



Political Modernity and the Postcolonial New World Order

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Abstract

The current world order is organized into invented, self-contained modern nation-states in defiance of realities of globalization, planetary human entanglements and visions of a debordered, denationalised, and deterritorialized, pluriversal world. Modern self-contained nation-states are epistemically products of Euromodernity and ideologically products of modern methodological nationalism. Inevitably, at the centre of Euromodernity has been the unfolding of complex triple processes of nation-state making, colonialism and decolonization as simultaneously co-constituting and contesting phenomena. In the (ex)colonies of Africa, just like in Europe, poets, philosophers and historians actively exercised their minds in epistemic inventions of nationalism and actual writing of nations into concrete existence, with colonialism being subjected to resistance, subversion, critique, and decolonial visions of liberation. This short article calls attention to the crisis of political modernity and the limits of both global and national imaginaries and articulates the agenda of decolonizing the political community.

Keywords: Decolonisation, Colonial modernity, Euromodernity, Postcolonial new world order, Postcolonial modernity

Introduction

The irony of the 21st century is that the increased global human entanglements, which ideally should produce concrete cosmopolitanism, are in fact provoking narrow populist ethno-nationalism characterised by an upsurge in racism, nativism, xenophobia as well as what the philosopher Wendy Brown (2010) termed “walled states.” This situation has escalated since the outbreak of the coronavirus and the COVID-19 pandemic, which forcefully brought back the state as the entire human globe became characterised by national lockdowns in an attempt to contain a virus that does not respect national borders (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021a).

Indeed, the modern world responded to the pandemic through national solutions within a context of globalization—revealing in stark terms the fragility of what Isaac A. Kamola (2019) termed the “global imaginary.” What undercuts the global imaginary is better rendered as the resilient but problematic “national imaginary”, which defies what Brown (2010) depicted as “waning sovereignty.” Harshana Rambukwella (2018) reveals that at the centre of the “national imaginary” has always been a nationalism that seeks to “tame the unruliness of history” through the invention of “a stable national subject.” Rambukwella (2018: 10) elaborates:

The story of the nation, any nation, performs a kind of double trick with history: it details the emergence of a collective over time, while making the collective itself appear timeless, natural and unquestionable. Any critical engagement with nationalism therefore needs to question the apparently unquestionable, to de-naturalize the assumptions that might otherwise appear so self-evident.

The nation-state has so invaded the minds of modern subjects that the nation has become an epistemic frame for understanding the modern world and has successfully embedded itself in academic and intellectual thought, as well as popular human imaginaries and interpretations of modern history and politics.

Rambukwella (2018: 10) correctly noted that the ubiquity of the notion of nation and national subjects has given birth to what is known as “methodological nationalism” whereby “nations and nation-states” emerge as usable units of analysis. What is at stake, therefore, is unpacking how the nation was historically and historiographically written into existence. Of course, once the nation-state has been invented, it has actively engaged in autobiographically rewriting itself and

naturalizing itself to the extent that there are multiple efforts in many places across the world aimed at “protecting, saving and restoring” the nation-state (Rambukwella 2018: 10).

This analysis brings us to the question of how Euro-political modernity delivered the birth of a problematic “national imaginary.” This is necessary because the modern nation-state, like all other inventions of Euromodernity, pretends to be a self-evident phenomenon that is somehow politically natural.

Rewriting the history of Euromodernity and its problematic gift—the “national imaginary”

There is increasing consensus that the “standard biography of the modern state” has to be rewritten (Mamdani 2020: 1). For example, leading African intellectual Mahmood Mamdani (2020: 1) successfully challenged the thesis that the modern nation-state emerged in 1648 (Treaty of Westphalia), positing that “this story starts too late, and, as result, provides the wrong lesson.” Rather, according to Mamdani (2020: 1), “the founding moment of the modern state” is traceable to 1492 when the Castilian monarch sought to “create a homogenous homeland for Christian Spaniards by ejecting and converting those among them who were strangers to the nation—Moors and Jews.”

