

On the differences between postcolonial and decolonial perspectives: Do prefixes matter?

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Amid the academic enthusiasm for adopting new trends and 'turns', it is crucial to examine the actual distinctions between postcolonial and decolonial perspectives and to consider the significance of these differences. This lemma aims to address these questions by critically engaging with key arguments presented by decolonial scholars in relation to how their work diverges from postcolonial viewpoints. I argue that it is important to pay attention to the critical debates ignited by the 'decolonial turn', while avoiding the pitfalls represented by buzzwords and strawman arguments. Furthermore, I illustrate constructive differences between postcolonial and decolonial writings within the field of peace and conflict studies.

Abstract

In recent years the call for decolonisation has been hard to miss, resonating with social movements and, increasingly, with those in the higher echelons of power. While the terminology of decoloniality had long existed only in certain niches of the social sciences, the last decade has witnessed what is often described as the beginning of a 'decolonial turn'. Since 'coloniality' denotes the afterlives of Western racial colonialism, broadly speaking, the ambition of decolonisation is to break the spell in terms of knowledge, power and being (Maldonado-Torres, 2011). The 'decolonial turn' hence describes the growing scholarly trend in favour of employing epistemic critiques (on how knowledge is produced and accepted) to embark on decolonisation as a 'necessary task that remains unfinished' (ibid.; also Grosfoguel, 2007).

In the targets for their critique decolonial scholars explicitly include postcolonial studies, which has evolved since the 1980s from a strand in English cultural and literature studies to a global body of scholarship on the postcolony as the spatial and temporal aftermath of Western colonialism. As such, postcolonial studies claim to 'persistently critique a structure that one cannot not (wish to) inhabit' (Spivak, 1993, p. 320). Despite the serious allegation that postcolonial studies itself needs decolonisation (cf. Grosfoguel, 2011), there has been very little overt contention, which is also due to the rather reconciliatory rejoinders offered by postcolonial authors who tend to refrain from engaging in overt controversies (Colpani et al., 2022, pp. 7-8). Constructed formulations such as 'post-/decolonial', often found in scholarly writings, however, cannot distract from looming questions about whether the decolonial turn supersedes postcolonial studies and consigns it to mere intellectual history, whether both scholarships can co-exist productively, or whether we should separate the positions at all, despite the contentious rhetoric.

This lemma asks how prefixes matter in the debates on the afterlives of colonialism. First, I engage critically with three lines of criticism by which decolonial scholars seek to establish a radical difference from postcolonial studies. I gauge these criticisms in the light of potential rejoinders from a postcolonial perspective, in order to argue for a recognition of important developments and constructive differences that avoids strawmen arguments and buzzwords. While the lemma's emphasis lies on the first part, I will also briefly illustrate the constructive differences between postcolonial and decolonial writings related to peace and conflict studies.

Much critical research has deplored the idea of liberal peace as colonial, but giving up on the basic liberal notion of human rights for everyone altogether causes equal unease. I submit that deconstructionist and reconstructionist strategies, dominant in postcolonial and decolonial contributions respectively, offer different ways to deal with this conundrum. Ultimately a diversity of critical practice is essential to confront the many ways of (ab-)using and undermining liberal orders for oppressive ends.

Introduction

One may ask what is at stake in exploring the differences between postcolonial and decolonial perspectives. In peace and conflict studies, can we not take these as two sides of the same coin? Mignolo, himself a pioneer of the 'decolonial option', has acknowledged the complementarity of both perspectives that would only take different paths in the same direction (Mignolo, 2011b, p. 55). In addition, post- and decolonial approaches claim a common intellectual and political ancestry defined by, among others, anticolonial struggles and their ideological representations, Black radical tradition or intersectional feminisms (Colpani, 2022). On the other side, Mignolo, Quijano, Dussel and others formulated the decolonial option as a radical alternative based in part on their fierce criticism of the influence of postcolonial studies in Latin America.

In the first part of this lemma I examine how decolonial scholars have argued for a 'radical difference' (Mignolo, 2007b, p. 163) grounded in three lines of criticism, which together sustain the provocative call for decolonising postcolonial studies (Grosfoguel, 2011). Then, I gauge these criticisms in light of potential counterarguments. In the second part I briefly illustrate how attending to what I deem constructive instead of radical differences can enrich critical debates in peace and conflict studies.

What's in the Prefixes?

Decolonial Criticisms on Postcolonial Studies: A Radical Difference?

