

Review – Decolonizing Politics: An Introduction

Written by Ayça Çubukçu

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AYÇA ÇUBUKÇU, JAN 7 2022

Decolonizing Politics: An Introduction

By Robbie Shilliam

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Robbie Shilliam's *Decolonizing Politics* is an audacious introduction to the academic study of politics across the four subfields of political theory, political behaviour, comparative politics and international relations. It is audacious in its unapologetic demonstration of how — from Aristotle to Kant, Adam Ferguson to Woodrow Wilson, Martin Wight and beyond — our foundational understandings of the political world are “filtered through colonialism far more than we imagine to be the case” (p.7). A decisive argument of Shilliam's book is that today, “political science remains indebted to approaches, debates and categories that emerged to make sense of the challenges that imperial centers faced in ruling over the colonial margins that they had created” (p.3). Whether addressing the themes of universal rights in political theory, citizenship in political behaviour, development in comparative politics, or war and peace in international relations, Shilliam offers a *tour de force* of the colonial and racial logics that underwrite each subfield of political science. But the book is audacious as well for its remarkably creative effort to decentre the centre of this political world, and our understandings of it, through its often-ignored margins.

Decolonizing Politics is a necessary book, an exemplary exercise in decolonizing knowledge. Shilliam does not merely assert the need to decolonize politics as an academic field; in this book, he manifests how that task can be undertaken. Among other means, he undertakes this task across the four subfields by putting the racist logics of Kant's anthropological writings in conversation with Sylvia Wynter's conception of the human (chapter two); by making Frantz Fanon speak against the grain of the “race science” grounding political behaviour as a subfield of political science (chapter three); by inviting Walter Rodney to contest comparativist efforts to ascertain degrees of development (chapter four); and by valorising the insights of anti-colonial peace movements in the study of international relations (chapter five).

Shilliam is explicit about his method, the three “key manoeuvres” that he makes in each chapter. First, beginning with Aristotle, he *recontextualises* political thinkers within “the imperial and colonial contexts that form the backdrop of their ruminations” (p.15). Second, he *reconceptualises* the contributions of these thinkers by “tracking the connecting tissue that arranges concepts and categories in a logical fashion” to reveal how colonial logics animate these concepts and categories in political science (p.16). Third, recognising that “the decolonizing mission” cannot be achieved solely by a critical evaluation of the canon — a necessary but insufficient endeavour — Shilliam *reimagines* the four popular subfields of political science by “gleaning” the margins of power (p.17). He attempts this third and most creative manoeuvre of the book based on the crucial premise that “studying only the center does not reveal to you the margins; but studying from the margins can inform you of the margins, the center and their relationality” (p.18).

After the introduction, the second chapter of the book interrogates the subfield of political theory and examines how Kant's anthropological writing “maps out a particular geography of race which betrays a fundamental logic of difference: the white race can fulfil human potential; the other races cannot” (p.27). In Shilliam's version of Kant's vision, only white European men are “racially counted as properly human,” while the rest of humanity is to be treated through the practical guide Kant provides for their colonisation (p.27). In the second part of this chapter, Shilliam

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turns to Sylvia Wynter, a ground-breaking Jamaican scholar of the humanities, to reimagine how “the colonial and racist logic that distinguishes the properly human from the non-properly human” can be revolutionised (p.28). As Shilliam recognises, Wynter is not satisfied with exposing the colonial overrepresentation of Christian-rational Man (what she calls Man1) as humanity during the Renaissance and its enlightened aftermath. Nor is she content with demonstrating the replacement of Man1 with a secularised Man2 around the 19th century as the overrepresentation of humanity. For then, instead of Christianity, Man2 comes to be understood in terms of biology and inheritance and turns into (whom Wynter describes as) a pale-skinned *Homo oeconomicus*, an “‘economic man,’ who has evolved so as to be able to meet his needs and satisfy his interests through the capitalist market” (p.45). Both the frustration and promise of this chapter lies in its effort to demonstrate how debates in contemporary political theory on the extent, applicability, and origins of rights are “inadequate if they do not address the colonial logics that constitute the ‘human’ — a racialised man masquerading as humanity at large” (p.51). While Shilliam entertains the possibility that “the very idea of the ‘human’ is partial and discriminatory” (p.39), he does not quite address *how* we could be “thinking against humanity” to remedy our contemporary predicament.