Mamdani’s central argument is only correct if the states and empires that emerged in Africa long before 1492 are excluded from the category “modern states.” The reality is there were indeed long-standing African states such as those of Egypt, Soghayi, Mali, Ghana, Kongo and many others that had nothing to do with Euromodernity but everything to do with African social formations (see Diop 1974; Diop 1987). Building on the expansive work of Cheikh Anta Diop (1989), the Nigerian feminist anthropologist Ifi Amadiume has underscored the matriarchal foundations of Africa’s precolonial formations, a reality which is very different from formations and institutions that emerged from Euromodernity (see Amadiume 1987a; Amadiume 1987b; Amadiume 1997). Diop and Amadiume’s work is important in that they convincingly argue that there were indeed other logics and values which produced particular moral orders and enabled particular formations. These included states and empires that were not patriarchal or prone to violence, in contrast to modern states that are characterised by what Max Weber (2015) termed “monopoly of violence.” Amadiume (1997: 40) emphasised that “matri-centric structures generate alternative

moral systems available to social subjects, both male and female, in the course of social relations” and concluded that:

The presence of these fundamental matriarchal systems generating love and compassion means that we cannot take the Oedipal principle of violence as a basic paradigm or given in the African context. The balancing matriarchal system acts as a constraint on the patriarchal structure, checking the development of absolute totalitarian patriarchy and a mono-logic system (Amadiume 1997: 40).

Diop and Amadiume should not be construed as presenting a highly romanticised notion of African social formations, constituted by pristine harmony and totally free of patriarchy and violence. Their central argument is that matriarchal ideology mediated and counter-balanced the patriarchal and violent ideology of warfare and therefore minimized the warrior tradition. Hence, Amadiume (1997: 37) posited that “If we exclude mother-focused ideas/philosophy, we miss the dialectic of gender, and consequently fail to understand the system of checks and balances in these societies.” Also of importance in Diop and Amadiume’s work is that unlike Mamdani’s analysis, which is focused on Euromodernity as a starting point, it provides alternative histories, sociologies and philosophies to rethink the constitution of the social and the political that is decoupled from Euromodernity. They challenge the naturalized “monologism of masculinist patriarchy and its inherent oppression and violence” (Amadiume 1997: 69).

Back to Mamdani: The founding of modern states was also accompanied by the colonization of the Americas, which was accomplished through the subjection of indigenous people to genocides (final solution). Mamdani’s thesis is therefore that:

Modern colonialism and the modern state were born together with the creation of the nation-state. Nationalism did not precede colonialism. Nor was colonialism the highest or the final stage in the making of a nation. The two were co-constituted. The birth of the modern nation state amid ethnic cleansing and overseas domination teaches us a different lesson about what political modernity is: less an engine of tolerance than of conquest. Tolerance had to be imposed on the nation-state long after its birth in order to stanch the bloodshed it was causing (Mamdani 2020: 2).

What must also be noted in the rewriting of the history of political modernity and the birth of “national imaginary” is that the Westphalian Treaty delivered tolerance and laid the foundation for liberalism in Europe, while outside Europe, enslavement, racialization, violence, warfare, genocide, conquest, dispossession and exploitation were integral to the unfolding of Euromodernity (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013a; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013b; Mamdani 2020). There was no toleration. This analysis dovetails with a long-standing argument of leading Latin American decolonial theorists who coined the popular concepts of “coloniality” and “decoloniality” as they rewrote the very history of Euromodernity from the vantage point of the racialized, enslaved and colonized people’s experiences (Quijano and Wallerstein 1992; Dussel 1995; Mignolo 2007).

It was actually Ramon Grosfoguel (2013) who identified what he termed the “four genocides/epistemicides of the long 16th century”, which included the burning alive of white women in Indo-Europe who were accused of being witches, the attack and destruction of Grenada (the last standing Muslim Caliphate in Southern Europe), the subjection of indigenous people in the Americas to genocide, and the kidnapping and enslavement of African people and their transportation to labour on the mines and plantations in the Americas. These four events (if read together) laid the foundation of Euromodernity and are constitutive of what James Blaut (1993) termed the “colonizer’s model of the world.” As put forward by Achille Mbembe (2021), at the centre of the “colonizer’s model of the world” was the imperial design of European colonizers, conquering the earth, claiming it as their own and excluding all others.