A first line of criticism concerns the places of scholarly writing and application, contending that postcolonial theory's Anglophone origins and focus render it largely irrelevant for Latin America (Rosenthal, 2022). This criticism relates to a more general charge of academic marginalisation

that Grosfoguel (2006) calls the imperialism of English-centred literature. The global resonance of postcolonial theories would imply an academic-imperialist leap that wholly ignores the contributions of Latin American intellectuals and their understandings of colonialism (Mahler, 2018). Since the introduction of postcolonial studies in Latin America, critics (e.g. Adorno, 1993; Mignolo, 1993) have therefore cited a number of intellectuals from the continent who allegedly contributed earlier insights that later became associated with postcolonial thinking.

A more conceptual turn of this criticism contends that postcolonial theories, which have been developed mostly against the specific historical and geopolitical backdrop of the British Empire and its afterlives in Asia, cannot travel to other contexts (Rosenthal, 2022). Scholars who seek to distance themselves from postcolonial studies have claimed that the focus on discourses, as sites of forging and contesting colonial rule, does not match Latin American experiences with Spanish and Portuguese colonialism (e.g. Adorno, 1993; Moraña, 1997; Walsh, 2007). Yet another variation of this criticism contends that postcolonial studies adopt Western perspectives. In this respect, Mignolo has made the influential distinction between a postmodern Eurocentric camp of postcolonial academics mostly located in the United States, on the one side, and a second camp, guided by himself, which writes and learns from outside the metropolitan centres to avoid the charge of 'internal (cultural) colonialism' that he levels at the postcolonial camp (Mignolo, 1993, p. 131; cf. Moraña, 1997, p. 51; Moreiras, 2020; Rosenthal, 2022, pp. 26–27).

The second line of criticism targets a perceived lack of radicality and normative critique. Certainly, this charge against postcolonial studies is not levelled by decolonial scholars alone. Debates on the use of 'post' as a prefix have accompanied the history of postcolonial studies, raising concerns about whether the terminological shift from anti-colonialism/anti-imperialism to the intellectualised 'postcolonial' in fact lends itself to de-politicisation and a softening of critique (McClintock, 1992; Shohat, 1992). Whereas Marxists take issue with postcolonial theory's abandonment of critical modern philosophies such as historical materialism in favour of abstract theories on discourses, decolonial scholars criticise this move as insufficient to break with Western thinking (Colpani, 2022, pp. 8–9). Grosfoguel's call for decolonisation takes issue with a type of fundamentalism in postcolonial studies that only accepts poststructuralist thinking, spearheaded by French philosophers like Foucault and Derrida, as a legitimate method of critique (Grosfoguel, 2011). Because of this intellectual debt to the traditions of European philosophy, which have also been (ab-)used to justify European colonial projects, his argument

concludes that postcolonial critique cannot be anything other than corrupted and harmless (Grosfoguel, 2006, p. 142; see also 2007). The influence of poststructuralism would render postcolonial studies an elitist, apolitical and excessively philosophical endeavour that has little relevance beyond the ivory tower of academia (Mignolo, 2007a). In contrast, the decolonial turn is portrayed by its proponents as radical, rooted in activism, and in opposition to the dominance of the Western canon (Noxolo, 2017; Mignolo, 2007a).

The third line of critique relates to the direction of scholarly debates in postcolonial studies. The intellectual trajectories of Bhabha, Spivak and Said – often referred to as the ‘holy trinity’ of postcolonial studies – revolve around the idea that colonialism has been an ‘enabling’ violation that, in Spivak’s words (1996, p. 19), yielded the postcolonial as a ‘child of a rape’ who must not be ostracised. Her allegory expresses a sentiment, already espoused by Fanon (1986), that the productivity of colonial scars must be acknowledged as well. This implies critical engagement with European thinking as discriminatory and often inadequate, yet also as indispensable for understanding the emergence of genuine identities and intellectual traditions in the aftermath of Western colonialism, or the postcolony (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 16; Mbembe, 2001). Exploring the intellectual heritage of colonialism critically – neither accusing nor excusing, but constructively abusing the legacy of Enlightenment for new ideas (cf. Spivak, 2012) – became the credo of much postcolonial writing. For example, Bhabha (1994) teaches us that ‘pure’ cultures of the colonised and the coloniser are illusions, and in fact colonial discourses produce hybrid identities where one always carries markers of the other.

