

COLONIALISM, ANTICOLONIALISM, AND DECOLONIZATION: THEORY, HISTORY, AND CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES

Denys Kiryukhin

Lund University
ORCID: 0000-0002-3686-3882

Per A. Rudling

Lund University
ORCID: 0000-0003-4691-8805

In the age of the end of European empires, when the third wave of decolonization began after the Second World War, discussions and debates about colonialism, anti-colonialism, and decolonization were confined to the anti-colonial and decolonizing movements and practices of the so-called Third World. The decolonial discourse was developed amid competition between capitalist and socialist projects for leadership in former European colonies. This competition catalyzed anti-colonial struggles and the decolonization process. It also contributed to the development of various decolonization models, some of which prioritized the struggle for social rights and economic justice, while others prioritized the struggle for national sovereignty and cultural and national identity. At the same time, the geopolitical confrontation between the two systems often turned former colonies into territories of armed conflict, with anti-colonial struggles and decolonization held hostage by this confrontation. However, the situation has changed with the end of the Cold War.

The collapse of the Soviet Union—one of the leaders of the global anti-colonial movement—and the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc gave new impetus to the struggle against imperial legacy and the lingering influence of former colonial powers over their former colonies, now independent states. This struggle is also linked to a new, broader understanding of colonialism and decolonization. It was the result of a ‘theoretical revolution’ in which the analytical categories of Marxism were displaced in the social sciences, with theoretical approaches influenced by post-structuralism taking over (Mendoza 2020). As a result, we are now rightly discussing the fourth wave of decolonization, which is unfolding before our eyes and has several notable features.

First, decolonization has recently evolved from a regional task into the leading “motivating force that triggered all sorts of changes ranging from global geopolitics and new trans-regional alignments to major migratory movements and bitter culture wars over the legacies of empire” (Martin & Thompson 2018: 4–5). The growing calls for the decolonization of reason, history, philosophy, literature, theology, art, cartography, urban spaces, museums, and public holidays are evidence that decolonization is being sought as a means of radically transforming not only the system of international, interracial, and interethnic relations but society as a whole. In the current context, the concept of decolonization lacks clarity. These days, it is more appropriate to speak of it as “a family

of diverse positions that share a view of coloniality as the fundamental problem” (Dube 2019: 58), rather than as a single line of thought. Accordingly, differing understandings of the origins and principles of colonial relations and decolonization lead to distinct programs, practices, and goals for political movements pursuing decolonization.

Second, following the end of the Cold War, the geography of the anti- and decolonization movement expanded. This is because the concept of colonialism is no longer exclusively associated with European colonial empires. As well as referring to British, French, and Iberian colonialism, the term is also used to describe Chinese, Russian, and Japanese colonialism, for example. Moreover, political transformations after the end of the Cold War led to the post-Soviet experience being perceived as colonial in many cases. It is possible to speak of the emergence of the phenomenon of the so-called “new colonized.” The point is that the expansion of the use of the terms “colonialism” and “imperialism” has enabled many nations to define themselves as victims. Theoretical results of these transformations include methodological changes in the study of Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet region. For instance, the interpretation of the Soviet Union as a colonial empire was relatively uncommon until recently, but has now become central to post-Soviet studies. Moreover, Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine provided a powerful impetus for many post-Soviet countries to promote the decolonization agenda.

Third, left-wing and center-left political forces have lost their monopoly on anti- and decolonization discourse. Inspired by Antonio Gramsci, the scholar and writer Lars Gustafsson, in 1980, referred to this as *problemformuleringsprivilegiet*, that is, the “privilege of formulating the problem” (Gustafsson 1989). It’s clear that the left has lost this privilege today. Dressing a nationalist message in a decolonial language has become increasingly frequent. The concept of “decolonization” has become a point of competition between representatives from opposite ends of the political spectrum. Today, the fight against colonialism and decolonization is not only part of the political agenda of leaders such as Lula da Silva and Evo Morales. Anti- and decolonial rhetoric is being actively used by figures such as Vladimir Putin, Ilham Aliyev, Viktor Orbán and Xi Jinping, as well as by representatives of the Polish right-wing conservative *Law and Justice* Party, Ukrainian right-wingers who present decolonization as an extension of decommunization and use it as a tool for illiberal memory management, and European and North American right-wing populists who are calling for action against “immigrant colonialism.” Predictably, this situation has prompted concern and criticism from the left (see Kołodziejczyk and Huigen 2023; Tlostanova 2023), raising the question of whether different types of decolonization are possible or whether we are witnessing imitations of “genuine” decolonization.