The Euromodernist idea was that the nation is to be constituted only by what they considered to be “civilized” people, and those designated as “uncivilized” were written out of the nation. Gurminder K. Bhambra (2007: 1) correctly characterised Euromodernity as underpinned by “rupture and difference.” Rupture refers to the colonization of time, taking the form of its division into “premodern” and “modern” with Europeans being the only modern subjects (Bhambra 2007: 1). Then, “a fundamental difference” was said to distinguish “Europe from the rest of the world” (Bhambra 2007: 1). These two assumptions underpinning Euromodernity produced what Gerrit W. Gong (1984) termed “the standard of civilization in international society.” This invented and problematic standard of civilization was also made possible by what Sylvia Wynter (2003) and Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) termed “coloniality of being”, involving the social classification and hierarchization of the

human population by race. Taking this analysis into account makes Mamdani's position clear:

Embracing political modernity means embracing the epistemic condition that Europeans created to distinguish the nation as civilized and thereby justify aggrandizing the nation at the expense of the uncivilized. The substance of this epistemic condition lies in the political subjectivities it affords. How does the subject understand herself? If she understands herself as a member of the nation, she is participating in political community. Colonized peoples lacked this subjectivity until Europeans foisted it on them, much as this subjectivity was foisted on Europeans themselves, at least in the early days of the nation-state (Mamdani 2020: 3).

This brings us to the analysis of how Euromodernity travelled into Africa, how colonialism rewrote history, invented tradition and recreated the African subjectivity called "native" that was excluded from the category "nation" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013b).

Colonial rewriting of history, invention of tradition and reproduction of African subjectivity

Through colonialism, empires imposed Euromodernity on Africa, including the reorganization and reworlding of Africa into colonial states following the scramble for and partition of Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885. Ironically, at the same time, colonialists were adamant in their denial of "national subject" status to the colonized people. This process entailed what Mamdani (2013) depicted in terms of "define" and "rule", resulting in the invention of the "native" as new political subjectivity. This is how the process unfolded:

Unlike what is commonly thought, native does not designate a condition that is original and authentic. Rather [...], the native is the creation of the colonial state: colonized, the native is pinned down, localized, thrown out of civilization as an outcast, confined to custom, and then defined as its product (Mamdani 2013: 2-3).

This colonial invention was a central aspect of colonial governmentality, which was preoccupied with what became known as “the native question” that “confronted every colonial power and [posed] a riddle that preoccupied the best of its minds” (Mamdani 1996: 3). What colonialists and colonial ideologues termed “the native question” was about how a minority of white foreign conquerors would rule over a majority of indigenous black people without provoking resistance, and indeed how to stabilize alien rule in an alien context. In his seminal book *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (1996), Mahmood Mamdani explained how the British colonial experience in India, where “direct rule” was attempted and provoked Indian resistance, led the British colonialists to innovate and introduce “indirect rule” as a form of colonial governmentality. Mamdani (1996: 16) explained that:

Direct rule was Europe’s initial response to the problem of administering colonies. There would be a single legal order, defined by the “civilized” laws of Europe. No “native” institutions would be recognized. Although “natives” would have to conform to European laws, only those “civilised” would have access to European rights. Civil society, in this sense, was presumed to be civilized society, from whose ranks the uncivilized were excluded.

With the shift to “indirect rule”, there was colonial “invention of tradition” masquerading as rule through African precolonial institutions, customs and traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The enduring consequence has been institutional in the form of what Mamdani (1996: 36) described as the “bifurcated state” in which the white colonialists concentrated in urban areas, towns were governed “directly”, and colonized black people, concentrated in rural areas, were governed “indirectly” through “decentralized despotism.” Peter Ekeh (1975: 91) also emphasized how colonialism fundamentally reorganized and reordered African political, social, cultural and economic life and introduced the concept of “the two publics” (the primordial public and the civic public) and how this structural colonial intervention “led to the emergence of a unique historical configuration in modern post-colonial Africa.” In short, Europe’s approach to ruling Africa entailed rewriting African history in favour of colonial and imperial designs in which difference was exaggerated and the existence of African people, as an oppressed majority, was denied.

