

Interview

Dr Leon Moosavi, Senior Lecturer, University of Liverpool, Singapore campus



This portrait of Leon was drawn by Myfanwy Franks, a freelance artist and researcher, who sketched Leon during the ongoing Decolonial Research Methods webinar series that Leon is coordinating.

Lizzie: Hi Leon, could you tell us a bit about yourself?

Leon: Firstly. Thanks for inviting me to have this conversation. I'm not really a very interesting person so there's not much to say. Somehow, I found myself in academia, which I think is because I have a lot of curiosity about what's going on in the world and it seems like academia might be the kind of place where we can ask those questions and sometimes find answers. The area I'm most interested in usually relates to topics like racism, Orientalism, Islamophobia, religious minorities, the legacy of colonialism. I'm very passionate about these topics because I believe that they have a huge impact on the modern world that we live in. I also believe that, as a collective, we haven't given them the attention that they deserve. I have been based in Singapore for the past 9 years, working at the University of Liverpool's branch here which offers one of the few criminology programmes that can be found in Southeast Asia. Before that, I was based in the UK which is where I was born and

raised, in Manchester. There's not much else to say about myself except that I support Manchester City.

Lizzie: Which criminologists do you count as your most important influences?

Leon: I'd be reluctant to name particular scholars as having been the most important influences on my intellectual development because I feel as though my understanding of the world has been shaped by my engagement with many different types of scholars, activist, commentators, and all of that has shaped my understanding. So rather than thinking about particular scholars, I would say the most important thing for me has been to make sure I engage with a wide range of perspectives and to try and sincerely consider those perspectives when trying to make sense of any issues. If you really pushed me to give some names, I would have to say that it was only at PhD level that I finally read something which I could say really struck me - although it wasn't by a criminologist. That was Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and his *Black Skin/White Masks* which made me realize that a lot of the issues that I'd been thinking about had been discussed so eloquently long before I was even born. For the first time when reading Fanon, I didn't feel as though I was reading academic material. I felt as though I was having a conversation with someone I knew who I really resonated with to the extent that it even felt like a type of healing. I know that sounds weird, but it was just how it was. Edward Said's *Orientalism* also had a huge impact on me, and his work has underpinned most of my scholarship and my general perception of the world. He also introduced me to a level and depth of scholarship and writing that's on another level which I deeply admire as I know that I could never produce what he produced even if I *really, really* tried.

Lizzie: Who or what influences you from beyond academia?

Leon: That's an interesting question. I would need to think about that to give a proper answer. I've definitely been shaped by the communities I belong to, which are quite complicated, diverse and even in tension with each other sometimes. One thing that is definitely clear to me is that important ideas don't only originate in academia. There are many people in the real world who can educate those of us who reside

within an academic bubble. I suppose it goes back to my previous answer which is to say what's really important to me is to have conversations with, and understand the perspectives of, a wide range of people, which also means paying attention to ideas that exist outside of academia, not just within academia. In this sense, one can find much to be inspired by within various communities outside of academia, whether we are talking about activist groups, political movements, religious groups, or even music. Actually, music has been an important influence for me in raising consciousness and awareness of social issues. Stand-up comedy has also been a big influence because stand-up comedians often also educate people about social issues, injustices, problems and things that we need to talk about. That's why I often say that comedians like Chris Rock and Dave Chapelle are some of the most important social scientists that have influenced me.

Lizzie: What does it mean to describe criminology as Westerncentric and how can this parochialism be transcended?

Leon: In many respects criminology is no different from all other academic disciplines. By now, it's well established that the knowledge that is produced in universities - and here I am talking about universities in the West but also universities outside of the West - is very much Westerncentric. What do I mean by this? Well, it means that the knowledge that has been produced, and the knowledge that has been taught, have tended to prioritise Western social contexts and Western concepts, theories and scholarship. This is unfortunate because it means that, not only do we ignore the problems, questions and issues that are facing most of the world's population, but we might also overlook inspiring and useful knowledge which has been produced in non-Western contexts simply because ethnocentrism leads us to believe that there is nothing worth knowing that originates from outside of the West which is of course simply not true. So, if we want to overcome this issue in criminology, there are actually many ways of doing this. For example, we may start to ask whether criminologists have neglected particular types of criminality, deviance and harmful behaviour because it is not as much of a concern in the West as it is beyond the West. We may also ask whether there are ideas, theories and concepts which have been developed beyond the West which might help us to view or address crime, criminality and punishment in a better way. Now all of that sounds quite

