

Introduction

Decolonizing Europe

Ethnographies of National and Transnational Projects

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Let us start with a staunch statement: it is necessary to fully recognize colonialism and racism as central elements of European modernity and as critical factors in the making of Eurocentrism as well as the narrative, performance and monumentalizing of the European nations. There is a vast (and renewed) scholarship about the formation of colonial worlds and their legacies in the present. Originating in the colonial era, notions of race, but also narratives about enslavement, forced labour or captivity, urbanity, and perspectives on (seemingly endless) natural resources and land property, albeit transformed over time, still impinge on our present in many ways. As already indicated more than sixty years ago in the writings of many anticolonial leaders in Asia and Africa, for instance Gandhi, Ho Chi Minh, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Amílcar Cabral and Eduardo Mondlane – who are hardly cited in mainstream anthropology, even though many had academic training in the social sciences – in this process, some peoples, languages, continents and histories were made to feel inferior to others, especially to the elites of the countries that colonized them. More recently, several authors have denounced the pernicious effects of colonialism and its empires, as causes for contemporary social tension (Cooper and Stoler 1997) and social and racial discrimination (Cahen and Matos 2018; Matos 2019). It is often from the ruins of the empire (Stoler 2013) that various contemporary speculations are based. As has been explored by historians of colonialism, the ‘colonial act’ affected the society that embarked on colonizing other ones, as well as the societies that were colonized (see, for instance, Cooper and Stoler 1997; Dorlin 2009). The process of decolonization – the abolition of colonialism

and its vestiges – had to deal with traumatic memories and called for the inclusion of the stories of those who had historically been exploited and/or marginalized. It had to be a move to seek to restore the dignity of the black person (Fanon 1952) by treating him or her as an agent of history through the social and cultural revolution that should accompany the anticolonial struggle and the effort to build new nations as well as ‘new peoples’ in the post colony. In such a context, decolonization was conceived of as a means to highlight the stories of ‘the wretched of the earth’, as Frantz Fanon (1961) forcefully referred to them in the book that is considered the stepping stone of the struggle for decolonization (Táiwò 2022: 2).

About fifty years after the end of formal colonialism,¹ over the last decade, the term decolonial has achieved a new popularity, to the extent that some authors speak of a ‘decolonial craze’, the popularity of which probably owes a lot to the iconoclastic bend through the denial of each and every episteme tainted by colonialism and the pursuit of new or rediscovered epistemes ‘from the South’. It is a movement – or a perspective – that is heir to at least four sources, although some of its most renowned authors are often inclined to refer to none of them: traditional anticolonialism (itself a very diverse cohort of universalist and identarian ideas), postcolonial studies from former British colonies,² the drive towards repatriation as reparation (which has affected especially the archive and the museum) and the Latin American ‘decolonial turn’. The key authors of such a turn have scrutinized the process of colonial inferiorization by focusing on a system of thought that involves control of knowledge and subjectivity (Mignolo 2007; Quijano 2020). A radical epistemological turn is considered by these authors as a key instrument in counteracting coloniality and, according to Grosfoguel (2007: 211; Maldonado Torres 2011), is a project that aims to ‘epistemologically transcend, decolonize the Western canon and epistemology’. The argument is that there is no single epistemic tradition from which to arrive at truth or universality (Grosfoguel 2007: 212). In the decolonial turn coloniality is a key category, a term created by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano in the 1990s (Quijano 2020) to characterize the legacy of colonialism and the colonial condition in societies that had experienced colonization. Its legacy is present in various domains, such as political culture, notions of (bad) taste in elite and popular culture, perception of ‘race’ and the somatic norm (Hoetink 1967), images of physical beauty and ugliness, public monuments, museums and exhibits, the narrative and performance of the nation. According to these authors, it is now apparent that coloniality has survived actual colonialism very well and adjusted to postcolonialism, and it is firmly in place on both the giving and the receiving ends, in the former metropole as well as in

the former colonies. Other authors, especially Africans, however, have argued that such a totalizing and Manichean approach denies African agency, because it rules out the possibility that the colonized, under certain conditions, managed to benefit from the facilities, languages, legislation, religious infrastructure and (communication) technologies brought by the colonizers and were able to subvert them for their own purpose (Ferdinand 2019; Táíwò 2022). This criticism has not impeded the term decolonial becoming very popular in Europe, as well as in other parts of the world, to the point that the pursuit of decolonization might even lead to yet a new cult of authenticity, purity and originality – something that, in alternate waves, has been part of Western culture since the industrial revolution (Van der Laarse 1998).

