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Writing a critique of the concept of decolonization and its uses across history is not an easy task, and yet, it feels almost overdue considering the trendiness of the topic in academic circles and the number of publications it generates. Decolonization has become a ‘buzz’ word that thrives in the contradictions of neoliberal academia – mainly as an avenue to mitigate power relations and relieve some of the ‘settler guilt’ associated with the creation and the management of Western universities (Tuck and Yang 2012). It has become obvious that the decolonization radical rhetoric has an unfortunate tendency to serve the interest of universities, often situated in the Global North, and that discourses are rarely followed up by concrete political actions to shift the cards in favor of indigenous groups and to redistribute (academic, wealth, territorial) assets accordingly. This type of ‘conservative nonconformism’, the author argues, is one of the pitfalls of decolonization (and decoloniality) as framed mainly as an epistemological issue. This new environment, in my view, also produces an ethically disturbing race as to which institution will prove ‘more decolonial’ or set ‘more proactive decolonial policies’ than the other.

Yet, this text is much more than a critique of decolonization as an academic smokescreen: it is both an attempt at drafting a history of (decolonial) thought and an exercise in theory. It raises a fundamental question: do we need decolonization, why and how? Decolonization, the author argues, suffers from ‘conceptual obesity’: it holds too many meanings, sometimes vague, contradictory or inconsistent, making it difficult to distinguish what is at stake. Decolonization today is as much about the historical and political struggles that led to the independence of new States that it is about contemporary academic fashion. Thus, a thorough exegesis becomes necessary to unpack the concept’s various uses. The author rightly reminds us of the variety of historical, geographical and social contexts in which the term has been used, and how these contexts have, in turn, influenced the definition of the term. Figures of anti-colonial resistance had different understandings of the political, social and economic model that they wanted to achieve in their newly-independent States. Not all of them advocated for a radical break with the past. However, it was clear that patterns of economic dependency, which maintained older power relations between the West and its former colonies, shaped the post-colonial condition.

The author’s critique is mainly targeted at the concept of decoloniality coined in the 1990s and the early 2000s. Its proponents developed a reading of global inequalities as the product of colonialism, but also set an intellectual agenda to ‘do away’ with modernity, and in particular ‘Eurocentric’ forms of knowledge. Their main methodological flaw, Trajano Filho points out, is to locate ‘European modernity’ in the 16th century (Mignolo 2011) to the risk of placating anachronistic concepts (the West, Europe) on a fragmented, changing world and reducing complex historical processes to a dichotomous perspective. Looking at recent publications, it seems that the time has come for such a critique. A similar argument is made by Táíwò (2022) in his book *Against Decolonization*. The conflation of colonialism with modernity leads to a unilateral reading of history that denies the reality of

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endogenous processes, choices, agencies and *historicités* (ibid., 148) during and after colonialism. The complexity of social life gets lost as any sociocultural association with ‘modernity’ and ‘the West’ becomes radically rejected.

I concur with the idea that decoloniality developed as a catch-all concept that provides an all-too-easy binary reading of historical and present power relations. Anthropologists involved in their field sites know that the social practices they observe are composite: they work through absorption, appropriation and creativity. Looking at historical evidence, precolonial histories are histories of human interactions. Colonization was a violent political project that obscured previous contacts and even denied them. It used binary categories (white/black, civilized/indigenous, Christian/heathen) to implement a specific form of domination. Yet, precolonial categories were much less clear-cut. The West African coast, for instance, was a frontier, a zone of interconnectedness, in which African groups interacted with white strangers, some of whom became integrated into local lineages. The Luso-Africans descended from Portuguese coastal traders, who had settled along the Senegambia since the 15th century. They were multilingual and bicultural, and after several generations, they kept their cultural identity, while their skin would go darker. These traders called themselves ‘Portuguese’ and ‘white’. ‘White’ implied both a social status (being a free man, not a slave) and cultural and blood ties to Portugal (Mark 1999). Further down the coast, during the 18th century, English merchants trading on the Sierra Leonean coast married into the Sherbro ethnic group and established Afro-British lineages. Some of these families became very powerful through the slave trade. They sent their children to be educated in England. By the end of the 18th century, records mention an estimation of 12,000 British mulatto traders in the region – which shows that these interactions were not a minor process, but a mechanism by which new sociocultural forms emerged.

