DECOLONIZE!
WHAT DOES IT MEAN?
CALLS TO DECOLONIZE education, development, and aid abound. Advocates of these calls argue that the struggles to realize equitable and just futures requires undoing the colonial legacies embedded within today’s economic, political, cultural, and knowledge systems. Decolonial theory, which many present-day calls to decolonize draw on, argues that the economic, political, cultural, and epistemic violence of colonialism has entrenched systems of racism, patriarchy, and economic extraction globally. These systems, it argues, upholds and reproduce present-day inequalities. As such, decolonial processes are necessary to tackle local and global inequalities.

This document introduces the key concepts of decolonial theory that inform many current calls to decolonize. It provides examples from Latin America, Africa, and North America of how activists have envisioned or realized decolonial futures. These movements led by Indigenous Peoples, people of color, women, and queer people articulate and define the possibilities of decolonial futures. Since decolonial theory suggests multiple futures and not one single solution, this document does not address what decolonizing particular systems, such as international development, should look like. Rather, the document aims to introduce the reader to the tools of analysis that decolonial theory offers, give examples of decolonial theory in practice, and discuss some potential shortfalls of the decolonial framework.

KEY CONCEPTS IN DECOLONIAL THEORY

COLONIALITY
Decolonial theory distinguishes between coloniality and colonialism. It argues that colonial relations continue to shape and ground our present-day political, economic, social, and knowledge systems; this is termed “coloniality.”

Colonialism, in contrast refers to the historical process in which European and western powers exerted territorial, political, social, and cultural power over non-western territories between, roughly, the 15th and mid-20th centuries. Although non-western colonization exists, decolonial theory focuses on European and western expansion and its relations to the development of capitalism.

For example, western private property relations, which first emerged in the United Kingdom, are now central to modern society and capitalism. They were instituted, often violently, across the globe through colonialism. In this way western private property relations are a form of coloniality; a decolonial intervention would imply instituting alternative property relations (e.g., collective or community ownership) that break from colonial private property relations to create more equitable ones.

REFLEXIVITY
Coloniality has been internalized by individuals, including, in some cases, those who were formerly colonized. Thus, coloniality exists at both the societal and individual level.

EPISTEMIC RECONSTITUTION
Colonialism entailed not just territorial, economic, and political violence but also epistemic and cultural violence. That is, colonialism erased or diminished longstanding Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. Thus, decoloniality entails epistemic reconstitution and reparations: drawing on and centering alternative knowledge systems to reimagine the categories of thought and knowledge that underpin our social, economic, and political structures.

For example, Nigerian scholar Oyeronke Oyewumi’s research uncovers how gender has been understood in distinctly different ways across societies. She argues that for the Oyo-Yoruba in western Nigeria during the pre-colonial period, the construct of gender was not determined by bodily attributes in the way it is in European cultures. Women’s social positions in power structures were not shaped by social narratives about their bodily attributes. She argues that for the Oyo-Yoruba, seniority, ascribed to age as well as kinship ties, was the basis for designating social positions, irrespective of gender. Colonialism introduced and entrenched a wholly different understanding of the concept of gender in Oyo-Yoruba society.
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A blackboard in Akatakyieso, Ghana, shows economic information. Ghana is a former British colony that became independent in 1957, and Akatakyieso is in an area severely affected by massive gold mines, which displace local farmers and affect forests and water resources. Many mining projects in former colonies like Ghana funnel profits to foreign-owned companies at the expense of local communities, a form of neocolonialism. Jeff Deutsch / Oxfam America

DECOLONIAL THEORY IN PRACTICE

Decolonial theory offers a framework of tools and processes to realize decolonial futures. The first tool is the analytical lens of coloniality to examine the ways in which colonialism continues to shape modern political, economic, cultural, social, and knowledge systems. Second, is the call to de-link from coloniality. Doing so means naming and continually unlearning, reimagining, and reshaping the structures, norms, and values that emerged from western colonialism and continue to shape present-day economies, societies, and cultures. De-linking from coloniality occurs both at the societal and individual level; it requires individuals to interrogate the ways in which they may be reproducing systems of coloniality in daily life. Third, decolonial theory advocates for individuals and institutions to center and cede power to the knowledge, voices, and experiences of people marginalized by colonialism and coloniality.