Aware of such a complexity, here we have chosen to be, as it were, ecumenical and consider the present decolonial movement or mood as evidence of both continuity and rupture concerning the past. There have been many uses of the term – quite a polyphony, in fact. Although the decolonial turn is tributary to the anticolonial struggle and its narrative, it tends to de-emphasize this heritage and present itself as something completely new, rooted in (the celebration of) pre-Western local knowledge and in the episteme of those who never compromised with colonialism. Here, we accept that there are both high-brow and vernacular usages of the term. Rather than focusing on any theoretical exactness – a task that several authors have already attempted (among others, Quintero, Figueira and Elizalde 2019) – here we offer a panorama of what can be called decolonial or decolonization action, that is, contemporary anticolonialism.

The effective uprooting of the colonial legacy and its icons from, for instance, the European city, which is the space dealt with by the chapters in this book, faces two problems. On the one hand, reinterpreting the past in order to use it as a source of inspiration for the future has not always been considered necessary – it is much easier to tidy up the past and move on. On the other hand, such critical scrutiny requires a participatory debate (by people from different disciplines, origins and different areas of society), and this is not always simple. For example, many of the people who are victims of contemporary racism are descendants of people who were also victims of racism in the past, whether or not they had contact with the colonial context (Matos 2013). Moreover, as powerful as it can be, such a process has also generated contradictions. If colonialism led to colonality, it also offers its antidote, through the presence in the metropole of descendants of the empire – ‘The Empire Strikes Back’ said Stuart Hall (2017 [1982]) more than four decades ago. One sees a new activism animated, mostly, by those descendants of immigrants that in the late 1970s started to be called the second generation: integrated into

society in many ways, but also demanding recognition as diverse people and definitely more alert to civil rights and discrimination. They are sick and tired of perceiving the representation of the European nations as something that consistently excludes or marginalizes them. For instance, they see the museums as institutions which are against them; they want to see themselves represented and propose a new kind of museum, besides the traditional division between the museum *'de soi et de l'outre'* (L'Estoile 2010), the museum of all of us. They raise new antiracist voices, in a changing political context and within the crisis of the traditional Left, which corresponds to a new epoch of disenchantment with the mainstream narrative of the European nations. In a way, this reminds us of the disenchantment with colonialists that became more apparent in the last years of colonialism itself and generated some of the masterpieces of anticolonial literature – such as the wonderful oeuvre *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (1958). No wonder that the new anticolonial disenchantment, now in the European metropole rather than in the former colonies, and increasingly verbalized in terms of a 'decolonial' attitude and activism, can lead to very different and diverging paths.

On the one hand, there is a new rejection of the colonial past, its icons and acolytes. On the other hand, one sees new forms of white supremacy and fundamentalism. White nationalism is, yet again, not only tolerable to sizeable populations but is a political force across Europe – this is largely the result of the crisis of working-class identities and of class-based emancipatory projects, which has its origin also in major changes in the modes of production and the generation of wealth and poverty. In fact, such general trends have led to a new European ethnoscape (Appadurai 1990) that combines local and global factors and creates new facilitating conditions for apparently opposite tendencies – on the one hand, neonationalism, neotribalism, and xenophobia feeding on anti-immigrant sentiments, and, on the other hand, transnational solidarity with a set of open-ended ethnic projects, such as with the Kurds – the topic of one of our chapters.

Whichever way we understand the decolonial effort or action, decoloniality is never a complete state for our societies but, rather, a process (Matos and Sansone 2021). It provides a perspective on the symbols or icons of the past and the present, or, as one of the contributors of this book (Chapter 8) puts it, it represents 'a desire for change' – for epistemic justice and material reparations. This desire is unevenly spread all over Europe. Its intensity depends on a series of socio-historical factors, like the importance of the past colonial empire in the building of the nation and public space, the presence and political power of formal colonial subjects or their descendants, the association between the feeling of relative

deprivation in the (White) majority and the incoming migrants (who do not always come from former colonies), political parties investing in xenophobia, Islamophobia, the existence of transnational antiracist or solidarity networks and their relative rootedness in society (for instance, in church or trade union cultures), the strength and political backing of multiculturalism and education to interethnic and religious tolerance (especially in schools, universities, museology and management of public monuments).