But perhaps, even more importantly, groups of fishermen and seafarers, who were central in shaping these intercultural contacts, like the Kru in Liberia and the Sherbro in Sierra Leone, later reappropriated the colonial discourse of being ‘civilized’ and more ‘westernized’ than other groups. Many were Christian educated and spoke fluent English, which constituted an asset for social navigation in the new colony. Today, among the Sherbro, the argument of being ‘civilized’ is regularly brought up as a proof of social status (Ménard 2023). This is important, because it shows the extent to which colonized populations can remain in control of their own narrative through different historical periods. They can play on different social registers and dichotomies (being indigenous/civilized), without being trapped in colonial categories.

The text argues that the decolonizing idea, by presenting a Manichean reading of sociocultural processes, advocates for the return to a romanticized pre-colonial form of ‘purity’ (uncorrupted by colonial domination and ‘modernity’) of indigenous social institutions, cultural practices and art forms. The search for purity/authenticity and self-contained cultures is not only deceptive but historically flawed. ‘Authenticity’ (as a layman concept related to tradition) is not tenable in the light of anthropological work that evidences the ability of peoples and societies to make

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‘modernity’ their own, not only by speaking its language but by actively creating new cultural forms. Moreover, different definitions of authenticity can coexist. In his compelling study of tourism in Emberá indigenous communities in Panama, Theodossopoulos (2013) shows that while tourists may ‘pursue authenticity in a static conceptualization of the past’ (*ibid.*, 399), indigenous communities understand authenticity as a process that involves the blending of past and present cultural practices. The possibility of deciding how and when to wear the full Emberá traditional attire, or mix it with Western clothes, is an avenue for embodying an indigenous identity made of diverse influences. Authenticity does not imply the rejection of modernity, but the creation of a political identity that owes much to the integration of these communities into global networks. Another (non-academic) example is the all-female skating group ImillaSkate in Cochamba, Bolivia. We owe the pictures of this collective to the photographer Luisa Dörr (2022), who captured beautifully female skateboarders who decided to wear the *pollera* (the skirt worn by indigenous women from the highland region) as a symbol of their cultural identity, but also resistance to stigmatization. Authenticity, in their words, is about wearing the *pollera* *when* skating as a statement for visibility, inclusivity and female empowerment, therefore including a female indigenous element in a US-originated and male-dominated sport.

In light of these brief examples, it becomes clear that the preoccupation with ‘purity’ in decolonizing discourses may easily take essentialist tones and overlook the richness of people’s strategies and practices of identification. Paradoxically, inasmuch as the idea of decolonizing includes emancipatory principles, it also plays the game of Western dichotomous perceptions of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ – each of these two terms being attached to specific geopolitical spaces, thereby reinforcing political hierarchies between the so-called ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’. Smith and Lester (2023, 210), for instance, analyze decoloniality through the lens of culturalism (a concept criticized by Samir Amin), which attaches essentialized features to a ‘European’ or ‘Western’ culture presented as stable in time, invariable, homogeneous.

It is important to stress that preserving purity is often a mode of domination, a negation of people’s agency. The African art market, for instance, by glorifying authenticity, also obscures the value of other forms of indigenous art originating from the continent. By defining ‘African’ features and attaching them to the past, it conflates indigeneity with tradition. More generally, the act of labelling produces knowledge hierarchies between ‘authenticators’ (tourists, experts etc.) and people, objects, performances that are objects of their scrutiny. This observation could apply to many art forms. Citing Mphahlele’s writings, Táíwò (2022, 87) questions the general lack of recognition of Africa-based culturally-mixed forms of art. Can ‘African’ art be non-ethnic? Can it escape an essentialist characterization of culture? Both Trajano Filho and Táíwò, in their respective texts, show that decolonization theories establish similar lines of demarcation and treat ‘modernity’ as the property of the West, which denies the contemporaneity of African practices and identities. Hence, Trajano Filho offers to substitute decolonization by creoliza-

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tion (or sociocultural mixture) as an avenue ‘to radically renounce the monadic idea of cultures as discrete and bounded units’ and to avoid Manichean thinking ‘in which a conceptual entity named Europe always plays the caricatured role of the bad guy’ (2023, 42). This represents a possibility to acknowledge the diverse origins of sociocultural phenomena and the indigenous nature of ‘modernity’ as it is *created* in diverse parts of the world.

