SOME PITFALLS OF DECOLONIALITY THEORY

By George Hull

Abstract

Decoloniality theory, with its signature concepts coloniality of power and coloniality of knowledge, initially emerged in Latin America. It has been developed further in southern Africa, where it now has significant influence in some universities. Decoloniality theory has to be distinguished from the broader endeavour of intellectual decolonization. The latter includes all intellectual efforts to free theory and ideology from distorting bias which is the effect of colonial or neocolonial power relations. Intellectual decolonization in this broader sense (e.g., in the writings of Anthony Appiah and Kwasi Wiredu) is truth-oriented: it aims to expose incorrect claims which are the result of bias, replacing them with correct theoretical conclusions. By contrast, contemporary decoloniality theory (e.g., in the writings of Walter Mignolo and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni) embraces several contentious metaphysical ideas, among which is rejection of the very possibility of universal truth. When decoloniality theory first emerged (in Aníbal Quijano's innovative writings) out of the discipline of political economy, however, it exemplified the broader, truth-oriented sense of intellectual decolonization. Quijano, and later Ramón Grosfoguel, were concerned to expose several false theoretical claims in social science which are a legacy of Eurocentric bias. Here I argue that tracing the steps by which contemporary decoloniality theory developed from this starting point can reveal some of its principal shortcomings. I seek to show that several of the distinctive metaphysical ideas in contemporary decoloniality theory are founded on drastically undermotivated, hyperphilosophising inferences from empirical premises. Even considered purely on its own terms, I argue, contemporary decoloniality theory exhibits a number of weaknesses and contradictions.

The idea that, following political decolonisation (which in Africa took place from the 1950s onwards), a process of ideological or intellectual decolonisation is also necessary, especially in formerly colonised countries, is not a new one [1]. It is plausible to think that Eurocentric bias, when not counteracted, could distort certain academic disciplines. Take, for example, political theory. If theorists seeking historical models of political association repeatedly turned to ancient Athens, while ignoring precolonial African, Asian and American social formations, they might end up with unduly limited notions of what is practicable [2].

In the discipline of philosophy, the Ghanaian thinker Kwasi Wiredu has argued since the 1980s that not only colonial-era political and religious doctrines, but also the European languages in which colonial education was conducted, have bequeathed to contemporary practitioners a certain amount of 'philosophical deadwood' (2007: 76). Translation into an indigenous African language, Wiredu has suggested, can be a useful tool for identifying philosophical problems which are '[t]ongue-dependent' (2004: 49)—which, that is to say, are not genuine philosophical problems at all, but merely artefacts of a particular European language's idiosyncrasies [3]. Similarly, K. Anthony Appiah has argued that an 'archaeology of Pan-Africanism's idea of race' (1992: 28) can help guard against false assumptions of cultural homogeneity, thus furthering 'ideological decolonization' (op. cit.: x).

These examples illustrate *intellectual decolonisation* in a broad sense which encompasses all intellectual efforts to remove or undo the effects of colonial, neo-colonial or other international power relations where, and to the extent that, these have hindered the attainment of knowledge and other worthwhile intellectual goals. Intellectual decolonisation in this broad sense is part of intellectual hygiene: it enables researchers to detect and address distortive effects of bias.

Decoloniality theory, on the other hand, is something narrower and more specific: a distinctive body of work that has grown up since the 1990s, at first in Latin America, later more widely. Its most recognisable claim is that a 'colonial matrix of power' has existed globally for at least four centuries, outlasting political decolonisation (see, for example, Mignolo, 2011: 8). This matrix is constituted by hierarchical forms of domination and exclusion operating worldwide, which include economic exploitation, sex, race and sexual-orientation hierarchies, and, crucially, an epistemic hierarchy—the 'coloniality of knowledge' (see, for example, Mignolo, 2018: 136). Appiah and Wiredu's approaches to *intellectual decolonisation* are truth-oriented, aiming to eliminate errors and maximise correct conclusions in theoretical work; contemporary practitioners of *decoloniality theory*, by contrast, are deeply uncomfortable with the notion that *any* substantial theory or body of cultural assumptions could be outright untrue—untrue no matter where or by whom it is believed. This makes for two features of contemporary decoloniality theorists' writings which are disorientating to the uninitiated. First, any set of beliefs or assumptions, or at least any set large enough to constitute a 'worldview', automatically earns the title 'knowledge'; any two or more are 'knowledges' (see, for example, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 21). Second, when two 'knowledges' are compared, it is not the rational and epistemic relations between them—for example, whether one evidentially supports or contradicts the other—which come under scrutiny, but instead the political relations—for example, whether they are 'non-dominant and equal' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020: 150) or whether one is in a 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' position (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: xi).

Decoloniality theory has become extremely influential in some southern African universities over the past six or seven years. The Zimbabwean professor Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, based until recently at the University of South Africa, is a prominent decoloniality theorist.

