

## POLITICAL THEORY

**Decolonizing Politics: An Introduction.** By Robbie Shilliam. Medford, MA: Polity, 2021. 181p. \$22.95 paper.

**Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously.** By Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwò. London: Hurst & Company, 2022. 270p. \$19.95 paper.  
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The term “decolonization” was coined in the early nineteenth century by a French journalist who refused to support France’s colonialization of Algeria. During the 1930s, the German scholar Moritz Julius Bonn expanded on this previous definition to refer to decolonization more broadly as those actions running counter to colonization enacted by empires and imperial states, as Dane Kennedy noted in the 2016 text, *Decolonization*. For several decades after the Second World War, decolonization overwhelmingly referred to processes of anti-colonial struggle for self-governance and independence from foreign colonial rule. There were political, social, economic, physical, and psychological wages involved. The Martinican psychiatrist, philosopher, and revolutionary Frantz Fanon’s 1961 book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, popularized with evocative prose this postwar interpretation.

Contemporary political theorists, including Karuna Mantena, Mahmood Mamdani, Paul Gilroy, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Adom Getachew, and David Scott, build upon the postwar understanding of decolonization to highlight strategies for achieving self-determination and worldbuilding in the postcolony. Decolonization, they assert, isn’t merely negative dialectics and the tearing down of dominating and arbitrarily interfering agents, but also the envisioning and constitution of new edifices and futures.

A mutation in terms and meaning, however, has occurred over the last 30 years. The words “decolonization,” “decolonizing,” and “decolonial” abound in today’s scholarly and public discourses. Decolonizing philosophy, the decolonization of knowledge, the decolonization of the social sciences, decolonizing the curriculum, decolonizing the university, decolonial methodologies, decolonial feminism, decolonial theory, the decolonization of education, decolonizing ethics, and decolonizing AI. The list of usages continues to grow.

But what do we *really* mean when invoking decolonization and its cognates? Walter Rodney, the twentieth century historian of political thought, cautions against sweeping generalizations in his posthumously published essay, “Decolonization,” included in the 2022 volume, *Decolonial Marxism*. As he writes, “When dealing with such a broad topic in a short time, one automatically runs

the risk of being extremely superficial” (p. 289). Book reviews are candidates for such a warning. Yet, as he stated in the same essay, his qualifying words notwithstanding, Rodney foresaw decades ago “that the definition of decolonization is itself undergoing transformation” (p. 300).

Two thought-provoking books by Robbie Shilliam and Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwò offer excellent guides to the benefits and costs of this transformation in decolonization’s meaning.

Shilliam’s *Decolonizing Politics* addresses colleagues in the discipline of political science. In exquisitely clear prose, the author examines the major political science subfields and offers an account of their formations, current pre-occupations, and alternative visions of what they can become. It’s in this vein that Shilliam aims to *decolonize politics*. In doing so, he deftly blends the post-World War II denotation of decolonization with a unique present-day usage.

Most surprising is how he begins the text. Shilliam goes back to antiquity to discuss decolonization before there was such a term. He describes a single figure at the heart of political science’s genesis: Aristotle. Aristotle is an uncanny choice to open the book. By “uncanny,” Shilliam means the combination of the familiar and unfamiliar (p. 2). In a brilliant explication of “Aristotle’s world,” the author shows how Aristotle’s experiences living under colonial rule, his existence as an immigrant, and his academic inquiries molded his views on politics. As Shilliam details, Aristotle “moved from a citizen of a colony-city to a resident alien of another city, to a barbarian-sympathizer, to an asylum seeker, to an academic in the court of empire, and back to resident alien again” (p. 10).

Aristotle, therefore, experienced hierarchical political orders. In his treatises composed for Athenian audiences, he presented those orders as they were while still believing they could be transformed. Aristotle did, though, think some types of hierarchy were necessary for the good life. This, Shilliam contends, is a weakness in his thought. Yet Aristotle’s attention to empires, colonies, citizens, and noncitizens inhabiting polities provides a rubric to discern to what extent processes of decolonization then and now pertain to the study of political science.

Shilliam contends that political science emerged from and is indebted to debates on the nature of empires, imperialism, colonial rule, and the ways actors either manage colonies or exit from colonial rulership. In Chapters 2–5, he describes the imperial and colonial contexts pertinent to four disciplinary subfields and their respective stated problematics and themes: political theory (focusing on universal rights), political behavior (emphasizing citizenship), comparative politics (highlighting development), and international relations (underscoring war and peace). Furthermore, the uncanniness of the project of decolonizing politics for Shilliam requires applying three analytic maneuvers to each subfield—that of *recontextualization*, *reconceptualization*, and *reimagining*.

Although Shilliam is a scholar of IR, his analyses of the political theory and comparative subfields are where his book shines brightest. For example, in Chapter 2, Shilliam explores the works of Immanuel Kant and Sylvia Wynter to describe how their understandings of reason, rights, and the human point to ongoing debates on rights universalism. The political theory of Wynter—particularly her notions of Man<sub>1</sub>, Man<sub>2</sub>, and the over-representation of Man as if it were the Human—are insightful for those seeking to reconcile discourses that claim universality yet in practice pertain to select individuals and groups. 1492, the age of Enlightenment, and the age of revolutions buttress Kant's and Wynter's findings as well as Shilliam's recontextualization, reconceptualization, and reimagining of the subfield.