straightforward and that's because it is straightforward but the problem that we face is that even though it is straightforward the issue remains, and the problem has not been rectified yet. So, what I hope we will see is more criminologists recognising the specific history of knowledge production, reflecting upon how that shapes and, more importantly, how it restricts questions that we ask and the answers that we come to. If we remain within a Western-centric framework, we are not only doing a disservice to the discipline and to knowledge production but we're also selling ourselves short by neglecting the enriching possibilities that exist. There is also a lot to say about the specific role that criminology has played in the past, but also in the present, in enacting forms of control and domination which means that the discipline of criminology may have specific issues that need to be addressed, but I think you'll have to invite me back for another interview to tackle that one.

Lizzie: You have discussed some of the pitfalls of what you term the 'decolonial bandwagon'. Can you explain what you mean by that, and the limitations you argue it creates?

Leon: In the past 5 or 6 years, there has been a decolonial turn in UK academia. Now this seems like a good thing at first sight because it is true that it is long overdue for us to address the way in which colonial hierarchies and imperialistic stereotypes exist within British universities. So, generally, we should welcome this movement and we should try to produce an academic environment which overcomes the harmful legacies of colonialism. However, when I spoke about there being a 'decolonial bandwagon' in one of my recent articles, I was trying to draw attention to concerns that exist amongst a lot of proponents of decolonization, and those concerns are that decolonization may be a victim of its own success in this sense that when it becomes so popular it may become superficial, tokenistic, and co-opted. So, what I am trying to say is, while it is important to decolonize the university, we must also recognize that some types of decolonial effort may not be as good as other types of decolonial effort and, even more importantly, some kinds of decolonial efforts may even reinscribe coloniality and add to the problem rather than remove the problem. Now if this occurs it is not usually because there is a deliberate plot to undermine decolonization but it's more because there are well-intentioned people who mean to do right but who have perhaps not devoted the time, nor had the necessary

dialogues, to reflect upon decolonization, what it means, what it can achieve, what the dangers are, and so if we are to aim for decolonization we need to aim for a true decolonization which achieves the objectives that decolonization should aim to achieve. And I have to also clarify that when I express skepticism about some approaches to decolonisation, I don't only wish to accuse other people of engaging in limited forms of decolonization, but rather, I would also admit that some of my own efforts to decolonize have also had their problems and should perhaps have been approached in a different way. So, my hope is that anyone who's interested in decolonization, including myself, will carefully consider what we are trying to achieve and ask ourselves what is the best way of getting there rather than rushing into the project and making the mistakes that others who came before us previously warned us of.

Lizzie: What do you see as the necessary work and action that needs to take place to decolonise British universities?

Leon: Well, there is a lot to do but I suppose we have to start somewhere. There are already a number of good initiatives that are ongoing and what we need to do is learn from each other about what is working well within our own institutions. What needs to be done depends on who you are within the institution and what influence you have to shape what is happening. If you're a Vice-Chancellor or from the senior leadership of the university then there is obviously a huge amount of things that you can do. Most people I speak to about these issues are fellow academics who don't have the authority to make the types of widescale changes that are really required. However, that doesn't mean that academics cannot use the channels that exist within universities to raise awareness of these issues to ask for them to be addressed. Also, academics have a lot of autonomy in designing our own curriculum, choosing our own research agenda and deciding upon which scholarship to engage with. Therefore, my suggestion to those who want to be involved in what is probably the most significant movement to have emerged within British academia in at least a generation is to ask yourself: What am I reading? What am I teaching? What do I know about what is going on beyond my immediate context? What can I learn from those contexts? I don't mean to end on a bombshell, but I actually have some reservations about whether British universities can even be decolonised. I haven't

refined my thinking about this topic yet, and I am hoping to write about it in the future, but sometimes I feel as though coloniality is so deeply entrenched that there's no way back and that the best we can hope for is a critical awareness of coloniality rather than decoloniality. Sorry for that cynicism. Keep up the optimism and ignore me.
