

Democratising democracy, humanising human rights: European decolonial social movements and the “alternative thinking of alternatives”

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Abstract

This paper offers a snapshot of the potential contributions that Decolonial Social Movements have to the democratisation of democracy and to the humanisation of human rights. It analyses European realities of racist exclusion through the theorizations of four Decolonial Social Movements; the Parti des Indigènes de la République (PIR) in France, the Dutch Black Movement, the Islamic Human Rights Commission in the UK, and the Studies Group of the Andalusian Workers' Union (Grupo de Estudios - Sindicato Andaluz de Trabajadores; GE-SAT). These movements all point to two fundamental crises of *longue durée*: the crisis generated by the category of the 'human', and that generated through the idea of 'democracy'. They underline the importance of 'democratising democracy', and 'humanising human rights' in ways that take into account 'other grammars of human dignity'. In essence, this effort implies abandoning the category 'human' and the idea of 'democracy' as globalised localisms –as the products of racism; the appropriation, violence and control of people marked as dispensable, subhuman and nonhuman, and instead reinventing them in ways that effectively counter their inherently racist/sexist logics; an alternative thinking of alternatives.

Keywords: Decoloniality, Europe, democracy, human rights, racism.

Introduction

This paper offers a snapshot of the potential contributions that Decolonial Social Movements in Europe have to the democratisation of democracy and to the humanisation of human rights.¹ The point of departure is that human rights and democracy are interrelated and interdependent ideas that play an important role in the ways in which racism is played out in Europe. As part of a recently initiated research project², this paper presents the concepts “white

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¹ The Decolonial Social Movements are organised in the Decoloniality Europe Network: <http://decolonialityeurope.wix.com/decoloniality>

² “ALICE, Strange Mirrors, Unsuspected Lessons”, coordinated by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (alice.ces.uc.pt) at the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra – Portugal. The project is funded by the *European Research Council*, 7th Framework Program of the European Union (FP/2007-2013) / ERC Grant Agreement n. [269807]. The Danish Social Science Research Council also funds the specific sub-project in which the researcher is engaged concerning the contributions to Europe from the south inside the north. This paper must be read as what it is in the collaborative endeavour of the research project in mention: it is my first approach to these movements' contributions, and speaks neither *for* nor *about* them. Rather, in coherence with the collaborative and decolonising methodologies employed in this research

political field” of the *Parti des Indigènes de la République* (PIR) in France, “scientific colonialism” of the *Dutch Black Movement*, “an-naas” and “Jihad” as they are conceptualised by the *Islamic Human Rights Commission* in the UK, and finally “indigeneity” as conceptualised by the Studies Group of the Andalusian Workers’ Union (*Grupo de Estudios - Sindicato Andaluz de Trabajadores; GE-SAT*). Each of the concepts has been elaborated in the context of dissimilar struggles, and yet, this paper argues, they speak to the same problems of racist exclusions, offering an innovative perspective from which to understand current challenges in Europe. They point to two fundamental crises of *longue durée*: the crisis generated by the category of the ‘human’, and that generated through the idea of ‘democracy’. Indeed, if we want to speak of Europe as inclusive societies (as is the language used in the current Horizon2020 initiative from the EU), we have to look at how those who are excluded from society analyse the problems of exclusion. This principal ethical and methodological point of departure in this paper is coherent with the methodological tools developed by the author (Suárez-Krabbe 2011), by which the focus of attention is not the movements as such, but their analysis of reality. Hence, this paper must be understood as an approach to the analysis of dominant Europe *with* Decolonial Social Movements’ theories rather than a paper concerned with studying social movements.

Democratising democracy and humanising human rights

Parti des Indigènes de la République (PIR)

French citizens of Arab-Muslim and Black origin, the latter especially from the Caribbean, compose the movement of the colonial subjects in France. Their work revolves around the decolonisation of being, power and knowledge, among others through their preoccupation with the historical memory concerning colonialism and slavery, and a radical questioning of the institutional structures of colonial power of the French Republic.³

project (see Suárez-Krabbe 2011), it constitutes a working paper, intended to form the basis of the first discussions with representatives of the movements.

³ The category Indigènes de la République is explained as follows: “Population living in France, originating from the former French colonies as well as, from the country’s current possessions overseas. Forged by activists who are themselves descendants of the colonial immigration in France, this formulation refers to the category of indigenous used by the French Republic in the XIXth and XXth centuries to refer to its colonial subjects. The aim of this category is to visibilise the continuity, which persists in spite of its metamorphoses, between the status of the former colonial subjects and the contemporary status to which the populations who originate in the colonies are confined. It also underlines the obvious paradox between the Republic’s egalitarian ideals and its reality.” Among the activities of the PIR are marches, coalitions with other groups, and public conferences, seminars and debates. Additionally, they count with a group of activist-intellectuals that elaborate diverse analyses of coloniality in contemporary France, and with a web page, which is updated on daily basis (<http://www.indigenes-republique.fr/pir>). The members of this movement continuously participate in public debates in France, and intervene in national newspapers, television and radio.