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During the student-led Rhodes Must Fall protests of 2015, mastering decoloniality theory's sometimes abstruse lexicon was a way for students to 'gain currency' and 'influence' in the movement—with one *ancien combattant* describing the Argentinian decoloniality theorist Walter D. Mignolo's writings as an 'opioid' (Chikane, 2018: 222–23). Rather unusually, the University of Cape Town in South Africa has since 2018 had in place a central 'Curriculum Change Framework' applying to all faculties; instead of being inclusive of various intellectual approaches, this document views curriculum change narrowly, often dogmatically, through a 'decolonial lens'—more specifically, 'the Latin-American perspective on coloniality' [4]. Evidently, a critical discussion of decoloniality theory has relevance far beyond its Latin American birthplace.

Decoloniality theory emerged from the discipline of political economy. In the Peruvian theorist Aníbal Quijano's initial writings about coloniality, it is essentially a branch of dependency theory or world-systems analysis [5]. The continuing influence of these intellectual beginnings explains, to a degree, why decoloniality theory has held itself apart from *postcolonial* theory in its various guises. If decoloniality theorists have accused postcolonial theorists such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Achille Mbembe of operating 'within a Euro-North American-centric modernist discursive [...] terrain' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020: 38) [6], they have also distanced themselves from postcolonial theory's war on 'grand/meta-narratives'. In Ndlovu-Gatsheni's estimation, postcolonialism marks a 'cultural turn', while decoloniality theory 'underscores [...] the transhistoric expansion of colonial domination and the perpetuation of its effects in contemporary times' (op. cit.: 25): while the former is preoccupied with culture, the latter is focused 'on questions of power' (37). Decoloniality theory, with its emphatic exposition of the centuries-long domination wrought worldwide by a 'colonial matrix of power', cannot dispense with grand narratives any more than classic world-systems analysis can.

Here I seek to show that tracing the steps by which contemporary decoloniality theory developed from its starting point in the discipline of political economy can reveal some of its principal shortcomings. My intention is not to provide a full overview of decoloniality theory, or to itemise its flaws comprehensively. Focusing on Quijano, Mignolo, Ndlovu-Gatsheni and the Puerto Rican writer Ramón Grosfoguel's discussions of the coloniality of power and the coloniality of knowledge, I argue that some of the distinctive metaphysical ideas in contemporary decoloniality theory are founded on undermotivated inferences from empirical claims about political economy and human biology. In the final section, I argue that, even considered purely on its own terms, contemporary decoloniality theory exhibits several weaknesses and contradictions.

Latin American exceptions

In their writings in decoloniality theory from the turn of the twenty-first century, Ramón Grosfoguel and Aníbal Quijano start out from the observation that certain general statements about national development, thought in some quarters to be universally true, in fact fail to apply across the board, because there are Latin American countries of which they are not true. Take, first, what I will call the *free trade thesis*:

> **FTT**: Countries increase their national wealth more through free trade policies than through protectionist policies

Already in the nineteenth century, as Grosfoguel relates, Latin American policymakers were voicing a suspicion that while the free trade thesis was true of Great Britain, it was not true of Argentina, Chile or Paraguay. Established large-scale industry, like that in England, could hold its own against imported manufactured goods. Latin America's small-scale fledgling industry, in contrast, needed to be shielded behind import tariffs, at least for a time, if it was not to be strangled in the nest (Grosfoguel, 2000: 351–53).

Just as the German economist Friedrich List had earlier in the nineteenth century [7], in the 1870s Argentinian economic nationalists such as Vicente F. López and Carlos Pellegrini argued that when the free trade thesis is straightforwardly given universal scope—

> **FTTU1**: *All* countries increase their national wealth more through free trade policies than through protectionist policies

—it is false. On the other hand, López and Pellegrini

(again like List) thought that there are facts about the industrial circumstances of different countries which enable one to explain and predict which countries will benefit more from free trade policies, and which more from protectionist policies. López thought that whether the free trade thesis applies 'depends on the particular conditions of each country'; specifically, '[i]n the first phase of industrial development, industries need protection from foreign competition' (Grosfoguel, 2000: 351). The free trade thesis (FTT) is thus not entirely incorrect; it does apply to some countries, and perhaps applies to all countries at some time in their history. But if it is to be worked up into a principle with universal scope, the straightforward universal principle (FTTU1) will not do. What is needed is a universal principle containing conditionals whose antecedent clauses capture relevant variation in countries' industrial circumstances at a given time:

> **FTTU2**: All countries increase their national wealth more through free trade policies than through protectionist policies if they exhibit industrial circumstances *C1*, and more through protectionist policies than through free trade policies if they exhibit industrial circumstances *C2*

(*C1* and *C2* can include comparative circumstances—for example, having larger-scale and/or longer established industry than the global mean.)

