

# How to make the “decolonial turn” more than just a fashion

*by Paola Minoia*

Numerous calls for papers and conferences around Europe and globally give us the impression that we are now going towards a “decolonial turn” in many disciplines: development studies, IR, geography etc. On the other hand, many criticize this pick of initiatives, doubting their effective and truly challenging nature vis-à-vis the current systems of cultural and scientific production. I agree that some calls for papers, especially for large conferences, may sound insincere and produced by academic scholars “surfing” on this new trend, instead of stepping down from their powerful positionalities.

However, my sensation is that decoloniality (of the mind) is a long-term process that requires time and persistence, since it entails a work of revision of all what we have read, studied and understood in many years of education and research. More and more scholars are now revisiting, also retrospectively, their methodologies, and exploring alternative views inside and outside academia. Epistemic changes do not depend on mere scientific discoveries (an idea that is at the very basis of the thinking of modernity) but on recognition of the diversity of truths (instead of *the* universal truth), their relationality and temporal and local contextuality. Even at the scale of the individual scholar, epistemic change is not linear and happening suddenly, but needs steps, peer guidance, debates, and experiences. It requires a process of learning, unlearning, being challenged, listening, and even some degree of conscious passivity to be able to step aside and listen to other perspectives, before being active; and it involves frustrations and disorientation. That is why I welcome decoloniality events – if they aim to be critical and to produce new constituencies and praxis.

Some conferences, workshops and new publications seem to “play the game by their own rules” through appropriation of terms and concepts, with no challenge of modern, colonial, capitalist, heteropatriarchal orders. We therefore need to improve our ability to make distinctions, ethically and politically.

I have two positive experiences: the [UNIPID DocNet seminar](#): two days in Tvärminne, Finland with doctoral students in development studies and/or doing research in the global south or in indigenous areas; and the [DENOR workshop](#) of the network named Decolonial critique, knowledge production and social change in the Nordic countries.

The first seminar, titled “Doing diversity/interculturality/decoloniality in development research” was aimed to discuss decoloniality and diversity in the research processes of PhD researchers, and to challenge their work empirically, theoretically and methodologically. The seminar was held in the research station of Tvärminne, a beautiful location in Southern Finland by the sea. Parts of the seminar involved outdoor discussions while walking in nature. I cannot say that the immediate outcome was to transform all prospective theses in decoloniality projects, but it was a first step for the majority of the students, and they asked for more seminars in the coming years. Decoloniality is not just a theme of research or teaching and the objective of the seminar was to bring into their academic projects different

forms of knowledge, sources and studies that go beyond the subjectivity of the researcher. The approach demonstrated the difference to the most-consolidated practices of participatory methodologies where involvement of local participants is often reduced to the collection of factual data and phenomena without recognition of deeper cultural and structural contexts in which that information is gathered. We also discussed the ethics of the research process; engagement with literature informing of epistemologies and ontologies of non-Western subjects; possible methodologies and practices to create partnership allowing marginal knowledges and wishes to arise; co-production of knowledges; and active engagement beyond the academic writing, considering how the research could contribute to locals' transformative projects.

DENOR network was a larger event, involving a network of researchers and activists from especially Northern Europe and other parts of the world. DENOR had a wider scope because it presented decoloniality as an overall radical project, and not simply a research or teaching theme.

In fact, is it enough to diversify to decolonize? What other actions, collaborations and networking can we activate for de-whitening our work and working environments? Of course, we do not want to enter in a counter-silencing or self-silencing round of racialized subjects (or depression; or self-centrality or simple navel-gazing); but there is a need to join forces and contribute to opening spaces for all. Universities are still too white, and as scholars, this is the first place where we should get activated, for instance diversifying syllabuses in profoundly intercultural terms, recognizing Southern epistemologies; making research groups more inclusive and representative of societal diversities; using alternative methodologies in pedagogy and research; challenging neoliberal and competitive academic structures and publishing; diversifying citations rather than constantly referring to "the usual suspects" who certainly do not need to increase their international relevance thanks to our citation work; and so on. Yet, there were "stars" also there in the seminar; but among many other scholars and activists who shared many important stories. I was particularly impressed by a panel discussion involving activists on "Practical experiences and strategies". Panelists presented ideas that can work in practice. Maimuna Abdullahi introduced the experience of an Islamic women's group in Gothenburg who had organized public discussions and counternarratives on various themes: for instance on their working rights, or to conduct a collective reading of Fanon; or to discuss the recent hijab ban, or other topics that are usually treated in divisive terms within the society. After the 2015 terrorist attack in one school of Trollhättan, in a neighborhood with a high immigrant population, they convened an assembly to speak of racist violence not as isolated accidents but within a long-term history and political continuity. She also made a powerful statement on decoloniality, as a strategy to challenge whiteness: are "white decolonizing scholars" trustable companions? What are western people ready to give up from their positions to subvert the enduring colonial order? Then Amanj Aziz spoke of politics of respectability as a means to fight Islamophobia, and affirmed the need to produce more popular science and spread knowledge against discrimination (as white-wing factions often do, through simple messages and popular literature, to disseminate their vision), to challenge the narrative of racist acts as expressions of personal attitudes and intolerance, and create one direction towards social cohesion to face current structural political and economic disparities. Moreover, Faith Mkwesha presented the SahWira Africa International ([SAWI](#)) campaigns against the exploitation of children bodies in NGO adverts through "Afro-centric approach" and "motherhood methodology" (*your child is my child*). Campaigns were launched "to protect black child used as begging container in White Finland"; and against the utilization

of images that “racialize, eroticize and sexualize the African girl-child, and violate the girl-child’s right to privacy and dignity”.

These events, like many others, are fundamental for sharing critical understanding and political sensitivity; and for showing praxis that can inspire many others. Their strength also stays in their non-occasional nature, for being part in workshop-series. Continuity creates community. In other occasions, especially after large conferences, the returns bring many ideas and ambitious dreams, but also frustrations for lack of capacity to enact them. Singularly we are powerless, and occasional events do not help enforcing new practices. This is why I believe that not all conferences can be impactful, but those where networks or, even better, constituencies are created, to support realization of critical interculturality and decoloniality in education and scholarly production. More structural changes need even more efforts and long-term partnerships.

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