The *longue durée* crises generated by the category ‘human’ and through the idea of democracy as globalised localisms have specific localised effects in the French context. The PIR’s struggle against racism and their conceptualisation of the ‘white political field’ point precisely at these crises. The PIR have defined ‘white political field’ as

“the space, the temporalities and the political logics that work at the heart of the imperialist states or the global interstate system structured through their institutional incarnations. These institutional incarnations are constituted, on the one hand, by the past and present conflicts within the established White group and, on the other hand, by devices of monopolization of the political developed by the same group.”⁴

The white political field, or arena, is to be understood in its spatial, temporal and political dimensions. These dimensions are interlinked, and ‘incarnated’ in institutions that contribute in the monopolization of ‘the political’. Because the political is monopolised by the white political field, the PIR work, among others, for the continued development of an autonomous political practice – a practice that “does justice to the temporal and spatial disjunctures between the situation of post-colonial subjects and white political space.” (Kipfer 2011: 1157, see also Khiari 2006). The efforts of the PIR to democratise democracy imply the political mobilisation of those citizens in France who do not enjoy a de facto citizenship in the French Republic. The PIR’s is an affirmation of existence through the creation of a decolonial political arena. The French ‘democracy’ is undemocratic because it rests upon the exclusion of its indigene populations, and upon a political field colonized by those who defend and inhabit the white political field. The white political field includes both the left and the right-wing parties.

The category ‘white’ used by the indigenes refers to, *“the established group that benefits from the racialising social hierarchy produced by the on-going coloniality of the power relationships in their political, economic, cultural and symbolic dimensions. The established frontiers of this dominant group transgress class and gender boundaries, and they have been constituted through a historical process of racialisation, associating the phenotypic characteristics (White epiderme) with a European and Christian origin”*.

While ‘white political field’ describes the exclusions produced by the idea of democracy through the discourse on republicanism in France, the term ‘white’ makes reference to one of the social races – the one that benefits from “the processes of racialization linked to capitalist coloniality” and hence is able to monopolise the political field. According to the PIR, however, the social races cannot be understood separately; they represent different and unequal positions in “the social relation of oppression and resistance to oppression produced by the processes of racialization linked to capitalist coloniality and the hierarchised social groups.”

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations of the movements have been taken from their “key concepts” developed in the context of their work in the Decoloniality Europe network. These can be found in the following link: <http://decolonialityeurope.wix.com/decoloniality#!key-concepts/c18i9>.

The PIR underlines the necessity of speaking of social races in the plural – to a great extent because processes of profound social transformation pass through deep changes in the subjectivities of colonizer and colonized alike. To do this, the category ‘human’ must be re-invented. This re-invention must take into account other grammars of human dignity such as those that take place in the continuous development of the decolonial, autonomous political field.

Dutch Black Movement

The Dutch Black movement has a long trajectory working in relation to Dutch slavery and its legacies, centring especially in contemporary debates about history, education and research (decolonization of the mind⁵), reparations and Dutch public policies (decolonisation of power). The movement, which is strongly supported by the Black Dutch community in general, has various institutionalised activities, such as a yearly summer school and symposium, an institute of research and education, several black radio stations that discuss the legacy of slavery and racism on a regular basis and hundreds of social-cultural organizations that organize public meetings on racism and the legacy of slavery in Dutch culture.⁶ Some of the members of this movement continuously participate in public debates in Holland, and are invited to speak in television and radio.

The struggles of the movement to obtain a space of knowledge construction within the university – in research centres and departments – has been characterised by responses that put to the fore the racist working of the Dutch society, and specifically of the Dutch universities (see Essed and Nimako 2006). The issues that are concerned with the democratization of democracy and the humanisation of rights must, in the context of their work, be understood against the backdrop of the negation of the black subjects’ history and the negation of their humanity throughout history. One of the targets of their activities is ‘scientific colonialism’, a term that describes “a current in Eurocentric science that uses pseudo-scientific arguments to paint a positive image of colonialism and blurs it as a system of oppression and exploitation.” In this endeavour, they have, among others, contributed with proposals to change the terminology used in historical and other social and humanistic sciences to inaccurately describe pivotal historical events. Among these concepts are the following: ‘Enslaved person’ must replace the term ‘slave’. This is substantiated by the following argument: “Slave is used as an attribute of a per-

