George Hull

Dr G Hull, Philosophy Department, University of Cape Town, South Africa.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0539-7508

E-mail: george.hull@uct.ac.za

Epistemic ethnonationalism: identity policing in neo-Traditionalism and Decoloniality theory

Traditionalism's most influential contemporary revival, Dugin's Eurasianism, is routinely characterised as being of the radical Right. The Decoloniality theory of Quijano, Mignolo and Ndlovu-Gatsheni, on the other hand, with its intellectual roots in Marxist dependency theory, presents itself as on the progressive Left. Yet, despite their different intellectual genealogies and drastically different reputations, both theoretical approaches have converged on a position with troubling practical consequences: *epistemic ethnonationalism*, the doctrine that which beliefs one should adopt and which concepts one should employ are determined by which ethnos/ethnie one belongs to. Both approaches deplore acceptance of Western beliefs and employment of Western concepts outside the West, both turn to existential phenomenology to ground their *ethnorelativism*, and both have influenced contemporary politics. I assess the theoretical underpinnings of both approaches, and argue that if neo-Traditionalism is to be classified as a Rightist body of thought, then Decoloniality theory ought also to be.

Keywords: Decoloniality theory, Traditionalism, Eurasianism, epistemic ethnonationalism, Aleksandr Dugin, Walter D Mignolo, Sabelo J Ndlovu-Gatsheni

Unlikely bedfellows

Traditionalist thought's most influential contemporary revival, Eurasianism, is a normative geopolitical theory which rejects the ideal of a single international rules-based order administered by multilateral institutions with planetary reach. It is routinely characterised as being of the radical Right, even fascist.[1]

Eurasianism holds that the world divides organically into four or five ethnocultural spheres, or "Great Spaces", each of which ought to be run according to its own values, or "particular and incommensurable horizon of being", by a powerful central administration. Eurasianism explicitly takes as its model for 'Great Space' governance the cultural and policy control over several of Russia's neighbouring countries to which Moscow aspires.[2] Its doctrines are thought to be one of the factors which shaped President Vladimir Putin's efforts to justify Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Von Drehle 2022).[3]

Aleksandr Dugin, Eurasianism's architect and energetic promoter,[4] is said never to have advised the Russian president directly. Yet his ideas have undoubtedly achieved uptake in government circles, and his geopolitics textbook was for several years prescribed reading at the General Staff Academy. Born in Moscow, Dugin became acquainted with the Traditionalist[5] writings of René Guénon and Julius Evola while a member of the esotericist Yuzhinsky Circle, which sought to combat the Soviet regime metaphysically, by attaining to a new level of reality. Following unsuccessful stints in domestic politics – he co-founded the National Bolshevik Party in 1993, then founded the Eurasia Party in 2002 – lately Dugin has focused on prolific book-writing and media appearances, also networking with

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1   See, *e.g.*, Laruelle 2019; Von Drehle 2022.

2   *Eurasian Mission* (Dugin 2014), a Eurasianist manifesto, advocates for "organic adherence to tradition", opposes "unipolar globalisation", affirms that "[e]very people and culture has its own intrinsic right to evolve according to its own logic", specifies that "integration of the post-Soviet territories" – with "national security, international relations, and strategic planning" ceded to Moscow – is envisaged, and includes handy maps of the "multi-polar world" (14, 18, 48, 51, 57–58, 78, 83–84, 116).

3   See, for example, Putin's (2021) article in which he argues that "Russians and Ukrainians [are] one people – a single whole".

4   'Eurasianism' refers here, and throughout, to the contemporary version of Eurasianism articulated by Dugin. My analysis is not intended to apply to all earlier versions of Eurasianist theory, such as those articulated by Russian émigré intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century (on which, see Laruelle 2012: ch. 1).