The economic nationalists' scepticism of free trade saw a reprise, from the 1960s onwards, in Latin America's so-called dependency school: this included Fernando Henrique Cardoso, André Gunder Frank, Aníbal Quijano and other political economists. But the dependency theorists took aim at a second general statement about national development, which their nineteenth-century precursors would probably have endorsed. Call it the *developmental stages thesis*:

> **DST**: As they develop economically, countries pass through one sequence *S* of successive developmental stages

Orthodox Marxists hold that *S* includes feudalism, capitalism, socialism and finally communism. For modernisation theorists (for example, Bert F. Hoselitz and W. W. Rostow), on the other hand, *S* fundamentally involves a transition from traditionalism to modernity via some intermediate stages (Grosfoguel, 2000: 358–59).

The dependency school believed that both modernisation theorists and orthodox Marxists go wrong by focusing on individual societies in isolation. The global economy, its theorists argued, is an integrated whole complete with an international division of labour. The economic condition of any given country is in large part a function of its position and role within this global system. While it may be true that the core industrialised countries which benefit most from the global economy have passed through a specific sequence of developmental stages, one should not expect countries in the periphery of the global economy, whose imposed role in that economy is very different, to follow the same path (Grosfoguel, 2000: 360).

For example, Quijano has claimed that the existence in Peru until well into the twentieth century of compulsory unpaid labour by *peónes* for a *padrón*, no less than the existence of slavery throughout the Americas into the nineteenth century, 'serve[d] the purposes and needs' of global capitalism (Quijano, 2000a: 550). It would thus be wrong, in Quijano's opinion, to conclude that Peru was passing through the same sequence of developmental stages as European countries, only *lagging behind*—still *bogged down* in feudalism or traditionalism—due to internal problems. On the contrary, Peru, just like West Germany or France, was following the path required of it and imposed upon it by the global economic system as a whole. After the fifteenth century, the world economy employed 'all forms of control and exploitation of labor', including 'slavery, serfdom, petty-commodity production, reciprocity, and wages', to 'produce commodities for the world market' (op. cit.: 535). By the mid-twentieth-century, global capitalism depended on a fully free labour regime in the core industrialised countries, but it equally depended on peripheral countries' labour regimes being a mix of free and compulsory (op. cit.: 538, 575n8).

So, if the developmental stages thesis is straightforwardly given universal scope—

> **DSTU1**: As they develop economically, *all*

> countries pass through one sequence *S* of successive developmental stages

—it is false. But the explanation the dependency school provides for why different countries pass through different sequences of developmental stages indicates that, while this straightforward universal principle (DSTU1) is incorrect, the developmental stages thesis (DST) can be worked up, albeit schematically, into a universal principle which is correct:

> **DSTU2**: As they develop economically, all countries pass through sequence *S1*, *S2*, *S3*, … or *S*n of successive developmental stages, depending on whether they occupy position *P1*, *P2*, *P3*, … or *P*n in the global economic system

This more sophisticated universal principle (DSTU2) can be true, even if we do not yet know all the possible sequences of developmental stages and all the possible positions in the global economic system—or, indeed, all the different shapes that global economic system could take.

Grosfoguel and Quijano argue not only that the free trade thesis and the developmental stages thesis in their straightforwardly universalised versions (FTTU1, DSTU1) are false, but also that they are Eurocentric. Under the heading 'Eurocentrism' they identify three kinds of bias, which are worth separating out. In the first place, the two theses about national development exhibit *sample bias*. They are, in Grosfoguel's words, 'an attempt to produce a universal theory from the experience […] of the core of the world economy' (2000: 359). What was observed in the case of industrialised West European national economies has simply been asserted of all other national economies, regardless of their level of industrialisation or position in the global economy. The problem here is that the theses were arrived at by a faulty inductive inference from a small, unrepresentative sample.

In the second place, they exhibit *prediction bias*. On the basis of the two theses about national development, Grosfoguel and Quijano believe, true predictions can be made about industrialised West European countries, but not about most of the rest of the world. Quijano writes that when people from Latin American societies 'look in our Eurocentric mirror, the image that we see is […] partial and distorted' (2000a: 556). The sample bias active in the process of formulating the two theses has generated an end product which is reliable in its predictions about national economies relevantly similar to those in the sample, but otherwise highly unreliable.

In the third place, the two theses exhibit *interest bias*. Whether they were arrived at through an innocent mistake or not, once they had been formulated it was generally in the interests of industrialised West European societies that people worldwide should believe the free trade thesis and the developmental stages thesis in their straightforwardly universalised versions (FTTU1, DSTU1). Argentina's nineteenth-century economic nationalists recognised that if all countries believed and acted on the free trade thesis, this would make 'a country that does not possess [England's level of] industry a tributary country' (Grosfoguel, 2000: 352). Similarly, a century later the *dependistas* observed that accepting the developmental stages thesis could be disadvantageous to Latin American countries, as it could lead societal actors to think certain events—such as a bourgeois-led revolution—were inevitable, when they were not (Quijano, 2000a: 571).

