
# Critiques of decoloniality

Posted on June 19, 2023 by Nazry Bahrawi
[vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text]Our objective for this session is to delve into critiques of decoloniality. For Tuck and Yang, decolonisation should not be a metaphor (2012). Their treatise is persuasive considering that academics are eager, perhaps too eager, to decolonise ‘this’ and decolonise ‘that’. That is to say, the word has fast become a fad, rendering it an empty signifier that is much too distanced from what they see as its true purpose—the need to return land back to the native peoples who were dispossessed of it by way of colonisation. As much as their argument is valid and necessary, Tuck and Yang were writing primarily about the conditions in America and other white settler nations. What if we were to cast our gaze elsewhere?

Let us consider Southeast Asia, for instance. The nations of Southeast Asia may have been administered by European colonisers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but they are all today largely managed by their own people. This is where the proposed article by Juno Salazar Parreñas can offer us some clues. Here, the feminist anthropologist prefers the concept of vernacular knowledge over decolonial thought as she muses over her research on orangutan care in Borneo that resulted in her award-

winning book, *Decolonizing Extinction* (2019).

In the article, she points us to her conversation with Nadim, an ethnic Malay-Muslim individual from Sarawak whose work as a ranger involves caring for the orangutans. Pointing to how the Malay word for animal 'haiwan' is derived from the Arabic word 'hayawan', Nadim comments on the human/animal distinction that this upholds:

> "Maybe when you talk of animal, they think animal. It's just animal: 'Ugh, I don't like this animal.' Maybe mostly management, everyday people, sometimes they see cat or dog on the roadside, they will die, they will think, 'like animal.' Unless you see people laying, then that would impress. A kid [for example]. But animal, you just let die, lah." (2019, 418)

It appears in this quote that Nadim disagrees with this distinction between human and animals for it justifies 'cruelty and complacency', says Parreñas (ibid.). In this process, Nadim casts doubt over an idea that came from a non-Malay interpretation of Islam. In the text, Parreñas also points to other examples of how Nadim is an active cerebral agent who meshes a variety of thoughts from both Islamic and Western sources, complicating the idea that the native is passive recipient of 'foreign' ideologies with no mind of their own—an assumption held by past scientific Western researchers of Southeast Asia such as Alfred Russel Wallace. This question of vernacular knowledge versus decolonial thought is interesting and bears deeper scrutiny.

Also implied in Parreñas' statement is a very basic question: is decolonisation the same as decoloniality? The two have been used interchangeably but refer to two different but related phenomena. Related is the supplementary reading by Tania Pérez-Bustos on homogenous decolonial thought (2017) that asks us to consider the universality of 'theory'. These, and other related lines of inquiries, are welcomed in our forthcoming reading group.[/vc_column_text][/vc_column][/vc_row][vc_row][vc_column][vc_toggle title="Reading group event details" open="true"]**Date:** 3rd July 2023
**Title:** Critiques of decoloniality

**Speaker:** Nazry Bahrawi
**Chair:** Giulia Champion[/vc_toggle][vc_toggle title="Selected minutes"]Beginning with a graphic map of maritime Southeast Asia on screen, Nazry situates his reading of Juno Salazar Parreñas' article by referencing two real-world examples from Singapore, an island state in the region; the move by Yale-NUS College students to include a Malay classical text into its 'great books' curriculum; and the public criticism by activists about the nation's bicentennial campaign to commemorate the founding of Singapore from the moment the British colonialist Thomas Stamford Raffles set foot on its shores. Both had resulted in positive change, suggesting that decoloniality looms large on the minds of Singaporeans if we take them to be a microcosm of Southeast Asians.

> "When it was announced, the bicentennial campaign saw a change in the narrative from celebration to memorialisation." — Nazry

While he finds Tuck and Yang's seminal article 'Decolonisation is not a metaphor' (2012) to be an important critique of decolonisation, he postulates that it works best for white settler colonies like America. He asks: how does this square with the earlier call in 1986 by Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's 1986 call to 'decolonise the mind' in his eponymous book?

> "The mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world" and "their tools of self-definition in relationship to others." — Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

At localities such as Southeast Asia where colonisation is cerebral and hidden, he proposes that there is value in positioning colonisation as a metaphor.

He demonstrates this through his study of kampong nostalgia in modern Malay prose in Singapore. The kampong is a Malay village, a word that's led to the English word 'compound', but one that's almost extinct in

Singapore.

His study found that the government narrative to channel the lost kampong spirit of yore is an empty signifier and a form of cultural appropriation that can be likened to the colonialist idea of the ‘savage native’ who is to be commemorated within terms familiar to the colonialist, or neocolonialist if we talk about Singapore.

Moving on to Parreñas’ article, he agrees with her premise that racial capitalism works differently in Southeast Asia as opposed to white settler colonies. Coupled with the fact that decoloniality is primarily fashioned by scholars who are resident in the Global North, Parreñas also asks:

> “How applicable is decoloniality when capitalism in Europe and the Americas, with their constitutive structures in racial capitalism, might be irrelevant in other parts of the world?”

Nazry thinks this can be seen as a proxy for a perennial question relating to theory. Can theory, as a general concept or as a specific idea like Marxism, be applied universally as a grand narrative to explain the workings of this world? Like Parreñas, Nazry is skeptical of the universality of theory, including decoloniality if we were to take it as a grand narrative of the workings of the world.