All in all, as it was in the past with the narrative of the anticolonial struggle, decolonizing means coming to terms with the legacies of the colonial empires. This legacy is present in the cultural and economic life of several European countries, especially, but not exclusively, in those countries that had an imperial past because, and this is one of our significant contentions, Europe as such has been profoundly affected by empire building and colonialism. Decolonizing is itself polemical. On the one hand, there is reasonable general consent about the need to eliminate the remainder of colonialism in knowledge production, curricula, the university, the classroom, gender, health, museums, architecture, and public space. On the other hand, it is not always clear how the decolonization process can be carried out – where, how, for whom, and with what objectives and advantages.

Formerly harboured by movements inspired by anti-imperialism, anticolonialism, and antiracism, the new decolonizing movement – in many ways a cultural trend – has now become a constant factor in our critical reading of the past and present of European societies, their teaching system, ideas of ‘race’, memory regimes, monuments, archives and museums. Some of these domains have been more severely affected. As a consequence, we dare state that, for instance, there are no critical museum studies nowadays without a decolonial focus, often associated with an engagement with the tense and controversial issue of repatriation, even more so when it concerns human remains. Also, the preservation and – even more so – the creation of any public monument celebrating the nation is now undergoing much closer scrutiny than in the last decades: is it representing the whole nation, is not being placed to boost only one section of society, what about more monuments to celebrate the groups or populations that have been thus far discriminated against?

The move towards decolonization has sparked the process of restitution and repatriation of material heritage and artefacts (Azoulay 2019). Museums have been the scene of debates on physical and metaphorical reparation and repatriation (Legene 2005; Sarr and Savoy 2018). The success of the recent book *The Brutish Museums* (Hicks 2020) reinforced this debate. In the case of museums, we can talk about including the

perspectives not only of the dominant cultural group – often the white colonizers or settlers – but also of the subjects represented in the museum or of the authors of the objects and creations displayed in these types of spaces (this, for example, is part of the strategic plan of the Abbe Museum in the United States of America, which seeks to share authority about documentation and interpretation of Native culture).³ The feeling of loss, theft or expropriation occurs because, although many objects may have been offered or purchased, most collections that are in museums come from imperial contexts characterized by expropriation and violence or are the result of fortunes made by people who benefited from colonialism or even slavery, as occurs in several European and North American museums.

There are well-known discussions about how the sculptured Dendera zodiac (in the Louvre Museum) or the Parthenon Marbles (in the British Museum) were acquired. In this sense, in a few museums, some collaboration strategies have been proposed with the communities that produced the objects (for example, the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago has invited Native American artists to present works in the Native American galleries) and in some countries, a debate has been started on the possibility of restitution and/or repatriation (discussing what to return and how) of objects (artefacts) and also of human remains, such as in the Canadian Museum of History. The discussion on the repatriation of artefacts that were pillaged, stolen, or abusively gathered in the Third World was initiated by the 1970 UNESCO Convention against Illicit Export (the Cultural Property Implementation Act) and boosted by the successive UNESCO resolutions on repatriation (Sansone 2017, 2019). In addition to lowering the price of access to the museum, the use of accessible language and the introduction of new languages are among the possibilities to be explored (Balosa 2022). In the exhibition on Mexican muralists, in 2016, the Philadelphia Museum of Art included Spanish-language text, and the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum included Sámi language in an exhibition in 2017. Debates on restitution/post-restitution and reparation are beginning to become increasingly frequent and with the involvement of different specialists, as happened in the Conference/Symposium ‘Exhibiting Difficult Histories: Benin Objects and their Potential for New Forms of Representation’ promoted by the Humboldt Forum, in Berlin, in April 2024. The conference focused on the display of Benin objects in current exhibitions and their potential for new forms of representation. It brought together case studies from different museums in Germany, Britain, the USA and Nigeria.⁴

Racism is, of course, the leading cause of the decolonial movement and this comes to the fore each time a new episode triggers public opinion.