Aníbal Quijano is best known in the field of world-systems analysis for his articulation of the concept *coloniality*. The phenomenon of 'coloniality', or 'coloniality of power', involves (i) 'the codification of the differences between conquerors and conquered in the idea of "race," a supposedly different biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to the others' (Quijano, 2000a: 533). Coloniality thus involves pervasive acceptance as common sense of a third general statement, which we can call the *race hierarchy thesis*:

> **RHT**: The human species is biologically divided into races which differ significantly in their abilities and constitute a natural hierarchy of human beings

But coloniality is not only a matter of beliefs or assumptions in people's heads. It also involves (ii) a systematic division of forms of labour, both within nations and internationally, on the basis of this putative race hierarchy (Quijano, 2000a: 536). It was, Quijano argues, widespread acceptance of the race hierarchy thesis as a basis for labour control which made societally possible the co-existence of free

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and compulsory forms of labour throughout most of the modern period: ‘each form of labor control was associated with a particular race’ (2000a: 537). In the Americas, slave labour came to be assigned to ‘the “black” population brought from Africa’, ‘serfdom’ was largely reserved for the indigenous ‘American Indians’, and ‘paid labor was the whites’ privilege’ (op. cit.: 538–39).

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Unlike the free trade thesis and the developmental stages thesis, the race hierarchy thesis (RHT) is true of no one and of nowhere. ‘The idea of race is literally an invention,’ Quijano affirms; ‘[i]t has nothing to do with the biological structure of the human species’ (Quijano, 2000a: 575n6). If Latin America is an exception to RHT, so is every other region of the world. Therefore, RHT cannot be Eurocentric either in the sense that it exhibits sample bias or in the sense that it exhibits prediction bias. It is true of no sample, has no predictive accuracy, can form the basis of no universal principle. Yet RHT can be, and *is*, Eurocentric in the sense that it exhibits interest bias. Pervasive belief in a hierarchy of so-called races which ascribes the greatest abilities to white people evidently could contribute to entrenching Europeans’ power and privilege. According to Quijano, it was one of the key factors which cemented West Europe’s position as the core of the modern world-system (2000a: 541).

What distinguishes Quijano, Grosfoguel and other decoloniality theorists from the mainstream of dependency theory and world-systems analysis is their emphatic insistence that *economic* ‘delinking’ [8]—whether by individual countries or by the Global South *en bloc*—is not sufficient, and is not even the primary thing needful, to overcome a peripheral position in the global economy. What is required is, in Quijano’s words, ‘[f]irst of all, epistemological decolonization, as decoloniality’ (2007: 177). The first step of a country in the global periphery should be to jettison those false ideas about national development which systematically work to the advantage of the countries of the core and to the disadvantage of countries in the Global South.

In the main, the works by Quijano and Grosfoguel discussed in this section, which inaugurated decoloniality theory, exemplify intellectual decolonisation in the broad sense which I specified at the outset. They are chiefly concerned to root out pervasive false beliefs—about trade, industrialisation or human biology—which not only arose due to a bias in favour of Europe and the West, but also contribute to entrenching European and Western wealth and dominance. The task of the next section will be to describe the process whereby decoloniality theory acquired the narrower and more metaphysical character which sets it apart today.

Hyperphilosophism

By *hyperphilosophism* I mean a faulty, unjustified inference from an empirical fact (a contingent truth, discovered by observation, about the world we live in) to a metaphysical theory (a general philosophical view about the fundamental structure of reality). Hyperphilosophism includes, by extension, unjustifiably attributing to somebody belief in a metaphysical theory on the basis that they believe some empirical fact. Let me begin with two examples

to make clear the sort of faulty inference I have in mind.

I am under the impression that, years ago, you and I heard Günter Wand conduct Bruckner in Hamburg. You prove to me that we did not. Now convinced that this never happened, I draw a further conclusion: that the past does not exist. Here, the empirical fact—that we never heard Wand conduct Bruckner in Hamburg—provides no motivation whatsoever for my conclusion about the nature of time. The past could perfectly well exist without this particular event having occurred. After all, other things might have happened, and a real, existent past might be constituted by them.

You assert that there is no such person as Prester John. I infer that you are a solipsist—that you believe you are the only person and centre of consciousness there is. Once again, my conclusion is radically undermotivated. You believe that there is no self which is Prester John's. That does not mean you think there are no selves apart from yourself. You may well think selves exist which are neither you nor Prester John: myself, for instance.

In one respect, the flaw in the inferences above is the same as that in the Eurocentric inferences Grosfoguel and Quijano exposed and critiqued [9]; in each case, the scope of the conclusion is unwarranted by the sample which forms the basis for the inference. But the examples above are more extreme. They are inferences not just to universal-scope principles in an empirical discipline, but to something in a different register: metaphysical claims about the fundamental structure of reality (such as time and consciousness)—claims of a kind which empirical observation and inductive argument alone would normally be insufficient to justify.

In the remainder of this section, I argue that two important components of contemporary decoloniality theory have been arrived at via inferences of this hyperphilosophising form. Hyperphilosophism, I believe, explains (at least in part) how decoloniality theory evolved from being an instance of intellectual decolonisation in the broad, truth-oriented sense I specified at the outset to being the narrower, metaphysically contentious body of theory it is today.

