

## Parsing “Decolonisation”

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### Abstract

This article addresses the fraught question of “decolonisation” at South African universities—what does it mean when students and some academic staff members call for the decolonisation of the curriculum? The issue of legitimate participation in the debate is raised, as well as that of the “incommensurability thesis”—the claim that individuals working within a certain “paradigmatically distinct” theory or within an identifiable discourse, cannot understand those working within *other* theoretical paradigms, and therefore thwart discussion between pro-decolonisers and those who oppose it. The consideration that, regardless of culture, or race, or gender, all human subjects are linguistic beings, is related to the mutual translatability of languages, and the notion of always being embedded in a cultural life-world. Instead of remaining relativistically imprisoned in the latter, it is argued that the sciences afford people the opportunity to step away from their involvement in this life-world, with its cultural prejudices, to meet one another through a shared terminology and conceptual or theoretical apparatus that enable one to understand the (natural and social) world in a manner that allows intersubjective understanding. The point is made that, for something to be scientific (or “rational”), any human being should be able to “test” or examine, or simply enter into a (sometimes difficult) dialogue about it. Unless these issues are kept in mind, one cannot even begin to discuss the merits of the demand for decolonisation. It is acknowledged, however, that there are “knowledges” that have been (unjustifiably) “disqualified” by Western culture as being “inadequate” in terms of “scientific cognition.” For this reason it is argued that every scholar, scientist or philosopher must be willing to see beyond the confines of privileged Western knowledge to acknowledge these “excluded knowledges” and to affirm that they are epistemic “equals” of, albeit different from, Western knowledge.

**Keywords:** culture; decolonisation; epistemology; knowledge; philosophy of science



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Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need  
For this bright morning dawning for you.  
History, despite its wrenching pain,  
Cannot be unlived, and if faced  
With courage, need not be lived again.

Lift up your eyes upon  
This day breaking for you.  
Give birth again  
To the dream.

**Source:** Maya Angelou, “On the Pulse of Morning” (Poem on the inauguration of the US President, 22 January 1993; quoted in Castells 2010, 1).

## Introduction

The most difficult question facing educators at universities in South Africa today is undoubtedly that of “decolonisation”—what does it mean when students and some academic staff members call for the decolonisation of the curriculum? Is the call justified? If it amounts to a call for the removal of all putatively “Western” elements from the curriculum—assuming for the moment that this is possible—would that not amount to throwing the proverbial baby (of knowledge) out with the bathwater (of the history and effects of colonisation)? Abandoning this assumption, what would an attempted purge of the curriculum of Western elements entail, and what would be the result? These are just some of the questions that are raised by reflecting on the meaning and implications of the demand for decolonisation.

At the outset I should state explicitly, however, that many of those calling for decolonisation would probably argue that, as a white South African, I am not qualified to participate in the debate.<sup>1</sup> If one accepts such an objection, it would amount to a special case of what is known in the philosophy of science and discourse theory as the “incommensurability thesis”—namely that individuals working within a certain “paradigmatically distinct” theory (within the “same” scientific field), or within an identifiable discourse, such as Marxism, cannot understand those working within *other*, or paradigmatically different theories, situated within the science or discipline concerned. My own position is simple: even when one is working within a theory that implicitly contests the validity of other theories about the “same” phenomenon, this does not exclude the possibility of entering into dialogue or conversation about it. For instance, the behaviourist psychological theory that people’s behaviour can be understood as “reactions” to events or conditions in their environment, which function as stimuli, is diametrically opposed to any theory that construes human behaviour as self-initiated “action” (instead of “reactions”), but this does not preclude dialogue among adherents of such divergent theories. To be sure, if one supports one or the other of these

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1 Brenda Leibowitz (2016, 1–2) has touched on this matter, too, and justifies her own participation in the debate on decolonisation by stressing her duty, as someone appointed to a chair in teaching and learning at a South African university, to help think through the implications of the “decolonisation discourse” for university teaching and learning. To this she adds her interest in the relationship between power, knowledge and democracy, in the phenomenon of knowledge as means of domination, and in the question how knowledge can be harnessed in the promotion of democracy and justice. These sentiments are compatible, and at several levels resonate with my own.

theories on what one regards as being unassailable grounds, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to convince such a person to accept another theory as having greater explanatory power, but attempts to convince one another of the error of their insights are not precluded. This is not the place to discuss Thomas Kuhn's (1962; Olivier 1984) famous notion of a "paradigm switch" that only takes place when something like a "religious conversion" happens—and the grounds of possibility of such a "switch"—suffice it to say that if one rules out the very possibility of entering into a conversation about the validity (or not) of a theory, then one must rule out the possibility of at least *some* (if not all) instances of "successful" communication. The unavoidable result of such a position is unadulterated "solipsism" or an incapacity to understand oneself or others (Baumer 1977, 419–420), that is, the position that one is forever fatally imprisoned within the confines of one's own mind, as it were. Needless to stress, if one adheres to such a stance the logical consequence is to stop communicating altogether.

