

FORUM ARTICLE

# Decolonising Development Studies

Ilan Kapoor 

Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change, York University, Toronto, Canada

**Corresponding author:** Email: [ikapoor@yorku.ca](mailto:ikapoor@yorku.ca)

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## Abstract

This article explores ways of decolonising Development Studies by: (1) examining the discipline's tendencies towards what some have called 'imperial amnesia', that is, proclivities towards disavowing if not erasing European colonialism, most evident in 1950s–1960s Modernisation theory, but also more recently in the work of such analysts as Bruce Gilley and Nigel Biggar; (2) considering the opportunities and perils of 'epistemic decolonisation', that is, ways of decolonising knowledge production in the discipline, including the limits of 'non-Eurocentric' pedagogies; and (3) reflecting on forms of material decolonisation (e.g., the reduction of socioeconomic inequalities by improving better access to education or resisting the corporatisation of publicly funded research) that need to accompany any epistemic decolonisation for the latter to be meaningful.

**Keywords:** Corporate Publishing; Decoloniality; Decolonisation; Development Studies; Epistemic Decolonisation; Free Public Databases; Imperial Amnesia; Material Decolonisation; Open Access; Perils of non-Eurocentric Pedagogies

## Introduction

We live in globally unsettling times: the advance of capitalist globalisation has caused the unmooring of social and cultural values and institutions across the planet, while at the same facilitating the rapid flow of information and communication. Although such instability is viewed as a danger in some quarters – giving rise to a conservative cultural backlash that seeks stable identity and the preservation of tradition and privilege, in others it is seen as an opportunity if not a boon – enabling, for example, the unravelling of deeply held prejudices and power inequalities. The latter position is one that many of us on the academic Left are likely to endorse for being modern and 'progressive'; yet, it is not one without its own perils, including the peril to which so many movements for change have often succumbed – the replacement of old power inequalities with new ones.

In what follows, I consider the presence of both these sets of predilections and perils in an attempt to decolonise my own academic discipline: Development Studies. I begin by asking why it is important to decolonise that discipline in these times, pointing to current (conservative) tendencies towards what some have called 'imperial amnesia', that is, proclivities towards disavowing if not erasing European colonialism, most evident in 1950s–1960s Modernisation theory, but also more recently in the work of such analysts as Bruce Gilley and Nigel Biggar. I then consider the opportunities and perils of 'epistemic decolonisation', that is, ways of decolonising knowledge production in the discipline, including the limits of 'non-Eurocentric' pedagogies. I conclude by reflecting on forms of material decolonisation (e.g., the reduction of socioeconomic inequalities by improving better access to education or resisting the corporatisation of publicly funded research) that need to

accompany any epistemic decolonisation for the latter to be meaningful in these globally unsettling times.

### Why decolonise?

The need to decolonise Development Studies stems, in my view, from the recognition that it is a discipline rooted in the significant historical power inequalities between the West and the ‘Third World’, inequalities that some continue to deny even today. Several analysts<sup>1</sup> argue, in fact, that Development Studies and its associated science/social science disciplines are (neo)colonial disciplines *par excellence*: they carry the baggage of imperial plunder (colonial resource extraction in favour of Europe’s industrialisation process) and colonialism’s civilising mission (making the colonial subject in the image of white, European ‘man’). To be sure, teams of botanists, ecologists, engineers, anthropologists, sociologists, archaeologists, and economists were an integral part of the institutional apparatus that helped colonise Latin America, Asia, and Africa. These ‘experts’ helped in establishing the institutional mechanisms (‘modern’ educational systems, ‘scientific’ forestry, agro-industry, art and archaeological conservation and collection, railway and shipping systems, etc.) required for surplus extraction. They not only helped record, categorise, and discipline colonial subjects according to European norms and frameworks (e.g., belief in ‘Western’ science, progress, private property, patriarchal inheritance laws), but in so doing also ensured the neglect if not erasure of non-European, and especially Indigenous epistemes.

Rather than confronting and coming to terms with this colonial legacy, Development Studies has tended to sanitise or ignore it. Indeed, the discipline can be said to have been founded on such sanitisation, emerging as it did in the post-Second World War period, when aid to ‘underdeveloped’ areas became vital to containing what the US and other Western powers saw as Soviet expansionism. Modernisation Theory – which pioneered development as an academic field, and has anchored Western foreign policy and development institutions ever since – bears the strong imprint of such Cold War politics. As many scholars have argued,<sup>2</sup> Modernisation tends to take a decidedly post-Second World War view of history, thus avoiding the history of Western colonialism. For instance, Walt Rostow’s *The Stages of Economic Growth* – so influential in economic and foreign policy circles – fails to deal with colonial rule in any meaningful way. It’s not that he doesn’t mention colonialism at all; he does, but its significance is notably downplayed. In a short section on ‘Colonialism’, he goes so far as to state that colonies were founded for ‘oblique reasons’ and colonial subjects ‘looked kindly’ on the coloniser’s efforts to organise ‘suitable political frameworks’.<sup>3</sup>