What exactly the different present-day calls to decolonize entail is a source of debate and tension. Calls to decolonize run the gamut from radical restructuring to more reformist approaches. For decolonial theorists, calls to decolonize should radically undo coloniality to create material changes. They must also be rooted in local histories and dynamics.

Indigenous movements from South and Central America broadly grouped under “buen vivir” (collective wellbeing), or “sumak kawsay” in Quechua, are an example of decolonial theory in practice. In radically reimagining concepts such as “development” by drawing on alternative knowledge systems, buen vivir movements capture what it means to engage in epistemic reconstitution and reparations. The philosophy and practice of buen vivir draw from Indigenous, pre-Columbian systems of collectivity to critique capitalism and to provide an alternate vision of collective wellbeing, distinct from mainstream western notions of development. Ontologically, buen vivir does not think of progress in linear terms; there is no conception of linear progression from underdevelopment to “developed” (the core of mainstream western developmental theory). Rather it advocates for a way of life that centers justice for individuals within the context
of community and environmental wellbeing. For example, this has meant advocating for property relations in which individuals do not own land and land resources but are rather stewards of them and have community permission to use associated resources, breaking from colonial frameworks for private property. Another example is education: buen vivir movements have advocated for the development of education not as a mere tool to meet labor market needs but rather as one that enhances individuals’ knowledge and relationship to the world they live in. ix

The experience of institutionalizing buen vivir sheds light on the difficulties of achieving decoloniality. The philosophy and ethos of buen vivir have been politically institutionalized in Ecuador’s and Bolivia’s constitutions. In its institutionalization, the philosophy of buen vivir has intersected with feminist, ecological, and solidarity economics. x This intersection has translated to government support for social and solidarity economies, which advocate for stronger community control and non-capitalist forms of market exchange and land use. Despite some incorporation of these approaches, inequities in the distribution of power remain. In some instances, the state and private companies have coopted buen vivir and the discourse of Indigenous knowledge to push through economic initiatives that may benefit some Indigenous communities while creating ecological damage and social inequalities. xi Critics have also noted that in implementation, buen vivir principles have not necessarily transformed patriarchal systems. xii Gender inequality between women’s and men’s political participation and power within communities remains. At times, the discourse of buen vivir has been leveraged to ignore the contradictions of inequality present in Indigenous communities. xii, xiv

DECOLONIALITY, FEMINISM, ANTI-RACISM, AND ANTI-CAPITALISM

The framework of decolonial theory is inherently feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist. Decolonial theorists argue that colonialism produced and was in turn shaped by patriarchal systems, capitalism, and racist social hierarchies. As such, decolonial futures are necessarily feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist. However, feminist, anti-capitalist, and anti-racist struggles are not inherently decolonial; they are, decolonial theorists argue, only decolonial when they strive to transform coloniality. xv

For example, decolonial critics argue that feminisms (both in western and non-western contexts) that center the nation state as a site of liberation are not decolonial; decolonial feminist struggles decenter the nation state, arguing it is a product of colonialism that continues to embody colonial violence. xvi Decolonial critiques of anti-racist struggles range from the ways that anti-racist struggles may reinforce economic or state institutions that reproduce coloniality to the lack of recognition of land sovereignty for Indigenous Peoples. xvii To be decolonial, anti-capitalist struggles must ensure that anti-capitalist interventions are anti-racist and feminist while undoing colonial economic relationships. Decolonial anti-capitalist struggles may call for the redistribution of land to Indigenous Peoples, not just the transformation of market relations. The Red Nation, described below, practices and advocates one vision of a feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist decoloniality. xix

THE RED NATION

The Red Nation (TRN) is an organization of Indigenous activists based in the United States that identifies as feminist, socialist, and decolonial. TRN situates their feminist and socialist principles in Indigenous knowledge and practices. TRN’s vision of decoloniality advocates for a vision of Indigenous sovereignty that breaks apart the settler-colonial institutions of the United States (police, military, etc.) rather than reproducing them. For example, TRN’s call for land repatriation to Indigenous Peoples is one that decenters private property and that enmeshes Indigenous self-determination with Black liberation to establish a “decolonized commons.” It is a vision of the “commons” that seeks self-determination for Indigenous Peoples while rejecting a nationalism that excludes others.
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DECOLONIZATION WITHOUT DECOLONIALITY?