If the incommensurability thesis is broadened to include the horizons of meaning (including epistemic, educational, religious and artistic meaning) characterising different cultures, there is no point to attempts in reaching some kind of mutual understanding between individuals from diverse cultures, even if they are working within, or studying, what is ostensibly the "same" science or field of research. Hence, on pain of demonstrating that this thesis is valid (which would entail an obvious contradiction), every interested, linguistically articulate person is qualified to participate in the debate. No matter what culture, or race, or gender we belong to, we are all human subjects, and that means, linguistically and communicatively active beings. And all languages are mutually translatable, even if such translation presupposes that one familiarise oneself with the other's culture, if not language. One cannot step outside of language to adjudicate linguistically articulated claims to knowledge by the other from a culture-free perspective; you are always already embedded in a cultural life-world.

The sciences—natural and social/humanistic—do afford us the opportunity, however, to step away from our involvement in this life-world with all its cultural and personal prejudices, to meet one another in a domain where a shared terminology and a conceptual/theoretical apparatus enable one to understand the (natural and social) world in such a manner that one can talk about it. And if these theoretical perspectives are found lacking, anyone trained in a specific scientific discourse is free to challenge, criticise or modify and replace the theories in question with "better" ones—as long as an expanded version of Karl Popper's principle is observed, that scientific claims must be "falsifiable" (Chalmers 1999, 59–65). "Falsifiability" does not here mean that a claim to knowledge should in fact be proved false, but that all scientific claims must "in principle" be "falsifiable"; in other words "testable." By "expanded version" I mean that room must be made for "other" knowledge systems and claims, which would require a broader conception of "falsifiability" not restricted to the Western tradition of science. If one claims something to be true about an aspect of the world, without doing so in such a way that others can check, or test (in this "expanded" sense), whether it is the case or not, your claim is irrelevant. The terms and conditions under which it can be tested must, in principle, be accessible to anyone willing to familiarise themselves with the knowledge

tradition in question, whether it be Newtonian science, quantum mechanics, indigenous African medicine, sociology, critical psychology, or Chinese acupuncture.

When, during the Reformation in Europe, and the concomitant persecution of so-called “witches” thousands of women were burnt at the stake on such flimsy grounds as having a mole on the skin near their breasts (regarded as the “devil’s teat”), the grounds of their execution by the Inquisition were not in any obvious way falsifiable in the sense of “testable” and therefore not “scientific” in the ordinary sense; one might say that they were born of religious ideology giving rise to superstition (Shlain 1998, 362–377; more on this below). Similarly, when today one claims to be able to formulate a physics that would challenge Newton’s, and that would explain why one is able to direct or “send lightning” at someone of one’s choosing, such a claim would not pass muster as being scientific in the Newtonian sense. If it is defended as being scientific, the conditions under which one could affirm or test such a claim have to be outlined, and if these prove not to exist, the claim must be rejected as being irrelevant.

To sum up: whether in the natural or the social/human sciences, the test for something being “scientific” (or more broadly, “rational” in a wider sense than just the Western, as long as one is able to understand what this entails) is whether any human being is able to “test” or examine, or simply enter into a dialogue about it. Unless this is kept in mind by the champions of decolonisation, one cannot even begin to discuss the merits of their demand. All of this is not to deny that there are, as Foucault (1980, 81–82) has put it:

... subjugated knowledges ... on the one hand, I am referring to the historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systematisation ... On the other hand ... a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.

