

Afterword

Ritu Vij

Decolonising Political Concepts joins a growing inter-disciplinary line of enquiry into the constitutive role of colonialism and empire in the making of the modern world. The onto-political concepts that compose the architecture of political modernity – sovereignty, democracy, freedom, the notion of the subject, and agency, among others – come under scrutiny here for the occlusion of the hidden transcripts of imperial and colonial violence that underpin modern liberal and heterodox political imaginaries. The fictions of a shared political horizon of autonomy, freedom, and justice, belied by the history and after-lives of slavery, capitalist extractive logics, and the fractal divisions of who counts or does not count as properly human are brought into sharp visibility in this collection. In alignment with the desire of the decolonial collective to call an end to the imperialism of categories that enable the dominance of “Western reason” and the denial of coevalness with other (i.e., non-Western) geographies of reason, this volume aims to decolonise political concepts from Euro-modernity’s enclosure of reason *tout court*. Defying the high priests of the Western canon of political thought mobilises a shared desire to recover modes of thinking in the hinterlands of modernity to acknowledge and build on subaltern political worldings. The recovery of suppressed knowledges holds out the promise of subverting one-world thinking, countering Hobbesian narratives of the civilising effects of war and state-making and Lockean claims of private property as the necessary predicate of sovereign subjectivity (both, incidentally, shareholders in colonial trade companies). In a neat reversal of stadiational narratives of progress in which the direction of travel is only ever from the West to the East, *Decolonising Political Concepts* engages – and extends – Latin American Decolonial Theory to consider how non-European geo-epistemologies can replenish political thinking in the contemporary conjuncture. In the brief reflections that follow, I call attention to some of the more generative lines of thinking outlined in the book.

The chief strengths of this book are (1) its fidelity to the ambition that constellates the body of work produced by the Latin American theorists widely regarded as progenitors of Decolonial Theory (DT) (Enrique Dussel, Anibal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Ramon Grosfoguel, Boaventura de Sousa Santos). As outlined in the Introduction, Modernity,

Coloniality, and Decoloniality work in tandem in very specific ways. Because modernity and coloniality are constitutively entangled and therefore inseparable, all roads beyond DT's critique of modernity and coloniality point to the pre-modern and pre-colonial as the exclusive register of decoloniality proper. (2) Thinking both with and against the grain of Decolonial Theory, the project undertaken in this collection questions the Western canon for its elision of the inseparability of modernity from colonialism but also presses against disciplining proclivities within the Decolonial canon as well. (3) The book's singular achievement, however, is its extension of decolonial thought beyond its Latin American provenance. Deploying DT in diverse contexts, the empirically rich discussions of political concepts and praxis in South Africa, the Southern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and South-Asia bring nuance and clarity to ongoing debates around contested political forms, including the category of the Indigenous, central to Decolonial Theory.

Foregrounding the colonial unconscious (Traverso, 2016: 174) that underpins political concepts and ordering practices, the collection attempts to show "how predominant political concepts in Western political thought are beset with colonial remnants in their construction, formulation, and deployment". This, the editors suggest, leads to "naturalising" political life such that the depredations that ensue from the practices of exclusion/inclusion that are integral to the containment of political imaginaries in nation-states, capitalist markets, and individuated subjectivities, fall outside the purview of political life. Contributors to this volume take up Decolonial Theory's critique of Western metaphysics and the Eurocentric epistemologies that work to produce and rationalise systemic injustice to show how modern political concepts as de-politicised modes of domesticating political difference foreclose vernacular political idioms of thought. Thus, Cecilia Cienfuegos Martínez, drawing on Hortense Spillers and Maria Lugones, examines the coloniality of gender to critique conventional de-politicised general paradigms of sexual difference. Calling attention to sexual violence as pre-eminently political, given the "locality of violence", Cienfuegos Martínez's argument helps re-locate the problem of sexual violence from its normalised registers of inter-personal relations, or as a technology of war in conflict zones. Similarly, Laurencia Saénz's critical re-formulation of "white ignorance" as principally conative not cognitive mobilises DT's desire to uncover the "colonial remnants" in the categories of thought that structure contemporary life. It also, however, presses on DT's concern with epistemology and sounds a note of caution regarding the redemptive potential of "epistemological disobedience" alone. Engaging emotions and affects, not just cognition, Sáenz suggests, is necessary to undoing white ignorance. Finally, to decolonise the notion of agency, Henrike Kohpeiß and Marie Wurth develop a critique of Hannah Arendt's notion of agency to uncover the impossibility of action and agency for enslaved populations that ensues from the coloniality of power. Drawing on notions of performative action and practice in the work of Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten, in particular, the turn to Black Thought enriches the volume's investment in exposing the "colonial load" that Western political thought carries.

