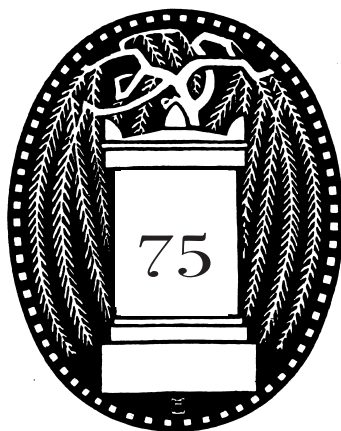


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An Analysis of Decolonial Studies in a Time of Conflict

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Introduction

An old phrase, often attributed to China, reads, “May you live in interesting times.” It is intended as a curse more than anything else. If so, we might consider ourselves cursed given the conditions of recent events. The last presidential election from 2020 ended with an unprecedented attempt to overturn Congress’s validation of the electoral count by rioters who forced their way into the nation’s capital. Russia invaded Ukraine in a war of aggression that threatens all the efforts since 1945 to create a peaceful Europe. China continues to build military installations on shallow-water areas of sea to project their hegemony over international shipping lanes while continuing to menace Taiwan and threatening to bring that nation under its authoritarian control. There have been two assassination attempts of a former President while a candidate for re-election. In the Middle East, Israel was the victim of a surprise attack on 7 October 2023 that left 1,179 dead and about 250 taken as hostages. Beginning in early 2024 anti-Israel protests on university campuses in the United States escalated beginning with the Columbia University campus occupation. Student protests spread to 45 out of 50 states with encampments, occupations, walkouts, or sit-ins occurring on 140 campuses. Riots and demonstrations have erupted across the U.S. in opposition to President Trump’s efforts to deport undocumented immigrants and abrogation of due-process laws. Most recently Israel and Iran engaged in direct warfare as Israel tried to destroy the latter’s nuclear-weapons program.

In light of these and other global events, my purpose here is to examine the central tenets of Decolonial Studies and how these tenets have fueled antisemitism through its analysis of the conflict between Israel and Gaza.¹ I first examine the works of leading Decolonial scholars, their advocacy of violence, how they have addressed the conflict in Gaza, and how their ideas have fueled antisemitism. My argument is not intended as an apology for or defense of the State of Israel. To be perfectly clear, both Israel and Hamas have made horrendous policy decisions, treated each other with less than the minimum standard of human dignity, squandered numerous opportunities for peace, and left future generations an inheritance of animosity and

warfare. It is also not my intent to address the Israeli government's seizure of Palestinian land or to debate the occupation of Palestinian land. Rather, my goal is to understand how an academic school of thought embraced and encouraged violence against a particular group, and in doing so ignored similar behavior by other groups that they have otherwise condemned.

Postcolonial studies serves as the analytical lens to analyze Decolonial studies by providing critical tools, historical context, and theoretical frameworks to assess, challenge, and enrich decolonial approaches and help groups to reclaim their identity in a postcolonial world.² I intend my analysis be used to highlight both the continuities and differences between the two, particularly whether its central tenets are justified or productive.³ The anti-Israel protests are of central issue to my argument. These protests have arguably constituted the greatest level of unrest in higher education since the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations of the late 1960s and early 1970s. One field of study that has fueled the demonstrations and been used to justify opposition to Israel has been Decolonial Studies.

Decolonial Studies is an academic field that arose from the 1955 Bandung Conference which produced theory used to explore ways to oppose colonialism in Africa and Asia.⁴ Its scholars examine and critique the legacies of colonialism and imperialism, particularly focusing on the ways in which colonial power structures, knowledge systems, and modes of domination continue to shape the modern world.⁵ Its creators meant for it to be used to dismantle such structures and suggest alternative futures that resist colonial domination.⁶ Decoloniality is defined by its radical delinking from modernity and identity with a revolutionary spirit opposed to coloniality.⁷ It is deeply intertwined with activism, indigenous rights, and efforts to challenge the enduring legacies of colonialism in contemporary society. This theory has been used to frame and analyze a broad range of topics in the fields of history, politics, culture, epistemology, race, and identity, and was conceived to center experiences and perspectives of colonized and marginalized peoples.⁸ One of the goals of decolonization is the actual return of land and resources to indigenous peoples, and the dismantling of colonial structures.⁹ It is important to note these goals have been commonly expressed during the 2024 protests. There is debate as to what extent the protests were organic in nature or were driven by outside agencies with an anti-Israel agenda, however, most consider it a largely grassroots movement.¹⁰ The question of the origins of the 2024 protests, however, I see as secondary to a critical examination of the rhetoric surrounding them.