What has been obliterated and excluded by the valorised knowledge systems of colonisers<sup>2</sup> are therefore “historical content” and “different knowledge(s).” In the case of colonised peoples their indigenous knowledge has indeed tended to be buried and disguised under layers of coloniser’s knowledge that have displaced it historically. And although, in the second instance, Foucault was talking about “subjugated (different) knowledges” such as that of the psychiatric patient or the doctor’s nurse, it is striking that his formulation as a whole fits the “subjugated knowledges” of colonised people like a glove. Hence, it is up to every scholar, scientist or philosopher who is willing and able to see beyond the confines of

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2 Leibowitz (2016, 4) refers to this as the “global hegemonisation of knowledge.” The Council on Higher Education (2017, 6) points out that, in the light of the subjugation of indigenous knowledge by hegemonic epistemic traditions such as the Western, “[d]ecolonisation of the curriculum is thus about resurfacing subjugated knowledges and recentering the knowledge project of the university from a different vantage point.” On the other hand, it is important to remember that Western thinkers themselves have been critical of hegemonic epistemic traditions, such as the dualistic Cartesian ontology, and one should therefore guard against “throwing out the baby with the bathwater”—as it were. As Jansen (2017, 9) puts it uncompromisingly: “the most profound responses to colonial knowledge (to coin a phrase) came from within the West itself.”

privileged Western knowledge to acknowledge these “knowledges”; and in doing so to affirm that, for as long as they and the cultures that gave rise to them, are not acknowledged as epistemic “equals” of, albeit different from, Western knowledge, the subjects of those knowledges have the dubious status of the “subaltern [who] cannot speak” (Olivier 2014; Spivak 1988, 104).

### **Science or “African Science”?**

Against the backdrop of the conditions for entering into a potentially productive dialogue regarding “decolonisation” it seems that a good place to start would be to do some (what in German is known as) “zurückfragen”—that is, to inquire what the tacit logic behind the call for decolonisation is. What this is was suggested to me by two experiences. A few months ago, while driving, I was listening to an interview on SAfm with a professor of English language studies at one of our universities. He was promoting the project of decolonisation energetically, arguing that the vestiges of colonialism should be removed from university curricula. When the interviewer asked him whether the inclusion of the work of African thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko in curricula is not enough to achieve this end, he retorted that one has to go further, to get to a point where people can discover “pride” in themselves. He was unable to specify what this source of pride would be, although his argument would seem to suggest (although he did not say this, as far as I recall) that it would be the uncovering of something like a pristine African cultural past. The second experience was watching the widely circulated video of a young woman at UCT who called for “Western modernity” in the guise of Newtonian physics to be scrapped (or “scratched off”), evidently with the goal of starting from scratch with an “African physics” (Henderson 2016), which could possibly, but not necessarily, be conceived as a different epistemic tradition.

However, one was afforded a glimpse of what the latter might be by her referring vaguely to “sending lightning” to someone else, ostensibly suggesting that this is what an African physics would enable one to do, technically speaking—keeping in mind that, chronologically, modern science prepared the way for technology, although Heidegger (1977, 21–22) argues that in a different, ontological sense, modern technology “preceded” modern science insofar as it was always already implicit in the latter as a kind of *telos* or goal. Presumably a similar relationship would obtain between an “African physics” (that is, a science, *not* a series of mythical beliefs) and its attendant technology, although this idea is vitiated by the fact that “African physics” appears to constitute an oxymoron: by definition, science universalises, and hence transcends all national and cultural barriers. If it would be (natural) science, it cannot be valid for “Africa” alone—people from other cultures should be able to understand and practise it too. Newton’s, or for that matter Einstein’s, physics offers scientific explanations of physical phenomena *everywhere* on Earth, as well as on Mars, Jupiter and even in other solar systems. Gravity works the same everywhere, and light travels at the same velocity throughout the physical universe. It is, therefore, not surprising that Jonathan Jansen (2017, 11), in his response to the decolonisation debate in South Africa, has insisted on the provision of “... every school student with a high quality education that enables them to engage the world of science.” Only in this way can university curriculum change work, in the

end—it has to build upon a school education system that is not “dysfunctional”; delivering “angry and inarticulate” would-be students to universities. In sum: to be able to articulate criticism of (Western) knowledge-traditions, including Newtonian science, one has to understand them. It is important to note, however, that this is *natural* science (the scientific explanation of nature), *not* social science or the humanities, where the way that culture is embedded in language complicates things somewhat. To put the matter in a nutshell: because human beings comprise the “subject-field” *as well as* the “object-field” of the social sciences and the humanities (unlike the natural sciences, where the human scientist as “subject” is “removed” and different from the “objects” she or he investigates), it means that everything which is approached theoretically, is also part and parcel of the life-world in which we are embedded. The usual approach in the human sciences is that care should be taken not to let one’s (understandable) prejudices affect one’s judgement. In positivism and phenomenology one’s prejudices are set aside to be able to scrutinise objects more “objectively”; while in hermeneutics prejudice is used as point of departure to engage in the “hermeneutic circle” of modifying knowledge incrementally until one reaches what Gadamer (1982, 273; 357–363) calls the “fusion of horizons” of interlocutors, or of “subject” and “object.” One might therefore say that in the human sciences one is simultaneously “subject” and “object”—unlike in the natural sciences. The words “subject” and “object” should be used circumspectly, though, because *complete* objectivity is not even possible in the natural sciences: what you perceive is the result of your *interaction* with “something” that is given only in the relationship of observer and observed, and not as it exists “in itself”—as Kant already showed in the 18th century (Kant 1978).