Time

Some versions of the developmental stages thesis (DST) have been invoked as a convenient rationalisation for colonialism, 'trusteeship', or other relations of political domination. If every society, 'race' or people must pass through one fixed sequence of developmental stages—each stage representing an improvement, a broadening and deepening of capacities, including economic capacities—then countries which consider themselves further along in this fixed sequence might claim the right, even the obligation, to step in and help less developed societies, 'races' or peoples progress to the next stage. 'Denial of coevalness' is the label Aníbal Quijano, following the German anthropologist Johannes Fabian, gives to the stance people from Europe or North America adopt when they regard people in Africa, Asia or South America as belonging to societies in an earlier and inferior stage of development, one which their own society passed through centuries ago.

There is an innocent ambiguity in the phrase 'denial of coevalness', which both Fabian and Quijano sometimes exploit, perhaps mainly for rhetorical purposes. When Fabian writes of anthropologists' '*tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse*' [10] (1983: 31), and when Quijano writes that 'the Europeans [...] relocated the colonized population, along with their [...] cultures, in the past of a historical trajectory whose culmination was Europe' (2000a: 541), they do not, of course, mean that anthropologists or Europeans literally viewed the people they were interacting with as living in the distant past, such that no encounter with them was possible except by time travel. They viewed them as belonging to societies *of* a different developmental age, not *in* a different age of the universe. The relevant kind of *denial of coevalness* is similar to a 12-year-old's denial that his 5-year-old brother is the same age as him (and his consequent insistence that he hold his hand when they cross the road).

However, the Argentinian decoloniality theorist Walter Mignolo has seized on this ambiguity and run with it. Mignolo dedicates a chapter of his book *The Darker*

Side of Western Modernity (2011) to the topic of time. After introducing the modernisation theorists' version of DSTU1, and attributing to Fabian the view that time itself is 'a conceptual and colonizing strategy' (2011: 151–52), Mignolo makes several ambitious claims. At his boldest, he is willing to assert that it was not until 'the sixteenth century' that the 'distinction between space and time emerged' (op. cit.: 163), that '"space and time" [...] were inventions of Western imperial modernity' (176–77), and that in the 'Western discourse on time [...], events are ordered one after another' (169). In these passages, not only are the colonisers credited with inventing time, but their denial of coevalness to the colonised is transfigured into an exotic metaphysical thesis: the denial of the very possibility of simultaneity, the view that events occur only ever in single file. Mignolo is clearly tempted by what would be the ultimate hyperphilosophising reading of Fabian's phrase.

In his more cautious moments, Mignolo is willing to concede that indigenous Americans had a concept of time long before the sixteenth century, albeit one different from that of Westerners: he contrasts 'Christian and Andean time' (2011: 169). He claims that 'the Spaniards managed to impose their concept of time' (156), effecting a 'colonization of time' (178). Describing the concept of time that they imposed, he calls it 'the linear concept of time' (154) and specifies that according to this concept, 'there is only one line of time' (162) which has a definite 'point of arrival' (164). If you adopt this concept of time, says Mignolo, 'you may end up believing that you are behind in time' and 'are more likely to want to catch up with modernity' (161). But this concept of time is not the only one. Mignolo contrasts it with 'cyclical time' (159).

Though somewhat less tendentious, this is also a case of hyperphilosophism. The contrast between a vision of human history as inexorably getting better and better until it reaches a final plateau (a 'point of arrival') and a vision of human history as going through cycles of improvement and decay ('cyclical time') is not a contrast between two concepts of time, but rather a contrast between two visions of time's *contents*, which presupposes the concept of time if it is even to be articulated. The former sees the human condition at the present time *t0* as inevitably superior to the human condition at any past time *t-1* and inferior to the human condition at any future time *t1*; whereas the latter sees the human condition at the present time *t0* as inevitably roughly equivalent both to the human condition at some past time *t-1* and to the human condition at some future time *t1*. Here Mignolo's hyperphilosophism about time consists in presenting contrasting empirical views about the contents of time, and the ordering of those contents in time, as though they were two different concepts of time itself.

Universal truth

Considered as a branch of world-systems analysis, decoloniality theory's distinguishing mark is its claim that the primary determinants of peripheralization in the world-system are not economic, but epistemic—meaning, here, in the realm of ideas and beliefs. To overcome peripheralization, according to decoloniality theory, a country or region must in the first place change its ideas.

No southern African scholar has pursued this line of argument more prolifically than Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni. In his recent book *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa*, he writes that 'Eurocentric epistemology actively worked and continues to work as the primary and active enabler of planetary European hegemony' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020: 2). He goes on to claim that 'what appears on the surface as the problem of political economy and as development challenges in Africa are rooted in the epistemic domain' (op. cit.: 91). In a nutshell, '[t]he predicament of Africa is fundamentally an epistemic one: that of trying to use Eurocentric epistemology [...] and thus failing to liberate itself from classical economic and conventional thinking' (ibid.).

