

BOOK REVIEW

Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa: Turning Over a New Leaf

by Sabelo J. NDLOVU-GATSHENI, London, Routledge, 2022

Kamna Patel 

University College London, The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, London, WC1H 9EZ, UK,
Email: kamna.patel@ucl.ac.uk

In the international development and charity sector, particularly in the UK but not exclusively, crises of safeguarding vulnerable people have driven relatively large-scale investment in risk management and boosted its importance in charity governance. In 2018, British newspaper *The Times* published an exposé of the international non-governmental organisation (INGO) Oxfam GB and its handling of allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct of its staff in Haiti and the Philippines (known colloquially as the “Oxfam-Haiti scandal”). An investigation into Oxfam GB by the Charity Commission, a government body that registers and regulates charities in England and Wales, found that the organisation’s safeguarding strategy, approach and resourcing were significant areas of weakness that meant “the charity exposed itself to undue risk, amounting to mismanagement in the administration of the charity”.¹ The lever of exposure to risks – including the risk of causing harm to others alongside reputational risks – led to major sector-wide investment and the growth of teams of safeguarding professionals that introduced new or shored up existing policies, practices, lines of reporting and accountability and engendered behavioural change. By 2022, the international development and charity sector has become well versed and proactive in its management and mitigation of risks within the organisation and those caused by the organisation. These are risks that can be known, boxed into processes attentive to them and contained so that organisations may continue their substantive work. This framework and approach to understanding and managing risk as an operational exercise seems profoundly unsuited to the next great challenge facing the international development and charity sector and the development sector more widely – a challenge that aims to undo its rules and institutions and disrupt its very paradigm of knowing.

This challenge is the call to decolonise. This is a call to divest of the legacies of colonialism and imperialism and their attendant logics of racism, patriarchy, ableism and cis-heteronormativity that have structured an industry primarily located in the so-called Global North tasked with making the lives of those in the Global South modern and progressive. It is a full and complete agenda to rethink the purpose and value of international development and the role of industry actors including INGOs. In the “decolonisation of development”, it is unclear what the risks of this call are and for whom they are risks: is

¹ Charity Commission, “Inquiry Report: Summary Findings and Conclusions, OXFAM GB” (2019) 6 <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807943/Inquiry_Report_summary_findings_and_conclusions_Oxfam.pdf> (last accessed 5 October 2022).

the call another crisis of legitimacy for INGOs to weather or an uprising of the continuously dispossessed and marginalised? What is clear is that to decolonise also calls into question the very framework of risk and risk management in the development sector as a Eurocentric exercise of knowing and containing. The clash between a world that is known and managed from Europe and a world remade through the decolonisation of development in Africa is the challenge brought forth by Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's new book *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa: Turning Over a New Leaf*.

This short book covers major ground and is part of the *Worlding Beyond the West* series at Routledge. Over eight chapters, Ndlovu-Gatsheni makes a compelling case for why and how "a new leaf" (a term borrowed from Franz Fanon and his reflections of the Algerian Revolution and its failures to deliver radical social transformation) must begin with producing new knowledge and working out new concepts from Africa – not as a point of geography, but as an ontological position rooted in African ways of knowing the world, a framing inclusive of African Diaspora and Black people globally. The book is a call for epistemic freedom and a direct challenge to Eurocentric epistemologies that claim the ground of objectivity and universality.

To Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the necessity to know and learn anew exists in the face of material, cognitive and metaphysical European empires that infected the continent of Africa. He writes:

This dangerous empire operated through the infection of the mental universe of its victims which amounted to the removal of the hard disk of previous endogenous knowledge and downloading into the African minds the software of European knowledge and languages.²

In each chapter, Ndlovu-Gatsheni walks the reader through new leaves that have turned in the past and how resultant challenges to the hegemony of Eurocentrism and whiteness in the global political economy have been contained, leading us to new leaves that are turning, that are still to turn and where we (those of us committed to projects of decolonisation) ought to turn next. Through purposeful acts of remembering decolonisation efforts of the past in Africa and in other regions of the world combating their own colonial and imperial legacies, this book is an act of epistemic repair by signposting readers to African and African Diasporic scholars, poets and politicians – including Kwame Nkrumah, Thomas Sankara and Amílcar Cabral – who have vociferously argued for and attempted to build post-imperial societies and global world orders that undo racism, sexism, cis-heteronormativity and ableism.

The first chapter makes the case for epistemic freedom, with Ndlovu-Gatsheni stating that "ontology is made of epistemology",³ and so that which is created and made real – like our global political economy and world order – is an epistemic creation in which Africa and Africans occupy lowly positions. Therefore, it is through acts of radical reimagining that new realities can be forged that break free from a world system designed to sustain exclusion. Ndlovu-Gatsheni writes: "To move forward, we must rethink thinking itself so as to build a future beyond the straightjacket of developmentalism."⁴

The crux of the second chapter – "The Decolonial Turn" – articulates why, following national liberation struggles against European imperialism throughout the twentieth century, decolonisation is back on the agenda at this time. The necessity of decolonisation –

² SJ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa: Turning Over a New Leaf* (London, Routledge 2022) p 8.

³ *ibid.*, 3.