By contrast, decolonial thinking aspires to de-modernisation, which requires rejecting, or ‘de-linking’ from, all traditions of European modern thought. For Mignolo (2007a), ‘de-linking’ requires ‘relinking’ with other modes of thinking such as the Islamic religion, the Aymara language or indigenous cosmologies (Mignolo, 2007a). He considers these other knowledges as non-modern, rather than pre-modern, because they continue to survive under contemporary colonial and capitalist regimes that treat them as different from and inferior to Western civilisation (Mignolo, 2011a). Decolonial scholars presuppose an invisible border between colonial/modern and non-modern thinking and identities, which was drawn by colonialism and has lingered ever since (Lugones, 2010; Maldonado-Torres, 2011). Decolonial perspectives seek to transcend the colonial/modern intellectual territory, where they locate postcolonial studies, crossing the invisible border (cf. Mignolo, 2000; also Hussein & Hussain, 2019) and taking as their vantage

point those who are marginalised in geopolitics or because of their embodied identities. This so-called 'corpo-politics' concerns the inscriptions of gender, ethnicity or class in marginalised bodies that survive in Western metropolises (cf. Anzaldúa, 1999).

Postcolonial Concerns

This abrasive criticism invites responses from a postcolonial point of view. First, decolonial criticisms seem to suffer from internal contradictions. It is unclear how the argument that important scholarly work like *La invención de América* (1958) pre-empted postcolonial contributions on the role of colonial discourses goes together with the argument that a discursive conceptual focus holds no value for Latin American experiences. Further, O'Gorman or Rama, whose work is often lauded by decolonial critics, draw heavily on Heidegger and Foucault (Rosenthal, 2022, p. 21) just as contemporary decolonial scholars engage with European philosophy, albeit critically. The activist-academic Rivera Cusicanqui (2012, p. 98 ff.) observes that Mignolo, Dussel and others have created their own 'little empire' with an academic jargon ('corpo-politics', 'border thinking', 'abyssal lines'...) that alienates them from the social forces they want to be in dialogue with.

In addition, criticism of the prominence of poststructuralism may hold some value for the contributions of the 'holy trinity', but it obfuscates the vast diversity of debates in postcolonial studies (Young, 2001). Problematising the place of academic work and elitism, of course, raises important points for scholarly inclusion, or epistemic justice. All the more puzzling, therefore, is the absence of discussions on the identities, or 'corpo-politics' to use their own jargon, of early decolonial proponents, themselves highly privileged (overwhelmingly male) scholars with positions at elite US universities (Rosenthal, 2022). At the very least, the rhetoric of 'academic colonialism' leaves a bitter ethico-political taste because it subliminally connects the issue of academic recognition (or lack thereof) and citation (mostly of privileged decolonial scholars) with the wholesale eradication of cultures through colonial violence.

The role of the intellectual has received considerably more attention in postcolonial studies. In her canonical *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Spivak (1994) criticises attempts by (poststructuralist) intellectuals to interpret subaltern experiences and motivations, pointing to the limits of what can be known (including by well-meaning intellectuals) and the risk of reducing subalterns to a canvas for romanticised imaginaries of revolution. The aim of promoting non-modern knowledge

in decolonial studies risks trapping marginalised intellectuals from the Global South in the role of ‘otherness machines’, in the words of Appiah (1991, p. 356). This means that these intellectuals will be appreciated only as far as they produce knowledge that is considered different from what is produced in the West (in considerations by Western-educated decolonial scholars), thereby manufacturing a (racialised) alterity. To put it provocatively, their work is valued as long as it does not teach us about reason, Kant or Hegel.

Presupposing a dichotomy between modern, European, Western, colonial, on the one hand, and non-modern, subaltern, indigenous, on the other, suffers from problems at both the theoretical and empirical levels. As to the former, decolonial thought treats as distinct those identities and systems of thinking that are bound by the bloody history of colonialism, in fact. Such a strict distinction mirrors the kind of thinking that decolonial scholars often associate with the Western imperative of separating cultures in order to categorise and put them into hierarchies (cf. Tembo, 2022). This is illustrated by Mignolo’s open affinity with Huntington’s hypothesis on the clash of civilisations (Mignolo, 2000, p. 4; cf. Colpani, 2022, pp. 63–64). Dichotomist thinking also homogenises diverse ideas as ‘Western’ and as serving colonialism in their very nature, but these strong assertions about whole worlds of thinking have been barely substantiated argumentatively (Chambers, 2020). Ironically this homogenisation further obscures the diversity of colonialism, both within Latin America and beyond its modernist manifestation, as well as diverting attention from how colonialism has connected to, transformed and re-written precolonial injustices (Spivak et al., 2022). At the empirical level, decolonial scholars fail to provide compelling evidence for epistemes, or systems of thought, that are radically different from the modern one. For example, Fanon and Césaire, celebrated as decolonial thinkers *avant la lettre* (Maldonado-Torres, 2011), employed nationalist and socialist ideologies to boost anticolonial and pan-African awareness, whereas imperialist legislation, in fact, sought to mobilise precolonial, ethnic identities as a counterstrategy (cf. Spivak et al., 2022). Rosenthal (2022, p. 29) further details how Mignolo’s portrayal (2007a, 460) of Guamán Poma as the first case of decolonial thinking ‘frankly misrepresents’ the indigenous author’s overt endorsement of Western Christianity over indigenous idolatry. This serves to illustrate the ever-present danger of a simplified and skewed nativism in the search for non-modern culture-knowledge formations.