This was what happened with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which began in the USA in 2013 and which resurfaced in force after the murder of the African American George Floyd by a white policeman in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020. The impact of this movement was felt in several European cities and, despite the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many people took to the streets to demonstrate their feelings against the excessive violence of the police on racialized people and other socially more vulnerable people. From there to the demonstrations that included the tearing down of monuments and statues of figures linked to colonialism, slavery and the slave trade, or the exploitation of people in general, was a short step. This militant attitude was brought to the fore about two decades ago by the 'struggle for memory and heritage' in several African postcolonial nations (Lentz 2019) and, more recently, by the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa (Rassool 2019).

European cities are experiencing a new *beeldenstorm*,⁵ or rather an epistemic storm, in which new groups want to become actors in the discussion and, therefore, cease to be considered as just research objects. A healing process, if not yet actually completed, seems to be coming. A new individual sensibility, especially in the so-called second generation, is also on the rise, resulting from the socialization of the offspring or descendants of immigrants in universities (e.g. Peralta, Delaunay and Góis 2022). These are (young) people who are very much aware of their rights, who have in many ways integrated into the host societies, and who care much more than their parents about the content and the projects of the public space, museums, libraries and higher education. In this new generation, as to coloniality, anthropology is drinking some of its venoms: as has long been well-known (Assad 1973), it is as a discipline more exposed to accusations of complicity with the colonial project and yet is possibly the discipline most influenced by the authors of the decolonial turn and the pursuit of new epistemologies from the South. From this follows a cry for the renewal of teaching curricula, especially for the teaching of anthropology (e.g. Matos and Mwewa 2022; Matos and Mwewa 2023).

To add even more complexity to our subject, the very idea of decolonizing deserves theoretical scrutiny. One can question how, for example, those not officially colonized can be decolonized, as with decolonial politics in post-socialist regions. Some authors are also beginning to argue that it is the decolonial movement itself that must be decolonized. Olúfémi Táíwò (2022), for example, from the fields of philosophy and language, considers that the idea of decolonizing, applied to everything and anything (in various scientific fields) and being obsessed with inventing the blunders of the past, can contribute to an annihilation of the

thinking of contemporary African intellectuals – most of whom write in the colonial languages without considering this at odds with an anti-colonial stance – and to a denial of African agency itself (Táíwò 2022). Another problem may be to confuse the colonial system of discrimination with other social and political systems that also involved power and forms of discrimination. One good reason for reflection is that several if not most of the initiatives related to decolonizing the public space have been promoted essentially by White people in Europe and the USA. The ironic side of this all is that the movement started in the Global North, among sections of the population that do not feel represented in the mainstream and often monotonous representation of the state, rather than in the Global South where colonialism and imperialism left their strong marks – South Africa with its Rhodes Must Fall movement is the exception to the rule. It is worth questioning why. Therefore, the decolonization process must be intersectional (Crenshaw 1989) to grasp the complexity of discrimination and difference beyond an additive/cumulative approach.

As this book shows, there is considerable polyphony around the terms colonialism and decolonizing: Europe was a major factor in colonization, but in recent history, parts of it were in themselves a colony of the Soviet Union, or nowadays perceive the Soviet period as one of colonization. Defining decolonization exactly means much more than pursuing academic rigour; we consider it worthwhile to shed light on the newly intense relationship between this social movement and academic agendas – at long last, there is a narrowing to the distance mix between the polis and the agora.

Besides the Foreword by Annalisa Frisina, who masterfully introduces the subjects in the discussion, the book is organized into eight chapters that might be read sequentially or not, as they are a coherent set and, in many ways, dialogue with each other. In the first chapter, Jordan Kiper and Chadra Pittman address the relationship between decolonizing Europe and racial justice and the importance of decolonization for peace studies and human rights. The authors question the meaning of decolonizing Europe in an era of global crises, in which phenomena of authoritarianism, populism and neonationalism have re-emerged and may represent an obstacle to decolonization.

The restitution of human remains is the subject addressed by Pegi Vail in the second chapter. This contribution is truly moving because the author analysed the process that involved the restitution of the human remains of her own ancestors, returned to Inishbofin by Trinity College Dublin. This process, which ended recently, in July 2023, had a happy outcome and fortunately was documented by various media – films,

documentaries, newspapers, blogs and radio stations – and can even act as an example for other situations being discussed elsewhere.