Resisting DT's wholly negative gesture of critique and the injunction to turn exclusively to non-Western epistemologies to anchor political struggle and transformation, contributors to this volume excavate modern political practices to call attention to how they can be effectively deployed to effect emancipatory decolonial outcomes. Exemplary in this regard is the preeminent political concept of the state which remains perilously tied to the fate of postcolonial societies, both rejected and affirmed. The post-colonial state is both and at once the only institutional source of relief for subaltern populations in the non-West, but also, as critics of the state-form have long argued, the apotheosis of what Foucault (1990) termed the "modern episteme". Any critical approach to the problem of the political, especially in the post-colony needs then to grapple with the state as *pharmakon*. Unlike canonical Decolonial Theory which elects to dispense with *all* modern political concepts, including the state, contributors to this volume traverse a more generative path. "Political concepts are not neutral or innocuous but explicit tools of power and efficient vehicles for establishing or changing relations of domination", the editors note. "As historical constructs, they are part of the colonial legacies that still permeate our contemporary world ... Yet, at the same time, they may be articulated and put to work in ways that may trouble" the "colonial load" they carry. Putting to work extant political concepts, Saxena and Chitkara's incisive critique of the hegemonic understanding of state sovereignty as a singularity uncovers the plurality and co-constitution of rule-making authority in the Indian context. Arguing that sovereignty, "like any other power is characterised by multiplicity", Saxena and Chitkara find affordances in Indian legal jurisprudence to advance Adivasi claim-making. Eschewing the binary framing of state and Indigenous sovereignty characteristic of DT, this contribution outlines an alternative approach that sheds light on the horizontal relation between sovereignty and Indigenous autonomy. Similarly, Shahin Nasiri develops a counter-history of nation-states to suggest that "refugeehood", conventionally understood as inhabiting an anomalous juridico-political space in relation to static understandings of state-based citizenship is better seen as a site for developing alternative notions of (un) freedom and (non)subjectivity. Through flight and multiple border crossings, refugees resist the exclusionary structure of unfreedom – what Fanon might call non-being – to enact their freedom and subjectivity. The state-based political order of the modern world does not present an unsurpassable horizon here: within its crevices and fault lines, practices of resistance signify epistemic and subjective creativity, not simply erasure.

Contributors to this volume thus join a trans-disciplinary scholarship that refuses binary distinctions between the colonial-modern and the Decolonial in a shared effort to apprehend the uneven and mobile workings of the (colonial) "modern episteme" in diverse contexts. Undoing the epistemic ravages of modernist thought and the world fashioned in its image entails not simply repudiation and disavowal at a rhetorical or theoretical level, but the far more difficult task of understanding how people and places "live with concepts". In this regard, the collection echoes the noted anthropologist Veena Das'

long-standing commitment to a philosophically inspired ethnographic recuperation of concepts that “emerge out of the engagement with practices of everyday life” (2020: xiii). For Das, as for the authors in this volume, this helps track political concepts, including the everyday state in all its quotidian manifestations in ordinary life. Concepts, Das notes, are not “magic words” that “open up a region of thought and illuminate empirical observations as with the touch of a button” (2020: xiii). Nor are they, for purposes of the project here, impositions that colonise the totality of the everyday. Rather, they are rethought in the vernacular idioms that prevail at different geo-sites, owned, accessed, and re-shaped in ways that are not – and cannot – be predetermined either by their abstracted form or through vernacular idioms elsewhere.