Many scholars view the conflict in Gaza as a colonial-type struggle, comparing it to other settler societies like Australia and the United States.¹¹ This perspective challenges the notion of Israeli identity and self-determination while focusing on the idea of colonial dynamics.¹² Decolonial

scholars who engage with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict often critique the Israeli state through the lens of settler colonialism and focus on the colonial nature of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, viewing Israel as a settler-colonial state that has displaced and continues to dispossess the Palestinian population similar to other global anti-colonial and decolonial movements.¹³

The ability critically to analyze current events is essential to understanding what ideas and perspectives influence different groups. Critical discourse analysis is one of the methodologies used in Postcolonial Studies to examine how literature is used to challenge colonial power structures and shape national identities.¹⁴ This methodology is most often used to investigate how language reflects and reinforces structures and ideologies, and serves as a powerful tool in comprehending the complexities and nuances of current affairs.¹⁵ Unlike traditional discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis is used to critique and challenge social injustices by exposing how language contributes to the reproduction or transformation of social problems.¹⁶ Using the methodology of critical discourse analysis, one can unpack underlying power dynamics, social constructs, and ideological narratives that shape the narratives surrounding current events.¹⁷ This methodological approach allows one to move beyond surface-level understanding of what is being reported and instead to delve deeper into implications and sociopolitical contexts informing these events.

The critical discourse analysis emphasizes the role of language in constructing and perpetuating social phenomena. By scrutinizing the language used in media coverage, political discourses, and public debates, one can identify the ways in which power is exercised, dominant perspectives are reinforced, and marginalized voices are suppressed or overlooked.¹⁸ Such a critical examination of the linguistic elements of current events can help one unveil hidden agendas, biases, and power structures that influence the public's understanding and interpretation of societal issues.¹⁹

Defining antisemitism is challenging due to its diverse manifestations and the contested politics surrounding it. It encompasses ideological, attitudinal, and practical elements, and is often linked to broader phenomena like ethnic prejudice.²⁰ The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance uses a *Working Definition of Antisemitism*, a non-legally binding definition.²¹ Antisemitism specifically targets the state of Israel as a notion of Jewish collectivity, denying Jewish people the right to self-determination by advocating the elimination of Israel, applying double standards or expectations not demanded of other nations, comparing the actions of the Jewish people or Israel to Nazis, or holding Jewish people collectively responsible for the actions of Israel.²² There is another important definition, Zionism, which needs to be articulated clearly because while antisemitism and antizionism are similar, they are not the same and the

distinction is important. Zionism originated in the late-19th century as a movement to fulfill the national aspirations of the Jewish people.²³ It was intended to be used to establish and maintain a Jewish nation in Palestine, a region corresponding to ancient Israel.²⁴ This could only be accomplished by securing as much land as possible for Israeli inhabitants and removing as many Arab citizens who lived there as possible.²⁵ Antizionism and antisemitism are related but distinct concepts. Antisemitism is hostility or prejudice against Jews as a religious, ethnic, or cultural group, while antizionism is opposition to Zionism or the idea of a Jewish state in Israel. While the two terms contain overlap, they are not inherently the same.²⁶ The expansion from antizionism to antisemitism takes place when an individual's position evolves into a more direct anti-Jewish attack, often specifically in relation to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.²⁷

Double Standards

Double standards in decolonialism can manifest in various ways, often leading to inconsistencies in how principles are applied. One way this double standard has been evidenced is through the romanticization of indigenous knowledge. Decolonialism may romanticize indigenous practices and knowledge systems, potentially overlooking the complexities and contradictions within those traditions while at the same time focusing on flaws in the perceived dominant culture or state. Some critiques of colonialism focus heavily on specific historical instances while overlooking other forms of oppression or colonial-like practices occurring elsewhere, leading to a biased understanding of justice. A frequent subfield of study in decolonialism has been the conquest and colonization of Central and South America by the Spanish. The history and legacy of Spanish colonialism has been widely critiqued; however, the legacy of the Aztec and Mayan civilizations' widespread practices of human sacrifice, child sacrifice, cannibalism, rule through autocratic monarchies, and wars of conquest have been given far less attention by comparison.²⁸ Conversely, much of the legacy that colonizing nations left behind are criticized even though they remain adopted long after the colonizing powers have left, such as language, religion, and other social institutions.²⁹

There can also be a double standard in how violence is interpreted; actions by marginalized groups may be justified as resistance, while similar actions by dominant groups are condemned, even when the contexts may be comparable. For example, Hamas set up a one-party state that crushed political opposition within its territory, bans same-sex relationships, represses women, and openly espouses the killing of all Jews.³⁰ The double standard is a central element of Decolonial Studies. It holds that Israel is a foreign colonizing force, and that Palestinians have a right to eliminate their oppressors.