But such disavowal continues in various guises even today. It is visible in World Bank/International Monetary Fund structural adjustment programmes, which make no mention of, or allowances for, the fact that the West’s colonial plunder might have something to do with the recipient’s current socioeconomic conditions. And it is evident in World Trade Organization trade deals, which so often assume a global economic level playing field in their pursuit of ‘free’ trade,

<sup>1</sup> Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1967); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1979); Arturo Escobar, ‘Discourse and power in development: Michel Foucault and the relevance of his work to the Third World’, *Alternatives*, 10 (1984), pp. 377–400; Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993); Anibal Quijano, ‘Coloniality of power and Eurocentrism in Latin America’, *International Sociology*, 15:2 (1 June 2000), pp. 215–32; Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Maria Lugones, ‘The coloniality of gender’, in Wendy Harcourt (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 13–33.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel J. Valenzuela and Arturo Valenzuela, ‘Modernization and dependency: Alternative perspectives in the study of Latin American underdevelopment’, in M. A. Seligsa and J. T. Passé-Smith (eds), *Dependency and Underdevelopment* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998); Andre Gunder Frank, ‘The development of underdevelopment’, *Monthly Review*, 41:2 (1 June 1989), pp. 37–52; Escobar, *Encountering Development*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>3</sup> Walt W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 110.

essentially amounting to trade ‘freed’ of any past colonial entanglements. Robert Fletcher<sup>4</sup> calls such persistent sanitisation of colonialism, ‘imperialist amnesia’. He analyses the work of several development/globalisation pundits to drive home the point: *New York Times* columnist Thomas Freidman, former World Bank economist Paul Collier, and economist and UN advisor Jeffrey Sachs, all of whom treat wealth accumulation in the Global North or poverty in the Global South by omitting consideration of the imperialist extraction of resources from the ‘Third World’.

More recently, in the wake of the rise of right-wing, neopopulist, and anti-immigrant jingoism across the globe (espoused by the likes of Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, Duterte, Erdoğan, Orbán, Farage, Golden Dawn, Vox, etc.), we are witnessing more of the same: reminiscent of the 1980s ‘culture wars’ in the US, there has been a noteworthy growing cultural backlash (especially in Europe and North America) on university campuses against the multiculturalisation of teaching pedagogies and the emergence of Indigenous, Postcolonial, and Decolonial Studies. This backlash translates not so much as amnesia about colonialism, but a highly selective reading of it – a *whitewashing* if you will. For example, Harvard historian Niall Ferguson has defended British colonial rule as a positive force,<sup>5</sup> as has his English compatriot, Andrew Roberts, who has gone so far as to claim that concentration camps set up during the South African Anglo-Boer War were ‘run as efficiently and humanely as possible.’<sup>6</sup> In Holland, similarly, historian Pieter Emmer has rebuffed criticisms of Dutch colonialism, championing its many ‘civilising’ benefits (e.g., telephone lines, railroads, and modernised health care, education and agriculture), and trivialising the Dutch role in the slave trade.<sup>7</sup> And at Oxford University, theology professor Nigel Biggar has launched a project on ‘Ethics and Empire’ whose aim is to rehabilitate the British Empire as a progressive force by constructing a ‘balance sheet’ of the rights and wrongs of colonialism.<sup>8</sup>

Let me dwell a little though on the work of one of the latest revisionists of colonial history, US-based academic Bruce Gilley, whose infamous journal article, ‘The Case for Colonialism,’<sup>9</sup> has caused notable uproar in development circles and beyond. Like several of his predecessors, Gilley carries out a putatively ‘objective’ cost-benefit analysis of colonialism, finding that the overall benefits outweigh the costs, so much so as to venture an argument for *re-colonisation*: ‘Colonialism can

<sup>4</sup>Robert Fletcher, ‘The art of forgetting: Imperialist amnesia and public secrecy’, *Third World Quarterly*, 33:3(1 April 2012), pp. 423–39.

<sup>5</sup>Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London, UK: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>6</sup>Andrew Roberts, Baron Roberts of Belgravia, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples since 1900* (London, UK: Weidenfeld & Nicolson,) 2006, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup>Pieter Emmer, *The Dutch Slave Trade, 1500–1850* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2006); Paul Doolan, ‘Pride, Shame, and White Fragility in Dutch Colonial History’, *Imperial & Global Forum* (blog) (14 May 2019), available at: <https://imperialglobalexeter.com/2019/05/14/pride-shame-and-white-fragility-in-dutch-colonial-history/> accessed 1 June 2021.