Interestingly, both Trajano Filho and Táíwò (2022) take the example of *Jùjú* music originated in Yoruba regions as an example of blending musical influences from outside and from within. I would like to stress the case by highlighting the recent wave of Afrobeat music on many radios of the world and the sudden passion of listeners (and Western artists) for lyrics in Nigerian pidgin, which has become cool and sexy on the international musical scene. This particular case not only illustrates culturally-mixed influences, but the changing status of an Africa-originated language – which, despite its English roots, seduces listeners by its ‘African’ characteristics. Nigerian hip-hop also builds on cultural hybridity and multilingualism in order to cross ethnic lines and represent a youth identity that embraces both indigenous values *and* inclusion in the modern global world (Liadi and Omobowale 2011, Ojebuyi and Fafowora 2021).

What about creolization? Let’s observe first that beyond creolization as a concept, anthropology is now very much concerned with the appropriation of ‘modern’ elements in local cultures and with the ‘indigenization’ of foreign sociocultural forms and practices. Anthropologists have an ethical responsibility in debunking us/them dichotomies and ethnography certainly constitutes the best avenue to do this. I read the text as a manifesto for ethnography, which allows for gaining ‘an understanding of decolonization less connected to delinking, denial, and difference, and less associated with institutionalized forms of power’ (Trajano Filho 2023, 49). The author further complexifies his argument with the concept of *anthropophagy*, which defines processes of mixture through appropriation – appropriations that nourish the collective body but also account for asymmetrical relations, since subaltern groups also engage in such processes. However, the author fails to explain how anthropophagy really differs from appropriation. Anthropophagy, in my view, is about *in-corporating* ‘the Other’ as part of one’s group and identity. It is a process of transforming ‘the Other’ that is mainly self-generative. Cultural forms emerge that require neither the presence of ‘the Other’ nor comparison to ‘the Other’. In this sense, anthropophagy may represent an avenue for embracing sociocultural uniqueness based on people’s own scripts of what *they* wish to keep from or reject of ‘the West’.

Yet, I would like to nuance my comment by raising two points regarding epistemology, which is the main battleground of decoloniality. Trajano Filho (2023, 28-29) advocates for a more cautious use of the term that relates strictly to the production of scientific knowledge. Science, he writes, cannot be simply replaced by traditional worldviews and knowledges. In my view, it is possible to advocate for a plurality, a coexistence of different *types* of knowledge, without necessarily refusing ‘Western’ concepts. In many instances, local knowledges are not isolated: they

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are already the product of contact. The development of fishing techniques in West Africa, for instance, have much to do with fishing migrations along the coast (since precolonial times) and with the adaptation of extraneous techniques (including European sailing). Labels such as ‘indigenous’ or ‘Western’ misrepresent specific knowledge histories. Thus, it is a valuable goal to attempt at a more equitable representation of knowledges in the academic system. Some scientific disciplines may see more advantage than anthropology in doing so: ecosystem management, for instance, is bound to fail if it does not take local practices seriously.

Finally, although it may seem disconnected from praxis, decoloniality theorists offer some leads to tackle structural inequalities practically. Despite their focus on ‘epistemic violence’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018), a lot of the discussion on decolonization in academia now focuses on politics and economics: representation, funding, visas etc. This allows a shift from epistemology to existing asymmetrical relations in the neoliberal world and the exposure of longstanding unequal practices, such as power relations within scientific projects and the division of labor between scientists of the Global North and the Global South (see Deridder, Ménard and Eyebiyi 2022). These are situations that colleagues from Africa, Asia and Latin America experience on a daily basis and that we should not dismiss, because it is our responsibility, as scientists, to elaborate ways to avoid relations of economic exploitation. Decoloniality, unwittingly, has also paved the way for a much-needed ‘materialist analysis of global capitalism’ (Smither and Lester 2023, 212).

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