DECOLONISING POLITICAL CONCEPTS

Edited by
Valentin Clavé-Mercier and Marie Wuth

Decolonising Political Concepts

This book presents a transdisciplinary and transnational challenge to the enduring coloniality of political concepts, discussing the need to decolonise both their theoretical constructions as well as their substantive translations into practices.

Despite the acclaimed twentieth-century decolonisation waves, coloniality still remains in subtle and obvious practices, in visible and invisible mechanisms of power, and in the privileging of certain knowledges and the dismissing of others. *Decolonising Political Concepts* critically addresses the role political concepts play in the continuing legacies of colonialism and ongoing coloniality. This book, building on postcolonial and decolonial thinkers and ideas, demonstrates how concepts may be used as oppressing political and epistemological tools. By presenting efforts to decolonise political concepts, the book signals the potential for genuinely postcolonial academic and political contexts. Bringing together scholars from different disciplines and engaging with a wide array of geographical contexts, the chapters examine concepts such as agency, violence, freedom, or sovereignty. This book enables readers to critically engage with concepts used in political discourse and allows them to reflect on their impact and alternatives.

It will appeal to graduate students and scholars from international relations, social sciences, or philosophy, as well as to socio-political actors engaged in decolonisation agendas.

Valentin Clavé-Mercier is currently a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Complutense Institute for International Studies (ICEI) at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Spain). His overall research interest lies in how non-Western and decolonial political ontologies and praxis contribute to the rearticulation of contemporary political thought and political imaginaries. His most recent research focuses on discourses and practices of Indigenous sovereignty, more specifically on their deployment by Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand. His areas of interest include decolonial/postcolonial studies, Indigenous politics, contentious politics, sovereignty studies, political geography, and identity politics. He is the author of "Politics of Sovereignty: Settler Resonance and Māori Resistance in Aotearoa/New Zealand" (2022).

Marie Wuth is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Hamburg. She is a political and moral philosopher specialising in social and political ontology, environmental ethics, democratic theory, early modern philosophy, French theory, and decolonial and feminist theory. Her research focuses on the question of the political, agency, identity, and the power of affects and images in politics. Additionally, she is interested in the impact of relations of power and societal structures for conceptualisations and the relation of nature and politics. Her most recent publications include "Hate. Imaginary Roots and Fatal Dynamics of a Complex Relations" (2022) and "Circular Politics. Potentials, Limits and Boundaries of an Arendtian Nature-Politics" (2021).

Routledge Research on Decoloniality and New Postcolonialisms
Series Editor
Mark Jackson
Senior Lecturer in Postcolonial Geographies, School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol, UK.

Routledge Research on Decoloniality and New Postcolonialisms is a forum for original, critical research into the histories, legacies, and life-worlds of modern colonialism, postcolonialism, and contemporary coloniality. It analyses efforts to decolonise dominant and damaging forms of thinking and practice, and identifies, from around the world, diverse perspectives that encourage living and flourishing differently. Once the purview of a postcolonial studies informed by the cultural turn's important focus on identity, language, text and representation, today's resurgent critiques of coloniality are also increasingly informed, across the humanities and social sciences, by a host of new influences and continuing insights for different futures: indigeneity, critical race theory, relational ecologies, critical semiotics, posthumanisms, ontology, affect, feminist standpoints, creative methodologies, post-development, critical pedagogies, intercultural activisms, place-based knowledges, and much else. The series welcomes a range of contributions from socially engaged intellectuals, theoretical scholars, empirical analysts, and critical practitioners whose work attends, and commits, to newly rigorous analyses of alternative proposals for understanding life and living well on our increasingly damaged earth.

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This book is dedicated to those who are thinking otherwise,
and to those who want to.

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Contributors

Karim Barakat is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Arts and Humanities at the American University of Beirut. His research focuses on what insight descriptive accounts, whether historical, metaphysical, or epistemological, can offer for social and political critique. He is also developing an account of political scepticism, which contributes to minimizing antagonism in political disagreement. Moreover, his research also examines the use of history in Arabic Political Philosophy. He has published several articles on the role of descriptive accounts in political theorizing such as "Understanding Power Through Governmentality" (2020) and "Grounding Reasonableness in Rawls" (2020).