In the sphere of the invention of colonial subjectivities, it is important to understand how colonized African people were “incorporated into—and not excluded from—the arena of colonial power” (Mamdani 1996: 15). An invented, racially hierarchised colonial social pyramid had the colonialists at the top, defined as citizens enjoying civil, political and all other modern rights and privileges; then, there were racial subjects consisting of Indians and other minorities; and at the lowest level were what became known as “natives”, who were denied all rights and said to be creatures of tradition and custom (Mamdani 1996; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003; Mamdani 2013). Those designated as “natives” were categorised as contending and inchoate “tribes” rather than “nations.” Being a “tribe” insinuated being pre-political, premodern, primitive and desperately in need of European tutelage as a form of “civilizing mission.” What ensued was an awkward situation in which foreign white colonial conquerors became “native foreigners” and indigenous conquered people became “foreigner natives” in their own lands (Neocosmos 2010). All these colonial political interventions and social reorderings of Africa had direct implications on how African nationalism would form and unfold—simultaneously as a product of colonialism and as its nemesis.

African national imaginary, nationalist historiography and the African idea of Africa

Colonialism was never free of internal contradictions and ambivalences, which made it possible for resistance, Black Consciousness, African nationalism and pan-Africanism to emerge (Bhabha 1994; Mazrui 2005). Colonial racism and exploitation provoked what Julius Nyerere termed the “African sentiment” and made it possible for the African idea of Africa to emerge as a resistance phenomenon born out of “double invention” by both colonial modernity and African experiences of exclusion, domination and exploitation (Mazrui 1963). This is what Nyerere said:

Africans all over the continent, without a word being spoken either from one individual to another or from one African country to another, looked at the European, looked at one another, and knew that in relation to the European they are one (quoted in Mazrui 2005: 75).

On the politics and technologies of the external invention of Africa, as well as the exotic idea of Africa, two seminal works by Valentin Y. Mudimbe provide details: *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (1988) and *The Idea of Africa* (1994). However, African intellectuals and African nationalists actively worked to rewrite Africa from an African vantage point and lay out an African idea of Africa. This initiative is well exemplified by Kwame Nkrumah's assertion that he was not born in Africa, rather Africa was born in him (Mazrui 1963). The African idea of Africa is about how Africans engaged in purposeful self-definition in defiance of colonial stereotypes and denials of the continent's very existence. At the centre of this self-definition initiative has been the reconstruction of what became known as "African personality", which entailed picking up the pieces (re-membering of Africa) after centuries of "dismemberment" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 2009).

At the centre of African nationalism and African historiography is the notion of Africa as an idea and a home that has to be liberated and celebrated because of what colonialism and imperialism did to it. Africa emerges as one of the most emotionally evoked names within what Achille Mbembe (2002; 2017) termed "African modes of self-writing" and "Black reason." At the centre of African modes of self-writing have been such initiatives as Ethiopianism, Garveyism, Negritude, African Personality, African Socialism, African Humanism, African nationalism, Black Consciousness movements, Black Radical Tradition, Afrocentricity and African Renaissance (Falola 2001; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021b). What frames all this is a Black radical tradition coming from the African Diaspora and African historiography coming from the African continent. According to Toyin Falola (2001: 224), African nationalist historiography is and was "a counter-discourse used for attacking European representations of Africa. It is a deliberate attempt to provide credible evidence for the achievements of Africa and combat racist views that Africans are incapable of managing themselves."

