# Decolonisation and identity politics

**Gurnam Singh *investigates the contested relationship.***

The moral imperative to address the issue of coloniality for UK universities may have begun in earnest following the high-profile racist murder of the African-American George Floyd on 25th May 2020 by five white police officers, but colonialism, in the modern sense, began with the 'age of discovery' led by the Portuguese following the conquest of the port city of Ceuta on the northern shore of Africa in 1415. However, the 'mainstreaming' of decolonisation has raised concerns about its political neutralisation, particularly in the UK, as universities try to address student demands while not antagonising a political landscape hostile to critiques of Britain's imperialist history. In this context, authors such as Olufemi Taiwo (2020), in his book *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously*, and Leon Moosavi (2020) have critiqued the 'decolonisation industry' and the 'bandwagon of intellectual decolonisation' as a performance of limited morality and authenticity.

If one looks at the current trend of universities committing themselves, sometimes publicly, to decolonise, one is led to believe that this is synonymous with other policies, such as those orientated towards diversity and inclusion. Whilst nobody would argue against such policies, it is important to realise that each is built around very specific political and ideological concerns, which on closer examination may appear to be contradictory. In a similar vein to the calls for defunding of the police following the murder of George Floyd, it is for this reason that Moosavi (2020) speculates whether a better alternative to decolonising universities is to abolish them. Though not advocating the dismantling of the university, in their widely cited book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Harney and Moten argue that, in its present form, the university serves to maintain existing power structures and reproduce social hierarchies, and that the short-term task of decolonising is to confont the system through direct actions, with the ultimate goal being a radical restructuring of the university system and a recognition of the knowledge and expertise of hitherto marginalised communities.

In a very general sense, contemplating a decolonial future where everybody feels a sense of belonging through validation of their individual and collective identity, be it religious, racial or ethnically determined, seems like a utopian dream. However, key points of departure will result from the precision with which one defines the respective concepts, and it is in this process that one uncovers fundamental points of contestation between decolonisation and identity politics.

Common sense may suggest that decolonisation and identity politics are inherently connected, since one of the many legacies of colonialism has been to disrupt and destroy indigenous traditions, identities, languages and cultures. However, the counter argument would be that identity politics itself is contingent on the very same mechanisms of essentialising identities that are associated with the kinds of epistemic violence associated with the colonial project. If Spivak (1988) is right in her assertion that colonial violence is related to power structures imposing their norms and worldviews onto colonised populations, then reducing complex individuals and communities to narrow categories and perpetuating a focus on difference seems likely to reproduce the very same modes of colonial violence that the politics of identity seeks to confront.

Interestingly, to avoid this contradiction, Spivak mobilises the concept of 'strategic essentialism', which she argues is a necessary political tool

designed to mobilise and empower marginalised groups to achieve a specific goal. Furthermore, wary of the dangers, she suggests that strategic essentialism should be accompanied by a critical awareness of its limitations and potential drawbacks, one of which was a fear that it could end up fixing identities and unleashing the kind of identity politics that she became troubled by - to an extent that, in her book *Other Asias* (2008), she disavowed the term, indicating her dissatisfaction with how it has been deployed in nationalist enterprises to promote (non-strategic) essentialism (p206).

So, the challenge can be seen in terms of the age-old paradox of universality and relativism, that is to say, the tension between the desire for universal principles, which forms the defence of European enlightenment values that apply to all, and the recognition of the importance of other identities, experiences and worldviews in shaping how people understand and navigate the world. In this regard, it is helpful to refer to a paper by Tuck and Yang (2012) entitled 'Decolonisation is not a metaphor'. Here the authors critique the use of the term 'decolonisation' in academic spaces. Devoid of its contextual, political and material determinants, it becomes deployed as a metaphor associated with the past, hence drawing attention away from the fact that colonialism remains intact and is perpetuated by structures of power and knowledge.

The impact of rendering decolonisation as a metaphor is to focus fire on diversifying curricula, multiculturalism and promotion of identity politics, which itself becomes a form of appropriation that obscures the ongoing struggles of colonised peoples, which can only be overcome by building solidarity to demand systemic change. And for individual actors occupying positions of privilege and power, who are often but not exclusively white elites, symbolic and tokenistic acts of metaphorical decolonisation can provide them with an excuse to not confront the material and political process that decolonisation, or perhaps more accurately anti-colonisation, should be about.

As for identity politics, as well as reducing decolonisation to a struggle over culture, one of the dangers that writers such as Amartya Sen (2007) have highlighted, deploying an anti-western colonialism narrative, as we have seen with Islamist and Hindutva nationalisms, can fuel reactionary political ideologies based on the same mechanisms deployed by European colonialists, of highly selective, fabricated and essentialist conceptions of culture, identity and values.

In this sense, perhaps it is advisable to go back to Fanon's critique of colonialism and the enlightenment. Fanon (2004) has no real objection to the ideals of the European enlightenment; he argued that it has miserably failed to live up to its claims to embody reason, freedom and equality for all people. The myths of enlightenment were used to justify their colonisation and the exploitation of other cultures and peoples. In terms of humanity, Fanon believed that all people were inherently equal and deserving of respect and dignity. However, he also recognised that the effects of colonialism and other forms of oppression had created deep psychological scars that could only be healed through collective action and the restoration of self-pride for black people, but that the ultimate aim must be to finish the project of enlightenment, which would be a new conception of what it means to be 'human', one that rejects the individualism and Eurocentric thinking that had dominated traditional humanism.

Whilst there is no denying that some enlightenment concepts of 'the human' were selective and designed to justify domination of colonised peoples, as Alison Assiter (2021) in her book *A New Theory of Human Rights* argues, they represent a conceptualisation of the universal that was exclusive, rather than a wholesale rejection of the idea of the universal human subject. Indeed, she highlights how anti-colonial struggles sought to assert the same universal human rights that were denied to them. A prime example of this is the Haitian revolution of 1791-1804 described by C.L.R. James in his seminal work *The Black Jacobins*. Against the background of the French Revolution in 1789, James outlines how Toussain Louverture led a successful insurrection of self-liberated slaves against French colonial rule in Saint-Domingue, now known as Haiti. Most crucially, though born a slave, Louverture was inspired by the French revolutionary ideas of liberty and equality which, according to James, 'meant far more to them than to any Frenchman' (James, 1989, pp. 197-198).

One can see similar examples of colonised and enslaved peoples mobilising ideas of freedom and human rights that emerge in the period referred to as the European enlightenment, with perhaps even greater fervour than those who are accredited with them. As James so eloquently states:
Pericles on Democracy, Paine on the Rights of Man, the Declaration of Independence, the Communist Manifesto, these are some of the political documents which, whatever the wisdom or weaknesses of their analysis, have moved men and will always move them, for the writers, some of them in spite of themselves, strike chords and awaken

aspirations that sleep in the hearts of the majority in every age. (James, 1989, p.197).

Anti-colonial freedom movements were concerned with taking power away from the imperialists and empowering the colonised subject. However, in most cases, such movements refrained from asserting the particularity of colonised subjects, as has become fashionable within current decolonising discourse, but to make the case for universal rights and common humanity as a basis for their claim to freedom and citizenship. Paraphrasing Leon Trotsky from his speech after the first congress of the Fourth International in 1938, Fanon's anti-colonial project rejects both a desire to recreate a lost pre-colonial past and becoming trapped in the kinds of politics of identity that can fuel ethnic nationalism, but calls for a project of reconstructing humanity.
*'For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man.'*

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