Against Audre Lorde’s widely noted scepticism about whether the master’s tools can be effectively used against the master, the book mobilises also the sentiment expressed in Gayatri Spivak’s provocation to use Enlightenment thought “from below” which opens up the possibility of critiquing Western political thought “from within, to turn it away from itself” (Spivak, 1999: 49). Whereas for Spivak the challenge is to explore if the “magisterial texts” of the progenitors of the dominant political concepts that have shaped modernity – Kant, Hegel, and Marx, most notably – “can now be made our servants” (Spivak, 1999: 6–7), for the editors and contributors to this volume, the more pressing task is the problem of political transformation and how to think about the conditions of possibility, both conceptual and practical, necessary for developing and materialising emancipatory political imaginaries.

Foregrounding the need to “work through, re-think, or even overcome” dominant political thought in order to “transform it into an (a)venue for post-colonial and decolonial struggles”, the collection attempts to shed light on the fraught and contested entanglements with modern political forms, rather than dispense with them altogether as DT does. It calls attention to “what is still a blind spot in decolonial theory, while simultaneously introducing a decolonial perspective in multiple discourses and analyses across the social sciences and humanities”. What sets this collection apart from standard decolonial endeavours is the recognition that decoloniality entails not just the undoing of the “epistemicide” engendered by colonial modernity, but also the intractable problem of grappling with the enduring enchantment of modernity in and for the very populations in whose name Decolonial Theory speaks.

The ontologisation of modern political concepts, the (re)making of many worlds into a world comprised of sovereign nation-states, capitalist markets, and sovereign subjects, has generated the unsettling paradox of formally decolonised societies’ evident embrace of the regulative ideals, political concepts, and crucially, political forms, incubated in colonial modernity. Even as the depredations of colonial modernity in social formations in the Global South are hidden in plain sight, this attachment remains unshakeable. Post-colonial aspirations and roadmaps, as Arjun Appadurai once put it, unfold within a dialectic of desire for and resistance against “modernity” in all its symbolic and material complexity. These aspirations, however, as this volume correctly intuits, are not only the purview of post-colonial elites but also part of the

horizon of subaltern aspirations. In their refusal to dismiss the non-West's fraught desire for and against modernity, including its political modalities, as false consciousness or as merely mimetic, contributors respond to the challenge of exploring the entanglements, antinomies, and contestations between modern political forms and praxis and the vernacular idioms through which these modalities are engaged or resisted.

Importantly, the volume is also attentive to the thorny questions of translation, context, and history in its attempt to mobilise and re-work a decolonial analytic. If political concepts forged in the development of a colonial modernity "travel" only by the complete erasure of local forms of political life and ways of knowing as Decolonial Theory is wont to claim, attempts to generalise from the Latin American provenance of Decolonial Theory can be legitimately seen, as one scholar notes, as "limited in its understanding of the problem of colonialism and should therefore not be universalised as the way to theorise the problem of colonialism" (Pillay, 2021: 391). For Decolonial Theorists, the problem of epistemological erasure and its undoing by a turn to Indigenist cosmologies and movements is key to their project. Writing from the African context of apartheid rather than the settler-colonialism of Latin America, however, Pillay's sympathetic critical engagement (and it is but one of many) with DT follows a parallel approach to the one sketched here: to situate and historicise decoloniality in its varied perturbations. The key takeaway from Pillay's critique is the injunction to think conjuncturally: critical political interventions in thought and action are always situated in time and place. The return to a pre-colonial and pre-capitalist past invoked by DT as a solution to the enduring violence produced by the colonial encounter is set aside here as several contributors pursue a fine-grained approach to the politics of decoloniality.