Radhika Chitkara is an Assistant Professor at National Law School, Bangalore, India. Her work has been embedded within the civil liberties, women's, and land rights movements in northern and eastern India. Her research interests include issues of criminal justice, civil liberties, human rights, and feminist legal theories. She is currently pursuing a PhD in "Special Procedures under Anti-Terror Laws and the Right to Fair Trial: An Empirical and Doctrinal Study of Investigations and Prosecutions under the UAPA" from NLSIU.

Cecilia Cienfuegos Martínez is a PhD Student at Carlos III University. Her work focuses on sexual violence, political philosophy, and epistemology. From the intersection of feminist theory, decolonial theory, and testimonial accounts of sexual violence, her research tries to construct an alternative epistemology of this form of violence. She is the author, together with Ana Abril, of "Cannibalising Violence: Rethinking the Cannibal in Order to Theorise an Unthinkability of Sexual Violence" (2021), in Champion, G. (Ed.) *Interdisciplinary Essays on Cannibalism: Bites Here and There*.

Valentin Clavé-Mercier is currently a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Complutense Institute for International Studies (ICEI) at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Spain). His overall research interest lies in how non-Western and decolonial political ontologies and praxis contribute to the rearticulation of contemporary political thought and political imaginaries.

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Laura Galián is Assistant Professor in the Department of Arab and Islamic Studies and Oriental Studies, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Spain). Before, she was a postdoctoral researcher in the European H2020 project RETOPEA: Religious Toleration and Peace at Universidad de Granada and a Juan de la Cierva research fellow at the same university. Her research interests and publications deal with the history of concepts, the history of ideas, and the Middle East. She has recently published the book *Colonialism, Transnationalism and Anarchism in the South of the Mediterranean* (2020).

Oscar Guardiola-Rivera is Professor of Political Philosophy & Human Rights at Birkbeck College, University of London. His research and teaching research and teaching focus on peace-making, mediation and conflict-resolution, political philosophy and legal theory, art & human rights, human rights and international law, peoples' tribunals, advanced constitutional law and ethics, with an emphasis on decolonial and visual methodologies, political economy, and racial justice. He is the award-winning author of *What If Latin America Ruled the World* (2010), *Story of a Death Foretold* (2013), and the poetic novella *Night of the World* (2020). He currently works on a memoir ethnography titled *Journal of the Twenty-First Century Years of Plague*.

Henrike Kohpeiß is a Philosopher and a Postdoctoral Researcher at the CRC Affective Societies at Freie Universität Berlin. She works in the fields of critical theory, Black Studies, and affect theory and is interested in critiques of the subject, histories of violence, and questions of coloniality and race. She is the author of *Bürgerliche Kälte. Affekt und koloniale Subjektivität* (2023).

Shahin Nasiri is a Lecturer in philosophy at Tilburg University. His areas of interest include political theory, theories of freedom, phenomenology, critical theory, migration and citizenship, and genealogy of resistance movements. He is the author of "Investigating the 1981 Massacre: On the Law-Constituting Force of Violence" (2022), "Freedom and the Imaginary Dimension of Society" (2022), and *The Repressed Voices of the Iranian Revolution* (2020).

Laurencia Sáenz Benavides is a Philosophy Lecturer at the School of Philosophy of the University of Costa Rica. She works on moral and political philosophy, feminist philosophy, critical philosophy of race, and philosophy of emotions. She is the author of the book *Instrumentos de poder: el rol de las emociones en la opresión* (2021).

Astha Saxena is a Law Researcher whose work lies in the rights to property and land, laws of land reform, acquisition, and studying the implementation of the 2006 Forest Rights Act. She also works with various groups of lawyers and social researchers to expand the boundaries of legal education. In her doctoral studies, she is exploring the relevance of legislative paradigms towards the realisation of socio-economic rights. She has authored *Land Law in India* (2020) and co-authored "Criminalisation of Adivasis and the Indian Legal System" (2022).

Rafael Verbuyst is a Historian and Anthropologist. He is currently a Postdoctoral Researcher at Ghent University's History Department – fully funded by a grant from the Flemish Scientific Fund. He is also a visiting research fellow at the University of Cape Town's Centre for African Studies. His research centres on the revival of indigenous identity in post-apartheid South Africa, land (re)claims, settler colonialism, decolonisation and resistance, and ethnographic methodology. He is the author of *Khoisan Consciousness: An Ethnography of Emic Histories and Indigenous Revivalism in Post-Apartheid Cape Town* (2022).