<sup>8</sup>McDonald Centre, ‘Ethics and Empire: Project Description’, available at: <https://www.mcdonaldcentre.org.uk/ethics-and-empire> accessed 9 June 9 2021; Nigel Biggar, ‘Don’t feel guilty about our colonial history’, *The Times* (30 November 2017), available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/don-t-feel-guilty-about-our-colonial-history-ghvstdhmj> accessed 12 May 2021; see also John Reynolds, ‘Colonial apologism and the politics of academic freedom’, in David Landy, Ronit Lentin, and Conor McCarthy (eds), *Enforcing Silence: Academic Freedom, Palestine and the Criticism of Israel* (London, UK: Zed, 2020), pp. 155–82.

<sup>9</sup>Bruce Gilley, ‘The case for colonialism’, *Academic Questions* (June 2018), available at: [https://www.nas.org/academic-questions/31/2/the\\_case\\_for\\_colonialism](https://www.nas.org/academic-questions/31/2/the_case_for_colonialism) accessed 23 January 2019. Note that this article was first published in *Third World Quarterly* in 2017, but was subsequently removed in the face of stiff opposition and controversy. See Vimal Patel, ‘A revolt at a journal puts peer review under the microscope’, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (26 September 2017), available at: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-revolt-at-a-journal-puts-peer-review-under-the-microscope/> accessed 12 January 2021; Shree Paradkar, ‘How an article defending colonialism was ever published is a mystery roiling academia: Paradkar’, *The Toronto Star* (21 September 2017), available at: <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2017/09/21/how-an-article-defending-colonialism-was-ever-published-is-a-mystery-roiling-academia-paradkar.html> accessed 12 May 2018; Lisa Ann Richey et al., ‘Academic Neocolonialism: Clickbait and the Perils of Commercial Publishing’, *Aidnography* (blog) (27 March 2019), available at: <https://aidnography.blogspot.com/2019/03/academic-neocolonialism-clickbait-perils-publishing-third-world-quarterly-richey-simon-kapoor-ponte.html> accessed 13 February 2020.

be recovered by weak and fragile states today in three ways: by reclaiming colonial modes of governance; by recolonizing some areas; and by creating new Western colonies from scratch.<sup>10</sup> The big methodological problem though is that there is nothing ‘objective’ about his approach. Even leaving aside the belief that you *can* ‘assign weights’ to historical phenomena, much depends on how you do so, and which events you include or exclude from your tally. How does one quantify the violence, racism, and anti-democratic rule of colonialism (e.g., the human costs of 13 million African slaves shipped mainly to the Americas between 1526 and 1867; the deindustrialisation of much of the periphery in favour of British and European manufactured exports, leaving hundreds of millions unemployed and impoverished across the colonies; or the four million deaths in the great Bengal Famine of 1943 after Winston Churchill diverted food away from Bengal in favour of British soldiers)?<sup>11</sup> In assessing the benefits of ‘modern’ agricultural production in the colonies, how does one account for colonial rule’s heavy reliance on coerced labour (slavery, debt bondage, indentured labour)?<sup>12</sup> Gilley and his ilk willfully ignore such significant methodological and factual details. As with all positivist approaches like theirs, the mistaken belief is that historical events can be abstracted from their contexts, or that the systemic violence of colonialism can be compared to the building of railways and schools, or worse still, omitted altogether. Nathan Robinson puts it this way: ‘Gilley has deliberately excluded mention of every single atrocity committed by a colonial power. Instead of evaluating the colonial record empirically, he has distorted that record, concealing evidence of gross crimes against humanity. The result is not only unscholarly, but is morally tantamount to Holocaust denial.’<sup>13</sup>

It seems plain that impoverished historical revisionism such as Gilley’s is galvanised not so much by scholarly insights or the search for historical accuracy as by neopopulist ideological inclinations – a clinging to tradition, a defence of patriarchy and privilege, a resistance to the socioeconomic changes wrought by globalisation. It is hardly accidental that Gilley and his fellow revisionists are all white men, their polemical defence of empire predictably displaying the hallmarks of right-wing nationalism in the form of postcolonial guilt and ‘white fragility’.<sup>14</sup> Their conservative cultural backlash is, in this sense, symptomatic of our times, underlining once again why Development Studies needs to continue to be decolonised: to gain further insight into our global colonial past; to better understand the patterns of colonial domination that stretch into the present; and perhaps most importantly, to struggle against continuing structures of socioeconomic and cultural inequality and injustice.