Fourth, the close correlation between decolonization and emancipation has been lost. The ideas of social, economic, and political equality, and liberation from imperialist oppression—which inspired fighters against colonialism in the 20th century—are less significant today than the “decolonization of reason,” overcoming epistemic exclusion and affirming national identity and cultural tradition. As it turned out, decolonization can create new forms of oppression and unfreedom, or it can itself become a neocolonial practice. The latter prompted Ijeoma Opara to call for the decolonization of

decolonization. The situation in the post-Soviet space exemplifies the former. In Belarus, under general procurator Andrei Shved, there is a heavy emphasis on the new ideological formula “the genocide of the Belarusian people,” as an aspect of the cult of the decolonial Soviet partisan movement during World War II. In Russia, the ideological formula “genocide of the Soviet people” informs its memory management, accompanying the intense instrumentalization of what it officially referred to as “the Great Patriotic War” – which, of course, is cast in terms of national liberation. This narrative, in Russia and Belarus, informs imperial expansion, annexation, sharp curtailment, and trampling of human rights. As Dace Dzenovska (Dzenovska 2024) shows, policies that rely on the binary opposition of colonizers and colonized ignore the social, economic, and cultural complexity of post-Soviet societies. This inevitably leads to the suppression of many social and cultural forms.

Nowadays, decolonization is a complex and often internally contradictory process. In post-communist Eastern European countries, the decolonization policies pursued by many raise numerous questions. One of the questions is whether they are victims of only Russian (Soviet) imperialism or of Western European imperialism too. Today, many of these countries have joined the European Union and become part of Western society. Should they therefore also be held responsible for European (neo)colonialism? These and many other questions lack clear answers in contemporary societies. This example shows that, in the current situation, the urgent task is not only to consider what should be decolonized and how, as is most often the case, but also to address the call for decolonization itself. It is also necessary to consider why the idea of decolonization is currently being used as an instrument of social transformation, and to analyze not only the issues associated with colonialism, but also how societies came to perceive their historical experience as colonial. This is exactly the ambitious task faced by this special issue.

The articles in this special issue are based on reports presented at the International workshop ‘*Decolonize This! Theory, Practices, and Outcomes of a New Decolonization Movement*’. The event took place at Lund University on November 1, 2024, and was made possible thanks to the financial support of the Center for Modern European Studies: An Öresund Network of Lund University, Malmö University, and the University of Copenhagen (CEMES).

The issue opens with an article by John L. Hennessey, who addresses the problem of defining a “colony.” As Hennessey demonstrates, researchers should exercise caution when using this term, as it is extremely challenging, if not impossible, to draw a clear line between what is and what is not a colony. The author identifies three theoretical approaches to understanding what constitutes a “colony”: the analytical, comparative, and historicist approaches. Having considered the specifics of each, he concludes that each exhibits elements of arbitrariness that permit politically motivated bias. They may also miss elements of colonial reality. Finally, within their frameworks, territories generally considered colonies are not necessarily classified as such, and vice versa. As Hennessey points out, the historicist approach is extremely interesting because it allows us to

reconsider areas that are not currently considered colonies. However, it is the least studied.

Mykhailo Minakov explores the interpretations of decolonial theory in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia. He views the concept of “decolonization” as an example of how intellectuals appropriate and reinterpret a “foreign” concept in this region. Marxism, for example, was previously borrowed and reinterpreted in this way. History shows that the outcomes of such appropriations are often far from the aims the original theorists intended. History shows that the outcome of such appropriations is often far from what the original theorists intended. According to Minakov, “decolonization” was no exception in this case. The author pays particular attention to the application of decolonization theory in practice in Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan, and compares the three countries’ cases. He concludes that decolonization theories, which fail to account for the social and historical contexts of post-Soviet countries, may contribute to the establishment of hegemonic and exclusionary structures. At the conclusion of his research, the author presents priorities for decolonization practices that enable the genuine liberation of oppressed social groups.

The articles by Per Rudling and Denys Kiryukhin are complementary, as they both provide similar answers to the question of whether right-wing decolonization is possible. According to the prevailing view in the literature, the rhetoric of decolonization used by many right-wing and right-wing populist politicians today merely results from the hijacking of the concept (Tlostanova 2023; Shah 2024; Platt 2024). Has not the time come to pose the broader question if this is not part of something wider, something broader that is but a “hijacking” or hostile takeover of a naturally and self-evident progressive issue, the prerogative of the left, by the “right”? Both Rudling and Kiryukhin demonstrate that right-wing decolonization rhetoric has its roots in the conservative intellectual tradition. In other words, the right has not merely appropriated the concept. There is every reason to talk about the phenomenon of right-wing decolonization.