These conclusions chime with those of the writings by Grosfoguel and Quijano examined in the previous section. If false universal-scope principles about national development or human biology come to be prevalent assumptions which guide policymaking in countries of the Global South, belief in those principles could itself become an obstacle to prosperity and a cause of economic dependency. But in the intervening two decades, a shift in the background framework of decoloniality theory has radically altered these conclusions' emphasis and character. Though I will examine this shift mainly as it features in Ndlovu-Gatsheni's writings, the same shift is evident

in the work of Mignolo (a major influence on Ndlovu-Gatsheni) and other contemporary decoloniality theorists.

In the writings by Grosfoguel and Quijano we have already examined, their primary criticism of the general statements about national development which they critique is that they are *false*. The free trade thesis and the developmental stages thesis are not true of all, or even most, countries; the racial hierarchy thesis is not true of anywhere. By contrast, Ndlovu-Gatsheni's primary criticism of ideas such as these is that they occupy a privileged and oppressive position in a hierarchy of knowledge established when 'Euro-American hegemonic knowledge banished alternative epistemologies from Africa and other parts of the Global South to the barbarian margins of society' (2013: 4).

In Ndlovu-Gatsheni's writings, Quijano's model of the 'coloniality of power' features not only as an unjust social ordering of persons, but also as a template for understanding how 'Western epistemology' has interacted with 'African modes of knowing' (2013: 8). 'Coloniality of power,' writes Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'is closely linked with coloniality of knowledge' (op. cit.: 20). The latter 'took the form of repression of existing African beliefs, ideas, images, symbols and forms of knowledge'; '[h]aving done this, Westerners then imposed their own forms of knowledge' (ibid.).

In Ndlovu-Gatsheni's vision, there exist 'knowledges and worldviews' (2013: 21) which correlate more or less with positions in the global hierarchy created by coloniality of power. Just as Quijano holds that the coloniality of power needs to be overcome 'through a radical and global process of the democratization of society' by which all people come to be recognised as equals (2000a: 568), so Ndlovu-Gatsheni advocates 'not a total rejection of Euro-American knowledge but a democratization of this hegemonic knowledge so that it recognizes other knowledges from the ex-colonized world as equally important and relevant' (2013: 60).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni's application of political concepts like equality, domination and democracy, not to persons or groups, but to 'knowledges and worldviews' immediately raises some concerns. First, it is problematic to label as *Euro-American* the ideas about political economy and human biology which, in Ndlovu-Gatsheni's writings as much as in those of Quijano and Grosfoguel, are the paradigm cases of ideas belief in which keeps the Global South dependent. If some Europeans and Americans have thought free trade a universal good, others have advocated protection, and governments have frequently acted on their recommendation [11]. The Marxist theory of history has probably been repudiated more than it has been accepted in Europe and North America. And many fierce critics of the concept of race have been European or North American. Quijano and Grosfoguel's critique of these ideas as *Eurocentric* is precise and reasonably plausible; it makes specific claims about the methodological origins and predictive power of these ideas, and about the effects of pervasive belief in them. By contrast, Ndlovu-Gatsheni's characterisation of these ideas as *Euro-American*, implying that they in some sense belong to or are characteristic of a region, is loose and, given any more precise cast, looks likely to be incorrect.

Second, ideas or beliefs do, in one familiar way, form a hierarchy: they are not all equal. Some are true, or at least supported by the available evidence; others are false, or at least not supported by the available evidence. If I base relevant life decisions on the belief that smoking increases my risk of cancer, because that is what the available evidence indicates, I ought not to be condemned for dismissing the alternative belief, disconfirmed by the available evidence, that smoking decreases my risk of cancer. On the contrary, I am giving these two beliefs just the treatment they deserve. In his writings on the coloniality of power from two decades ago, Quijano adopts exactly this approach to the race hierarchy thesis (RHT), coloniality's ideological strut: it is 'a mental construction' (2000a: 533), 'literally an invention' (575n6), a false belief that needs to be overcome. Likewise, the straightforwardly universalised version of the developmental stages thesis (DSTU1) is, in view of the Latin American exceptions to it, 'wrong' (Quijano, 2000b: 218). Both are beliefs that deserve to be set aside and replaced with others which better reflect the way the world is.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, determined to treat any ranking of beliefs as objectionable in just the same way as an invented race hierarchy, adopts the position that 'all human beings were born into valid and legitimate knowledge systems' (2020: 154). 'The ultimate goal,'