## How to decolonise

My colleague (and friend), Olivia Rutazibwa, whose arguments I otherwise readily endorse, suggests that one way to decolonise Development Studies is to ditch it: ‘we need to find ways to go beyond critiquing and deconstructing it, and seriously considering getting rid of it ... we need to

<sup>10</sup>Gilley, ‘The case for colonialism’.

<sup>11</sup>See Eric Eustace Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Shashi Tharoor, ‘Viewpoint: Britain must pay reparations to India’, *BBC News* (22 July 2015), sec. India, available at: {<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-33618621>} accessed 3 May 2020; Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2018); Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *Colonialism and Indian Economy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011); Raúl Prebisch, *The Economic Development of Latin America and Its Principal Problems* (Lake Success, NY: United Nations Dept. of Economic Affairs, 1950).

<sup>12</sup>Pepijn Brandon and Aditya Sarkar, ‘Labour history and the case against colonialism’, *International Review of Social History*, 64:1 (April 2019), pp. 73–109.

<sup>13</sup>Nathan Robinson, ‘A quick reminder of why colonialism was bad’, *Current Affairs* (14 September 2017), available at: {<https://www.currentaffairs.org/2017/09/a-quick-reminder-of-why-colonialism-was-bad>} accessed 12 May 2018; See also Vijay Prashad, ‘Third World quarterly row: Why some Western intellectuals are trying to debrutalise colonialism’, *Scroll* (21 September 2017), available at: {<https://scroll.in/article/851305/third-world-quarterly-row-why-some-western-intellectuals-are-trying-to-debrutalise-colonialism>} accessed 20 May 2018.

<sup>14</sup>Robin J. DiAngelo and Alex Tatusian, *White Fragility* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018).

fight the desire to hold on to Development Studies, cut the umbilical cord with this discipline ...'<sup>15</sup> I think this is a mistake: her claim appears to be anchored in the belief that if only we could eliminate the old discipline, we will finally be able to construct some new field of study 'in which many worlds are possible.'<sup>16</sup> To the contrary, I would argue that until and unless we meaningfully face and come to terms with the failures and crimes of development, we will not learn from them, with the result that any 'new' discipline will reproduce them in novel ways. Is not the rise of right-wing revisionist colonial history precisely the consequence of inadequately confronting past inequalities and injustices? It is *because* such inequalities continue in the present that the privileged (and revisionists) want to perpetuate them. In this sense, 'cutting the umbilical cord' with development's past is what ensures the 'return of the repressed'.

I would like to suggest instead two closely linked approaches for decolonising Development Studies: epistemic and material, each with its own strengths and pitfalls, and each attempting to face and come to terms with development's colonial past and neocolonial present.

### *Epistemic decolonisation and its perils*

Epistemic or discursive decolonisation is about addressing the Western domination of knowledge systems: this concerns not just the Eurocentrism of our curriculum, but also coming to terms with the fact that colonialism has ignored or erased many non-Western and Indigenous knowledge systems (languages, ways of knowing and learning, storytelling, art and architecture, health and medicinal knowledge banks, farming and fishing practices, etc.). The idea here is to expand and democratise the Development Studies canon by retrieving non-Western and subaltern/Indigenous texts, writers, and practices. This has been a significant part of the work of Postcolonial Studies, and more recently of Decolonial, Indigenous, and Black Studies. The renewed interest in, and validation of, such writers and thinkers as Fanon, Mahasweta Devi, Achebe, El Saadawi, Iqbal, Rumi, Mudimbe, Wynter, Bomfim, and Martí, or of such 'traditional' subaltern practices as community fishing and forestry, Indigenous medicine, and Ayllus and Markas of Tawantinsuyu self-governance, are cases in point. The objective is not simply to diversify the curriculum or sanction non-Western and subaltern knowledge, which can sometimes amount to tokenism and assimilation, but in so doing to also broaden what and whose voices count as knowledge by making Development Studies – which has tended towards too narrowly focusing on the Western and the economic – more meaningfully inclusive and interdisciplinary.<sup>17</sup>

Radical Black and Indigenous scholars<sup>18</sup> have elaborated decolonising methodologies in knowledge production, bringing attention to 'white normativity', that privileges a (most often bourgeois,

<sup>15</sup>Olivia Rutazibwa, 'On babies and bathwater: Decolonizing International Development studies', in Sara de Jong, Rosalba Icaza, and Olivia Rutazibwa (eds), *Decolonization and Feminisms in Global Teaching and Learning* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019), p. 162.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>17</sup>See de Jong, Icaza, and Rutazibwa (eds), *Decolonization and Feminisms in Global Teaching and Learning*. See also the contributions of Kristina Hinds, Ajay Parasram, and Somdeep Sen in this forum.