To put the difference between the natural and the human sciences even more succinctly, while human reason operates fairly unencumbered by cultural prejudices in a science like physics, reason is encumbered by cultural beliefs in the social and human sciences. This is why theory plays a cardinal role in these sciences too, and not only in the natural sciences. Theory is like a pair of coloured spectacles that (natural *and* social/human) scientists put on to enable them to perceive the world more or less in the same manner as other scientists (who use similar “spectacles”). A more telling metaphor would be to think of theory as a prism, and experience as the light projected through it, to be refracted in the colours of the rainbow, which here represents the theoretical findings, interpretations or causal explanations. “Theory” in this sense would encompass all (theoretical, explanatory) knowledge claims, not only those that originated in Western culture.

### **Magic and Superstition: A Paradigmatic Film**

I want to emphasise that offering a “causal” explanation of events is not necessarily scientific; it can be done in terms of religious or superstitious beliefs too, for example the belief in magic (which some people may defend as a knowledge-tradition; Feyerabend (1993) [see below] is sympathetic to this possibility), which is thematised in Malian filmmaker Cissé’s *Yeelen* (1987). In a discussion of African beliefs in magic, Ryszard Kapuscinski (2002) describes the strange nocturnal behaviour of a group of men, carrying someone on a stretcher on the outskirts of a village where he and his guide were spending the night, dashing

furtively from shrub to shrub instead of walking openly. When he questioned his guide about the villagers the next day, the latter simply replied that they belonged to the tribe of the Amba, and added, “Kabila mbaya” (roughly, “bad people”; Kapuscinski 2002, 185). To understand the puzzling behaviour of the villagers, one has to keep in mind, in Kapuscinski’s words (2002, 185), that:

People like the Amba and their kinsmen believe profoundly that the world is ruled by supernatural forces. These forces are particular—spirits that have names, spells that can be defined. It is they that inform the course of events and imbue them with meaning, decide our fate, determine everything. For this reason nothing happens by chance; chance simply does not exist.

Hence, according to these beliefs in supernatural powers, if something bad happens to anyone, it is usually attributed to the agency of a wizard—either in the shape of what is known in English as a “witch”—the very incarnation of evil—or of a “sorcerer” which is less incorrigibly demonic, but still capable of casting potent spells on people. None of this should sound unfamiliar to even the most hardened rationalist or scientist, provided they have some historical memory—after all, not only is there hardly a culture in the world that has not gone through a phase of its history marked by a similar belief in human susceptibility to magical or demonic powers (such as the persecution of witches in Europe in the 16th century, referred to earlier), but even our own modern/postmodern culture still bears clear signs of its continued hold on people’s minds. What else do popular games like *Dungeons and Dragons*, *World of Warcraft*, or literary and cinematic works like J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series represent, if not a lingering belief in (or perhaps nostalgia for) magic?

The pervasive presence of the supernatural in certain African contexts is vividly demonstrated in *Yeelen (Brightness)*, a 1987 film by Souleymane Cissé of Mali. The film’s title resonates with the ironic title of Kapuscinski’s book, *Shadow of the Sun* (2002), because Africa is the continent of the sun, first and foremost, as Kapuscinski acknowledges where, at the beginning, he evokes the effect of sunrise on an African village—everything comes to life, instantaneously, when the sun appears. *Yeelen*, too, opens with the image of the red sun rising, and ends with the excavation of two large eggs from the sand, intimating not merely the indissoluble bond between the sun and life itself, but simultaneously and specifically the Bambara people of Africa’s conception of a cyclical, Phoenix-like universe, where destruction is perpetually followed by rebirth, suggested here by the eggs.

