
DECOLONIAL, POST-COLONIAL, POST-APARTHEID - Reflections on some dilemmas of Self-Determination

By Ari Sitas

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The waves of student protest in South Africa in 2015 – 2016 reflect the failure of an ANC government to deconstruct the country’s deeply embedded colonial legacy, both in ideas and in its myriad practical manifestations. The writer uncovers the effects of layers of colonial hegemony from its early onset to the present and offers some direction for government and university administrations and faculty to create new pathways for inclusive development.

The new whispers about “decolonisation or the decolonial” had started in earnest in 2011. When Prof Sarah Mosoetsa and I were tasked by the Minister of Higher Education to create a Charter for the Future of the Humanities and the Social Sciences, we spent inordinate hours speaking to all



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concerned from professors to students. We tried to listen attentively to a rising black student discord especially at Wits, UCT and Rhodes.

Whereas at most Universities (UKZN included) the students’ main preoccupation was the link between Humanities and the Social Science curricula and employability, the murmurings were clear: something had to be done about the curriculum’s and indeed the system’s Eurocentrism. This was accentuated by US-trained black academics who had experienced the

overlay between Race and its manifold tensions in their studies.

The focus obviously had to shift away from defending the “integrity of the Humanities and the Social Sciences” and concentrate on what KIND of education was appropriate for a post-Apartheid education system. So far, most of the arguments about the defence of such subjects of inquiry could have been written in Switzerland as the Humanities were under attack everywhere. We pursued this in the Charter as politely as possible. Even if we stated the challenge politely, we received a hostile reaction from the press. Chumani Maxwele was not so polite: in 2015 he decorated Cecil John Rhodes with bucket loads of human excrement. The rest, as we all usually say, is history.

The fact that a black student in 2016 can still feel like a pariah in any institutional space in a country that should be hers should raise some alarm. Sol Platjie felt so in 1913. The year now is 2017. Has so little changed? Is it a telling criticism of our failures since 1994? Was all this emphasis on the market, on entrepreneurship, on qualifications frameworks, on science and technology, a huge mistake? Why is she arguing for decolonisation, what



Amílcar Cabral

does she mean when she speaks of the “decolonial” or “decoloniality”?

Although her call for decolonisation might sound vague, ill-defined and random, the solutions she demands cannot be ignored. By contrast, the more scientific and historical we get about the concept of decolonisation, the vaguer it gets! Let me explain.

The modern world system was brought about through European foraging, settlement and colonialism. It was a cruel and violent process: there were people who were deemed to be surplus and exterminable; there were people who were deemed to be enslave-able; indenture-able and, like chattel, transportable; there were colonial subjects and there were unwanted people who were excludable. Each category of racial and/or national derogation brought forth its own narratives of resistance.

In Africa, once foraging and partial settlement turned to colonisation by the late 19th century, and European powers sat in Berlin and cut up the continent into colonial possessions, what was meant by decolonisation took on a specific turn. 1885 did not only demarcate colonial borders but opened the continent for the scramble of its resources and, in the process, tore each new entity away from the other, permanently damaging its internal coherence and connectedness. It proceeded to define the “native” and imposed or strengthened external rule.

This much is known and understood in all elements of the South African liberation movement: Decolonisation = Self-Determination.

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Once people rejected colonial reality and its mythologies and, in the case of South Africa for example, rejected the term “Native,” which defined them as the racialized Other, they delved into an exploration of how to move from Other to Self! The first qualitative leap was the assertion of an African belonging; it was not just a wistful change in name to go from a Native to an African National Congress (or for that matter to an African People’s Organisation).

What kind of colonial society; what kind of racial domination; the differences between thickly-settled societies and colonially administered ones; whether South Africa was a colonialism of a special type; whether racial domination and colonial forms of managerialism were necessary for capital; whether any race had the

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monopoly over the right to exploit others. Seeking consensus around these issues has shifted over the years and so has the meaning of self-determination. Furthermore, the meanings of Africanity - who was an African and who was not, what were the overlays between Black and African, what about the status of Coloured and Indian people - have animated the landscape of thinking and struggle.