<sup>18</sup>Lewis R. Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), pp. 85–6 (p. 59); Lewis R. Gordon, *Freedom, Justice, and Decolonization* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2020); Sylvia Wynter, 'Is "development" a purely empirical concept or also teleological? A perspective from "we the underdeveloped"', in Aguiou Y. Yansané (ed.), *Prospects for Recovery and Sustainable Development in Africa* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), pp. 299–316; Sylvia Wynter, 'Towards the sociogenic principle: Fanon, identity, the puzzle of conscious experience, and what it is like to be "black"', in Mercedes Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana (eds), *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America* (New York, NY: Routledge, n.d.), pp. 30–66; Robbie Shilliam, 'Black/academia', in Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nisancioglu (eds), *Decolonising the University* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2018), pp. 53–63; Robbie Shilliam, *Decolonizing Politics: An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, 'Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3:3 (21 November 2014), pp. 1–25; Deborah McGregor, Jean-Paul Restoule, and Rochelle Johnston (eds), *Indigenous Research: Theories, Practices, and Relationships* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2018).

male-centred, and secular) Western perspective as the standard of development, while exoticising, inferiorising, and marginalising non-white and Indigenous worldviews and practices. They suggest alternative, decolonising methodologies that situate academic research within the wider context of (neo)colonial histories and take into account the power dynamics involved in knowledge production, including 'fieldwork'. For example, Linda Tuhiwai Smith<sup>19</sup> prioritises the project of Indigenous self-determination, requiring the academic researcher to be held accountable to the Indigenous communities under study, rather than drawing on the latter as yet another cultural resource for the benefit of the academy. And Kerry Pimblott<sup>20</sup> highlights the significance of making visible the historical role of the university itself in racism and (neo)colonialism: exposing, for instance, the role of Victorian scientists in the development of race-based science and eugenics. The point here is to see our institutions of higher learning as laboratories themselves for learning about the power and the colonial dynamics of knowledge production.

Such a decolonisation of pedagogy and curriculum can (and needs to) often be accompanied by broader discursive/institutional struggles on university campuses to overhaul teaching and hiring practices. The goal here is to rethink, for example, the privileging of theory – and what counts as theory<sup>21</sup> – as well as valorise alternative modes of knowledge production and learning (visual, oral, and experiential learning, storytelling, critical thinking, etc.) to account for the multiple ways in which knowledge is constructed, learned, and communicated in both the Global North and South. Integral to such diversification of knowledge are changes in faculty hiring practices that have tended, at least in the West, to privilege white (and mostly male) applicants towards one that not only prioritises but specifically targets applicants along class, gender, sexual, disability, Indigenous, and racialised lines. A socially diverse teaching faculty, to be sure, is one that is better able to produce and teach knowledge that critically reflects the global and social diversity intrinsic to Development Studies.

Of noteworthy concern in Development Studies is that the knowledge of Global South scholars still largely remains marginalised and racialised. One recent study<sup>22</sup> indicates, for example, a sharp decline in the number of publications by Africa-based scholars over the last twenty years in such top African journals as *African Affairs* and the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, with researchers in Africa typically publishing and being cited at a far lower rate than researchers based in other continents. The onus thus falls on the likes of us Northern scholars to seek out, read, use, and cite the important research of our Global South colleagues, and for journal and book publishing editorial boards to diversify, as well as encourage the publication of Global South research.

But the challenge here remains about not only recognising and including Global South and subaltern knowledge, but also meaningfully coming to terms with it: taking account of the latter's struggles and what these reveal about the global capitalist system and production of knowledge, their patterns of exclusion and oppression. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak<sup>23</sup> would say, it's the difference between the subaltern speaking and the subaltern being heard: it's not enough to simply valorise subaltern ways of being and knowing; one has to also discern and challenge the material

<sup>19</sup>Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2nd edn, London, UK: Zed Books, 2012). See also Ilan Kapoor, 'Hyper-self-reflexive development? Spivak on representing the Third World "Other"', *Third World Quarterly*, 25:4 (2004), pp. 627–47; and the contributions of Dana El Kurd, and Lisa Ann Richey and Consolata Raphael Sulley, in this forum.

<sup>20</sup>Kerry Pimblott, 'Decolonising the university: The origins and meaning of a movement', *The Political Quarterly*, 91:1 (2020), p. 213.

<sup>21</sup>Harney and Moten go so far as to refuse to recognise universities as centres of critical theory, advocating instead for the *undercommons* as sites where insurgent/oppressed people engage not in intellectual pursuits dictated by market and state logics and depend on people's oppression but self-organised spaces of learning aimed at creating new societies that avoid being founded on others' oppression. See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Ivanhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013).