⁵ See Sandew Hira’s presentation about the decolonisation of the mind from approx minute 37 in the following video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVqWZkG7HMg&feature=player_embedded

⁶ *Black Europe Summer School* <http://www.dialogoglobal.com/amsterdam/>, *NinSee – The National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy*: <http://www.ninsee.nl/>
Sandew Hira’s Blog: <http://www.starnieuws.com/index.php/welcome/index/nieuws/29>,
The International Institute for Scientific Research: <http://www.iisr.nl/>

son, but no person is born as a slave but as a free human being. They are forced into slavery by a social and political system. Enslavement is an act, not an attribute.” The category ‘slave’ can be said to be the opposite of the colonial category ‘human’ – the change of terms proposed by the Black Dutch movement implies the double effort of decolonization whereby the terminology referring both to the colonizer and to the colonised must change. In this manner, they propose to change the term ‘planter’ or ‘master’ to that of ‘driver of enslaved persons’ or ‘enslaver’. The argument for this change is this:

The term planter for the white man who enslaved blacks is factually incorrect. The blacks were doing the planting for the driver of enslaved persons. The term master is incorrect because it suggests an acceptance by the enslaved person of the relationship of being enslaved and of the enslaver. The term driver of enslaved persons is preferred above that of “enslaver” because it is better suited to cover the content of the relationship during slavery.

The efforts at decolonising the mind and decolonising power are inter-linked. They are based on the recognition that, in order to create new public policies whereby democracy can be democratised, the existing colonial mind-set must also change.⁷ Through such changes the possibility of humanising human rights emerges. Indeed, human rights are inhuman from the outset because the understanding of what humanity is has been constructed on the basis of the negation of black subjects’ humanity.

Islamic Human Rights Commission

The work of the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) in the United Kingdom is based on fieldwork conducted by intellectuals and activists from all of Europe about the discrimination and Islamophobia faced by Muslims in Europe. The IHRC collaborates with different Muslim and non-Muslim organisations towards the construction of an anti-racist and decolonial legal system, and the decolonisation of human rights. Their work has many expressions: the elaboration of reports to national and international organisations, articles for the written press, media monitoring, documentation of war crimes and elaboration of research papers on discrimination, human rights, human dignity, democratization, etc. Much of the material elaborated by the IHRC is available online in their web page.⁸

The IHRC contributes with concepts that allow seeing the dimensions of their struggle as well as the shortcomings of contemporary dominant understandings, which are the foundation for the notions of democracy and human rights. Firstly, they propose that the term “social being” be used to replace the use of ‘man’, ‘human’ and to challenge epistemic control of the nature of being that allows subalternisation. Social being is a translation of ‘an-naas’, a Quranic concept usually mistranslated as ‘man’, ‘human’ in modern translations, that internalise gendered, othering discourses.

⁷ Sandew Hira, see footnote 10.

⁸ <http://www.ihrc.org.uk/>

es within European discourses. 'Social being' comes from the roots of 'an-naas' and undermines the idea that otherisation of fellow social beings is possible. All are socially interconnected by their state of being – no 'man' or 'human' can deny another's 'humanity' or worth within a universal understanding of being."

This is an attempt to decolonize the idea of 'humanness', which rests upon the negation of the other's humanity as mentioned previously. The proposal also takes into account that human rights, as globalized localisms, work for the protection of the 'human', at the expense of a majority of social beings. In a Fanonian vein, a possible path to 'humanise' human rights might well imply the complete destruction of the idea of 'humanity' and 'humanism' in order to respect the emancipatory notion of mutual interconnectedness that could provide substance to changes in subjectivity towards common dignity and community.

Where 'an-naas' roots the idea of the social being proposed by the IHRC as a fundamental change in relation to rights thinking, 'jihad' speaks to efforts of 'democratising democracy'. It takes into account the problems and exclusions generated through the idea of democracy, and to the different societal processes, mainly educational, that produce subjects indifferent to social injustice. Jihad, understood as "A struggle for emancipation of the soul and all the oppressed, that requires faith that the nature of the struggle and the end goal are emancipatory when they are both just" speaks against this indifference. It is a powerful principle of participation, a decolonial political field that might encompass similar dimensions to that of the Indigènes de la République.

