

Decolonial Subversions

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Editorial
Decolonial Subversions 2021:
A Time for Change

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All our silences in the face of racist assault are acts of complicity

bell hooks (1996) *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*

Io non sono pacifista. Io sono contro la guerra...e non mi piace la parola 'utopia'; preferisco parlare di 'progetto non ancora realizzato'¹

Gino Strada (2006) Interview at *Che tempo che fa*

The past months have left many of us with a sense of powerlessness in view of increasingly worrisome macro-narratives around health, politics and the environment. While our everyday lives are directly affected by each one of these discourses, paradoxically, there seems to be little that can be done at an individual level to impact them.

One cannot help but wonder:

What is the value of populations in the Global North being offered second and even third doses of a vaccine against a global pandemic, when millions of people worldwide have not yet had access to a single dose?

What impact does one's vote have in a political reality where leaders choose bending to the will of multinational corporations over being accountable and responsive to citizens?

Do one's protesting, recycling, choosing to travel less or eat differently have any importance when seas and forests are ruthlessly depleted and polluted by predatory enterprises constantly chasing financial profits?

The current times have made it clear as never before that the globalised neoliberal system has harmed peoples across the world and the ecosystem at large. Matters of survival, once arrogantly or obviously brushed away by the Global North because considered to be primarily concerning the Global South, have in the last few years become central across the

¹ I am not a pacifist. I am against war...and I do not like the word 'utopia'; I prefer to talk about 'projects yet to be realised'.

so-called ‘advanced’ nations too. Despite wealthy nations refusing to acknowledge it, environmental damage and the depletion of natural resources impact everyone worldwide regardless of wealth, technological advancement and access to scientific innovations. Yet, in contrast to pandemic responses, no vaccine can mitigate environmental disasters and excessive exploitation.² And, while the ultra-rich race against each other to colonise alternative planets, an increasing part of the global population struggles with depression and mental health issues in a progressively alienating world.

With the gap between the poor and the rich steadily widening both in the Global North and Global South the harmful effects of an economico-political system revolving around profit appear to have come full circle. Despite its moral, economic and environmental unsustainability, the neoliberal model continues to be presented by politicians and capitalists worldwide as the sole option—especially following the collapse of the Communist Bloc, whose dissolution was assumed by the capitalist West to be proof that there is no economico-political system that delivers a viable alternative to capitalism.³

Crucially, a shift away from capitalist neoliberal ideologies does not entail falling back onto a communist world order, but makes space for as many possible frameworks of coexistence as there are communities in the world.⁴ Moreover, supporting a more just society does not require that one embarks on a formal journey to become a politician: as activists and artists—from second-wave feminists⁵ to novelist Thomas Mann,⁶ to musician Bob Marley⁷—show, politics are pervasive to the extent that not only the conduct of one’s everyday life, but merely existing according to specific modes of being-in-the-world have political value.

² We are aware that the questions asked here are not the only important ones in this time for different people across the world. Our main intent is to highlight the fallacies of the neoliberal system and its unsuitability in addressing the world’s issues. Concerning, in particular, the politicised topic of the pandemic, Monika’s and Romina’s individual positions—whether expressed through the abstention from conversations on it or, conversely, reflections thereupon—are in no way meant to be representative of anyone other than themselves; see ‘Uncensored Conversations on the COVID-19 pandemic’ on our [YouTube channel](#), which was envisioned and led by Romina to diversify the conversation.

³ See, for example, Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Ed. Penguin, London. 1993.

⁴ See for example Escobar, Arturo. *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Ed. Duke University Press, Durham. 2018; Reiter, Bernd (ed.). *Pluriverse. The Geopolitics of Knowledge*. Ed. Duke University Press, Durham. 2018; and Kothari, Salleh, Escobar, Demaria and Acosta (eds.). *Pluriverse. A Post-Development Dictionary*. Ed. Tulika Books. 2019.

⁵ ‘The personal is political’ or, also, ‘the private is political’ was a slogan characterising the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. See for example McCann, Carole and Seung-Kyung, Kim. *Feminist theory reader: Local and global perspectives*. Ed. Routledge, London. 2013.

⁶ Thomas Mann states that ‘Everything is politics’ in his classic *The Magic Mountain* (1924).

⁷ Bob Marley is often remembered for his anti-colonialist and anti-establishment politics. He famously stated that ‘Everything is political. I will never be a politician or even think political. Me just deal with life and nature. That is the greatest thing to me’.

When the Doomsday Clock seems to be way past midnight⁸ and no natural disaster or health crisis is deemed alarming enough by the powerful to change their course of action, it appears obvious that ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’;⁹ therefore, now more than ever, narratives that overcome neoliberal, exploitative, hierarchical relationships across and within nations *altogether* are the need of the hour.