⁴ *ibid.*, 13.

as a political and epistemological movement – is linked to what Ndlovu-Gatsheni identifies as our triple crises: (1) the systemic crisis arising from the catastrophes of global capitalism and planetary ecological emergency; (2) the epistemic crisis resulting from epistemicide, the dearth of non-colonial learning and the need for new concepts and not adjustments to existing ones (a remark pertinent to international development and its continual reinvention from a project of global modernisation to “sustainable development”); and (3) the ideological crisis – the absence of an overarching vision of freedom, liberation and emancipation. Embedded in these crises is the absence of a repudiation of modernity. To Sylvia Wynter, “[i]n decolonial thought, modernity is said to have unfolded as a phenomenon that colonised time, space and being”⁵

In this argument, Ndlovu-Gatsheni positions himself and swathes of African decolonial thought alongside and interwoven with Latin American decolonial scholarship and the modernity–coloniality–decoloniality schools of thought. This is stood in sharp contrast to postcolonial scholarship arising mainly from South Asian schools of thought as a field that has decoupled colonialism from modernity. As a recounting of entire fields of study in a short chapter, this is a necessarily selective reading of genesis stories, and there is clearly a great deal more to unpack in multiple decolonial and postcolonial traditions and political positions.

The third chapter recounts “the Bandung Spirit”, a reference to the 1955 conference of twenty-nine Asian and African nations that gathered in Indonesia and articulated a vision of global solidarity and postcolonial world order. This spirit is a historic one of transnational decolonial struggles for liberation and freedom that sought to undo and dismantle coloniality, not make coloniality bearable for the impoverished and marginalised. Starting with the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), Ndlovu-Gatsheni injects African and Black histories into planetary narratives of resistance to Northern domination, thus illustrating the leaves that have been turned before and the reasons their actions were thwarted.

One of the most welcome aspects of this book is its spotlight on race, racism and racialisation within articulations and expositions of decoloniality. Chapter 4 – “The Problem of Blackness” – engages head on with the problematics of “race” as a European social construct that instils crude hierarchies that dehumanise people, and it represents a potent source of liberation, solidarity and sisterhood that can transcend national (colonially crafted) borders. In this chapter, Ndlovu-Gatsheni gives us a language to analyse Blackness on a global scale through the binary of dismemberment and re-membering. The former is the ontological split “that pushes all those designated as black out of the human family”,⁶ visible in a global colour line (to borrow from W.E.B. du Bois). The latter is the re-humanisation of Black people and the renaissance of non-European intellectual traditions (ie the recovery of history as an act of repair to dismemberment). These ideas are fleshed out later in the book (Chapter 6) under a call for an African Renaissance, not as a single event or time period, but as a continual struggle of and for the continent, which includes Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall movements. The call is heavily inspired by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s retelling of processes of dismemberment that is traced to Transatlantic slavery, the Berlin Conference (1884–1885), neo-colonialism and neoliberal developmentalism, which sowed and continue to sow “division of the African [and African Diaspora] from [their] land, body and mind”.⁷

In Chapter 5 – “African Political Economy” – Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s central proposition that from epistemic freedom comes ontological freedom is applied to illustrate how African political economy and African developmentalism are underpinned by Eurocentric ways of

⁵ *ibid.*, 36, citing S Wynter, “Columbus and the Poetics of the *Propter Nos*” (1991) 8(2) *Annals of Scholarship* 251–86.

⁶ *ibid.*, 74.

⁷ *ibid.*, 119, citing N wa Thiong’o, *Re-membering Africa* (Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers 2009) pp 5–6.

knowing the world, to the detriment of African liberatory projects. The chapter unpacks how “Africa”, as a construct of political economy, became and remains entangled in global capitalism and its means of production. The new leaves that were turned over in the national struggles for liberation in the twentieth century failed to take root not only because of the effects of the three crisis (as discussed in Chapter 2), but also through active counter-projects, including the undermining of African democracy via the public-sector austerity and structural adjustment demanded by the Bretton Woods Institutions (the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization), which direct the global economic order on behalf of their most powerful (Northern) members.

In the face of such challenges, the African Renaissance called for in Chapter 6 to bring to life popular struggles for de-imperialism, decolonisation and democratisation is complemented by a focus on “African Humanities” in Chapter 7 as a space to rehumanise. Drawing on Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian author of “Africa Is People”, Ndlovu-Gatsheni introduces us to *Ubuntu*, a humanist expression that means “I am because we are”, as a powerful repost to the Cartesian logic of man’s existence through reason. An African humanities starts with humanism and our connectivity as the means of epistemic freedom that upends and dismantles individual accumulation, racial and gender hierarchies and the primacy of European–North American knowledge systems.

The book concludes with a turn to the future and the role of technology in a Fourth Industrial Revolution, as well as offering a set of queries regarding “for which people and purpose does technology work?”, culminating in “how can technology turn over a new leaf ‘from colonial entrapment and poverty’⁸ in Africa?”. On closing the book and drawing out its final lessons, thoughts of technology were not at the forefront of my mind. What was there instead was just how much the new leaves Ndlovu-Gatsheni writes of in each chapter represent heartfelt cries for justice and liberation from coloniality. This is more than just a book.

Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa: Turning Over a New Leaf gives wide-ranging, thorough and illuminating treatises on big waves in African and global history. Readers in Europe especially (as I am) may find references to thinkers they did not know, ideas unfamiliar and epochs only previously understood in frames of East–West Cold War politics. But what does it say of risk and risk management, particularly in the international development and charity sector? Clearly, current flirtations in the sector with a decolonisation agenda are the tip of the iceberg. Projects of knowing and uncovering African knowledge constitute the work of epistemic justice; they come in waves rather than as specific managed actions or projects, and they are driven by African people (a remark on position over geography). From this a central question has to be: what is African risk, and is it the same as risk through a European gaze? This question matters because the potential to upend the world and its order – including the international development sector – may not be a “risk” at all, but a work of liberation that cannot and should not be managed and contained.

⁸ *ibid.*, 171.