5   With initial letter capitalised, 'Traditionalist' and 'Traditionalism' refer to the body of thought reaching from Guénon in the early twentieth century, through Evola, to Dugin and others in the present day—rather than simply a preference for old ways or homeostasis. For a history of Traditionalism, see Sedgwick 2004.

the 'identitarian' groupings of the West European New Right. His brief spell as an academic, teaching international relations at Moscow State University, came to an abrupt end in 2014 when he lost his professorship after being filmed exhorting his compatriots to "kill, kill, kill" Ukrainian nationalists (Sedgwick 2004: 225, 230–37; Laruelle 2019: 155–58, 163; Teitelbaum 2020: 47–48, 141–50).

Decoloniality theory, on the other hand, is an antiracist, antisexist, anticolonial body of academic writing that has grown up since the 1990s. To be sure, theorists from a broad range of intellectual backgrounds have championed the notion of *epistemic* or *intellectual decolonisation* over the past half-century. Decoloniality theory is just one distinctive body of thought within this broader trend[6] –but a particularly influential one. With roots in Marxism, Decoloniality theory is generally associated with the progressive Left.

Centred on the Modernity/Coloniality Group (*Grupo M/C*) of Latin American scholars, it emerged intellectually from dependency theory in the discipline of political economy. Drawing on world-systems analysis, postmodernist literary criticism and some tropes of liberation theology, Decoloniality[7] theorists have argued that there can be no true economic "delinking" of peripheral countries from the core of the world economy without a prior, and more fundamental, "epistemic" delinking from the thought patterns of Western modernity (Maldonado-Torres 2008: 9-11; Mignolo 2011: xxv, 143, 315; Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 8-9).[8]

The most recognisable thesis of Decoloniality theorists – including Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, Puerto Rican sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel, Argentinian literary critic Walter D Mignolo, Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and Zimbabwean historian Sabelo J Ndlovu-Gatsheni – is that a "colonial matrix of power" has been in place worldwide for half a millennium, outlasting political decolonisation. The matrix is constituted by hierarchical, planet-wide forms of domination and exclusion, comprising not only economic exploitation and race, sex and sexual-orientation discrimination ("the coloniality of power"), but also the repression or undermining of bodies of knowledge ("the coloniality of knowledge"), and even a metaphysical hierarchy within *being* itself ("the coloniality of being") (Maldonado-Torres 2004: 36-37, 42-44; Maldonado-Torres 2007: 242-43; Mignolo 2011: 8-9). If societies of the Global South are to progress

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6   For two examples of a different approach to epistemic or intellectual decolonisation, to which my characterisation and criticisms of Decoloniality theory do not apply, see Appiah 1992; Wiredu 1996.

7   'Decoloniality' with initial letter capitalised refers to this intellectual current – rather than other, potentially more inclusive, versions of the idea that intellectual or epistemic decolonisation is needed. For more on this distinction, see Hull 2021: 64-65.

8   On 'delinking' in the context of political economy, see Amin 1990.

from decolonisation – formal independence – to *decoloniality* – dismantling the colonial matrix of power – this will occur primarily through "critical reactivation of subaltern knowledges". As Ndlovu-Gatsheni puts it, only an "epistemological rebellion" can overcome "epistemological dependency" (Maldonado-Torres 2008: 11; Mignolo 2011: 52-55, 74; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 49, 52).

Both neo-Traditionalism and Decoloniality theory have become highly influential over the past decade; but in different spheres, via different channels.