Sindicato Andaluz de Trabajadores (SAT)

The Andalusian Workers Union emerges in 2007, and must be seen as a continuation of the movements of occupation of large estates in Andalucía that have existed since the mid-seventies. The SAT is sometimes described as a nationalist Andalusian movement. In contrast to most other separatist movements in Europe, their 'nationalism' however, must be understood within the historical process of the conquest of Al-Andalus that preceded the conquest of the Americas in 1492. Indeed, as Grosfoguel has shown,⁹ these two colonial projects are closely interlinked, and in this sense the history of Andalucía must be analysed, as does the SAT, as a history of colonial invasion, exploitation and control including the racialization processes that follow such practices. The SAT's work involves the redimensioning and redefinition of their own history as Andalusian workers of land, among others tracing it to (at least) 5.000 years ago.¹⁰ By doing so, it also recognizes the deep intercultural

⁹ In a lecture held on the 19th of October 2012 at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Grosfoguel refers to these processes, and to the south inside Europe. The lecture can be accessed following this link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJmDKCBv-yI>

¹⁰ See for instance Ayuntamiento de Marínalea - <http://www.marínalea.com/inicio.htm>, Guindilla Bunda: text to be published as "Intervención de Guindilla Bunda Decolonial Project en la primera reunion de Decoloniality Europe." in <http://decolonialityeurope.wix.com>.

composition of the population that makes up the movement. The SAT has recently approved the constitution of a 'Studies Group' aimed at supporting the Andalusian Liberation Movement by putting into practice the knowledge that some of the members of the SAT have acquired in the university and in other social struggles.¹¹ The Studies Group of the SAT conceptualises the problems related to the category 'human' and the idea about democracy as such:¹²

"We call racism the forms through which forms of being, knowing, practicing and interpreting the world of individuals and groups who inhabit the earth are negated by a worldview that believes itself to be the only and true, and that responds to the principles of profit and surplus above the truths that are born of the bodies and the earth. Or, to put it in plainer words, to treat as fools and abnormal the ones who believe, trust and practice healthy ways to live with themselves and others."

Coherently with their critique of the Spanish nation-state as a colonial state, the Studies Group of the SAT classify themselves as indigenous peoples of Europe. By this, they are conceptualizing the ways in which the hierarchies, which developed from the imperial endeavour in 1492, also created 'dispensable' and racialised subjects in the continental European territories. Coloniality is thus at play within Europe, both in relation to the 'immigrant' subjects, and to the colonial subjects that became such in the processes of Christian European expansion inside and outside the continent (see also Grosfoguel 2004). These conceptualisations are developed further in relation to democracy and law:

"They tell us that [we are] not "fair", "democratic", that [we are] "outside the law". And, what do we do when the law is unjust? The realm of law is created from that racist worldview, and if we want to change it, we know that we have to skip the law in order to fulfil it."

The Studies Group of the SAT conceptualises here the undemocratic democracy, which uses ideas of fairness, democracy and law to criminalise them. Because law is unjust, and works to protect an undemocratic democracy, they must practice law and democracy outside of the frames provided by the colonial ones.

Closing lines

Contemporary official discourse in Europe pays considerable attention to three distinct realms of crises: the economic crisis, the crisis of multiculturalism, and the environmental crisis. These seem to be the core preoccupations of the European left, who currently mobilise predominantly on the basis of the, to them, most tangible crisis; the economic crisis. Decolonial Social

¹¹ <http://grupoestudiossat.wordpress.com/quienes-somos/>

¹² Both citations are the author's translation, and have been taken from <http://grupoestudiossat.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/dignidad-construir-una-utop3ada-i-acerca-de-la-c3baltimas-represiones-del-sat.pdf>

Movements' analyses imply that the ways in which the European left conceptualises the problems in Europe are framed within a racist logic that is characteristic of Eurocentric political thinking. Significantly, the understanding of the crises and the ways in which political priorities are made, happens on the basis of a naturalised position of privilege in relation to Europe's colonial subjects. Indeed, the analyses made by the four movements with which this paper is concerned also question the very basis upon which these crises are defined, pointing to two core concerns: firstly, these crises are not new to the world's colonial and racialised subjects, and some of them would say that these crises have lasted 500 years. It is not a coincidence that these crises are conceptualised as global when the conditions faced by the majority of the world's population start to affect white subjects in Europe and the US.

Secondly, in Europe, the conditions addressed as crisis are not new to immigrant populations and racialised subjects. These analyses point to other fundamental crises of *longue durée*: the crisis generated by the category of the 'human', and that generated through the idea of 'democracy'. This is why it is important to 'democratise democracy', and 'humanise human rights' in ways that take into account 'other grammars of human dignity', such as those exposed by the Decolonial Social Movements in the conceptual snapshots presented here.¹³ In essence, this effort implies abandoning the category 'human' and the idea of 'democracy' as globalised localisms – as the products of appropriation, violence and control of people marked as dispensable, subhuman and nonhuman (Santos 2000), and instead reinventing them in ways that effectively counter their inherently racist/sexist logics; an alternative thinking of alternatives.

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¹³ This terminology is central to the research project ALICE: Strange Mirrors, Unsuspected Lessons, coordinated by B. de Sousa Santos.

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