he consequently affirms, 'is to put all onto-epistemic traditions in a non-dominant and equal position' (op. cit.: 150). But if all theoretical approaches or sets of assumptions are to be treated as equals, principles like RHT, FTTU1 and DSTU1 can no longer be dismissed for being false or evidentially unjustified, as they were by Quijano and Grosfoguel. Accordingly, Ndlovu-Gatsheni makes a quite different complaint about them: they are instances of 'universalizing Western particularism' (2013: 38) [12]. In Ndlovu-Gatsheni's eyes, principles like RHT, FTTU1 and DSTU1 are 'Western particularistic ideas' (op. cit.: 12), meaning that their truth or validity is relativized to a particular context or culture—the West. While Quijano and Grosfoguel hold that some particular empirical principles, RHT, FTTU1 and DSTU1, are not true of anywhere, Ndlovu-Gatsheni's line of attack is of a different stripe. He asserts that principles and beliefs are, across the board, not the kinds of thing which can be true everywhere (relative to all contexts or cultures).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni's move is a hyperphilosophising one. Quijano and Grosfoguel argued, using the method of counterexample, that certain empirical theses in political economy and biology are false—false no matter where they are uttered or by whom. However, as we saw in the previous section, their explanations of why these theses are false in two cases provide the basis for a repair: one that delivers revised empirical theses which stand a chance of being true—true no matter where they are uttered or by whom. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, taking the same flaws in the same theses as his starting point, leaps to a conclusion of a quite different order: that there is no universal truth, that the error is to think that *any* thesis could be other than 'particularistic'—true or valid only relative to a particular culture or context of utterance [13]. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's embrace of this metaphysical conclusion, and his celebration of a 'harmonious pluriversal' alternative (2020: 65), are drastically undermotivated by the counterexamples to empirical theses which are his—as they are Grosfoguel and Quijano's—point of departure.

What is the meaning of 'where'?

The transfiguration of central claims in decoloniality theory from empirically grounded criticisms of social-scientific theses into a metaphysical denial of the possibility of universal truth, which we followed in Ndlovu-Gatsheni's writings [14], is by no means unique to him. Grosfoguel's thinking has moved in the same direction. Like Ndlovu-Gatsheni, he now claims that accompanying the coloniality of power is 'an epistemic hierarchy that privileges Western knowledge and cosmology' (Grosfoguel, 2007: 217), and criticises the latter for 'hid[ing] its local and particular perspective under an abstract universalism' (214). Mignolo, a strong influence on Ndlovu-Gatsheni, also believes decoloniality theory should 'dispel the myth of universality' and embrace the 'pluriversal' alternative (2011: xv–xvi). The slogan 'I am where I think' is Mignolo's label for a 'basic epistemic principle that legitimizes all ways of thinking and de-legitimizes the pretense of a singular and particular epistemology, geo-historical and bio-graphically located, to be universal' (op. cit.: 81). But the slogan 'I am where I think' immediately raises the question of what Mignolo means by 'where'. More to the point, all contemporary decoloniality theorists owe us an answer to the following question: To what sorts of location or context of utterance does decoloniality theory say the truth or validity of propositions is to be relativized?

Two answers to this question can be found in the work of contemporary decoloniality theorists, both of which face difficulties, and neither of which sits easily alongside the other. In closing, I will briefly explore both.

The first answer to be found is that the salient context of utterance is one's 'epistemic location in the

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structures of colonial power/knowledge' (Grosfoguel, 2007: 213). According to this answer, 'where' would mean one's position in the imposed race hierarchy and the corresponding hierarchy of 'worldviews' or 'knowledges' which decoloniality theorists believe structure the contemporary world. Mignolo writes that there is 'a kind of subjectivity emerging from the lived experience of white and Christian males' (2011: 111), which he contrasts with the kinds of subjectivity emerging in those who occupy other positions in the colonial hierarchy. Discussing the work of the Indian political scientist Partha Chatterjee, Mignolo writes that 'what Foucault did not have was the colonial experience and political interest propelled by the colonial wound that allowed Chatterjee to "feel" and "see" beyond both Kant and Foucault' (2011: 133). Similarly, Grosfoguel asserts that 'if we move the locus of enunciation from the European man to an Indigenous women [sic] in the Americas', the result will be 'radical critique' (2007: 215–16).

The idea that people on the receiving end of oppression have the greatest insight into a society's true character is a coherent one. But it sits in some tension with decoloniality theorists' relativism—their repeated assertions that there is no truth except 'particularistic' truth, truth 'in parenthesis' [15], 'pluriversal' truth. For, in the passages quoted above, Grosfoguel and Mignolo's contention appears to be that those on the receiving end of colonial oppression have greater insight into what is true of the world-system *for all of us*.

Quite apart from its tension with relativism, this contention generates some complications of its own. Mignolo, a professor at Duke University, admits that he is writing his book 'at my house in North Carolina' (2011: 93), where presumably he is taken to be racially 'white'. Is Mignolo not, by his own lights, on the wrong end of the relevant hierarchies to have the necessary insight into coloniality? The same question can be asked of other decoloniality theorists. The obverse problem also arises: some people in the right hierarchical position have the wrong views. Or, as Grosfoguel puts it, '[t]he fact that one is socially located in the oppressed side of power relations, does not automatically mean that he/she is epistemically thinking from a subaltern epistemic location' (2007: 213). Mignolo and Grosfoguel owe us a statement of the conditions under which views of people in the right social position cannot be trusted (and those under which views of people in the wrong social position *can* be trusted). This had better not be: *when they agree with decoloniality theory*!