Illustrating this attention to context, Rafael Verbuyst's chapter explores the politics of indigeneity in the South African context. Highlighting the pitfalls of an uncritical embrace of Indigeneity as a category of liberation, Verbuyst carefully charts the fraught politics of Indigeneity in South Africa that suborn the claims of the Khoisan, an unacknowledged ethnic group, to a wider (decolonial) claim that *all* Africans are Indigenous now. This "colonial equivocation" enables an exclusionary articulation of indigenous politics in the context of South Africa anchored, paradoxically, in a wider politics tethered to claims about the decolonisation of the majority. Likewise, "challenging the univocity of concepts, their history, and their uses", Laura Galián's discussion of the translation of anarchist thought into Arabic vernaculars in Egypt, Morocco, and Lebanon shows how decolonised modes of resistance emerge from a linguist praxis of translation. The extension of anarchist thought in translation re-locates national aspirations for liberation in a global context of justice, unsettling the borders that separate the geographies and histories of colonial *and* decolonial reason. And finally, Karim Barakat turns to historical analysis and the social conditions under which political concepts take shape to address the charge of relativism often levied against DT. While some might balk at Barakat's call to develop "an objective conception of history" dependent on a

method or set of criteria that would enable adjudication between different historical views, the chapter succeeds in sounding a cautionary note about the universalising impulse endemic to political philosophy and political theory. Thinking decolonially, for Barakat, warrants a turn both to and away from particular histories.

Unlike Decolonial Theorists for whom the project of undoing epistemological erasure of non-European, specifically Indigenous, ways of thinking demand a clean rupture from colonial modernity by an embrace of the virtues of a pre-capitalist or pre-colonial world, this collection eschews a binary framing of the colonial/decolonial. Rather, it takes the relational history of coloniser and colonised seriously in its attempt to explore the politics of decolonising the historical present. Entanglements between coloniser and colonised, the master and the slave, the oppressor and the oppressed *on both sides of the line* (between Europe and the non-European) offer a decolonial analytic potentially far more generative of the solidarity, humanity, and conviviality that DT seeks to resurrect but paradoxically forecloses by de-linking and un-coupling the previously colonised (Latin America in this case) from the Euro-modern world. For thinkers like Achille Mbembe (2021), for instance, people on the margins of all societies – the global subalterns, one might say – inhabit a similar and shared space of exclusion from the vectors of society. In this space at the extremes of society, those denied their humanity can create zones of *créolité*, spaces of dialogue, and creativity to forge trans-local, trans-national political imaginaries, and bonds of sociality that offer road maps for World-making after empire. Within these *créolité* spaces, new forms of folk politics and political imaginings interact with extant modes of political association (including the State in its inordinate and everyday register), to enable new political concepts and practices to emerge not only locally, but, more urgently, internationally. Harking back to the Bandung moment of 1955 in which leaders like Nasser, Sukarno, Nehru, and Nkrumah attempted to forge a new way of being in the world from the erstwhile space of what Frantz Fanon referred to as nonbeing, ongoing historical work devoted to recovering alternative universalisms embedded in black citizenship (as envisioned in the Haitian Revolution and a trans-national anti-colonial praxis, for instance) aligns with theoretical attempts to develop political concepts and practices enabling of an emancipatory politics.

Echoing Habermas' declaration of modernity being an unfinished project, Maldonado-Torres (2011), one of the principal theorists of DT has also announced that decoloniality is an "unfinished project". If the former has been critically received as a weak defence of the dark underbelly of modernity, specifically its imbrication with colonial and racial violence, the latter can be seen as a pre-emptive defence of the aporetic claims of Decolonial Theory (i.e., in its Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality iteration). If decoloniality proper warrants the return to a pristine, uncontaminated pre-modern and pre-colonial past, this return is condemned to a permanent deferral by continued attachments to the very shape of the world DT hopes to unravel. Unlike Olufemi Taiwo's (2022) call to dispense with the "ideology of decolonisation" altogether,

on the grounds that it disavows African agency and provides an alibi for political ineptitude by African political elites, this collection's sustained attunement to the enchantments and disenchantments with modernity in the post-colony render the radical decolonisation on offer by DT at best utopian, at worst naïve. In a world in which nation-states, markets, and the rights-bearing subject constitute the regulative horizon of the world, the spirit of decolonising the “modern episteme”, and transforming nonbeing into being requires more than the articulation of pre-modern genealogies of thought. For bringing readers to the threshold of thinking decoloniality contrapuntally, this volume deserves notice.

In closing, it is worth noting that the question of whether decolonising political concepts can deliver an emancipatory horizon is inseparable from how a reflexive decolonial project can help foster new political forms through contestation in socio-political struggles.

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