Ritu Vij is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Aberdeen, UK. Her current work examines the limits of contemporary thinking on sovereignty, precarity, and subalternity in two ongoing collaborative projects: "Precarity: Poetic and Aesthetic Explorations", and "Political Imaginaries of the "Slum". Her recent work includes a co-edited collection, *Precarity and International Relations* (2020), "Precarity and the International", a special issue of *Globalizations*, articles on affective and housing precarity, human security and difference, and the cinema of precarity. Her earlier books are *Japanese Modernity and Welfare* (2007) and *Globalization and Welfare: A Critical Reader* (2007).

Marie Wuth is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Hamburg. She is a political and moral philosopher specialising in social and political ontology, environmental ethics, democratic theory, early modern philosophy, French theory, and decolonial and feminist theory. Her research focuses on the question of the political, agency, identity, and the power of affects and images in politics. Additionally, she is interested in the impact of relations of power and societal structures for conceptualisations and the relation of nature and politics. Her most recent publications include "Hate. Imaginary Roots and Fatal Dynamics of a Complex Relations" (2022) and "Circular Politics. Potentials, Limits and Boundaries of an Arendtian Nature-Politics" (2021).

Preface: We Shall Dance Better

Oscar Guardiola-Rivera

When we launched what is now known worldwide as "the decolonial turn" back in the mid-1990s, our mind was not set on producing yet another sociological type ("coloniality", for instance). Instead, we wanted to place a bomb. To explode the framework within which the social sciences and the humanitarian arts of law and literature had been developed since at least the dawn of modernity.

Perhaps, in this respect, it would be best to speak of the "arrested development" of the sciences, of humanitarianism, and of the republican arts, which for us meant, quite simply, the making of things public.

We knew that a different kind of humanism and republicanism had emerged in the wake of the encounter between "Christians" and the societies that worked out or retained a bio-cultural wisdom, especially in the Americas, which made them resist the idea of progress toward perfection or achievement followed by stasis that had become a dogmatic principle of politics and the mind after the importation of the techniques of perspective to the practical knowledges of siege architecture, speculative geography, and surveyance which informed the expansionist enterprise of European kingly powers.

We knew such humanism and republicanism had actively stood against the association between a way of seeing and arguing with demonstrative pretensions, in which the axiomatic and the arbitrary go hand in hand, best exemplified by the defensive attitude and mentality expressed in the justifications of conquest and empire in the Americas put forward by jurist-theologian Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda during the famous debates of the 1550s. And we also knew that a different association could be made between the critique of the imperialist project and a different image system that valued differently what happens to be the case in the world and argued about it in a fallibilist manner that can concede our world formulas are at best approximations and continue work at them by making them present and concrete in bio-cultural sites that involve the affordances of rivers, the vulnerability of bodies, and the experimental power of judgement and the imagination.

Because of this, we focused our efforts on the concrete practices of internal colonialism, discipline and control of time or time orientation, as well as self-colonisation as forms of "arrested development" that damned Amerindian,

Afro, and creolised societies to a static past and foreclosed other futures, thereby condemning the sciences and humanitarian or republican arts to remain within a framework in which dialectics are affixed to an absolute viewpoint or subject, while at the same time insisting on the active presence and ongoing-ness of the signs, images, and concrete symbolisations produced and reinvented by those societies.

In other words, instead of producing trademarks or tokens like "coloniality" of… this and that to market them among the rapidly changing fashions of contemporary political communications and academia, or assuming that "decolonial" waves in the nineteenth or twentieth century had resulted in sufficiently clean and simple colonised/coloniser or victim/perpetrator binaries, to use the now ubiquitous language of human rights, we focused on the percepts and concepts left behind by "traditional" (meaning demonstrative, arbitrary, and axiomatic) thought, historically associated with the expansionist enterprise, and the habits of sensing and familiar sense after its demise as philosophy (Castro-Gomez et al., 1999).

For us, the call for a frame of reference in which everything has its place after the fall of all ultimate points of reference, to seize a political philosophy, a concept, or something to hold onto, dissimulated under the pretext that such "centre" or "ground" would better guide us to the promised land, was but a repetition and reinvention, for the new speculative global markets and relations, of the older ways of seeing that organised the visual world as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God. Also, a mask for nothing more than aggression, the desire to appropriate and take hold of a philosophy, a landscape, and everything in it, in the way that the schools of old used to devour each other. That predatory scene was never for us a matter of abstract theory, since the apotheosis of war and plunder surrounded us in the lands of our childhood when we launched the modernity/coloniality research project in the 1990s, and such apotheosis has now viral, global reach.