The decolonization of territories in Africa that began in the 1950s and continued into the 1990s is often held up by some decolonial theorists as an example of decolonization absent decoloniality. With independence, a number of African nations gained territorial independence while many, but not all, retained systems of economic growth, governance, and education developed under colonialism. At the same time, decolonial theory is also rooted in the struggles to decolonize territories in Africa. In fact, Franz Fanon, writing about colonialism and decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, underscored the adverse psychological effects of colonialism and the struggle to undo the epistemic violence of colonialism on the African continent. Ghanaian independence leader and first prime minister Kwame Nkrumah coined the term “neocolonialism” to capture the ways in which European and western powers continued to exert economic and political power over former colonies post-independence. For example, in Nigeria, two foreign companies [British Petroleum and the Royal Dutch Company] that had control over the vast majority of oil reserves in the Niger Delta pre-independence continued to do so many years after independence. Another area of continued colonial influence is in the education system. For example, the West African Senior School Certificate Examination is an exam that students residing in Anglophone West African nations have to take for university admissions. The exam was developed by the British to funnel a very small number of West Africans into colonial administrative posts. Today, the exam often privileges richer families that can ensure that their children have English language skills, deepening social inequalities. Efforts to decolonize the education systems in African countries have been underway since at least the 1970s and were the basis of significant student mobilizations in 2015 in South Africa under the banner of Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall.

The 2015 mobilizations argued that although South Africa had territorial independence, decolonizing remained an unfinished project. The two campaigns in tandem demanded that South African universities undo the colonial legacies found within the education system. Principal demands included the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes from the center of University of Cape Town, the reformation of the curricula to reflect non-western epistemologies [including the greater use of Indigenous African languages], the reforming of the institutional culture of the university, and lastly, the demand for more inclusive access to education by reducing fees. During the same period, students at nearby Stellenbosch University, historically, the intellectual home of apartheid ideology, fought and won the right to be taught in English rather than Afrikaans, the language of the apartheid system. In this way, these recent movements put forth a vision of de-linking from coloniality within the South African university education system and of the continuing work of decolonizing.

POTENTIAL SHORTFALLS OF THE DECOLONIAL FRAMEWORK

1. **Decolonizing as a buzzword.** The popularity of decolonizing discourses has meant that its more revolutionary potential is often sidelined for reformist compromises. Individuals and institutions may often graft “decolonizing” on to any number of social justice initiatives, without engaging in the radical and liberatory work necessary to undo and reimagine coloniality. Moreover, the work of defining a decolonial pathway cannot be done by those who wield power; decoloniality should not be coopted by those who currently hold power.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN DECOLONIAL, ANTCOLONIAL, AND NEOCOLONIAL

- **DECOLONIALITY** aims to de-link from our present structures of knowledge and power to create new ones.
- **ANTICOLONIAL** resists colonial structures but does not necessarily strive to create wholly new structures.
- **NEOCOLONIALISM** refers to processes by which external power in economics, politics, and culture is exercised over former colonies by other nation states or private actors. In comparison to decoloniality, neocolonialism does not address the question of epistemic reconstitution.
2. **Class matters.** Many decolonial theories and approaches do not adequately address the role that class plays in efforts to realize decolonial futures. Those who benefit from or control current economic and political systems are not just external groups, but also include domestic elites that benefit from these systems. Theories of decolonization that arose from African anti-colonial struggles highlighted the important role of class interests in being able to realize decolonial futures, a dynamic that has been sidelined in current debates.xxviii xxix

3. **Ensure that epistemic shifts also transform material inequalities.** Calls to decolonize can get mired in symbolic changes that do not transform material inequalities. Efforts to decolonize education, for example, cannot just focus on transforming curricula or the relationship between teacher and student. They have to also link these calls to addressing structural inequalities in access to education and the inequitable working conditions of Black, Brown, and Indigenous workers in the education system.xxx

4. **Learning from but not idealizing.** Some calls to decolonize may uncritically promote interventions or practices simply because they are non-western, which may reproduce other forms of historical marginalization or power hierarchies particular to those societies.