These two events frame the narrative of a struggle between an evil sorcerer father (Soma), intent on the destruction of his supposedly wayward son (Nianankoro), who similarly possesses magical powers, and in the end faces his father courageously, armed with a magical object of great power—enough to match that of his father’s magical pole. Before the climactic, ultimately Oedipal confrontation between father and son, one witnesses the unfolding of narrative events that culminate in this. In the final clash between them the unbearable, lethal brightness (*Yeelen*) that emanates from their respective occult objects encapsulates the paradoxical implications of the film—brightness, associated with the sun, is simultaneously the condition of life, but can also be the source of death (darkness). Any

Western viewer who might look at this film with the vaunted sense of superiority of someone supposedly emancipated once and for all from its pervasive sense of being subject, willy-nilly, to magical forces, should remind themselves, however, that its unmistakably African particularity is only one of its aspects. Behind this there hides a universally human susceptibility to what Freud (2011), in a memorable essay, refers to as the “uncanny” and what Rudolf Otto called the “numinous” (Baumer 1977, 449)—an awareness that may strike one unpredictably, that within the ordinary there lurks something alien to its very ordinariness. Upon realising the ubiquity of such experiences, viewers should not find it difficult to understand that the Africanness of *Yeelen* reverberates with a spectrum of experiences across cultures, and beliefs encountered in many religions—neither Christianity and Islam, nor Judaism and Hinduism, are exempt from the imprint of the supernatural; in fact, it is constitutive of these religions.

If the impression still exists that it is in African culture alone that such beliefs in magic have held sway, and in some areas of (South) Africa still do (Olivier 2004), let me hasten to add to what has been said above that this has been the case in many cultures, including the Western, as Leonard Shlain (1998), referred to earlier, demonstrates at length with regard to the notorious witch hunts in Europe during the Inquisition that, in the course of its attempts (in the face of the Protestant Reformation) at eradicating all heresy, murdered thousands of women on the superstitious grounds of believing that they were witches. This was undoubtedly one of the worst episodes in Western history, and similar manifestations of superstitious beliefs have manifested themselves from time to time in Western countries since then, such as the infamous case of the “witches of Salem” in America (Blumberg 2007). Many people would no doubt be surprised to know that, as recently as 2005, “witchcraft lessons” were ruled as being tax-deductible in the Netherlands, on condition that they enhanced “a person’s employability and earning potential” (John 2016); although this should arguably be understood in the light of the greater receptivity, in “the pluralistic discursive space of postmodernity” for more diversity of practices than was the case at the height of modernity (Olivier 2009, 11).

### **Different Causalities and “Open Exchanges”**

The point about *Yeelen* as “cultural symptom” of a still widespread belief in the occult is that it is a reminder that such beliefs are predicated on a different kind of causality—not the mathematically articulated causality underpinning Newton’s macro-mechanics, but a qualitatively different causality, which Kapuscinski (2002, 185–191) characterises persuasively by juxtaposing two kinds of explanation for the fact that someone died in a car accident: in the one (Western) case, it is explained in terms of mechanical causes relating to the working parts of the brake-system failing (for various possible reasons); in the other (African), a “deeper” cause is alluded to, “behind” the working components of the brake-system. This underlying cause pertains to magic, to the belief that the brakes ultimately “failed” because a spell had been cast on them, or on the driver of the car. Both the “mechanical” (scientific) explanation and the one that appeals to magic have one thing in common, namely a belief in causality of some kind. One might gather from this that there are



divergent ways of understanding the world; if one is not in thrall to the rationalism underpinning most of Western science and philosophy, one might conclude that, perhaps, these different approaches to phenomena could possibly learn from one another. Such a position is encountered in the work of anarchist philosopher of science, Paul Feyerabend (1993, 227–228):

An open exchange [as opposed to a “rational” one; BO] ... is guided by a pragmatic philosophy. The tradition adopted by the parties is unspecified in the beginning and develops as the exchange proceeds. The participants get immersed into each other’s ways of thinking, feeling, perceiving to such an extent that their ideas, perceptions, world-views may be entirely changed—they become different people participating in a new and different tradition. An open exchange respects the partner whether he is an individual or an entire culture, while a rational exchange promises respect only within the framework of a rational debate. An open exchange has no organon [instrument, tool, organ; BO] though it may invent one, there is no logic though new forms of logic may emerge in its course. An open exchange establishes connections between different traditions ...

