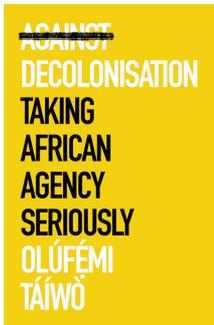




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Against decolonisation: Taking African agency seriously



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Modernity and its discontents: Tradition and the problem of liberation in postcolonial Africa

At the turn of the millennium, the Marxist historian and cultural critic Arif Dirlik surmised that if there was once scholarly consensus in the 1970s over the meaning of colonialism, as the political and economic control of the territory of one society by another, the intrusion of postcolonial discourse into the academy in the 1980s signalled the elevation of colonialism to a “totalizing structure”, which came to be synonymous with a metaphysical adumbration of modern society as colonial Eurocentrism. He cautioned that this theorisation of colonialism tended to de-historicise the historical dynamics conditioning the emergence of specific colonial systems of governance (each producing complex, differing effects) with the radical representation of a unified metaphysical system that erased all analytical specificity. His diagnosis was that this development in intellectual history was symptomatic of the morality of a global elite whose knowledge production is defined by a lack of interest in critiquing the political system they constitute, rather asserting their authority with different iterations of “cultural nationalism”.¹

Although Dirlik’s critique is representative of an orthodox Marxist position that has reductively read postcolonialism’s claim that colonial racism is irreducible to capitalist exploitation as bourgeois idealism, the emergent institutional dominance of Latin American Decoloniality theory as the global successor of postcolonialism has led credence to his symptomatic reading of the new *postcolonial*, or rather *decolonial* intellectual. Ramon Grosfoguel and Walter Mignolo have been influential in arguing that it is less valuable to be a political activist in the periphery campaigning for modern human rights and freedoms, i.e. reproducing colonial epistemologies, than to be in the metropole practising “epistemic disobedience”, subverting the epistemic conditions that structure our global capitalist world system. They propose that true decolonisation from the colonial matrix of power, knowledge and being, that is, colonisation as a metaphysical system, necessitates dismantling the dominant Western knowledge system at the metropolitan core and centring the hitherto marginalised and excluded epistemic contributions of non-Western indigenous knowledge systems, which offer alternative ways of understanding and being in the world.^{2,3}

In contrast to this trend, the exemplary scholarship of Professor Olufemi Taiwo, in his new book, *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously*, which he describes as a footnote to his earlier, now classic text, *How Colonialism Preempted Modernity* (2009), is an exception that speaks profoundly to the challenge laid out by Dirlik. One advantage of Taiwo’s account over his opponents is his rigorous theoretical and conceptual delimitation of what decolonisation entails. He differentiates between two distinct forms, Decolonisation1 and Decolonisation2 (p.1–12). Decolonisation1 involves the positive transformation of a colony into a self-governing entity that directs its own political and economic existence. The first chapter of the book illustrates the positive conception of Decolonisation1 as reflected in the work of prominent anti-colonial intellectuals and revolutionaries, Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral and Kwame Nkrumah. Taiwo criticises what he views as a farcical application of Decolonisation2, the result of conflating modernity and colonialism. This form demands that an ex-colony reject entirely any cultural, political, intellectual or linguistic artefact idea, process, institution or practice that retains even the slightest trace of the colonial past, under the threat of remaining eternally colonised. Taiwo associates the genealogy of Decolonisation2 on the African continent post-independence, not with the prominent Latin American Decoloniality school, which has been disseminated through the work of Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and the African Decolonial Research Network, but with the thought of Ghanaian-born philosopher Kwasi Wiredu and the Kenyan born literary critic, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o.⁴

My intention in this review is not to probe whether Taiwo’s historical sourcing of Decolonisation2 in the postcolonial African context is accurate. However, it is worth cautioning the reader that, while the contributions of Taiwo’s criticisms are profound, their work (particularly Wiredu) is of marginal importance to contemporary debates concerning the decolonisation of postcolonial African society. My interest is in examining the presuppositions for this interpretation and why Taiwo does not engage directly with the Decoloniality school in the body of his text. Paradoxically, this choice stems from a shared Fanonian agreement and disagreement with Latin American decolonial scholars on the repressive nature of the postcolonial bourgeoisie, outlined in Fanon’s chapter on *The Pitfalls of National Consciousness in The Wretched of the Earth*. The Decoloniality school argue that liberation from colonisation was incomplete insofar as the national bourgeoisie adopted the epistemic values of coloniality after the formal demise of colonisation. The core of Taiwo’s argument follows a similar premise, as he argues that once independence from European colonialism was obtained legally in Africa, Africa’s rulers

proceeded to put in place numerous political contraptions – all designed to subvert and deny the freedom of their own people – to turn their citizens into subjects and to substitute their own wills for those of their people when it came to the installation of governments all across the continent... In other words, the promise of independence was never redeemed for ordinary Africans at the micro-level of their quotidian lives. (p.194)

Taiwo’s normative focus is realising the potential of modernity for ordinary postcolonial Africans, which he defines as the second struggle for freedom following independence. His work engages with a tradition of African political philosophy concerned with the problem of underdevelopment and the failure of democratic institutions on the continent. Walter Rodney’s field defining intervention challenged prevailing views that failure was predicated on African cultural values, rather claiming that Europe’s colonial system of racial capitalism, and blatant disregard for African sovereignty were to blame. Taiwo’s original contribution to this debate is the assertion that the overwhelming Fanonian characterisation of colonialism as direct rule by contemporary decolonial scholars neglects the way local traditions were appropriated within the exploitative and oppressive structures of colonial governance. He argues that, by simplifying colonialism in this manner, scholars have fundamentally neglected the

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sociopolitical impact of British indirect rule in Africa, a problem which he expounds upon in detail in *How Colonialism Pre-empted Modernity*. According to Táíwò, British indirect rule inculcated a social formation he refers to as sociocryonics. Sociocryonics is the preservation of traditional African cultural practices as historically immutable, which has led to the uncritical perpetuation of indigenous systems of governance after colonialism. Táíwò analyses the maintenance of chiefly rule and child marriage by postcolonial African leaders, which has stymied the dynamic growth and change of cultural practices across the continent. His core argument is that sociocryonics serves the venal interests of postcolonial African ruling classes by politically repressing the rights, liberties and formal equality that characterises democratic citizenship. He argues that post-independence African rulers have adopted these colonial tactics, legitimising oppressive and exploitative 'pre-colonial practices' by referencing their 'Africanity'.

The challenge that Táíwò's book bequeaths to students of contemporary decolonial theory is a philosophical problematisation of the role traditional, indigenous culture plays in contemporary society as inherently subversive, progressive and liberatory. Responding to the prevailing wisdom of an entire generation, Táíwò's book raises a more unsettling problematic: are scholars associated with the progressive left propagating traditionalist discourses that would not liberate Africans, but lead them further into oppression? While he does not flesh out the implications, I will conclude by noting that, after the breakdown of formal colonial relations, Pan African principles were institutionalised through the founding of the Organization of African Union (OAU) in 1963. With the demise of the Cold War, the shift

from the OAU to the African Union (AU) was influenced by the political discourse of the late Muammar Gaddafi (1942–2011), and the emergence of post-apartheid South Africa's former president, Thabo Mbeki's (1942–) emphasis on a postcolonial African renaissance. The AU states that it promotes an identity that is liberal, democratic and inclusive, but similarly its reconstructive, governmental strategy continues to endorse an essentialist conception of African unity as grounded in tradition, or "indigenous African culture".⁵

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