<sup>22</sup>Ryan C. Briggs and Scott Weathers, 'Gender and location in African politics scholarship: The other white man's burden?', *African Affairs*, 117: 466 (1 January 2018), pp. 168–9. See also the contribution by El Kurd in this forum.

<sup>23</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313.

and epistemic structures that subalternise in the first place (including in the academy). Thus, the proof of the decolonised pudding is when subaltern struggles such as those of the Dalit, Indigenous poor, or Black Lives Matter actually change how we work and live – how and what we study and teach, whose voices we listen to, who we form political and institutional alliances with, when (and if) we confront the corporatisation of the university, how effectively we dismantle socio-economic, caste, and racial barriers within and outside our campuses, the extent to which we give back the Indigenous land on which several of our universities are built (rather than merely giving ‘land acknowledgements’), and so forth. Change in the form of meaningful decolonisation will not happen without challenge, struggle, and loss of material privilege (in favour of the subaltern).

There is also the real danger that in retrieving subaltern voices, we as privileged Western(ised) academics end up objectifying them as universalist figures of oppression or agency. This is visible in certain strands of both Postdevelopment and Decolonial Studies, which sometimes resort to *making* the subaltern speak by sentimentalising it. For example, Arturo Escobar and Walter D. Mignolo have been taken to task for romanticising if not heroising Latin American social movements and Indigenous groups, refraining from the slightest critique of them or admitting their challenges and failures.<sup>24</sup> The danger here is that we lapse into the very problem we are criticising by simply inverting the modernity-tradition or elite-subaltern binary, that is, by ascribing our own political agendas to the subaltern, thereby continuing to silence it.

The related danger is a certain refusal to engage with the Western canon, as if decolonisation can happen by ignoring the likes of Hegel, Weber, or Marx. Mignolo is again emblematic of such a tendency, for example explicitly refraining from drawing on Marxist or postcolonial theory because, according to him, each is too closely associated with metropolitan (and hence colonial) intellectual traditions.<sup>25</sup> The problem is not just that this type of anti-Eurocentrism is a knee-jerk reaction to Eurocentrism, but also that we cannot ignore that ‘postcolonial’ and ‘decolonial’ critiques are, in the very intellectual background and the critical tools they depend upon, quintessentially ‘Eurocentric’ pursuits (Mignolo appears to forget his own positioning, and that of several other decolonial theorists, in the US/Western academy). Given the history of Western (neo)colonialism and contemporary world dominance (despite the recent challenge of the BRICS), we cannot escape Eurocentrism, and we should not pretend to do so. So rather than mourning the loss of mythical precolonial roots, engaging in *ressentiment* (against European philosophers), or searching for some Global South authenticity, it seems to me that one of the key tasks for Development Studies is to fully immerse itself in the Euro-North American canon, by mastering the Master’s language better (or more creatively) than him. Such an argument echoes Spivak’s about colonialism’s ‘enabling violation’ and the persistent transformation of ‘conditions of impossibility into possibility’.<sup>26</sup> Part of the challenge is to appropriate and reconstruct key elements of the

<sup>24</sup>Ray Kiely, ‘The last refuge of the noble savage? A critical assessment of post-development theory’, *The European Journal of Development Research*, 11:1 (1 June 1999), pp. 30–55; Andy Storey, ‘Post-development theory: Romanticism and Pontius Pilate politics’, *Development*, 43:4 (1 December 2000), pp. 40–6; Jan Nederveen Pieterse, ‘After post-development’, *Third World Quarterly*, 21:2 (1 April 2000), pp. 175–91; Ilan Kapoor, *The Postcolonial Politics of Development* (London, UK: Routledge, 2008), pp. 52–3; Kiran Asher, ‘Latin American decolonial thought, or making the subaltern speak’, *Geography Compass*, 7:12 (2013), pp. 832–42; Ilan Kapoor and Zahi Zalloua, *Universal Politics* (Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 94–104. One of the latest manifestations of such an uncritical decolonial politics of authenticity and romanticisation is Walter D. Mignolo’s endorsement of a 2021 right-wing Hindu supremacist book embracing a return to Hindu epistemology, causing Mignolo to eventually withdraw his endorsement after a public outcry (see: <https://twitter.com/dibyeshanand/status/1431169087023947776>) accessed 21 November 2022).

<sup>25</sup>Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. xviii, xxviii, 137; Walter D. Mignolo, ‘Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality’, in Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (eds), *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (London, UK: Routledge, 2010), p. 306; Asher, ‘Latin American decolonial thought’, pp. 838–9.

<sup>26</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, NY: Methuen, 1987), pp. 198–201; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, eds Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (London, UK: Routledge, 1996), p. 19.