Open exchange practices, for Feyerabend, are characteristic of (or may give rise to) “free” societies, and his description of such a society drives home the distance that separates us from it (1993, 228):

*A free society is a society in which all traditions are given equal rights, equal access to education and other positions of power ...* If traditions have advantages only from the point of view of other traditions then choosing one tradition as a basis of a free society is an arbitrary act that can be justified only by resorting to power. A free society thus cannot be based on any particular creed; for example, it cannot be based on rationalism or on humanitarian considerations. The basic structure of a free society is a *protective structure*, not an ideology, it functions like an iron railing not like a conviction.

Needless to emphasise, in such an “open society” there would be no derogation of any epistemic position in the face of others; representatives of divergent epistemic traditions—not only those claiming to be scientific—would enter into debate or linguistic exchanges with one another in order to persuade their interlocutors of the validity of their positions in any and every way possible. For Feyerabend (1993) this is unavoidably accompanied by mutual change and perhaps modification of one’s initial position. I fear that, in a world still firmly under the sway of Western knowledge-traditions (which, paradoxically, include Feyerabend’s “anarchistic” position), we have a long way to go before attaining such mutual epistemic sensitivity.

### **The Invisible Logic Underpinning Calls for Decolonisation**

Against the backdrop of the discussion of magic above, the “argument” put forward by the UCT student referred to earlier, that modern physics just be done away with and an African physics be put in its place, shows in stark contours what such an approach presupposes in terms of causality. In the light of the reference to Feyerabend’s (1993) promotion of “open exchange” it is not difficult to understand the reasons for this imperative to “decolonise.” Furthermore, as Frantz Fanon’s work (1963; 2008), as well as that of W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) unambiguously and forcibly testifies, all people who have been subjected to the coloniser’s oppressive and exploitative power would feel the need to throw off its yoke. Anyone who has

been familiar with, let alone subjected to what Du Bois, referring to conditions in some American states in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, evokes with the following description, would probably feel the same (Du Bois 1935, 7):

As slavery grew to a system and the Cotton Kingdom began to expand into imperial white domination, a free Negro was a contradiction, a threat and a menace. As a thief and a vagabond, he threatened society; but as an educated property holder, a successful mechanic or even professional man, he more than threatened slavery. He contradicted and undermined it. He must not be. He must be suppressed, enslaved, colonized. And nothing so bad could be said about him that did not easily appear as true to slaveholders.

But have African (and other) countries not been decolonised in the course of the post-colonial period, at least politically speaking, ignoring for the moment the question of the current, ongoing, globalised economic neo-colonial expansion perpetrated by neoliberal capitalism (which is, to my mind, a far more serious matter than that of decolonisation as it is understood in South Africa; see Stiegler, 2010; Hardt and Negri, 2001; 2006; 2012; more on this below)? Admittedly, when they attained their independence in the course of the 20th century they faced the task of living up to that “independence” by, among other things, finding their “own voices.” Broadly speaking, this could be understood as “decolonising” themselves, which is another way of saying that they have had to become independent in their thinking, speaking and writing.

This already indicates what form such decolonisation should take beyond the obvious political changing of the guard, namely the installation of new, African governments in the place of erstwhile colonial authorities—which, incidentally, often went hand in hand with a continuation of oppression by those who took over the governing positions of erstwhile colonial authorities and proceed acting as the agents of global capital (Hardt and Negri 2001, 132–133). The most important, but also most problematic task facing a drive for decolonisation in the sense of finding your own “identity” in a distinctive African vocabulary, would seem to be the discursive-linguistic task of eradicating all traces of colonisation from the language that people use, for the simple reason that all ideology, including colonial ideology, is embedded in language as discourse. This is just another way of saying that colonisation, like other forms of ideological conquest, is (or was) about the imposition of power, as the mostly ignored, but yet very obvious, economic neo-colonisation of Africa by Western corporations demonstrates. Hence, any authentic decolonisation process has to rid itself of the power of colonising forces. How is this to be done? Certainly it cannot be done by returning to some mythical pre-colonial, “pure” African cultural “origin” as it existed, unblemished by colonial influences before the arrival of colonisers on African soil. If it is a matter of “taking back cultural power” it can only be done by doing for South African culture what the French do so well—prioritising the practice of French culture, even if American (and other kinds of) cultural imports exist side by side with it in France. Needless to say, this entails the use of indigenous African languages on a much larger scale in educational institutions than is the case at present—knowledge is inseparable from language, and African scholars themselves are responsible for countering the hegemonic use of English by

developing relevant scientific and discipline-terminologies in languages like IsiZulu and IsiXhosa for use at university level.