If there is 'an epistemic hierarchy that privileges Western knowledge and cosmology over non-Western knowledge and cosmologies' (Grosfoguel, 2007: 217), then there must be several different identifiable human systems of belief or 'cosmologies'. These systems of belief—what Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls 'knowledges and worldviews' (2013: 21)—provide a second possible answer to the question at the head of this section. This answer says that the context of utterance for assessing the validity of a belief or assertion is the system of belief within which it is situated. Examples of such systems include the 'Western' (Grosfoguel, 2007: 217) or 'Euro-American' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 60), the 'Andean' (Mignolo, 2011: 169), and the 'African' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 20). Theories which relativize truth to cultures or belief systems face many problems. Here I will mention only one central problem, which concerns the status of a relativist's own theory.

If the truth of propositions is to be relativized to regional or cultural contexts of utterance, what does this mean for decoloniality theory itself? Unlike some varieties of postcolonialism and postmodernism [16], decoloniality theory cannot dispense with grand narratives. Its signature claim, after all, is that a 'colonial matrix of power' exists worldwide, has endured for centuries, and affects all our lives. Mignolo is the decoloniality theorist most conscious of this reflexivity problem. In response to it, he restricts the ambition of his theorising with a concession which is perhaps greater than he realises. Mignolo tells his readers he is putting forward his decoloniality theory not as '*the* option', but as 'just an option' (2011: 21). He does not wish to argue for decoloniality theory over other theories, because '[t]o argue for one or the other [...] would be a modern/colonial way of framing the issue' (xxvii). Mignolo cannot consistently allow himself any more ambitious conclusion, given his view that 'there is no reason (other than epistemic racism) to believe that, among all forms of creative thinking [...], one mode of being where one thinks is better or preferable to the other' (101).

I have argued that decoloniality theory took on

the shape it has today via a series of drastically undermotivated inferences from empirical propositions to contentious philosophical conclusions. Quijano and Grosfoguel's initial critique of Eurocentrism in social science advances intellectual decolonisation in the broad, truth-oriented sense: it aims to strip away false theoretical conclusions which are the result of bias. By contrast, contemporary decoloniality theory is wedded to a set of controversial metaphysical claims, including rejection of the very idea of universal truth. In this final section, I have argued that, quite apart from being radically undermotivated, decoloniality theory's relativism is hard to reconcile with its grand narrative about the colonial matrix of power, and tends to undermine decoloniality theorists' ability to claim that their own theory is correct. If, as Mignolo insists, decoloniality theory is 'just an option', I hope I have made the case that it is an option we should decline [17].

Notes

[1] See, for example, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986.
[2] In this paragraph and the two following, I draw on Hull, 2019a. For a fuller discussion of different approaches to the decolonisation of philosophy, see Hull, 2019b: 6–11.
[3] Wiredu's 'conceptual decolonisation' agenda is not uncontested. Sanya Osha (2005) believes it does not go far enough, while Bernhard Weiss (2019: 235–39) doubts that Wiredu's case studies take him as far as he thinks they do.
[4] The 'Curriculum Change Framework' is available at http://www.news.uct.ac.za/images/userfiles/downloads/reports/ccwg/UCT-Curriculum-Change-Framework.pdf. Quotations are from p. 18 and p. 30.
[5] Quijano co-authored an article with the doyen of world-systems analysis, Immanuel Wallerstein (1992), which prefigures some themes of his subsequent writings in decoloniality theory.
[6] See also Mignolo, 2011: 57–58.
[7] See Levi-Faur, 1997.
[8] For a discussion of this concept in the context of political economy, see Amin, 1990.
[9] See previous section.
[10] Emphasis in original.
[11] See Levi-Faur, 1997.
[12] Mignolo likewise deplores 'the universalization of Western nativism/localism' (2011: 330).
[13] See, for example, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020: 94–95, where he slides between endorsement of Samir Amin's view that some putatively universal economic laws are not true of all social and economic systems, and advocacy of the view that the validity of economic statements is relative to cultural structures, without noting the significant difference between the two.
[14] See previous section.
[15] 'Truth in parenthesis' is Mignolo's label for truth or validity which is restricted to a particular context of utterance (see, for example, Mignolo, 2011: 44).
[16] See, for example, Lyotard, 1984.
[17] Most elements of this critique of decoloniality theory were first explored and discussed in meetings of the Beyond Decoloniality Reading Group, Observatory, Cape Town. I am indebted to Kavish Chetty and Gabriele Teale-James for their hospitality and intellectual companionship. I also profited from discussion with participants from Brazil and South Africa in the UCT-Pernambuco joint online workshop entitled 'Intellectual Decolonization: Critical Perspectives' (9 September 2021), at which I presented some of this material. Finally, I am grateful to Veeran Naicker and Anye Nyamnjoh for written comments on a draft.

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