fact I am fluent in English and the scholarship valued by global academia and the Aotearoa New Zealand context made me especially aware that I have a privileged position that brings certain obligations with it toward honouring *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (Treaty of Waitangi) and if I do not reflect this in my work I can contribute to the same patterns that I have been critical towards in my own work.

As co-authors, we are multigenerational and first generation *tauiwi* (non-Māori), both Pākehā (European New Zealanders) and people of colour. We come with different migration stories, relations to colonisation and racism and their impacts, and relationships with *tāngata whenua* (people of the land). Together, we work across seven universities in all major subfields of political science as well as in cognisant disciplines,² and recognise how all of us, no matter our courses or specialisations, should meaningfully reflect Māori politics, worldviews and contexts. As Te One and Bargh articulate, engaging in this work brings us closer to upholding our Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations, and more accurately represents and prepares students for our political context. This work concerns all of us, and should not be confused with either a particular political position or simply a “Māori issue”. It aligns us with broader shifts that have long been afoot here and abroad; delay in making the changes Te One and Bargh identify denies our students the benefits of this transition and risks bringing the discipline and programs within which we work into disrepute. Even where we have made changes to how we teach and research, we can see how far we still are from realising the potential and responsibility of our discipline outlined by Te One and Bargh.

As Te One and Bargh underscore, although Te Tiriti o Waitangi statutes and statements commit our institutions to upholding Māori rights and authority,³ across our universities both *who* is teaching and *what* we are teaching as “political science” substantially underrepresents Māori. Māori teaching staff are either absent or a sole member of our political science programs, limiting the academic role models and potential pathways our students see before them, as well as the collective capacity of our programs to represent *mātauranga Māori* (Māori knowledge) in our classes and postgraduate supervision. Being the sole Māori staff member also comes with added and often invisible labours and challenges that lead many to leave, or not apply at all (Funaki et al., 2021; McAllister et al., 2019).

In terms of what we teach, with some minor exceptions in specific ethics or research funding processes, there is no formal expectation for staff to have knowledge about Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the treaty that outlines rights and responsibilities for all living here since 1840, or about *tikanga* (customary system of

² While most of us are trained in political science, not all of us have found a home in political science programs. Te One and Bargh’s (2023) piece productively opens a discussion on how this might not be an idiosyncrasy, but linked to the problems they describe that require examination of how this occurs.

³ Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington, Te Tiriti o Waitangi Statute, www.wgtn.ac.nz/documents/policy/governance/te-tiriti-o-waitangi-statute.pdf; Massey University Strategy 2022–2027, www.massey.ac.nz/about/te-tiriti-o-waitangi-massey/strategy-and-charter/; Ōtākou Whakaihū Waka – University of Ōtago, Te Aka Matua-Māori Strategic Framework 2030, www.otago.ac.nz/maori/maori-strategic-framework; University of Canterbury, Tangata Tū, Tangata Ora UC Strategic Vision 2020–23, www.canterbury.ac.nz/about-uc/corporate-information/strategy-and-plans/uc-strategic-vision-2020-2030; University of Auckland, University and Te Tiriti o Waitangi, www.auckland.ac.nz/en/about-us/about-the-university/the-university/university-and-the-treaty-of-waitangi.html; Lincoln University, Midpoint Update on Ten-Year Strategy 2024–28, www.lincoln.ac.nz/assets/Strategy/Final-Lincoln-University-Strategy-Midpoint-Update-2024-2028-1.pdf. For an overview of commitments made in university strategic documents across the country, see Waitoki et al., 2024.

Māori values and practices), the “first law of Aotearoa” (Mikaere, 2007; Williams, 2013).⁴ It is the exception in courses across all subfields and levels for political science students to have exposure to Māori scholarship, political institutions and practices, or conceptual frameworks and methodologies; where this is present, it is often greatly outweighed by Western counterparts. Almost all political science courses still take the state to be the primary unit of analysis, rather than the “nation” that has been recommended as one clear way the discipline can better reflect Indigenous politics (Ferguson, 2016, pp. 1031–32). Where Māori politics is engaged, Lindsey Te Ata o Tū MacDonald observes that political science in Aotearoa often limits analysis to a broad category of “Māori”, conflating and overlooking specific, diverse *iwi*, *hapū*, *whānau* (nations, subnations, family groups), and other political bodies “that have a history of representation that stretches beyond” settler arrival, New Zealand as a country and “Māori” as a concept (2016, p. 122). In almost all cases, it is possible for students to complete our degrees without a basic understanding of core Māori political concepts, Māori systems of governance, our settler-colonial context, or foundational political documents like Te Tiriti o Waitangi and *He Whakaputanga* (the Declaration of Independence).⁵