Two schools of thought constituted African nationalist historiography. The first is the "episodic school" represented by historian Jacob Ade Ajayi of the Ibadan Nationalist School in Nigeria, who, in his efforts to counter imperial/colonial historiography, posited that colonialism was a "mere episode" in African history as he strove to recover precolonial African history (Falola 2001, Mazrui 1986). This school of thought inadvertently ended up minimizing the epochal impact of colonialism and tended to confuse the event of colonization with the process of colonialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). The second is the "epic school" represented by the work of

Peter Ekeh (1975; 1983), Frantz Fanon (1968), Ali A. Mazrui (1986) and many others who understand colonialism as a system of power with far-reaching consequences for Africa, including its postcolonial politics. It is perhaps from the vantage point of the “epic school” that Mamdani (2020: 15) posed the following questions: “Why had Europe’s past become our present? Why were nationalist elites reviving the civilizing mission that colonialism had abandoned when it embraced the defence of ‘tradition?’” Mamdani (2020: 4) elaborated that:

The violence of postcolonial modernity mirrors the violence of European modernity and colonial direct rule. Its principal manifestation is ethnic cleansing. Because the nation-state seeks to homogenize its territory, it is well served by ejecting those who would introduce pluralism. Ethnic cleansing can take a variety of forms. These include genocides, whereby the minority is removed from the territory or concentrated in a minimal portion of it, away from the majority.

This argument alerts us to the problematic nature of nationalism as a “derivative discourse”. It delivers the same problems that haunted Euro-political modernity, which was underpinned by a paradigm of difference (see Chatterjee 1993 on derivative discourse). Of course, there were many original innovations by African nationalists during their making of African nationalism, but the very fact that they imagined the attainment of “national subject” status as the arrival at the heaven of decolonization demonstrated how African nationalism was deeply interpellated by the immanent logics of Euro-political modernity. This brings us to the critique of what Nandita Sharma (2020) terms the “postcolonial new world order” and replication of the colonial paradigm of difference.

From empire to nation: Critique of postcolonial new world order

The problematic gift of Euromodernity is nationalism, which Sharma (2020: 2) depicted as a “new religion of nationalism” within which the “nation” has become a god to be protected, preserved and, indeed, worshipped. The composition of national anthems and making of national flags concretize the notion of a “new religion of nationalism.” Under empire, the colonized were reduced to rightless subjects called “natives”. As noted by Sharma (2020: 3): “After WWII, with astonishing speed, the

near-global space of imperialism was mostly nationalised.” What had started in 1492 was engulfing the rest of the world and pretending to be the destiny of humanity. To be defined as “national subjects” became a badge of honour and a sign of being with the emergent postcolonial new world order (Jabri 2013; Sharma 2020).

Three imperatives informed the shift from empire to nation. The first is the long-standing and problematic European liberalism, which, as demonstrated in Lisa Lowe’s *The Intimacies of the Four Continents* (2015), was simultaneously anchoring the rise of modern nation-states in Europe, with its politics of toleration, and imbricated in enslavement, colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism that denied a majority of the world freedom, equality and fraternity. The second is the post-1945 rise of two superpowers (the USSR and the USA), both of which were eager to dominate a world after the withdrawal of the empires and their monopoly over Africa. This point is highlighted by Sharma (2020: 16):

Instead, the United States understood that imperial-state monopolies over colonies prevented capitalists based in the United States from exploiting these same territories and the people in them. Empires simply stood in the way of the United States becoming a world hegemon. The basis of U. S. support for expanding the principle of national self-determination to the colonies was the understanding that it would gain from the opening of closed imperial markets for land, labor, and commodities. Such an opening would be achieved by the transformation of both imperial metropolises and colonies into “independent,” sovereign nation-states, each enmeshed in an international regime of financial, political, and military ties.

Therefore, it is no surprise that, at the conclusion of the WWI in 1919, the USA drew up the Fourteen Points and included the principle of national self-determination; in the midst of WWII, in 1941, the USA signed the Atlantic Charter, which contained the universal principle of self-rule; and at the end of the WWII, the USA participated in the drafting of the UN Charter, which enshrined the principle of recognition of the right to self-determination and the right to national sovereignty of the people.

The third imperative became the long-standing anti-colonial and decolonial struggles that ensued from the very time of colonial encounters. Adom Getachew, in *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (2019), identified African anti-colonial nationalists as “worldmakers” and “nation-builders” to the

extent that, through their struggles, the principle of self-determination became escalated to the status of a human right. There was also concerted effort in bringing about a New International Economic Order, and indeed, there were also intensified efforts in inventing transnational pan-African federations as a guarantor of the hard-won political sovereignty. But what is problematic is the very idea of making attainment of “national subject” status and national sovereignty the end goal of decolonization. This is why Sharma (2020: 3) is sceptical about the “postcolonial new world order” itself:

The Postcolonial New World Order of nationally sovereign states thus ushers in a new governmentality, one which produces people as Nationals and produces land as territories in control (in the past and sometime in the future if not always the present) of sovereign nation-states.