We began this editorial with the powerful words of two great activists, who, through their engagement in non-hierarchical relationships revolving around love and support, have lived their everyday lives as radical political acts that made the world a better place to be in. Both standing by the side of the most marginalised and oppressed—hooks by exploring issues such as race, gender, class, love and healing throughout her eclectic writings, Strada by bringing medical care and building hospitals and clinics in war-ridden zones across the globe—their works have inspired innumerable people and will continue to do so long after their deaths, which occurred, a few months apart, in 2021.

Needless to say, few people get to touch and inspire as many lives as hooks and Strada did; however, as both teach, no act of care is too small to be insignificant, and inspiration often resides at life’s most uncomfortable junctures. In important ways, the last year has illustrated just this to many of us at *Decolonial Subversions*, as the platform bore witness to our struggles and offered a space to practice kindness, undertake insightful discussions and initiate encouraging projects.

Defined as a continuous work-in-progress revolving around the common denominator ‘decolonisation’,¹⁰ *Decolonial Subversions*’ growing community of activists, thinkers, artists and academics from all parts of the world and walks of life, in fact, strives to effectuate changes in the publishing scene and, through inclusive publications and projects, to promote modes of existence that emphasise:

Collectivity – rather than individualism

Collaboration – rather than competition

Understanding – rather than control

Multiple languages – rather than solely English

Multiple forms of expression – rather than solely written text

Diversity – rather than homogeneity

⁸ The Doomsday Clock is a symbol representing the likelihood of a man-made catastrophe established in 1947 by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. The clock is set every year by the Bulletin’s Science and Security Board together with 13 Nobel laureates, with midnight indicating apocalypse. Set at seven minutes to midnight in 1947, it has officially reached hundred seconds to midnight in 2020 and 2021.

⁹ Lorde, Audre ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.’ 1984. In Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press. 110-114. 2007.

¹⁰ See our Manifesto for an illustration of *Decolonial Subversions*’ guiding principles at: <http://decolonialsubversions.org/manifesto.html>.

Creativity – rather than calculated efficiency

Plurality – rather than anonymity

Egalitarianism – rather than hierarchy

a **Pluriverse** – rather than the Anthropocene

Shaped by these principles, in 2021 *Decolonial Subversions* has welcomed numerous new members, participated in a number of unconventional conferences, kicked off a Reading Group, strengthened existing partnerships with international colleagues, held talks for potential new institutional collaborations, and begun working on the first guest-edited Special Issue since its establishment. In parallel, as editors, we have worked hard to produce a fully-fledged annual volume with written, visual and acoustic pieces from contributors based in different parts of the world.

Firstly, we would like to welcome to the team two new Advisory Board Members, Simran Kalra and Vincenzo Cammarata based in the UK, and a new Editorial Board Member, Giridhar Rao based in India. We are honoured that Simran, Vincenzo and Giridhar have formally joined the platform after contributing to *Decolonial Subversions* in various capacities over the past months.

Special thanks go to [Jessica Aitken](#), who has joined [Rachel Duncan](#) as *Decolonial Subversions'* proofreaders. Jessica and Rachel have done fabulous jobs in rendering both the content of the webpage and the contributions polished and refined, always keeping in mind the constrictions imposed by the English language on authors whose first language is not English.

Among *Decolonial Subversions'* promotional activities figures a [conversation](#) with the South-South Movement at the Central European University, where Danilo Babić, Romina Istratii and Monika Hirmer have discussed decolonial publishing practices.

Vincenzo Cammarata has initiated the *Decolonial Subversions* Reading Group, which met for the first time in November to discuss three books chosen collectively by the participants and read in the months prior to the meeting. The works that were reviewed—*Plantation Memories* by Grada Kilomba, *Why I am not a Hindu* by Kancha Ilaiah and *From Kingdom to Elitdom* by Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes—prompted a discussion on colonialism and on what it means to decolonise. Each participant enriched the conversation through insights from their unique worldviews, research contexts and personal experiences. Vincenzo's notes on the meeting, reviewed and enhanced by the participants' comments, can be found in the list of written contributions below. We look forward to Vincenzo's next meetings, and invite those interested in joining the Reading Group to contact us.

In 2021 we also worked to strengthen existing partnerships, among which figure those with Project [dldl/ጸልጽል](#), [Convivial Thinking](#) and the [Esperantic Studies Foundation](#). Moreover, conversations have begun for the first partnership with a university in Central Africa, which *Decolonial Subversions* hopes will materialise in 2022.

Last but not least, and before turning to the contributions of our Main Issue 2021, we are pleased to have initiated *Decolonial Subversions'* rotational editorship, with a Special Issue led by Victoria Odeniyi from the University of the Arts London and Gillian Lazar from Middlesex University on the important topic 'Decolonising the university and the role of linguistic diversity'. Gillian and Victoria are currently curating the pieces for their special issue, which is anticipated in 2023.