Beyond our classrooms, the tertiary culture of Aotearoa New Zealand is similar to universities around the globe in reflecting Anglo/Western European or “white” culture, shown to privilege particular values, practices, knowledges and narratives (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022; Collins et al., 2020; Gusa, 2010; Neely & Montañez, 2023; Schlesselman-Tarango, 2017; Smith et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2021). Signs of this abound, from the value placed on international (largely U.S. and U.K.) publishers, journals and referees over domestic counterparts in hiring and promotion, to the individualism that structures everything from promotion and grading to office design, to valorisation of the written over the oral word, to how rarely embodiment, emotions or care labour are acknowledged (Harding, 2015; Smith, 1999; Winter 2021). This “whiteness” goes largely unmarked, its cultural specificity and constructedness hidden behind being the norm, the objective, the rational and the only correct way of understanding. It maintains dominance through hiding how it is just as located as any other system of knowledge; instead of being a system of knowledge, it becomes *the* system of knowledge, to which all others are left wanting, are less, in contrast.

Anna Agathangelou and L. H. M. Ling (2004) call this power structure “the colonial house” of International Relations with upstairs inhabitants (who they call “White Cosmo Man”) and downstairs inhabitants, that is, the rest, the pesky post-colonial, Indigenous, Black, and scholars of colour who are so obviously in the West and in the Western academy. The “West and the rest” or the Western–Indigenous binary is itself a colonial construct, with the boundaries of the “West” continually imagined and reconstituted in opposition to the notion of an “other”, but consistently positioned as superior (Said, 1978; Tolbert & Azarmandi, forthcoming 2024). This hierarchic house of knowledge production has meant that, for scholars here and abroad, bringing Indigenous and other non-Western knowledges and methodologies into scholarship and teaching involves extra work and friction for staff, and is often “parochialised” – read as reflective of its specific context – while those from the European tradition are often presented as if they have “universal validity and reproduce an abstract and disembodied vantage point of the knowing subject” (Icaza & Vázquez, 2018, p. 119).

⁴ Some universities have developed brief training packages and resources for staff in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, introductory *te reo* (Māori language), or *tikanga*, such as Te Hāpai (THW–VUW) or Te Rito (Otākou / Otago). These are much needed, but currently remain optional and only cover basic introductions.

⁵ Of all these dimensions of politics in Aotearoa New Zealand, some universities ensure politics students learn about Te Tiriti o Waitangi through mandatory first-year courses, examples being Massey University as part of its BA program and, as of 2025, the University of Auckland with a university-wide course. In Lincoln University’s politics courses embedded in its environmental management, policy and planning degrees, Māori studies papers are compulsory at first, second and third year.

Underrepresentation of Māori in our staffing, curricula and campus culture means that our programs largely present Western politics *as* politics, and reflect in countless ways “the pivotal settler colonial and national assumption: that the Crown *always already* had and continues to have superior underlying title to Indigenous lands” (Mackey, 2014, p. 240). “Everyday political whiteness” is not just about irrational prejudice or unconscious bias, but emerges through structural features, collective actions, and underlying logics that stabilise power relations embedded in our institutions, and forestall justice (Ambikaipaker, 2019; Tecun et al., 2022). There are some important actions being taken to change this in specific classes and programs, or at university-level, but we still have a long way to go to strike the balance between Māori and *tāngata Tiriti* (people of the treaty) in our discipline. Efforts to recognise Māori aspirations can also be constrained by an approach that sees Māori as one of many stakeholders in decision-making processes, resulting in a limited “grafting” of acceptable practices onto the status quo whereby “*taonga* [Māori treasures] Māori are reduced to components that can enhance the university’s image as a bicultural institution while entrenched Pākehā norms, values and structures are left unchallenged” (Waitoki et al., 2024, p. 552).