Through its creation of “a people of a place” (national subjects) and “a people out of place” (immigrants/foreigners/outside), the postcolonial new world order “normalises a racism in which political separations are seen as the natural spatial order of nationally sovereign states” (Sharma 2020: 4). The second problem is that such narrow nationalist ideologies as nativism, which breed autochthonous and xenophobic politics, are not aberrations but intrinsic elements of nationalism. Hence, Sharma (2020: 4) concluded that “Thus does nationalism become the *governmentality* of the Postcolonial New World Order, the separation of ‘national subjects’ from Migrants its *biopolitics*, and ‘national self-determination’ its *leitmotif*.”

The third problem is that making attainment of “national status” a goal “substitutes demands for decolonization with demands for national sovereignty” and creates a false impression that “the end of colonialism occurs when all nations have obtained their national sovereignty. This is a confusion of decolonization for postcolonialism” (Sharma 2020: 14–15). Sharma (2020: 20) is correct to say: “Postcolonialism is the governmentality of the international system of nation-states and the equally international system of capitalist social relations.” She explains her position as follows:

In rejecting the Postcolonial New World Order with its separated political categories of Natives and Migrants, I embrace a collective struggle for our common, borderless world. The contemporary struggle for our commons, one

that I believe must be both worldly and global, is the latest effort to decolonize our world and our imaginations, another effort to make our heaven on earth, despite the jealousies and violence of those who want to be sovereign lords (Sharma 2020: 35).

Sharma is not alone in rejecting the postcolonial new world order. Hamid Dabashi (2020: 9) also rejects it: “the very notion of the ‘nation-state,’ as we understand it today, was a colonial legacy and has now transformed into a postcolonial myth. We in the postcolonial world had no business buying into it. It has never worked—in or out of Europe.”

Conclusion: Towards decolonization of the political community

Decolonization of the political community has to begin as a work of imagining something new and better, but such imagining, and indeed dreaming, cannot happen in a vacuum. The essential prerequisite for political imagining has to be predicated on a rewriting of the very history of political modernity from the vantage point of its victims, namely the enslaved, colonized, racialised, minoritized and those written out of the nation-states (stateless). This is why Mamdani (2020: 20) posited: “So the decolonization of the political demands an intricate engagement with history”

But there cannot be successful rewriting of the history of political modernity without an epistemic revolution in which the change forces are free to think as themselves and from where they are located socially and epistemically. This brings in the important aspect of “epistemic freedom” that is well articulated in *Epistemic Freedom in Africa* (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). The fact that African nationalists could be accused of deriving nationalism from Europe and North America and predicating their postcolonial nation-building projects on such templates as the Westphalian system, to the extent that it provoked Basil Davidson to write the book *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Case of the Nation-State* (1992), indicates a terrible capture of Africans by the colonial cognitive empire and a lack of epistemic freedom.

Therefore, the rewriting of the history of political modernity has to be predicated on a rethinking of thinking itself—that of political identity formation and inventions of political community. Mamdani (2020) and Dabashi (2020) agree that the practical result of the work of decolonization of the political is the decoupling of the “nation” from the “state.” This is how Dabashi (2020: 17) put it: “My concern instead is a

complete decoupling of the nation and the state. This is a bad and misbegotten marriage, and the sooner it ends, the better.”

What makes this work of decolonizing the political community difficult is that nationalists continue to feed the world with obnoxious ideas of glorious pasts (“Make America Great Again”) and promises of ever-brighter futures as long as external and internal enemies are eliminated. Across the world, there is not yet an agreement about the failures of the postcolonial new world order, partly because it works for capitalists and partly due to the colonial-nationalist cognitive empire with its technologies of destruction of new imaginations of the world. This is why an epistemic revolution becomes an essential prerequisite for decolonizing the political community.

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