Frantz Fanon has argued that decolonization is a violent process, as it involves dismantling the structures of colonialism deeply embedded in society. He viewed violence as a necessary means to achieve genuine decolonization.³¹ He maintained that violent struggle could serve a cathartic function, and be culturally and psychologically beneficial to those oppressed by colonialism.³² Fanon concludes in *The Wretched of the Earth* that non-violent resistance was ineffective, dismissing it as merely preserving of the capitalist, colonialist state.³³ The Hamas attack was therefore, viewed through Fanon's argument, a natural consequence of Israel's history of oppression.³⁴ Walter Dignolo's work has focused on delinking knowledge from coloniality through epistemic disobedience. His approach encourages disruption as a means to deconstruct colonial institutions.³⁵

The words and actions of other self-identified Decolonial Studies scholars reveal how the principles of Decolonialism influence contemporaneous behavior. The most powerful examples of how decolonial scholars view violence are evidenced on social media, such as on X (formerly known as Twitter). Ameil J. Joseph of McMaster University wrote on 8 October 2023, "anticolonial, and decolonial are not just words you heard in your EDI workshop." The same day, Mahvish Ahmad of the London School of Economics posted, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free," calling for the complete elimination of Israel. And at Texas Tech University's College of Education, Jairo Fúnez-Flores wrote, "PALESTINIANS HAVE THE RIGHT TO RESIST SETTLER COLONIAL GENOCIDE, PALESTINIANS HAVE THE RIGHT TO RESIST OCCUPATION & APARTHEID, PALESTINIANS HAVE THE RIGHT TO LIVE WITH DIGNITY IN THEIR OWN LAND."³⁶ He furthermore criticized other not-as-vocal decolonial scholars, characterizing them as "white ladies" with "fuzzy bunny" views or "Karens."³⁷ In an April 2024 post he wrote, "Israel is a garbage country that's only loved by garbage people. It was founded on ethnic cleansing, apartheid, and settler-colonialism. Its flag is a symbol of white supremacy."³⁸

One of the main assumptions among decolonial scholars is that Israel is a "white" or "white-adjacent" nation and Palestinians are "people of color."³⁹ In fact, Israel has a large community of Ethiopian Jews, and 21% of Israelis are Mizrahi, descendants of Jews from Arab and Persian lands, and therefore native to the Middle East.⁴⁰ They are neither settlers nor colonialists nor European.⁴¹ Decolonialism's double standard is made more evident when considering how immigrants are regarded in nations like the United Kingdom or the United States where immigrants are regarded as British or American within a lifetime. However, both countries have prominent leaders such as Suella Braverman, David Lammy, Kamala Harris, and Nikki Haley, whose parents or grandparents migrated from India, West Africa, or South America. No one would describe them as "settlers." Yet

Israeli families who have resided in Israel for a century are nevertheless designated as “settler-colonists.”⁴²

Collective Guilt

Decolonial studies scholars frame the role of the colonial settler in terms of universal guilt, suggesting that focusing on innocence can undermine moral responsibility and obscure widespread complicity in structural injustices like settler colonialism.⁴³ Collective guilt refers to the shared feelings of guilt experienced by members of a group for actions committed by the group, often relating to historical injustices or collective wrongdoing. Instead of evaluating responsibility across a spectrum in terms of individual actions where some can be considered innocent of colonial settler behaviors, everyone is rendered guilty.⁴⁴ The result is that people are treated as members of a group rather than as individuals.

