

BOOK REVIEW

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò. *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously*. London: C. Hurst & Company, 2022. 368 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$19.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781787386921.

How, in the absence of colonial subjugation, can a people still remain dependent and unfree? In seeking to answer this question—or similarly themed questions—scholars in Africa and beyond have developed a vast literature of counter-hegemonic discourse, demonstrating their belief that the coercive power of colonialism stretches far beyond its official end date in erstwhile colonies. But while the persistence of hegemonic structures is scarcely debatable in the post-colonial period, there remains the question of whether counter-hegemonic discourse—in and of itself—moves the erstwhile colonies toward actualization of their freedom in any meaningful way.

For a significant majority of scholars writing in and about Africa today, the case for counter-hegemonic discourse is aptly expressed through the concept of decolonization, which literally means to negate colonization. Its emergence as a trope of scholarly discourse in the post-independence era coincided with the popularity of “post” theories in the humanities—such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, or postdevelopmentalism—and draws implicitly on their influence. What this means for knowledge production in and about Africa is, however, a matter of ongoing dispute.

One of the dissenting voices to this scholarly trend is the prominent philosopher Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, whose book *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously* takes aim at contemporary African decolonization discourse for denigrating African agency. Táíwò is the author of *How Colonialism Preempted Modernity in Africa* (2010), *Africa Must Be Modern* (2011), and several other critical essays that challenge basic presuppositions of contemporary African scholarship.

Táíwò maintains, consistent with his position in “Rethinking the Decolonization Trope in Philosophy,” that contemporary African decolonization discourse has lost its way. However, he further clarifies his position by introducing an important distinction between decolonization₁ (as the struggle for national independence) and decolonization₂ (as the contemporary

academic hostility to ideas and practices primarily because of their colonial provenance). This distinction signals Táíwò's preference for a deflated conception of decolonization (decolonization₁) and forms the centerpiece of his polemic against decolonisation₂.

Unlike decolonization₁, which aims to achieve political and economic self-determination, Táíwò claims that decolonisation₂ has no clear end goal or end date in view. Not only is this historically problematic, it is also analytically unhelpful, especially when read against the philosophical contentions of Frantz Fanon, the supposed pioneer of contemporary decolonization discourse. Furthermore, Táíwò suggests that not only is the ubiquity of decolonisation₂ unwarranted, but its proponents should also carefully consider whether the particular phenomenon they aim to decolonize has been created, caused, determined, conditioned, or influenced by colonialism.

Deploying decolonisation₂ without due regard for alternative sources of explanation—such as inertia or choice-making by the formerly colonized—leads to oversimplification of complex situations and some negative, even if unintended, consequences for African knowledge production. Here, some of the leading lights of decolonisation₂—Achille Mbembe, Charles W. Mills, and Adam Branch—are caught within the firing line of Táíwò's critique, but they are hardly the main target. Táíwò reserves his most potent attacks for Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Kwasi Wiredu, two advocates of linguistic decolonization. Dismissing their decolonization projects—in literature and philosophy—as misguided and unrealistic, Táíwò strikes a chord deep within many a decolonization scholar. And so, the demise of linguistic decolonization—especially the Ngũgĩ variant—is unlikely to be mourned. Táíwò's real contribution, however, comes in the form of a pragmatic alternative represented in the historical figure of Amílcar Cabral.

Following Táíwò, Cabral's "instrumentalist" approach to language is a strong affirmation of the colonized's agency, represented by their capacity to appropriate and take part ownership of their colonizer's language, religion, and other cultural artefacts. But more importantly, it widens the scope of what may be considered worthy of appreciation as products of African genius. Here, the artistic, literary, and philosophical genius of a great number of African thinkers—who otherwise tend to be ignored by scholars of decolonization—comes into view for critical acclamation. What this suggests, especially to a younger generation of African scholars, is that they are descendants of an intellectual tradition that is far richer and more sophisticated than the proponents of decolonisation₂ would have them believe. *Against Decolonisation* is therefore a challenge to young African scholars to explore beyond the limits of African knowledge production as dictated by decolonisation₂. This work is far from perfect; it offers a helpful diagnosis of what ails Africa today and identifies what is to come next (the ongoing second struggle for freedom), but leaves little in

the way of substantive solutions. The stage is therefore set for a new generation of African scholars to engage through new lenses the question of Africa's freedom and autonomy in today's world.

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