Where does this leave us? I believe that the difference between post- and decolonial scholarship is less 'radical' than the latter has claimed, and that decolonial writings run into contradictions when they assume such a confrontational position. It must be noted, though, that the radical rhetoric mostly appeared in early programmatic writings. As Bhabra (2014) observes, applied postcolonial and decolonial contributions rather emphasise convergences and cross-fertilisation. The now global debates in decolonial scholarship (e.g. Bakshi et al., 2016) support arguments in favour of the travel of ideas over isolationism and the alleged singularity of (Latin American) colonial experiences. Besides, writings about the Lusophone world have demonstrated masterfully how postcolonial lenses can help us to explore the fine nuances of ambivalent relations between masculinity, racialisation and elitism beyond British colonialism in Asia (e.g. Valente Cardoso, 2023).

Nevertheless we should not do away with difference altogether, as Mbembe (2019; cf. Tembo, 2022) teaches us when appreciating decolonial work for its contributions to new methodological and theoretical facets. He warns against both erasing the multiplicity of knowledge and casting it in terms of a separating difference. Pretending post- and decolonial scholarship are either essentially the same or incommensurable will both impede approaches to the world as multiple, fractured and contested.

Constructive Differences in Peace and Conflict Studies: De-/Reconstructing the Liberal Peace

Following Mbembe's reasoning, I believe that approaching differences as constructive, rather than radical, affords a productive way forward to engage with decolonial and postcolonial perspectives, also in peace and conflict studies. Postcolonial interventions have blazed a trail in denouncing the colonial logics underpinning a scholarship that has been inclined to contrast the alleged peacefulness in the Western metropole, at least since the end of the Cold War, with armed conflicts plaguing the postcolony. Like a lot of other critical research (e.g. Barreto Henriques 2016), postcolonial scholars have specifically targeted the liberal peace, which envisions an idealised Western life-style characterised by democracy, rights and free markets as the salvation for the postcolony while obscuring the violence inherent in global racial capitalism sustained by this very life-style (Jabri, 2016, 2013b; Krishna, 1999). However, their general suspicion of essential differences and identities (i.e. coloniser-colonised) has also led

postcolonial scholars to be critical of the seemingly progressive scholarly turn towards the 'local peace'. Although well-intentioned, the celebration of local ideas of peace as emancipatory in contrast to international visions, presented as inherently oppressive, risks maintaining colonial (native-cosmopolitan) distinctions, even if these are reversed, and feeding into the imaginary of the noble and peaceful savage (cf. Jabri, 2013a; Sabaratnam, 2013).

Postcolonial perspectives teach us to engage with the ambivalences of liberal peace as an enabling violation, which can be clearly illustrated in the case of human rights. Scholars (e.g. Barreto, 2012; Karpur, 2006; Mutua, 2000) have long emphasised the colonial history of human rights, denying certain people recognition as humans based on their ethnicity or gender. However, the history of fighting for human rights as emancipatory ideals, from the Haitian revolution to the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, cannot be ignored either (Georgi, 2022). In the words of Spivak (1991; cf. de Jong, 2022, p. 95), just like any other imperialist language, human rights are not merely oppressive; their toxicity also makes them into a medicine, in the same way that one would not wish to live without freedom of expression even though it often serves as a protection for the hate speech of the oppressor.

Spivak's words stand for a larger trend in postcolonial contributions aiming to deconstruct colonial discourses. Deconstruction seeks to lay bare internal contradictions in order to sabotage and dismantle the Master's house without using the Master's tools, as Lorde (2003) famously put it. Instead of rejecting liberal ideas of peace tout court for the role they have played in legitimising colonial violence, postcolonial work exposes hypocrisies in exporting liberalism globally, examines the new cultural formations and hybrid identities that this export has produced, and searches for ways to appropriate liberal ideas for the emancipation of the postcolony. Spivak (2005) targets the human rights regime not for allegedly having a Western origin or nature, but rather for producing 'class apartheid': dispensers of human rights, or professionals in the Western metropolises who are increasingly recruited from Global South countries, seek to right the wrongs done by and to marginalised or subaltern people who, as Mutua (2002) notes, are often thereby reduced to either 'savage' perpetrators or victims in need of salvation (cf. Georgi, 2023).