The work of Jordan Abel emphasizes the importance of settler groups to recognize their collective role in ongoing injustices. His work is heavily influenced by Walter Dignolo and, in addition to collective guilt, he advocates for the use of decolonial violence as a form of resistance.⁴⁵ Robyn Bourgeois emphasizes the importance of collective blame as an essential step in the process of decolonialization. She urges privileged groups and organizations to recognize their roles in perpetuating colonial systems.⁴⁶

The act of holding an entire group responsible for the actions of a few individuals is often considered unfair and harmful for several reasons. Collective guilt can unfairly assign blame to individuals who did not participate in or support historical events, leading to a sense of injustice and feelings of personal guilt even if not directly involved in the wrongdoing.⁴⁷ Such guilt can perpetuate cycles of hostility, lead to unjust retribution, and undermine social cohesion. Collective guilt is often hypocritical, as it tends to target outgroups while excusing similar behaviors within one's own group.⁴⁸ It also fails to admit its own mistakes while demanding others to admit theirs.⁴⁹ Collective blame can perpetuate stigma and negative stereotypes about entire groups, potentially fostering resentment and hostility rather than promoting understanding and healing. It also can be challenging to determine who is responsible for historic events that happened several generations before, making it difficult to implement meaningful reparative actions.

As evident in the 2024 protests, the notion of collective guilt can be exploited for political purposes and used to mobilize support for agendas that may not genuinely address historical injustices. These criticisms highlight the complexities surrounding the concept of collective guilt and suggest that approaches to addressing historical injustices should promote constructive engagement rather than simply assigning blame.⁵⁰

Fueling Antisemitism

In many activist circles, expression of solidarity with Palestinian rights has been framed in ways that dismiss or ignore Jewish experiences of trauma, particularly in contexts where antisemitic rhetoric is present.⁵¹ This situation highlights the need for careful, nuanced discussions to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes and to foster genuine solidarity that recognizes the complexities of multiple histories and identities. The portrayal of a binary struggle between “colonizers” and “colonized” can erase the complexities of Jewish history and identity, potentially leading to adoption of a one-dimensional worldview that positions Jews solely as oppressors rather than acknowledging their own complex history. In this way, Jewish identity is effectively erased and Jewish peoplehood is denied. Jews are frequently depicted as “Europeans” or “whites,” notwithstanding that Mizrahi Jews, largely from North Africa and with no actual connection to Europe, outnumber Ashkenazi Jews in Israel.⁵²

Framing Israel as a colonial state leads to the dehumanization of Jewish people or conflation of Jewish identity with the state of Israel which can feed into antisemitic narratives. While decolonialism is used to address historical injustices, some critiques can overlook the unique historical experiences of Jewish communities, particularly in relation to persecution and displacement. More recently antisemitism has spread via social media and the internet.⁵³ Criticisms of Israel by decolonial scholars have been grounded in the idea that colonialism is rooted in whiteness.⁵⁴ Other Decolonial scholars have critiqued Zionism, the ideological foundation of the Israeli state, as a form of settler colonialism. These scholars argue that Zionism, in seeking to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine, involves the displacement of the indigenous Palestinian population. Edward Said, a Palestinian-American intellectual, critiqued Zionism in *The Question of Palestine*. Said views Zionism as a colonial project, analogous to European imperialism, used to create a state for Jewish people at the expense of the indigenous Palestinian population. He highlights how Western powers supported this project, treating the Palestinians as invisible or irrelevant to the colonial ambitions of the Zionist movement.⁵⁵

“From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” is an antisemitic slogan commonly featured in anti-Israel campaigns and chanted at demonstrations. This rallying cry has long been used by anti-Israel voices, including supporters of terrorist organizations such as Hamas, which seek Israel’s destruction through violent means.⁵⁶ It is an ugly and cruel phrase that implicitly endorses the killing or deportation of 9.5 million Israelis.⁵⁷

Decolonial Studies represent a one-sided view of the Middle-East’s history and casts one group as oppressors and another as victims through vast oversimplification. It also encourages one to view the people involved as members of a group, rather than as individuals who all deserve the same

level of human rights, dignity, and consideration. In this worldview, Jews moving to Israel in the 19th and 20th centuries, many of whom were fleeing from oppression by European powers, were actually engaged in a sinister “structural process of territorial dispossession, demographic displacement, and political erasure” on behalf of European powers.⁵⁸

Conclusions

Highlighting past injustices can reignite historical grievances, leading to renewed tensions between groups that may have been working toward reconciliation or understanding especially if the expectations for those historical injustices are completely disconnected from political reality. Advocating unrealistic solutions to extremely complex problems makes meaningful communication and progress impossible. Many historians agree the Mexican–American War (1846–1848) was an act of aggression and a land grab. However, it would be unrealistic to think the United States government would ever consider returning the southwest states to Mexico. Likewise, it is completely unrealistic to think the 9.5 million citizens of Israel will evacuate their nation—and where they would go if that were to happen?