Teaching Western politics as politics excludes and devalues other approaches and bodies of knowledge, and offers a limited lens on our political world (Tully, 2016). Both Māori and non-Māori students have echoed Te One and Bargh’s concern that this fails to equip them with sufficient understanding of the political context in which they work post-degree. Continuing to overrepresent Western knowledge and approaches also causes students and staff from other contexts to struggle to belong or thrive except to the extent they can assimilate. In this context, Te One and Bargh remind us that, while work can be fulfilling, “there is a greater emotional and physical cost” (2023, p. 8) for Māori academics, and current underrepresentation of Māori in politics classrooms and journals could be because “Māori students and academics may not see the politics discipline as one which is culturally safe” (2023, p. 11). It has also made some students feel unrepresented, unrecognised and discouraged from pursuing further study (Lacy, 2024). As Melinda Webber and Angus Macfarlane find in their studies of key conditions for Māori student success: “In essence, Māori students may feel they must make the choice between prioritizing academics (and laying down their Māori identity), or prioritizing Māori identity (and laying down their academic integrity)” (Webber, 2008; Webber & Macfarlane, 2020).

Te One and Bargh call us to not merely include more Māori political content, but also decentre Western frameworks, which can easily miss the meaning and potential import of non-Western political concepts or realities. One clear example of this has been the use, as interpretive framework, of Western notions of “sovereignty” that founded the Westphalian nation-state system: “an exclusionary concept rooted in an adversarial and coercive notion of power” (Alfred, 1999, p. 59; Bauder & Mueller, 2021). Indigenous definitions of political authority defy this Western concept; continuing to centre sovereignty in our research and teaching leads to misunderstanding – and the presumption of understanding – about other conceptions of political authority. It also ensures that Indigenous peoples begin to negotiate their political aspirations from a position of profound disadvantage (Reilly, 2006, p. 23). Failure to find commensurate concepts in Indigenous politics has been mobilised to deny the sovereign existence that decolonising and presently colonised people are insisting upon and struggling for. This also hinders the work that post-colonial and Indigenous scholars are doing to decolonise our institutions and build alternative concepts and knowledge infrastructures to realise epistemic freedom (Getachew & Mantena, 2021; Kamola, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017; 2021).

All of us live, work and study on Māori land, where, despite colonial fictions, sovereignty was never ceded (Waitangi Tribunal, 2014), and Māori political authority as well as systems of governance continue to operate to this day. As Te One and Bargh persuasively articulate, we who reside here and teach

“political science ha[ve] a particular obligation to represent Māori politics” (2023, p. 13), and to ensure that *how* we teach and research, whatever our subfield, reflects this context. Where Agathangelou and Ling (2004) generalise the experiences of “downstairs inhabitants” from a global perspective, Te One and Bargh’s careful analysis highlights the importance of context and locality. Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, *kaupapa Māori* (Māori based) politics, as “the first form of politics in Aotearoa”, must be centred, and decolonial and Indigenising efforts need to be led by Māori, as the original political actors within this framework (Te One & Bargh, 2023, p. 6). As Māori politics tend to be “grounded” and “very localised” (Te One & Bargh, 2023, p. 3), the forms this takes will also be contextual and multiple. Yet we all have a role to play in the transformation required, and there are clear steps we can take together.

Where to from here? How to challenge everyday political whiteness

Te One and Bargh’s article is both generous and ultimately hopeful; they offer their critical analysis to “support positive change” (2023, p. 2). Their analysis highlights how working in tertiary spaces comes with countless daily forms of “slow violence” (Nixon, 2013) and “epistemic violence” (Spivak, 1988). They nonetheless extend this challenge to us out of profound care for students and aspirations for the discipline. Sara Ahmed (2021) highlights how often, and detrimentally, efforts to identify and change harmful dimensions of our institutions are met with vilification of those who have made these efforts. Equally common and counterproductive are impulses to minimise or rationalise the issues, or deflect attention to the feelings of those in the early stages of engaging with what has harmed and been actively resisted by Indigenous peoples and people of colour for centuries. Yet rigour and integrity as core academic values call us to focus our energies on future-oriented conversations and collective work in our respective locations and institutional roles, with epistemic humility, commitment to unlearning some of our academic training where needed, and meaningful action.