In the historical context of expanding empire, increased immigration, and industrial urbanisation in late 19th century UK and USA, the third chapter of *Decolonizing Politics* examines how “a logic of race heredity” became foundational to the subfield of political behaviour (p.55). As in other chapters, Shilliam develops this examination by focusing on key figures, including Walter Bagehot (former editor-in-chief of the *Economist*) and Woodrow Wilson, who attempted to apply Bagehot’s analysis of political behaviour based on the science of race heredity to the US congressional system (p.56). Although Wilson was not a card-carrying eugenicist, at the time, “progressivists by and large were, and they reserved the right to use eugenics to redress the degeneration of the Anglo-Saxon race when necessary” (p.69). In this context, Shilliam argues, Wilson “conceived of the challenge of public administration through a logic of race heredity that required the evolved Anglo-Saxon mind to be preserved amid the contamination of the public sphere by degenerate racial inheritances” (p.68). Through a close study of John Watson, Shilliam affirms that in part, “behaviourism” rose to prominence in the early twentieth century as a challenge to eugenics (p.70). Shilliam nevertheless argues that like many “non-racist” scholars of the twentieth century, “Watson took the supposedly biological characteristics associated with race and re-presented them as cultural behaviours. He implicitly ranked these cultural attributes in a hierarchy of values” (p.72). The critical point Shilliam makes in this chapter is that while eugenics and behaviourism were in many ways opposed, “both depicted the competent/incompetent citizen through a set of racial inheritances that set normal and abnormal behaviour, whether culturally or genetically” (p.73). Enter here Frantz Fanon, the anti-colonial psychiatrist, whom Shilliam mobilises as the radical challenger of the very distinction between competent/normal and incompetent/abnormal citizens. Through Fanon, Shilliam attempts to reimagine political behaviour and “caution us against presuming that we can easily escape the logic of race heredity by swapping the ‘gene’ with ‘culture’” (p.84).

In the fourth chapter on comparative politics, Shilliam argues that “it is with regard to the idea of ‘development’ itself that colonial logics can be identified in the comparative approach to political science” (p.85). After recontextualising the emergence of comparative analysis within the expansion of European empires and the challenges that came with maintaining them, Shilliam turns to the formalisation of the subfield of comparative politics at the beginning of the Cold War, problematising the comparativist distinction between “traditional” and “modern” societies. In this chapter, Shilliam also conceptualises “the colonial paradox of comparison,” which consists of the acceptance of difference analytically, and its simultaneous disavowal normatively (p.100). As he convincingly argues, it is through a politics of assimilation that the colonial paradox of comparison is attempted to be resolved, which legitimises both violence and domination. In the last section of the chapter, Shilliam turns to Tanzania and a particular moment in 1967 when Julius Nyerere, the leader of the newly independent state, expounded a new development policy of self-reliance. Here, Shilliam examines the work of radical scholars who taught at Dar es Salaam University — including Walter Rodney — to reimagine the meaning of “development.” Shilliam demonstrates how, by focusing on relations of exploitation, these scholars “managed to avoid the analytical embrace of difference and normative disavowal of difference that comprised the colonial paradox of comparison” (p.115). What is less clear is whether the framework of “under-development” devised by radical intellectuals at Dar es Salaam University thereby managed to break with the modern yardstick of “development.”

The fifth chapter of the book addresses international relations. Here, through a close study of the English historian

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Martin Wight's writings on "international society" circa 1959, Shilliam forges his central argument that the pessimism evident in the study of international relations is "less a result of the logic of anarchy and more a colonial logic concerning the loss of empire" (p.121). In Shilliam's account, Wight lamented the decline of the Commonwealth model of good imperial governance that was based on a "racialized combination of equality and hierarchy: interdependence for white peoples and polities; dependence for non-white peoples and subjects" (p.127), which was the source of his "conservative pessimism" (p.136). In the latter parts of the chapter, Shilliam proposes that "peace movements in the service of anti-colonial self-determination provide us with a very different logic as to the causes and prospects of peace on a global level" (p.121). In particular, through an intersectional analysis, he examines the struggle against nuclear testing in the Pacific in which Pacific women were central activist-strategists. In doing so, Shilliam attempts to demonstrate how we can arrive at a fundamental reimagination of the causes of war and prospects for peace, though he refrains from spelling out what the tenets of this reimagination could be, apart from its intersectional anti-colonialism. Towards a conclusion in the last chapter, Shilliam turns to the Chicana queer theorist Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa (1942-2004) to think through how and why "those at the margins, who have suffered [existential] crises longest, might provide the most edifying ideas and effective analyses concerning the redemption of humanity from war and destruction" (p.149).

I began this review by asserting the audaciousness of Robbie Shilliam's *Decolonizing Politics*. Allow me to conclude with the acknowledgement that this brief engagement with the book has not done justice to its learned richness, the fine detail and moving spirit through which Shilliam engages with each subfield of political science. Whether one has already come to experience the decolonizing pulse beating in the academy or not, *Decolonizing Politics* is recommended reading for any student of politics—anyone in fact, who has ever been a student.

About the author:

Ayça Çubukçu is Associate Professor in Human Rights and Co-Director of LSE Human Rights at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is the author of *For the Love of Humanity: the World Tribunal on Iraq* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018) and of numerous essays in academic and public domains.