With *Decolonial Subversions'* Main Issue 2021 we are happy to inaugurate the platform's section on visual contributions with two short films by João Araió and Veronica Calarco. In 'The Real Places are not on the Map' João returns to his hometown in northeast Brazil after seventeen years to visit his grandmother Luísa, the matriarch of the family whose care filled the film director's childhood. In seven minutes João attempts to summarise seventeen years spanning across three generations, and reflects on how to rescue ancestral affections and memories. The film sophisticatedly deals with self-representation and efforts to maintain an identity when one's experiences have been plundered and adulterated by the colonial gaze.

Veronica Calarco's short film '*Y tir wedi'i dad-dewi / The Land Unmuted*' and her accompanying Field Notes explore an installation that visually and aurally presents the struggles linked to reclaiming and holding onto endangered languages. Through her film, Veronica shows how languages are visually mediated through land; landscape being a space infused with history, identity and connection, the resurrection of languages also resurrects the knowledge of a land. Veronica focuses on the Indigenous Australian endangered language Gunnai/Kurnai and on the minority Welsh Celtic language Cymraeg: both are endangered by the dominant language English which, in the film, has been displaced from its centrality.

To our acoustic contributions is added the audio conversation between Manuela Da Rosa Jorge and Benedetta Zocchi that reflects on an interview with Professor Walter Mignolo titled 'Decoloniality, Coloniality and Mobility: A Conversation with Professor Walter Mignolo', part of the 'Mobile People: Mobility as a way of life' Leverhulme Trust Doctoral Scholarship programme, touching on the themes of decoloniality, mobility and border thinking. Their conversation starts with Mignolo's own encounter with decoloniality and moves on to the potential of decolonial thinking in addressing questions of human mobility. The speakers discuss how Mignolo reflects on concepts that challenge decolonial being and acting, such as border-thinking, re-existence, de-linking and un-learning.

In her written contribution 'Be Brave but be Smart: Can PhD Researchers be Epistemically Disobedient?' Benedetta Zocchi discusses the nature of the academic world as a hybrid between a creative platform and a corporate industry and reflects on how, on the one hand, researchers are given the liberty to explore, dare and critique while, on the other, they need to constantly remain loyal and committed to the hierarchical structure they belong to. Benedetta summarises the contradictions that she faces as a young scholar, and illustrates the frustrations implied by being exposed to epistemic freedom while, at the same time, being conscious of the dangers this freedom comes with.

In 'The Prospect of Decent Work in the Informal Economy: A Case Study of Bulawayo Metropolitan Province (Central Business District) Zimbabwe' Shaka Keny Bob discusses the concept of 'decent work', which seeks to promote opportunities where all workers are entitled to employment security, freedom, equality, recognition and dignity. Applying the

Edward Webster Decent Work Deficit Index as a theoretical framework, Shaka illustrates the differences of the decent work deficit conditions among urban informal workers in the Bulawayo central business district and suggests that, in order to advance decent work, the concept of heterogeneity must be incorporated into informal economy analysis.

Vincenzo Cammarata's article 'Decolonising Academic Debate and Space: An Analysis of Djamila Ribeiro's Works' discusses the decolonial vision of Brazilian philosopher Ribeiro. Through Ribeiro's works, Vincenzo develops a debate around the processes of suppression that silence all those who are situated outside the hegemonic white, male, and heterosexual discourses, and illustrates the subversive power deriving from the acknowledgment of one's own social positioning, *lugar de fala*. The author also emphasises the relevance of the acts of 'speaking' and 'listening' in order to decolonise physical and intellectual spaces of knowledge production and fruition.

Finally, Antonela Soledad Vaccaro, in her contribution 'Questioning Language Policies and Ideologies to Decolonise the School Curriculum' discusses how in apartheid South Africa the Afrikaner government imposed Afrikaans throughout the country, and used indigenous languages to divide the population. Once apartheid ended, nine indigenous languages became official and three of these were established in schools. Despite these policies, Antonela shows that English (introduced during colonial times) and Afrikaans are still dominant, and proposes that this extends the colonial legacy and reproduces inequalities. The author substantiates her arguments with a case study conducted in a prestigious school in Cape Town.

Decolonial Subversions wishes you happy reading, listening and watching!

29 December 2021

If you are interested in submitting a contribution you can write to mh121@soas.ac.uk or ri5@soas.ac.uk after consulting our [Manifesto](#) and [Contribution Guidelines](#). We accept submissions all year round on topics concerning decolonisation, broadly defined. Contributions submitted by April are considered for the same year's Main Issue, whereas all other contributions are considered for the following year's Main Issue.