The task of decolonisation is not merely to understand or name these power structures, but to challenge and dismantle the everyday political practices that sustain them. As Te One and Bargh, write, “structural change involves a transfer of resources and decision-making to Māori and a genuinely collaborative approach to the content and teaching of courses, including via Māori pedagogy and with Māori staff” (2023, p. 6). We must actively move these conversations beyond acknowledgment or responses at the individual level, to what we will collectively do to address the current imbalance and genuinely collaborate. Te One and Bargh (2023) offer a number of clear directions for next steps within our institutional contexts: changes to hiring full-time Māori academics; creating Māori academic pathways; support for Māori academic publication and research; and changes to content, epistemologies and methodologies in courses to better reflect the political context. These should become key priorities in our respective programs in the years ahead, and are projects in which tauwiwi have a significant role to play. These structural changes also bring us closer to achieving key aims recommended for institutions by the University of Waikato taskforce on racism: (1) a welcoming, inclusive and affirming environment for staff and students of all cultures where systemic racism has been eradicated; (2) *mana* (authority) of Māori teaching, learning and working at universities is enhanced; and (3) *mātauranga Māori* is meaningfully woven through teaching and research approaches (Smith & Jones, 2021).

Te One and Bargh also highlight the need for non-Māori academics to interrogate “the pervasiveness and invisibility of white supremacy in academia”, and how this impacts our teaching, research and institutions (2023, p. 12). Dominance of Anglo/Western European ways of thinking and living are so embedded in the fabric of everyday life in Aotearoa New Zealand, it goes largely unnoticed for those reflected in and advantaged by it (Moewaka-Barnes et al., 2014). This means that Pākehā academics will

have difficulties seeing how academia reflects and benefits them, and how inequitable our research, teaching and campus lives are today (Medina, 2013; Mills, 1997; 2007). It also leads some to misread this collective challenge as personal critique, or react in ways that hold us back from addressing it (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Alongside other actions ahead, then, Pākehā academics are called to cultural capacity-building—not to become experts in mātauranga Māori, but to understand their *own* cultural difference and take responsibility for how it is disproportionately represented in our classrooms, programs and scholarship. An important part of this process would also see Pākehā picking up the challenge of unburdening tāngata whenua and people of colour from the task of helping other Pākehā to see this is not personal critique, but rather an opportunity to change inherited systems, processes and practices for everyone's benefit.

Indeed, all tauwiwi academics are invited to realign their understanding of their own histories, cultures and work, and refuse the overrepresentation of Western worldview and histories as well as settler culture. Not presuming to fully understand the complexity and enormity of political theories or practices that are of this place and beyond our own training, such as tikanga or kaupapa Māori politics, tauwiwi academics must understand there is an essential and central place for this in the discipline and our political science courses and programs. This capacity-building is a necessary, but also preliminary, step to the genuinely collaborative relationships with Māori colleagues and structural, material changes needed in our programs to make this a reality.

Concluding remarks

The work that Te One and Bargh call us to in the discipline of political science is no small challenge. It requires us to notice our cultural edges and historical legacies, where many of us have been trained to speak in universals and as individuals. It requires learning to see how daily practices that can feel utterly ordinary reassert our colonial dominance. It asks those of us who inhabit positions as “experts” to step into truly unfamiliar terrain, where even our epistemic and methodological terms of reference are open to question and, taken alone, will be insufficient. But although we may be accustomed to the role of expert, we are also *learners by profession*, and we are at our best when we bring our open questions and keen awareness of how much there is yet to learn to our most difficult challenges.

The task ahead might feel daunting, but it is also exciting. We are invited to come as who we are, without the pumped up civilisational regalia and credentials, but in our full humanity, in the belief that this will shift the conversations and institutional decisions in meaningful ways. We see this excitement in new and different ways of addressing problems, of thinking outside our traditional political and policy frames. Relationships such as the personhood of rivers and forests, rooted in tikanga and mātauranga Māori, are already providing policy solutions where traditional Anglo/Western European approaches to policy have floundered. As we move into an era of increasingly wicked political and policy problems, the strengths and opportunities provided to us through an equality of multiple systems of knowledge behoove us to not be limited. We have such a unique wealth of possibility in this nation, and to embrace such charges us with potential.

For our students, our staff and the rich possibilities of what we as a discipline might become, this is a challenge profoundly worthy of our focus.

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