I don't know of any sub-Saharan African sources or texts that predate the 17th century, when the Dutch arrived in the Cape. If they exist, such texts—in other words, any kind of decipherable inscription, on any material—would probably constitute genuinely “African” cultural records or “texts” of some kind, as do San rock paintings in a certain broad (Derridean) sense of textuality. I specified “sub-Saharan” above, because there are several instances of texts from North-Africa that could be regarded as “African”—such as the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, the Arabic texts preserved in libraries in Timbuktu, or the texts written by thinkers from North-Africa, including St Augustine, Fanon, Albert Camus and Jacques Derrida—the latter being a thinker who was regarded as one of the leading philosophers in the world at the time of his death in France in 2004.

Those driving the (counter-colonial) ideological project of decolonisation would probably find little comfort in this, because all these thinkers, from St Augustine in the 4th and 5th centuries CE to Derrida, wrote in a Western idiom—not as a gesture of disregarding Africa's needs, but because that is the philosophical-theoretical idiom that they inherited from those who preceded them, and if there is one thing that is impossible to do, it is to invent an *absolutely* new theoretical idiom, out of thin air; at best, one is dependent on languages that pre-exist the individual. Besides, invention always presupposes convention, as Derrida (among others) has shown, even if, in *Positions* (1981, 24), he granted that one is able to shift or “modify” the epistemological terrain bit by bit, by engaging with the existing fabric of the sciences and disciplines. (And if one were to object that Derrida is just another Western voice, might I remind them that he was born in Algeria, Africa, and has contributed enormously towards recognition of the cultural and gendered “other.”) Furthermore, if anyone believes that one could in fact “go back” to an original fountainhead of African culture, predating the advent of colonisation, the question to ask—already implied above—is: In what medium has this been preserved? If not in cultural artefacts of some kind, then in what else? And artefacts of any kind, lexical or iconic (as with San rock paintings), ineluctably have to be interpreted from the horizon of one's own present. One has no alternative but to acknowledge the impossibility of returning to, uncovering, or repeating, an origin which is somehow “pure”—invariably it turns out to be a projection of a desire for an unblemished “foundation” of sorts.

The implications for “decolonisation” should be clear: if the aim is to uncover the “original form” of African culture, it would be impossible without an intervening cultural tradition. The giant leap across the African cultural tradition, intertwined as it is with Western and other cultural influences to the mythical source of pre-colonial African culture, is impossible. One could imagine such a culture, of course, but it would be a hypostatisation. There are probably many records of African culture that date back to the early years of colonisation, but I'm willing to bet that they would be framed through Western eyes, or—if rendered by Africans—by Africans in terms borrowed from Western colonisers. The news for those committed to the project of decolonisation is therefore not good. Unless they persist in

deluding themselves, it is not a viable project. And if they do persist in their delusion, they ought to be reminded that it is an ideological project, burdened with the blindness that besets all ideological projects. Such blindness shows itself when those driving the project make statements like the following: “What is needed here is an epistemological paradigm-shift!” Reflection would reveal that the very statement is inescapably indebted to Western theory: both “epistemological” and “paradigm-shift” are concepts fashioned in the workshop of Western thought; the former among the ancient Greeks, and the latter (“paradigm”)—although also “originally” from ancient Greek philosophy—in the philosophy of science of Thomas Kuhn in his 1962 publication, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

### **Criticism of my Position**

In a critical response to my position, briefly articulated on an earlier occasion, Nyna Amin (2016) wrote as follows:

... I totally disagree with some parts of your argument. It may have to do with its decontextualized take on decolonisation. From my discussions with you, I know that it pertains to particular institutions so it is unfortunate that you chose to write this post in a generalised way. Those of us who are engaged in the decolonization project see it as a strategic intervention to release the mind from the stranglehold of apartheid and the pseudoscience of eugenics on the psyches of Blacks. And perhaps it speaks to my own history of wresting my mind from the aberrations of apartheid, the low self-esteem and feelings of inferiority. It is a struggle to reclaim dignity, respect and self-worth. Often the psychological agenda is sublimated in overt actions and discourses that misdirect decolonial intentions.