The present book shares and takes further that spirit and focus on percepts and concepts, political concepts, as much as the critical (as opposed to "traditional") approach that animated the modernity/coloniality project in the first place. Not only it takes it up but runs with it! Its starting point is that the study of politics, law, and literature in the West largely stands on the premise that such things as politics, the communication of signs and symbolisation, laws, and kinds of value, as well as literature begin with letters and images posited and made literary or civil within a proper, ultimate frame of reference. Against the call for a frame of reference, emerging with the acceptance of analytic geometry and calculation not only as an approximation to the world but as a more real world hiding behind this one, which we could decrypt or decode if we were in possession of The Word or Cypher, the essays in this collection invite us to see better and see through. To shift our (speculative) geography and perspective. Not just to de-centre but to tell better stories about the so-called centre or centres both in the political philosophical or jurisprudential and geo-political sense.

To question the fantasy of harmony through calculation which has returned in full twenty-first-century garb, dressed up in shiny algorithmic or AI regalia that already contains quantification of what is spatially perceptible, abstraction according to conventional ways of seeing and thinking that may even be based on arbitrary axioms (so that the arbitrary and the axiomatic go hand in hand), and to translate our supposedly critical ideas and correct moral positions into parts of the imagination that are also points of contact with real relations – in motion, transiting, transformative, and transforming.

The first two parts of this book explore and question relations of power and knowledge embedded in the ways we see and conceptualise the world in which we dwell, often using the image of a fork on the road or an intersection. The third part of the book puts into practice other languages of refusal and resistance that may enable decolonial liberation across diverse geographical contexts and political movements.

Throughout, the emphasis is on movement or trans-motion. This entails a way of symbolizing, a symbol and a concept that is not a static one. Rather, it contains within itself a principle of differentiation. "Principle" in the powerful sense of a new beginning, and an idea capable of carrying that new beginning, in which all other pasts are present, into the future. As such, the very character of a concept is reworked in this book: it becomes a category that shows us the direction to follow. It is not only a matter of difference but one of difference and orientation.

However, and this is where the very idea of a decolonial turn, re-turn, or move makes better sense, the country in which a non-static symbol dwells, as in the Coyote or Donkey stories and word cinemas found throughout Amerindia, remains uncharted and not-yet subject to Euclidean mapping or geo-political lines of demarcation. If so, the political reason that emerges throughout the collaborations of this book is not the purer, more Euclidean reason that builds and elevates utopia to the status of a "shared value", belief, or faith. Would I dare saying that since such rationalist utopia is a power trip, monotheocratic, declared by executive decree or royal prerogative, maintained by strong willpower or constancy, premised on progress rather than process, and, therefore, Euclidean, European, and masculine, then this political reason is not utopian at all?

Or at least, this is not how utopia ought to look like. You will recall that the quality of stasis or static perfection (the "perfect" and "perfectible" communities of Second Scholastic political thought that still lie buried within our supposedly modern political and legal concepts) is actually an essential element, a quintessence or a deification (hence, our speaking before about the apotheosis of war and the market in the twenty-first century) and, therefore, also an element of the non-inhabitability of the Euclidean, white European, masculine utopia.

If so, to attain a more inhabitable time and place when faced with the apotheosis of war and market, with climate meltdown, and fascination of abomination, we must not only turn (no matter how "decolonial" that turn might seem) but also re-turn, go round, go inward, undercover and underground, like investigative detectives, like Forensic Architectures investigative detectives, or like surreal detectives such as PI Clem Snide.

The latter, you may recall, would try to solve a case by sitting back, listening at random to sound recordings made in a device not too dissimilar to today's Teenage Engineering PO portable mixers and sequencers "specially designed for cut-ins and overlays and you can switch from record to Playback without stopping" it. He would record the sounds of the forest outside the villa of the dead man, the rattle of dishes being washed, the sound of water and wind as he walks along a riverbed or the sea, as well as rave music to dance or even the toilet flushing. Later, he would randomly choose sections of the composite recording while watching TV so that he would listen only half- or sub-consciously.