5. **Decolonizing: A western concept?** Some critics argue that decolonizing is a western concept not applicable to the "global South."xxxi However, theories of decolonization and decoloniality emerged through African anti-colonial struggles and debates about colonialism in Latin America. They are often deployed by Indigenous activists in the Americas. It is also true that the term may not resonate across all formerly colonized territories and should not be imposed upon local groups. At the same time, the term "decolonial" captures disparate movements across a number of formerly colonized territories that engage in a practice of epistemic reconstitution and reparations to address global inequality even if they do not use the terms "decolonize" or "decolonial."

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The foothills of Cayambe glacier in Ecuador reach territories used for agriculture and growing livestock. Indigenous communities based near the glacier produce corn, potatoes, barley and beans. However, the glacier’s retreat coupled with non-sustainable producing techniques has begun to affect water sources with lakes, streams and wetlands beginning to dry up. Photo by Cecilia Puebla/Oxfam, 2010
There are multiple visions of what emancipatory futures could look like and how systems that perpetuate inequalities can be transformed. The decolonial framework provides three important tools to help evaluate and envision how to start the journey towards those emancipatory futures. First, it offers a framework by which to unpack the impacts of western colonialism in current-day systems; this is termed coloniality. Second, it asks individuals and institutions to interrogate how they reproduce these systems. Included in this is an interrogation of the knowledge systems and voices that individuals and institutions draw on to understand the world and how that may be reinforcing coloniality. Third, the decolonial framework asks institutions and individuals to elevate, center, and cede power to the voices, experiences, and knowledge systems of those marginalized by colonialism and coloniality. In doing so, interventions and solutions may be better equipped to imagine the “possibilities of creating another world,” ones that are more just and emancipatory.

SUGGESTED READINGS


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2 Some of the core theorists of decoloniality are the Latin American scholars Walter Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, and María Lugones. The discussion on key concepts draws on their writings. However, Frantz Fanon, writing decades prior, made similar arguments regarding the epistemic, cultural, and psychological violence of colonialism, and the need for anti-colonial and decolonization struggles to transcend this violence. The debates around anti-colonial struggles and decolonization on the African continent also inform present-day calls to decolonize.

3 The discussion on gender in the section on epistemic reconstitution draws from Oyeronke Oyewumi, The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

4 The call for reflexivity also applies to those who are from formerly colonized territories, as argued by Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni in Duncan Omanga, “Decolonization, decoloniality, and the future of African studies: A conversation with Dr. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni” Item: Insights from the Social Sciences, 2020),

5 Omanga, “Decolonization, decoloniality, and the future.”


7 In addition to buen vivir, the framework and movements in Colombia of “vivir sabroso,” led by Afro-Colombians, holds many similarities to buen vivir and has recently become a popular and politically salient framework in Colombia. Please see, Vivir Sabroso. The Afro-Colombian Movements and Struggles in the Middle Atrato: Bojayá, Chocó, Colombia by Natalia Quiceno Toro for more details.
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L. Avilés Irahola, “Decolonial feminism.”


Dhamoon, “A feminist approach.”

One can apply a decolonial lens to the discussion of reparations in the United States and examine in what ways different proposals for reparations may hold up systems that reproduce coloniality, such as systems that produce housing as a product for profit rather than as a guaranteed right.


Anti-colonial struggles on the African continent predate the 1950s; since the beginning of European colonial occupation, there have been anti-colonial struggles.


Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor.”


Tshabalala, “Contrasting decolonisation debates.”


Omanga, “Decolonization, decoloniality, and the future.”
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Cover photo: Men and women from Padol village, an ethnic Jarai community in far northern Cambodia, meet on a nearby island in the Sesan River. Padol has filed for a communal land title, so it can manage its forest land, agricultural areas, and sacred places in keeping with its culture. Cambodia’s land laws, promulgated after the Khmer Rouge era, allow for communal land titles for indigenous communities, but the registration of the titles is difficult and time consuming to achieve. Savann Oeurm / Oxfam America

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