In the third chapter, Bruno Sena Martins presents the project International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024) established in 2013 by the United Nations General Assembly. Since 2015, there has been a greater presence of antiracist agendas in Portugal, which were reinforced by the resurgence of the BLM movement in 2020. Given the movement of people, often called Afro-descendants – immigrants from former Portuguese colonies to Portugal and their offspring or the second generation – the author focuses on the active role that some of these people play today in denouncing structural racism and the persistence of discrimination in the present.

In an attempt to decolonize education, but this time focusing on the arts, in the fourth chapter Francesca De Luca and Anna Serlenga present the project *Pass the Mic!* The under-representation of racialized subjects and immigrant students in higher education and cultural organizations led the authors to develop a creative and collaborative process in three different countries of Southern Europe – Italy, Portugal and Greece – that involved students, researchers, artists and activists. In this chapter, the authors discuss this creative approach to decolonizing education in secondary schools in Italy and Portugal.

As previously stated, the world of education and the social sciences have played a central role in the colonial experience. For this reason, it is important to promote a decolonial education, as Carmeliza Rosario and Ema Pires demonstrate in the fifth chapter, based on the study they carried out at the Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas [Higher Institute for Social Sciences and Politics] (ISCSP), an institution based in Portugal, that was previously linked to the colonial project, having trained colonial public servants, which gives rise to several challenges for the decolonizing project in the present.

Based on long-term ethnographic research on the Kurdish context, the sixth chapter, by José Vicente Mertz, explores how the Kurdish struggle for self-determination went from an ethnonationalist struggle to an internationalist movement, which echoes the situation of other European regions that fought for their self-determination. Furthermore, this movement is not restricted to Europe and has been in dialogue with groups in South America and has contributed to several international reconfigurations.

The seventh chapter includes Vida Savoniakaitė's ethnographic research on the Cold War Museum in Žemaitija National Park, at the site of a former Soviet ballistic missile launch complex located in the north-western Lithuanian village of Plokščiai. Her text raises several questions about security and analyses traumatic memories and the campaign

waged by the people of Lithuania for a decolonized Central and Eastern Europe. Some of the life stories included in her text are revealing of the potential threats that are still felt today in certain parts of Europe.

The eighth and final chapter, by Axel Mudahemuku Gossiaux, is focused on decolonization in Francophone Belgium based on projects and practices led mainly by Afro-descendants in two of its multicultural cities, Liège and Brussels. These projects, namely the public space decolonization IREP project and the cultural objects restitution BREATHE! Erasmus+ project, mainly involve associations committed to promoting Black culture, the decolonization of public spaces and the promotion of a cultural democracy.

As can be seen, the analyses presented in these eight chapters involve European countries in the north, centre, east, west and south, as well as the relations of these countries with other regions outside Europe. We reiterate the importance of the memory of the past and what has been done with it, and we consider that it is urgent to expand this debate and not forget the democratic processes that have been witnessed in recent years. At a time when far-right parties (the main producers of racist and anti-immigration speeches) occupy an increasingly prominent role across Europe, starting with its economic and political core, France and Germany, we are confident that this book will make a positive contribution to the debate on decolonizing Europe, proposing concrete initiatives which can be applied to different contexts.

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Notes

1. Suriname, Belize and Mozambique were the last European colonies to become independent in 1975.
2. Postcolonial theory, largely originating from former British colonies and from literature studies, was very strong in the 1990s and was built around the concept of resistance, of resistance as subversion, or opposition, or hybridity or mimicry – but with the haunting

- problem that resistance always inscribes the resisted into the texture of the resisting (Desai and Nair 2005). Among the main names of this current of studies can be counted Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Paul Gilroy and Gayatri Spivak, whose famous question 'can the subaltern speak?' sums up the spirit of the approach.
3. Retrieved in October 2022 from <https://abbemuseum.wordpress.com/about-us/decolonization>.
 4. The presenters were Annie E. Coombes (University of London), Staffan Lundén (University of Gothenburg), Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona (University of Benin), Tukufu Zuberi (University of Pennsylvania), and Jamie Dau (Reiss-Engelhorn-museums). Retrieved in June 2024 from <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/programm/termin/guided-tour/the-kingdom-of-benins-historical-entanglements-and-their-significance-to-the-current-restitution-debate-126201/>.
 5. The iconoclastic rebellion against holy images in Christian churches that followed the Protestant Reform.

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