The difficulty of pinning down a precise meaning for decolonisation was compounded by the variety of independence movements on the African continent: Nkrumah’s Pan Africanism was not exactly the same as Haile Selassie’s; Sekou Toure’s version was not Mobutu’s; Cabral’s and Nyerere’s was not Azikiwe’s or Senghor’s or Kenyatta’s. All of them would have agreed on the withdrawal of the colonial powers from their geographic spaces and insisted on a variety of ways of re-affirming African values and making them a guiding



President Julius Nyerere

principle of governance.

Even before the effervescence of the first decade of independence fizzled out, criticisms mounted that political Uhuru did not achieve “decolonisation” as African economies were seen to be locked into “Neo-colonial” relations with their erstwhile European rulers. Such criticisms extended to the cultural and intellectual realm, where mimicry >>

of Europe galloped ahead of what people thought was the necessary “decolonisation of the mind”.

The continuity of white rule in South Africa from the period of Segregation to Apartheid created new challenges and debates. The ANC and its Alliance partners would not agree with the PAC; neither of them would agree with the adherents of the Black Consciousness Movement or with the followers of the Non-European Unity Movement about the precise meaning of what self-determination, decolonisation or post-Apartheid might mean. The ANC was neither right nor wrong in this debate, but it held sway over the other movements.

By this I mean that the ANC became hegemonic and its key ideas gained traction, so much so that between 1980-2010, the Congress enjoyed the centrality of any platform or debate. We can say that at its worst it was trapped in a peculiar tautology: its practices and policies were sound and popular because they were based on a correct theory and its theory was correct because it was popular and sound. The National Democratic Revolution = Self-Determination = Decolonisation. Within this it could contain Mandela’s juridical republicanism, non-racialism, black majority rule, trans-ethnic unity or Mbeki’s “two-nations thesis”, the African Renaissance and even a range of Marxist ideas.

The problem with any negotiated settlement after a prolonged conflict is that negotiators are faced with the irreconcilable narratives of national adversaries. Any third space that was available, such as the joint recognition that the past was regrettable or that the spirit of reconciliation and a substantive restitution would be possible, would always be vulnerable, unless the consequences that followed were seen to be a success. There would always be a great difficulty in defining a common “we.” In the end the ANC managed to survive the transition



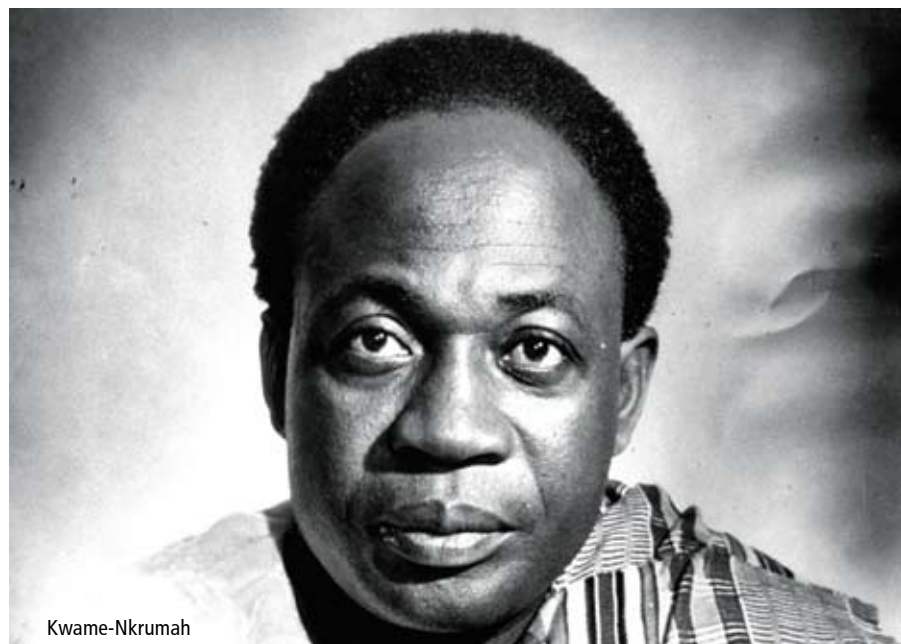
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on what I called the four pillars of a grand compromise: the land question, the modernity vs tradition question, the conflict-resolution question and the promise to the masses for a reconstruction and development programme.