After watching the recent unrest on college and university campuses, the question arises: Will Decolonial Studies continue to foster divisiveness and antisemitism rather than encouraging groups peacefully and constructively to engage with each other better to understand the complex history of the past 80 years? Scholars need critically to examine Decolonial Studies in order to answer this question and to come to some agreement as to whether as a discipline Decolonial Studies provides a balanced view of history and encourages us to treat people as individuals, or if it sets the stage for pitting groups against each other in divisive and demeaning conflict, providing people with a one-sided list of historical grievances without any realistic solutions. Have we in fact turned our critical thinking skills toward Decolonial Studies with the same rigor as we have examined and critiqued any other ideology, methodology, or social theory?

It should not be surprising that Decolonial Studies scholars appear hostile to Europeans and Western culture because their focus is defined through opposition to others. A review of its leading thinkers reveals their work and ideas framed in terms of opposing something, rather than putting forward a framework to advance or advocate for realistic solutions. Fanon, in addition to his advocacy for violent uprising, targets European ideas and values for underlying the structure of global capitalism.⁵⁹ Achille Mbembe’s work extends Fanon’s analysis of colonial violence by suggesting colonial structures exert political power through control over life and death.⁶⁰ Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Antoni Aguiló critique the global dominance of Western knowledge systems and advocate for acknowledging epistemologies of the South, the recognition of non-Western ways of

knowing, and questioning the hegemony of Eurocentric science, law, and governance.⁶¹

Its critics argue that decolonialism often oversimplifies the diverse experiences and histories of colonized peoples. A careful review of scholarship reveals a pattern of inconsistencies in how Decolonialism addresses Israel compared to other global conflicts. Its scholars can neglect variations within different contexts such as Jewish voices and experiences, resulting in some being marginalized or excluded. This is particularly the case when discussions about colonialism focus solely on specific geographic or cultural contexts, neglecting the diversity of narratives, including Jewish history.

When individuals are viewed solely through the lens of their group identity (e.g., as “colonizers” or “colonized”), that view can overshadow an individual’s personal experiences, agency, and complexity, reducing them to stereotypes. The oversimplified binary of oppressor versus oppressed can erase nuances of individual motivations and histories, leading to a lack of empathy and understanding for those perceived to be on the wrong side of the divide.

One criticism of Decolonial Studies is that it opposes modernity by treating it the same as colonialism, when the two are actually very different.⁶² While Decolonial Studies scholars aim to address colonial legacies and promote social justice, some argue for alternative approaches that may foster more-constructive dialogue and inclusivity. The settler-colonial paradigm has counter-hegemonic implications for understanding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and prescribes decolonization, but its limitations make it less effective than other approaches.⁶³ The decolonial framework can sometimes create divisions between groups which may hinder constructive dialogue and reconciliation efforts. The concept can oversimplify complex social and historical dynamics by reducing individuals’ identities and actions to group membership, ignoring personal agency and diversity within a group.

I argue a more suitable theory for understanding the effects of colonialism and imperialism while emphasizing the complexities of identity, power, and resistance in a postcolonial world is Postcolonial Theory. Postcolonialism and Decolonialism share similar origins in that both emerged in the mid-1900s, as scholars from previously colonized countries began to focus on the lasting and continuing effects of colonialism. Its central ideas are grounded in critical theory, particularly in analysis of the history, culture, and literature of European governments. Its theory is considered more adaptable and inclusive, while Decolonial Studies emphasizes a more-radical, violent break from colonial legacies.⁶⁴ Decolonialism emphasizes breaking away from Western epistemologies and institutions, while Postcolonialism focuses more on cultural critique and representation.⁶⁵

This methodological alternative can enhance dialogue around colonial legacies and social justice, promoting a more inclusive, multifaceted approach that recognizes the complexities of identity and history. Postcolonial theory is noted for its strong embrace of the notion of difference or Otherness, which allows those who employ it to resist polarities of power and prejudice, promoting the idea that culture is dynamic and evolving.⁶⁶ Postcolonialism's greatest strength lies in its scholars' willingness to move beyond conflict to find a practical solution in facilitating the founding and stabilizing of postcolonial societies.⁶⁷ Other advantages include its flexibility, focus on cultural difference, and constructive engagement with Western thought.⁶⁸ Its scholars specifically encourage the adoption of human commonalities to promote negotiation rather than negation.⁶⁹ Postcolonial theory can help frame discussions around reconciliation by acknowledging the blending and coexistence of cultures, which can foster mutual understanding and respect among diverse groups, while rejecting positioning adversarial to Western institutions.⁷⁰

Endnotes

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