To suggest that approach as an analogue for doing political and legal philosophy in the digital era might strike some as either too Kitsch or too Dada, at a time when the bourgeoisie has grown bored of both, declared them unfashionable, for they move fast, so fast they see no more than the surface glitter of a life too swift to be real. They/we are assailed by too many new things ever to find the depths, the roots in the survivance and ongoing poetics of the signs obscured by a cultural logic of the archive, the court, and the museum as a final resting place in which everything has its place. The rush of life past, that stormy wind, they/we call progress, though it is now too rapid for us to move with it.

But what if it is no longer the case that Amerindian naïve or Dada have subsided into history, and instead, before the facts of pandemics and climate meltdown bringing back the re-enchantment of nature, it is history that is subsiding into Dada and magical realism? And that can help when one knows not whether to go away or staying in the place where one's people dwell, when visited by war or with an infectious distemper (Taussig, 2021).

I want you to read this book because I know of no other work that takes for its central concern the political power of images, percepts, and concepts in a way that is neither utopian nor dystopian. But rather, a way that is no way, not on the road atlas, which is, after all, the only way to get to a place that is no place. The intellectual concern of this book is this matter of "westernisation", "progress", or a mimetic power so excessive and so fast we can no longer move with it. This is perhaps the central fact and concern of our times. If so, of course this book provides no ultimate answer, model, roadmap, or solution; it simply indexes and indicates, like a lighthouse that is not a wreckers' lantern, the way that cannot be gone. Its poetic image is, therefore, that of an enantio-dromia. Like a donkey moving backwards to the forest, or a porcupine backing into a crevice. To better see and hear the challenges ahead and think of a more habitable place. It moves sideways or backwards looking forwards. It dances. That is a proper decolonial move.

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At the Crossroads of Coloniality, Power, and Knowledge

It Is Time to Decolonise Political Concepts

Valentin Clavé-Mercier and Marie Wuth

> *[C]oncepts have teeth, and teeth that bite through time.*
>
> (Simpson, 2014: 100)

The first two decades of the 21st century have seen renewed attention to how sustaining legacies of colonialism continue to reside within and to shape social relations, politics, human–nature interactions, culture, or education. In recent years, this critical inquiry crystallised in a myriad of decolonisation calls that have been raised in a variety of ways: mounting social pressure to confront systemic and institutionalised racism epitomised by movements such as Black Lives Matter; political processes aimed at breaking colonial bonds between polities such as the New Caledonian independence referendums or Barbados' rupture with the British monarchy; warnings regarding the challenges of the so-called Anthropocene and connected environmental injustices; the questioning of the role of museums in colonial processes culminating in campaigns such as the Museums Association's "Decolonising Museums"; or students-led movements to decolonise educational curriculums and universities such as the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa, the "Why is my curriculum White?" campaign in the United Kingdom.[1]

Western contemporary thought has similarly received significant attention for its contributing role in colonisation processes and in sustaining what is known as 'coloniality' (Chatterjee, 1993; Ivison et al., 2000; Mignolo, 2021; Pagden, 1995; Said, 1993; Walker, 1987). More than maintaining a mere relation of complicity with colonialism, Western modern political thought has been exposed as being shaped via the experiences of colonial expansion and invasion, then in turn actively contributing to justify and underpin said phenomena (Anghie, 2005; Barker, 2005; Bonilla, 2015; Shaw, 2008). However, the particular role of political concepts in this process, as the tools through which this political thought is articulated, has rarely been properly dissected. Beyond a theoretical endeavour, examining the colonial roots and ramifications of some of the most used political concepts in public forums, in the media or in academia is directly linked to ongoing political concerns and struggles being deployed in the Global South and Global North. It is about confronting the

continuous reinforcement of limits and exclusions brought to life through the uncritical use and reproduction of certain political concepts in their Western modern understandings. Similarly, it is about the capacity of Western modernity's Others to express and articulate alternative and resistance.