The first pillar was about considering land claims and restitution after 1910, which would lay to rest prior land dispossession during colonisation; the second, that the

amakhosi would have their authority enshrined in the constitution and so would the customary rule of areas in the old homelands; the third, through institutions like NEDLAC, government, capital and labour would create a system of cooperative policy formulation; lastly, that basic needs and upliftment of the majority would be prioritised and inequality redressed. It is the erosion and unravelling of these pillars that created and continues to create the turbulence of the contemporary period. To put it bluntly: the equation between the National Democratic Revolution, Self-Determination and Decolonisation is seen by many as not holding anymore.

The language of decolonisation re-emerged through the student movement (although Irwin Jim of NUMSA started referring to “colonial white monopoly capital” since 2013). Through our National Institute workshops with senior students it became evident that it has new dimensions: it draws heavily from African-American, Post-Colonial and Fanonist sources while at the same time circling and returning to the writings of Steve Biko. In South Africa,



Kwame-Nkrumah

as in the USA, it has been argued that black lives do not matter. Rather, the government is seen as tilting towards protecting white privilege. Such privilege is reinforced through the Education system, its Eurocentric bias and its kinship to the Colonial system; and as in Fanon's invective about the "native bourgeoisie" in the "Pitfalls of National Consciousness", it has become a servant of white monopoly capital/neo-liberalism or the corrupt black networks linked to state capture.

Given the USA Academy's prominence, arguments may shift from an extreme black vs white Manicheism where Race trumps Class and Gender to arguments about intersectionality, where race, class, gender and sexuality are always in a co-influential relationship. They shift towards a valorisation of the Nobkhubulwane Institute's maiden initiation and reed rituals in KwaZulu Natal or to a post-colonial Afro-Feminism.

In short, the voices in the ferment demanded that not only Cecil John Rhodes Must Fall but all Cecil John Clones must fall and all black servants of their enduring power must fall so that a free, socialist and "decolonial" system may emerge. Period.

Added to that are of late the indigenista arguments of Latin

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Haile Selassie

American thinkers: they are about the enduring "coloniality of power" and the necessity of the "decolonial". For these thinkers, coloniality is deeper than governance as it is embedded in a "civilizational magma" whose sources are not just the conquerors but monotheistic religions: they supplanted the original empathetic relationship to nature of the indigene with a biblical and divinely sanctioned subordination of all flora and fauna to human servitude. Capitalism and instrumentalism are mere extensions of that civilizational precept. The strands of a reconstituted real or imagined African spirituality on the ascendance these days, draws freely from such sources which it combines with a sharp criticism of Missionaries in Africa.

It is obvious that self-determination and what we all understand by it needs re-visiting. The students' movement may be losing its coherence and unity, but this is not a reason to duck the issue.

There is very little one can add in a piece like this save to say that there has to be a political will supported by movements to exorcise the curse of Berlin, out of its historical blockages, dependencies, indebtedness and internal incoherence. To cut the puppet strings held by the Washington Consensus and create new African Pathways and strategies of inclusive growth. It is only through such a bold step that it can link with the new waves

of development that might for the first time benefit the continent.

Secondly, there has to be honest and frank discussion at the universities between academics, students and administrations to find ways of dealing with three dimensions of pressure: an absolutist one that insists that everything - architecture, rooms, labs, designs, rules, regulations, the functioning of the university in its entirety (let alone the curriculum) - is non-indigenous; the syncretic, which urges re-defining usage to suit an emerging African consciousness; the

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representational: keep the buildings but change the managers, caretakers and janitors.

Thirdly, and this is closer to the mandate of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Science, we need to harness our intellectual energies for genuine knowledge projects: enhance the catalytic areas of research so there is scholarship about the pre-colonial past, create heritage hubs and turn them into knowledge projects of note, catalogue the traditions that were practised despite Apartheid (you will be surprised what exists there!) and make explicit their sources of creativity. Finally, work hard on alternatives to the present economic, social, political and cultural impasse.

Self-determination is not a formula, it is a long process from Otherness and Alterity to Self. [NA](#)