Shilliam then shows that the logic of race heredity is essential to the origin narrative that grounded the study of political behavior. He argues that an evaluation of the subfield's origin also necessitates inquiries into both eugenics and behavioralism's challenge to eugenicist precepts, the founding of the American Political Science Association and the publication of W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* in the same year, and the writings of Walter Bagehot, editor-in-chief of *The Economist*, and political scientist-turned-United States President, Woodrow Wilson. Shilliam, in turn, issues an anti-colonial reimagining of political behavior through engaging with the ideas of Fanon. Fanon's psychiatric studies unsettle earlier definitions of "normal" behavior and who citizens in a democracy are.

Chapter 3 delves into the comparative politics subfield. Shilliam probes what comparison entails and examines a "colonial politics of comparison" (p. 86) central to modernity. Moreover, notions of political development and underdevelopment in capitalist and socialist societies drive comparative politics studies. This subfield has roots in the mid-twentieth century Committee on Comparative Politics. For Shilliam, it was the interventions of African intellectuals and a group of radical scholars from abroad who relocated to the University of Dar el Salaam in the 1960s to 1970s during Tanzania's experiment in African socialism that's had lasting ramifications for the politics of comparison in a manner that hasn't erased non-Western peoples and thought.

The defining feature of international relations, Shilliam argues, is "pessimism" (p. 119). But this doesn't have to be the case. IR started formally in Great Britain, and its earliest preoccupations were with good imperial governance, international society, the global color-line, and race development. Shilliam maintains that IR has had the biggest "decolonizing" impulse of all the subfields" (p. 147), and he focuses on struggles for a nuclear-free, independent Pacific. Much more could have been said in this chapter, but its return to Sylvia Wynter compellingly links concerns for the human condition with issues impacting international actors.

By the conclusion—which describes border politics via Gloria Anzaldúa's idea of mestiza consciousness and revisits Aristotle without preserving the forms of hierarchy Aristotle upheld—one can't help judging that *Decolonizing Politics* is a book that many students and researchers will find immensely informative.

*Against Decolonisation* is a very different work with an intentionally misleading title. Táíwò doesn't reject all understandings of decolonization. What he loathes is the trend over the last three decades to expand decolonization beyond its post-WWII usage. Drawing upon debates in African political theory, Táíwò contends that African agency is reduced through these projects of late modern "decolonisers" (p. 15). The "decolonisers" have tainted decolonization's meaning and delegitimized the important activities of aspiring contemporary African sociopolitical actors seeking freedom.

Táíwò introduces a fascinating distinction to buttress his entire analysis: *decolonisation*<sub>1</sub> versus *decolonisation*<sub>2</sub>. *Decolonisation*<sub>1</sub>, the lexicon Táíwò supports, refers to decolonization's "original meaning—that is, of making a colony into a self-governing entity with its political and economic fortunes under its own direction (though not necessarily control)" (p. 3). *Decolonisation*<sub>2</sub>, in contrast, involves "forcing an ex-colony to foreswear, on pain of being forever under the yoke of colonisation, any and every cultural, political, intellectual, social and linguistic artefact, idea, process, institution and practices that retains even the slightest whiff of the colonial past" (p. 3). It is the second conception that, Táíwò argues, is seriously harming scholarship in and on Africa.

Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first postindependence political leader, coined the term *neocolonialism* to describe "colonialism-like situations" in a postcolonial state (p. 27). While not without its imperfections, Táíwò contends that the idea of neocolonialism helps to differentiate the conditions and sociopolitical structures of colonialism from life after the end of juridical colonial rule. Additionally, Táíwò finds egregious the increasingly widespread invocation of Frantz Fanon's oeuvre to legitimize *decolonisation*<sub>2</sub>.

At the center of Táíwò's critique of *decolonisation*<sub>2</sub> are two towering intellectuals—Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan writer and finalist for the Nobel Prize in Literature; and the late Ghanian thinker Kwasi Wiredu, a pioneer in the fields of contemporary African philosophy and Africana political theory. Thiong'o and Wiredu, with their respective "decolonising the mind" and "conceptual decolonization" arguments, are the most influential African endorsers of *decolonisation*<sub>2</sub> (p. 59). Táíwò explains this proposition at length in the second chapter. He also views noted thinkers such as Achille Mbembe—and we can add scholars including Françoise Vergès—as their impactful disciples. Although Chapter 3 narrowly explores the movement to decolonize disciplinary philosophy and how issues of nativism and atavism pertain to that mission,

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Táíwò devotes the bulk of his text to a range of decolonisation<sub>2</sub> intellectual movements outside of philosophy.

Despite their distinct contributions, Thiong'o and Wiredu both uphold the significance of African languages. They contend that writing in African languages and speaking in languages of the peoples of the continent is of paramount importance. Táíwò has no problem with Africans writing in and speaking African languages. But what he objects to is the claim made by Thiong'o, Wiredu, and like-minded decolonizers that speaking and writing in languages brought to African polities because of colonialism somehow fundamentally delegitimizes the thoughts and practices of Africans conversing in those languages (English, French, Dutch, etc.). Under this decolonization<sub>2</sub> logic, he contends, an African intellectual living in Africa

who publishes an article on the liberatory politics of education in English in *Perspectives on Politics* perpetuates African unfreedom.

One's ideas—via an article or another medium—are what's crucial, not the languages they're conveyed in. Otherwise, we jeopardize African agency. "At a time when Africa is in the thick of the second struggle for freedom," Táíwò writes, "I see no place for the decolonising trope" (p. 222). *Against Decolonisation*, thus, entices readers to question whether evocations of decolonization today work to facilitate freedom or remain empty signifiers.

Read together, Robbie Shilliam and Olúfẹmi Táíwò invite us to forge bold visions of a free pedagogy attentive to the fraught shards of colonial history and the intellectual traditions it shaped.