This volume was born out of an interest to contribute to the decolonisation of modern political thought by foregrounding the different dimensions and articulations of coloniality contained in some of its central political concepts and in the theories and practices associated with them. Across *Decolonising Political Concepts*, researchers discuss and reflect upon specific political concepts against the background of postcolonial and decolonial theories and ideas. The contributors share the conviction that, in spite of the formal and alleged demise of colonial domination, coloniality – understood as an ontological order hierarchising modes of existence along a spectrum of humanity and, thus, validity – still endures. It endures in the relation between the dominant Western culture and 'other-ed' cultures, in the global economic arrangements, in social discrimination and oppression structures articulated through race or ethnic constructions, and in a wide array of other processes. Moreover, coloniality unfolds in the privileging of certain forms of knowledge, in the dismissing, ignoring, or silencing of others. Problematising and defying the entanglement of all these processes and their encapsulation into socio-political constructs are at the heart of this collection. Concretely, the contributions gathered here explore how predominant political concepts in Western political thought are beset with colonial remnants in their construction, formulation, and deployment. We contend that using them uncritically leads to naturalising a biased purview on political life that in turn shapes the available contemporary political thinking and praxis. In addition, this volume engages with concrete practices of colonised peoples and decolonial activists trying to reveal, work through, or subvert the colonial load and impact of political ideas surrounding them.

It is our firm belief that this collection represents a timely contribution in that it confronts one of the most important contemporary issues in the task of articulating just, inclusive, and emancipatory political thought: how to determine, imagine, and construct appropriate forms and spaces of political expression for the worldviews, thinking, claims, and aspirations of colonised peoples. Addressing this question needs to start with unpacking the entanglement of the predominant political thought with coloniality. Yet, it is an endeavour that cannot be circumscribed to critique. As necessary is to articulate ways to work through, re-think, or even overcome this predominant political thought and transform it into an (a)venue for postcolonial and decolonial struggles. It is this question, in its twofold character, that this volume delves into through a critical examination of some of the most common political concepts present in contemporary political thought. As already argued above, its originality lies precisely in its focus on political concepts and their relations to coloniality and decolonisation, an aspect often neglected in the existing literature.

We contend that political concepts are actually crucial to the work of decolonisation, thus requiring specific attention. Such significance stems from the

fact that they provide the ground for theories and practices deployed in the political and public sphere and beyond. On the one hand, political concepts inform political communities' models, infrastructures, or juridical systems, as well as political movements, resistance practices, reforms, and political imaginaries. On the other, they shape our perception of and orientation in the world, as well as our interactions with other individuals, groups, or nations. Thus, political concepts are not neutral or innocuous but explicit tools of power and efficient vehicles for establishing or changing relations of domination. They convey and may impose certain perspectives, beliefs, values, and norms, being used and deployed as tools for social, political, and cultural control. As historical constructs, they are part of the colonial legacies that still permeate our contemporary world. The way academic and socio-political actors define and use them is largely mediated by traditions of political thought marked and framed by coloniality. Yet, at the same time, they may be articulated and put to work in ways that may trouble it.

Despite the increasing and far-reaching work of postcolonial and decolonial research, this aspect of political concepts is still too often silenced or ignored. This volume asserts the need to question how we understand the world that surrounds us, what concepts are used to produce meaning, and the impact these particular lenses have in and beyond the analytical process. In doing so it contributes and adds to recent literature on the decolonisation of epistemology (Bendix et al., 2020; Meghji, 2021; Menon, 2022; Shilliam, 2021; Wood, 2020). However, it departs from the more narrow and predominantly philosophical lenses adopted in these works to instead compile a transdisciplinary and transnational exploration of theoretical and practical ramifications of political concepts, oftentimes illustrated through contemporary socio-political issues and struggles. As such, the present collection intends to shed a light on what is still a blind spot in decolonial theory, while simultaneously introducing a decolonial perspective in multiple discourses and analyses across the social sciences and humanities. It is the hope of its editors and contributors that such a volume will offer useful reflections for students, scholars, and activists in their respective journeys to decolonise their discourse, practices, teaching, and thinking.

Decolonial Theory, Political Concepts, and the Ideological West

Postcolonial and decolonial thinkers and activists have spent decades unravelling the intellectual, political, and structural legacies of colonialism in our contemporary world. Although a strict distinction between decolonial and postcolonial approaches is not always expedient or even possible, and productive perspectives at times emerge from combining them,[2] this volume is chiefly situated and understandable within the context of decolonial theory. By "decolonial theory" we refer to a corpus of thinking that poses colonialism as a fundamental problem intrinsic to Western modernity and the colonised as a potential agent for radical epistemic, symbolic, and material change. Said