'Western' egalitarian and emancipatory legacy (freedom, equality, social justice), thereby reinventing that very legacy,<sup>27</sup> opening it up so that emancipation applies not just to white Europeans, but to all (and especially the subaltern), thereby depriving Europeans of any exclusive knowledge or interpretation of the 'European' canon (i.e., postcolonialising and democratising the canon, which is to say, decolonising it).

My claim, therefore, is that if decolonising Development Studies is to happen discursively, it would require hearing the subaltern without speaking for it, while also critically engaging with, and thereby reinventing, the 'Western' canon.

### *Material decolonisation (and its limits)*

For its part, material decolonisation involves a range of strategies at the level of the university. Such strategies are inevitably limited since we academics are most often confined to what happens on our campuses, with more or less restricted control over the broader processes of political economy that determine socioeconomic and ecological (in)equality and (in)justice. In this sense, there will be no meaningful and sustainable decolonisation on campus without meaningful and sustainable equality outside campus.

One worthy strategy nonetheless is the fight for better access, indeed universal access, to higher education, particularly for marginalised populations in both the Global North and South. Decolonisation, after all, is not simply a 'topic' to be covered in classrooms but a politics aimed at promoting access to critical learning and knowledge production by all – and by the subaltern first. To be equitable and just, this would need to take the form of free fees or entrance scholarships (on the basis of both merit and need), rather than loans which indebt students and bind them to the very capitalist market that creates global inequalities and unevenness.<sup>28</sup> Free or nominally low tuition used to be the norm in several countries before the onset of the neoliberal university, and still is in a few (e.g., Germany, Taiwan, Argentina, France, most Nordic countries), so this is not an unrealistic proposition. But where free tuition is not (or is no more) the norm, it will likely require the collective mobilisation of universities, unions, and the public to pressure the state to make it so.

Going hand-in-hand is the fight against the neoliberalisation and corporatisation of the university: the latter take many forms, ranging from the positioning of students as 'customers' and prioritising funding of the sciences and business at the expense of the humanities and social sciences to quality assurance (e.g., research and grant metrics, performance-based funding, the employment of administrators to supervise neoliberal performance)<sup>29</sup> and subjecting research to corporate or state security interests.<sup>30</sup> Yet, running campuses like businesses reduces knowledge to a commodity, valuing it for exchange rather than use/edification. It encourages private and competitive behaviour, producing a disregard for the public. It constructs students as consumers and faculty as job trainers – specialists and 'experts' required for solving concrete social problems. What disappears as a result is the task of citizenship and critical thinking that undergirds the decolonisation of Development Studies and beyond: not just to offer solutions to the problems given to us by the status quo (the market and state), but to question the very construction of these problems, the interests they defend, and the gaps and exclusions they hide and imply.

<sup>27</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'I plead guilty – but where is the judgment?', *Nepantla: Views from South*, 3:3 (19 December 2002), p. 580; Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London, UK: Verso, 2009), p. 580. See also Shilliam, *Decolonizing Politics*, p. 17. What is considered 'Western' or 'European' is itself the result of hegemonic European notions of sovereignty, which privilege questions of space and territory, thereby neglecting the many 'European' ideas, institutions, foods, etc. (e.g., algebra, astronomy, community forestry, the concept of zero, tomatoes, potatoes, spices) that are themselves the result of cross-border exchange, travel, and especially commodification and appropriation of the non-European.

<sup>28</sup> Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, pp. 58ff.

<sup>29</sup> Gordon refers to them as the 'academic managerial class', *Disciplinary Decadence*, p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> See Jonathan Langdon, 'Decolonising Development Studies: Reflections on critical pedagogies in action', *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, 34:3 (1 September 2013), pp. 384–99.

Finally, it is important to note the growing battle against the privatisation of university-based knowledge. Indeed, the majority of our scholarly research, much of it publicly funded through grants and stipends, is privately owned by corporate publishing multinationals (Reed Elsevier, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Wiley-Blackwell, etc.). As a result, access to our research is restricted to only those who can pay for it, with journal subscriptions now consuming about 65 per cent of university library budgets (some science journal annual subscriptions can cost up to \$21,000), thus reducing the number of books that can be purchased.<sup>31</sup> George Monbiot calls such a set-up ‘pure rentier capitalism: monopolising a public resource then charging exorbitant fees to use it’.<sup>32</sup> To be sure, multinational publishers are some of the most profitable companies worldwide, several of them fetching profit margins of between 35–40 per cent.<sup>33</sup>

The encouraging news though is the increasing trend towards free access to online databases for publicly funded research. In Europe a consortium of funders and research agencies is moving forward with ‘Plan S’, which requires that all scientific publications supported by public grants be published in open access journals or platforms. This initiative has been backed by state research bodies in Zambia and China. In the US, federal government agencies are now mandated to make all non-sensitive government data available to the public under an open format, and the University of California system requires that any state funded research be made open access. There are also a number of other state and university initiatives around the world for setting up open access repositories for publicly funded research.<sup>34</sup> Much still needs to be done to generalise this trend, but it constitutes an important step in helping to decolonise knowledge by making it universally accessible.