Parreñas suggests that locals use ‘multiple ways of knowing’ as active agents of change. Nadim, whom she interviewed combines Darwinian biology and Islam. Yet, Nazry is less convinced by Parreñas’ suggestion that vernacular knowledge is a foil for comparison to indigenous knowledge as if the latter is a clearly definable object. Citing Linda Tuhiwai-Smith’s concept of plural indigeneities, he argues that this very adaptation of multiple discourses could itself be a form of indigenous knowledge.

In fact, the idea that decoloniality is a non-transferable product of the Global North can be a tad dismissive, Nazry says. He refers to Leon Moosavi who wrote in 2020 about the problem pitting Global North to the Global South.

> “One needs to be more nuanced when considering the contributions of scholars in the Global North who are ‘miscategorised on account of their Northern citizenship’ despite their Southern heritage.” — Nazry, citing Moosavi

Finally, he refers to the accompaniment article by Tania Perez-Bustos, which brings attention to the privilege of the English language. Decolonial knowledges, she argues, are contained within languages that are not English. This remains an issue.

Nazry ends by suggesting that decoloniality possesses multiple genealogies, something that Perez-Bustos raises in the context of Latin American scholarship. Southeast Asia has its own decolonial tradition, he argues, that is informed by its own specificities of racial capitalism, gender and colonial matrix of power.

Multiple questions and comments were articulated by audience members in the room and online. Here are excerpts.

> “Are we getting too caught up in conceptual housekeeping? Perhaps there is something to be valued from the two views.” —Reader

> “Mignolo raises the concepts of alternative modernities in comparison to alternatives to modernity. The latter, he says, still operates within European Enlightenment discourses. The former concerns the hard work of looking at knowledges that are not formally contained within academia. On intellectual gatekeeping, I am wary of this. It is indeed useful to use binaries and comparisons when attempting to advance our understandings of the world but we must never be too caught up in them.”—Nazry

> “Speaking to you from Washington DC, I invite you to speak on the relationship between postcolonial studies, postcoloniality and decoloniality. I am getting confused as to the connections between these schools of thoughts.” —Reader

“I understand it as three different phenomena: Decolonisation is a material way of weaning ourselves from colonisation. For example, -we can change laws inherited from the British legal system. Decoloniality and postcolonialism are epistemic projects. Postcolonialism arises out of Orientalism. That is, the idea that there has been a commodification of the Orient/Other. The difference between these is that postcolonialism uses assumptions that came out of European Enlightenment such as the notion of the subject-object dichotomy expressed as the self-other. These ideas can be traced to the poststructuralist projects of Derrida and Foucault. Decoloniality, according to Mignolo, is an epistemic project that does not start from the subject/object dichotomy. This is why the discussion of animals in Parreñas is so interesting. It helps to discuss how people see animals as another element in a shared world, breaking down the subject-object dichotomy. You might see this interdependency as a relationship between subject and subject.” —Nazry

“I am trying to reassess the theoretical merits of decolonial theory. Latin America, historiographical literature, the struggle against colonisation and appropriated ideas of modernity. My question is, in brief, how do we accommodate this historical evidence that modernity is Eurocentric—are we not presenting the most Eurocentric versions of modernity? Eurocentrism is part of Indigenous meaning-making.”—Reader

“I see your point of view. Parreñas points to Nadim to discuss how his view of human-animal relations is drawn from Darwinian biology and Islam. The discourse of Chinese Privilege in Singapore uses American discourse of White Privilege which speaks to your point. It is very hard to pinpoint when something starts and when it ends. I don’t fully endorse Mignolo’s idea of alternatives to modernity as it is a very challenging leap of logic. We live in modernity, in capitalism—the discourse of capitalism is pervasive. How can we ignore it totally? The point is to expand on existing knowledge and not to replace it with something totally new.”—Nazry

> “Just a thought on perpetuating cultural imperialism. I wonder if the author was aware that the word ‘vernacular’ itself comes from ‘verna’, a word for ‘home-born slave’. Rather than critiquing words like ‘decolonial’ or ‘indigenous’, perhaps we can instead critique the associations we attach to these words in certain academic contexts and geographic regions?”—Reader

> “I didn’t think about this genealogy of language. It opens a discussion of Latin-root words in academia and their Eurocentredness. I think that we should be asking where you are anchored in, and this should be the base of how you interact with the world around you. Where is the anchor of where you are decolonising from?”—Nazry

**Minutes made by Dr Claire French***

*These minutes have been edited and selected by the author, based on the arc of the conversation and the multiple perspectives offered.[/vc_toggle][vc_toggle title=”Final thoughts” open=”true”]The session is motivated by the dilemma of how I might begin to square the specificities of decoloniality with some of its more universal claims. The ensuing rich discussion by readers from different regions, South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa, suggests to me a deep and persistent interest in the decolonial option. This is despite notable contextual differences and the coherent, persuasive critiques levelled at it, not just by Parreñas and Perez-Bustos, but also Moosavi and Tuck and Yang, to name a few.

The promise of decolonising from a base culture, anchored in a specific time, space and location, foregrounds our subjectivities as researchers. Perhaps this recognition of multiplicities accounts as one way we might sidestep the commodification of decoloniality as a discursive tool in service of the neoliberal university looking to student enrolment rather than socio-political change.

The conversations stirred within this reading group have certainly solidified some of my own thoughts on decoloniality and its discontents.[/vc_toggle][/vc_column][/vc_row][vc_row][vc_column][vc_sep

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Editor: CLAIRE FRENCH
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