Decolonial debates in peace and conflict studies are much younger in comparison. This notwithstanding, however, they have already left a deep methodological mark on the field over

the last decade. Innovative approaches such as ‘sentipensar’ (Rodriguez Castro, 2021) and ‘territorio cuerpo-tierra’ (Satizábal & Melo Zurita, 2021) break with the rules of academic knowledge production that have their roots deep in European Enlightenment traditions. Decolonial approaches aim to adapt to the lived realities of people in the postcolony and address them as sources of knowledge, rather than objects of study, metaphorically captured by Subcomandante Marcos’s habit of wearing two watches—one with Western and one with indigenous time. Still, purist approaches are rather the exception to a critical practice in peace and conflict studies amalgamating different post- and decolonial traditions and authors.

Similarities and amalgamation should not obscure the fact, though, that decolonial approaches tend to centre on the reconstruction of ways to think about and conceive of the world (so-called knowledge-worlds) that are at the margins of, and often mocked by, dominant traditions of thought that are centred around formalized methods of reasoning and which have been spread globally through colonialism. Whereas postcolonial perspectives focus on deconstructing liberal peace as a universal or globally applicable ideal ‘from within’, decolonial perspectives tend towards challenging the liberal universal ‘from outside’ – that is, by reconstructing knowledge-worlds with diverging ideals – and thereby demonstrating that in fact the world is not uni- but pluri-versal (cf. Escobar, 2020). Let me illustrate this again with the issue of human rights. As discussed above, decolonial writings often presuppose a dichotomy between Western metropolises and colonial societies, territories and bodies. Santos (2014) calls this separation an ‘abysal line’; human rights, together with the principle of humanism, was only ever designed for the metropole and never for the colonised world that is ruled through violence. From this, it would follow that classical liberal ideas about human rights hold little to no ‘enabling’ value, as postcolonial scholars claim. In fact, a recent volume of decolonial contributions (Santos & Martins, 2021) claims that the re-imagination of human rights as inclusive requires narratives of human dignity and vocabularies of justice that are different from, and that have been historically drowned out by, liberal ideals dominating human rights discourses.

Deconstructive and reconstructive strategies have emerged as characteristic in postcolonial and decolonial writings respectively. This distinction crystallises in the use of the term ‘unlearning’. In the reconstructionist arguments offered by Santos (2014), unlearning concerns acknowledging the colonial violence against dissenting thinking (‘epistemicide’) in order to relearn about the world from the point of view of non-modern knowledge-worlds. In her

deconstructionist thinking, however, Spivak denies that recovering or accessing non-modern knowledge-worlds is possible, or even desirable. For her, unlearning relates to recognizing the very own privileges we hold as intellectuals and our insatiable desire to know the world of the subaltern, which inevitably comes with the subliminal lust for control and power over what is known, as the history of science and colonialism has taught us (cf. Spivak, 2004). Ultimately, for her, unlearning comes down to acknowledging the limits of what can (and should) be known as the real basis of accepting difference without appropriating it.

Maintaining a constructive difference between decolonial and postcolonial directions of critique – one that allows for conversation and cross-fertilisation – can only be productive when the idea of peace with rights is not only (ab-)used for imperialist wars and the expansion of racial capitalism, but is also challenged by the global rise of right-wing populism and ethno-nationalism. Decolonial reconstruction has engaged with multiplicity to debunk the myth planted by colonialism that the antidote to (armed) violence lies solely in liberal modernity. Deconstructionist traditions in postcolonial studies are a critical reminder that essentialising differences (such as indigenous vs. international) and erasing grey scales of identities and thought can reinforce a nationalist, chauvinist, oppressive anti-liberalism. Cherishing and nurturing this diversity of critique is essential in times where the onslaughts on emancipatory projects are equally diverse.

Conclusion

Do prefixes matter, then? Yes, they do, but not as markers of a radical difference that barely exists, particularly in applied scholarship. As intellectual kin, decolonial and postcolonial perspectives have come to mirror each other's incompleteness; postcolonial deconstruction risks becoming apolitical if it fails to undermine power structures, while decolonial reconstruction faces the danger of romanticising otherness. Maintaining conversations by avoiding simplistic oppositions as well as superficial reconciliation promises an important discursive engine for critical thought in peace and conflict studies and beyond.

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