Looking at the Ukrainian émigré far right, Per Rudling traces the development of “anti-ideologies,” in this case anti-communism and anti-imperialism, as a basis for authoritarian ultranationalist activism following the collapse of the Axis world that had formed them. Focusing on its dominant ideologues, Yaroslav Stets’ko and Dmytro Dontsov, his article is a survey of OUN(b) and ABN de-colonial thought over the half-century from 1946 to 1996, of political actors who were affixed as official heroes in 2007. The study surveys a trajectory from the imperial to the anti-imperial and decolonial; initially awkward and contradictory, where comporting itself as “the most faithful allies” of Western colonial powers constituted a delicate and difficult balancing act, where the anti-imperial rhetoric vis a vis the Soviets was difficult to reconcile with support for racial segregation, Rhodesia and Portuguese colonial rule, and where human rights abuses in the USSR was accompanied with support for, and sponsorship from, the regimes Francisco Franco, Chiang Kai-shek, Augusto Pinochet and Alfredo Stroessner.

Kiryukhin explores the history of Russian anti- and decolonial discourses. He pays particular attention to the differences between the Leninist and Stalinist approaches to the colonial question and to the right of a nation to self-determination. The triumph of

the Stalinist approach ended the Bolshevik policy of decolonizing the former Russian Empire, thereby shaping the principles of Soviet anti-colonial foreign policy. The study shows that, although Putin's Russia formally reproduces the Soviet anti- and decolonial rhetoric, the initially "leftist" concepts of "colonialism" and "decolonization" are now being interpreted from right-wing, conservative positions. This interpretation has become possible because the dominant theoretical paradigm today interprets colonialism as a form of domination that manifests itself in the control of thought and identity formation rather than socio-economic exploitation.

Vera Skvirskaja examines internal Ukrainian discussions on decolonization policy, which is being implemented amid the ongoing war. Using the situation in Odessa as an example, she shows that the conflicts and contradictions in Ukrainian society resulting from decolonization were driven by multiple factors. The influence of Soviet stereotypes and myths on perceptions of the decolonization process itself is an important factor. At the same time, the Soviet legacy is manifested in the methods used to implement the policy of decolonization, which, in some cases, reproduce Soviet practices. The author concludes that viewing Ukrainian society as post-Soviet is not outdated.

Two review essays conclude the special issue. Ten years have passed since the publication of *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR*, by Adeeb Khalid, one of the leading researchers of the history of colonialism in Central Asia. This stimulated Anton Finko's reflections on the book's theoretical significance and on the "revolutionary-imperial" social experiment in Central Asia during the Soviet era. The book *The Western Crisis of Truth in the Early 21st Century: As the Enlightenment Dims* by Arvydas Grišinas became the subject of Mykhailo Minakov's thoughts. Not only does Minakov reconstruct Grišinas's position, which addresses the decline of Enlightenment epistemology and the associated threats to liberal democracy, but he also engages in debate with the author about the book's core ideas.

The editors of this special issue express their deepest gratitude to the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation (grant number KAW 2019.0151) and the Marianne and Marcus Wallenberg Foundation (MMW). Thanks to their generosity, Per Anders Rudling was able to organize the research program at Lund University, and Denys Kiryukhin could join his research team.

Bibliography:

- Dube, B. (2019). Trajectories of Mutual Zombification in the Praxis of Postcolonial Faith in South Africa: A Need for African Decoloniality Theology. *Acta Theologica* 39(1): 55–73.
- Dzenovska, D. (2024). Emptiness against Decolonization: Reflections from the Imperial Fault Line in Eastern Latvia. *Slavic Review* 83(4): 687–704.
- Gustafsson, L. (1989[1980]) *Problemformuleringsprivilegiet: Samhällsfilosofiska studier*. P.A. Norstedts förlag.
- Kołodziejczyk, D. & Siegfried H. (2023). East Central Europe Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial: A Critical Introduction. In Huigen, Siegfried and Kołodziejczyk, Dorota (eds). *East Central Europe*

Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial in the Twentieth Century. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–35.

Martin, T. & Thompson, A.S. (2018). Rethinking Decolonization: A New Research Agenda for the Twenty-First Century, in Thomas, M. & Thompson A.S. (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mendoza, B. (2020). Decolonial Theories in Comparison. *Journal of World Philosophies* 5(1): 43–60.

Platt, K. M. F. (2024). On The Subjects and Objects of Decolonization. *Slavic Review* 83(4): 709–13.

Shah, A. (2024). When decolonization is hijacked. *American Anthropologist* 126(4): 553–566.

Tlostanova, M. (2023). Decoloniality: between a travelling concept and a relational onto-epistemic political stance. In Suarez Krabbe, Julia, and Adrian Groglopo (eds.). *Coloniality and Decolonisation in the Nordic Region*. London: Routledge, 145–163.