### Conclusion: Epistemic *and* material decolonisation

The decolonisation of Development Studies – and for that matter any discipline – thus involves profound transformation, touching not only on the discipline, per se, but the personal and political, the university and the broader political economy, the local and the global, and the Global South and North. I have highlighted both the epistemic and the material dimensions of such transformation, but here too, the one cannot be separated from the other: as we have seen, knowledge production and dissemination is shaped by whether it is privatised or publicly accessible; and encountering the subaltern depends on breaking down not just epistemic but also socioeconomic barriers.

What should not be neglected here again is that universities themselves remain deeply complicit in the production of inequalities, not only in as far as knowledge production is concerned but also, as Pimblott underlines, ‘in their increasingly expansive roles as employers, property developers and asset managers’.<sup>35</sup> Rather than merely making this problem the object of criticism, it is an opportunity once again for faculty and students both to learn about, and struggle against, the political economy that undergirds institutions of higher learning (exploitative and discriminatory employment practices, gentrification, financialisation, corporatisation, state austerity measures, security and surveillance, etc.), thereby linking theory and practice, ideology and materiality, academe and

<sup>31</sup> George Monbiot, ‘Academic publishers make Murdoch look like a socialist’, *Guardian* (29 August 2011), available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/29/academic-publishers-murdoch-socialist> accessed 22 June 2020.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Jason Schmitt, ‘Paywalls block scientific progress: Research should be open to everyone’, *Guardian* (28 March 2019), available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/28/paywalls-block-scientific-progress-research-should-be-open-to-everyone> accessed 22 June 2020.

<sup>34</sup> See George Monbiot, ‘Scientific publishing is a rip-off: We fund the research – it should be free’, *Guardian* (13 September 2018), available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/13/scientific-publishing-rip-off-taxpayers-fund-research> accessed 22 June 2020; Schmitt, ‘Paywalls block scientific progress’.

<sup>35</sup> Pimblott, ‘Decolonising the university’, p. 215.

capitalism. In this regard, as intimated earlier, Indigenous scholars<sup>36</sup> are weary of the now pervasive current North American practice of giving land acknowledgements at official university (and corporate) events, which, when not backed up by actual land repatriation, becomes an empty, ‘feel-good’ gesture – an act aimed less at learning about and dismantling than covering up, indeed disavowing, systems of dispossession.

Thus, struggling for epistemic decolonisation without struggling for material decolonisation compromises both. In fact, to return to where we began, the current campus ‘culture wars’ (i.e., the defence of empire, the rise of neopopulist nationalism and white supremacy) are further proof of this, demonstrating how those in positions of power seek to defend their privileges in the face of resistance to continuing forms of socioeconomic inequality, domination, and exclusion. Such symbolic fights are likely to continue (on the part of the Right as much as Left) as long as material inequality and injustice persist. Which is to say that decolonising Development Studies is an ongoing struggle.

**Ilan Kapoor** is Professor of Critical Development Studies at the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change, York University, Toronto. His research focuses on psychoanalytic and postcolonial theory and politics, and ideology critique. He is the author of *The Postcolonial Politics of Development* (Routledge, 2008); *Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Global Charity* (Routledge, 2013); and *Confronting Desire: Psychoanalysis and International Development* (Cornell University Press, 2020); editor of the collected volume, *Psychoanalysis and the Global* (University of Nebraska Press, 2018); and co-author, with Zahi Zalloua, of *Universal Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2022); with Gavin Fridell, Maureen Sioh, and Pieter de Vries, of *Global Libidinal Economy* (SUNY Press, 2023); and with Gavin Fridell of *Rethinking Development Politics* (Edward Elgar, forthcoming 2024).

<sup>36</sup>Michael C. Lambert, Elisa J. Sobo, and Valerie L. Lambert, ‘Rethinking Land Acknowledgments’, *Anthropology News* (blog) (20 December 2021), available at: {<https://www.anthropology-news.org/articles/rethinking-land-acknowledgments/>} accessed 18 May 2022; Graeme Wood, “Land acknowledgments” are just moral exhibitionism’, *The Atlantic* (28 November 2021), available at: {<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/against-land-acknowledgments-native-american/620820/>} accessed 18 May 2022.