This is not the first endeavour to displace a powerful set of beliefs or practices. We are well aware of the battle between science and religion, the Falo del Vanita (bonfire of the vanities) of 1497, and the French policy of assimilation in Africa, to name a few. The illogic of those assays did not endure. At some point rationality restaged a return. I suspect a similar occurrence is at play. Various attempts are being made at decolonisation, some good, some suspect. After all, there is not a singular “decolonisation”; there are multiplicities. Following Laclau, we see here discursive articulations of an empty signifier. So ... you and I are in a battle to fix the meaning and interpretation of decolonisation.

While I do not support the insensitive, nay, stupid attempts to use decolonization for political and self-interest, particularly by those whose minds are deluded, I do think it is necessary for various efforts to continue so that they may be “falsified.” Those that are illogical will fade and those that are productive will endure. The idea that “everything that is white or Western is bad” will also not survive especially when one considers what this could mean in practice: no Christianity, technology, motor vehicles, high heel shoes, branded products, brick and tile homes, modern appliances, television and films, etc. Yes, it may result in some discomfort for some but when one places this in the context of centuries of undignified being then it appears to be a small price to pay. I think that rather than decolonization, (not because of the irrational search for origins), proponents will eventually stumble upon deconstruction when they identify the paradoxes, contradictions and ironies inherent in philosophical or even pragmatic revisioning.

My answer to her was the following (Olivier 2016):

Thanks, Nyna, for being honest, as usual, and for providing constructively critical comment, but I believe that we are talking about two different things. What you are talking about is—in my terms—simply resisting the tendency of a dominant discourse to subjugate people to its hegemony, and I believe that the best defence against such a tendency of a dominant

discourse (the “colonial” here), to “speak” those subjected to its imperatives, is to position oneself against it by means of a counter-discourse, such as the postcolonial, or feminist (in relation to patriarchy) discourse(s). I think that “decolonisation” is perhaps the wrong word for that project, simply because, as I tried to show in this post, its underlying, if hidden, logic is the drive towards an unattainable “origin” or source. I happen to support and promote “the release of the mind from the stranglehold on the psyche” by whatever discourse(s) claims hegemony—if that is what you understand by “decolonisation”, I am all for it. But the shape it assumes when academics are expected to “purify” their courses, etc., is misguided because of what it presupposes—which is what I try to spell out in the piece. I prefer “postcolonial studies” (I don’t know if you read the piece I added below the original post on this), which can proceed deconstructively or genealogically, for instance. It may seem strange to you, but because I was always intuitively opposed to apartheid—even when I could not, at a young age, articulate my reasons for this—I, too, had to struggle to rid myself of the stranglehold of apartheid discourse, but I never thought of it as “decolonisation.” Rather, it was a matter, at the time, of resistance to an unacceptable ideology, or what today I would describe as an invidious discourse.

I would like to add to this response that, if the term, “decolonisation” has to be used, then I would prefer to understand it, as already intimated above, in the sense of claiming one’s (relative) autonomy, and refusing the “colonisation” of your subjectivity by another, whether this “other” is a hegemonic economic or political system, or, for that matter, another person intent on “using” you strategically for their own dubious utilitarian ends (Habermas 1984, 87–88). From this perspective, “decolonisation” remains an ever-unfinished task, insofar as the cultural subject has to repeat, *differently*, her or his resistance against attempts at colonising their subjectivity, in the process experimentally looking for, and possibly finding, their own “voices” (see Olivier 2014). That is how culture develops—by way of what Kristeva (2000) calls (creative) “revolt”—which is a way of “returning to your (true) self.”

## **Conclusion**

It would not be easy, nor desirable, to try to put an end to the debate on decolonisation, here or in other countries. However, in the light of what was argued above, it would appear that there are many issues that require conceptual clarification before such a debate can even be conducted in a manner that is conducive to mutual understanding of the parties involved in the debate, let alone reach the “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer 1982) referred to earlier. The work of Frantz Fanon (1963; 2008) and other related thinkers, for example, bears close scrutiny (a task for future research) to ascertain its relevance for the debate, and the degree to which it could contribute to clarifying what is at stake. So does the question of a different kind of “decolonisation” that is called for in the era of the neoliberal (economic) colonisation of the world, particularly of countries in the southern hemisphere. No matter what, whether from a black, “Africanist” perspective, or a white, “Euro-African” one—both of which inescapably have to avail themselves of language—unless different interlocutors accept that they have to strive for some kind of understanding of the other’s position, no debate (and no progress in mutual comprehension) would be possible. In sum: there is still a lot of groundwork to be done, to which this article is an attempt at a modest contribution.

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