As a rule, the theorists of Integral Traditionalism have acquired their intellectual training and propagated their ideas initially in Sufi tariqas or European occultist circles which try to practise magic. René Guénon, the French doyen of Traditionalism, embraced Sufi Islam early in the 20th century, as did, more recently, Olavo de Carvalho, born in Campinas, Brazil, who in the late 2010s ran YouTube philosophy classes and advised President Jair Bolsonaro directly via Skype from his adopted home in rural Virginia (Teitelbaum 2020: 9-10, 126-40). In the 1920s, Italian Traditionalist Julius Evola wrote on magic and probably participated in rites intended to restore the Roman Empire. Benito Mussolini, a superstitious man, "was afraid of Evola's magical powers and formed the well-known gesture against the Evil Eye whenever he was mentioned". But the *Duce* respected Evola's ideas, commissioning him to formulate a 'Fascist' (as opposed to 'National Socialist') racial doctrine, and Evola was at Mussolini's side in Rastenburg, East Prussia, following his 1943 prison break (Hansen 2002: 34-35, 47, 49). In the past few years, neo-Traditionalism has even gained a foothold in Washington. Stephen K Bannon, chief executive officer of Donald Trump's election campaign in 2016 and White House chief strategist in 2017, is a student of Traditionalism who cites Guénon and Evola as intellectual influences and has had substantial face-to-face exchanges with both Dugin and Carvalho. Traditionalist ideas have, to some extent, shaped the version of populist nationalism which Bannon promoted as executive chairman of Breitbart News, in his official roles for the former president, and subsequently as an informal advisor to Trump and as a podcaster (Green 2017: 204-208; Teitelbaum 2020: 1-3, 32, 92-96, 153-61, 164-71).

If neo-Traditionalism's sphere of influence is an unlikely duo – fringe spiritualist circles and the highest levels of government in three powerful countries – Decoloniality theory's is more humdrum: sociology and cultural studies journals, networks of academics, university campuses in the Americas, Europe and southern Africa. The leading formulators of Decoloniality theory have occupied prestigious professorships in the USA and Latin America. In southern Africa, Ndlovu-Gatsheni held a professorship and managerial positions at the University of South Africa (UNISA), and created the African Decolonial Research Network (ADERN), before moving to the University of Bayreuth, Germany (Pillay 2021: 396-97, 411n19).

To the extent that Decoloniality theory has had an impact on politics, it has – so far – been of the lower-stakes campus variety. When the well-publicised 2015 Rhodes Must Fall protests broke out on some South African campuses, demanding 'decolonisation of the curriculum', protesters turned to Decoloniality theorists' writings to flesh out their grievances. Rekgotsofetse Chikane, who was for a short time at the centre of Rhodes Must Fall at the University of Cape Town (UCT), has described how Decoloniality theory was both an inspiration and, with its often abstruse jargon, an important gatekeeping mechanism for the hierarchy of the student movement. Mignolo's writings in particular were, writes Chikane, an "opioid" (Chikane 2018: 222-23). In 2018, in response to campus protests, UCT introduced a central 'Curriculum Change Framework', which somewhat dogmatically prescribes "the Latin American perspective on coloniality".[9] This remains in place, and continues to be cited as a basis for university policy – for example, in faculty curriculum reviews. But Decoloniality theory also has the potential to be an ideology guiding party politics or government, and there are now some indications that it is going to take on this role.

My purpose here is to outline how, despite their different intellectual genealogies, and their drastically different reputations, neo-Traditionalism and Decoloniality theory have converged on a doctrine with troubling practical consequences, which I call *epistemic ethnonationalism*.

Epistemic ethnonationalism denies that there are universal epistemic standards by which the truth, coherence or well-foundedness of beliefs can be assessed. In postmodernist style, it dismisses the declared aspiration to universal validity of argument or belief as nothing but a power play, a tactical move in a political game. However, it does not follow postmodernism in assigning beliefs, theories and methods to free-floating 'discourses', in the sempiternal war between which a multitude of believers or asserters are unwitting pawns.[10] Rather, epistemic ethnonationalism associates with each 'ethnos' or 'ethnie' a set of beliefs, concepts or theoretical frames proper to it, such that a member of *E*1 who embraces concepts, theories or methods proper to *E*2, *E*3 or *E*4 *ipso facto* reveals themselves to be at best confused or brainwashed, at worst a collaborator or fifth-columnist. Epistemic ethnonationalism therefore denies that achieving advances in knowledge and in ethical and political values can be a shared global endeavour. Instead, it insists that each ethnos/-ie must develop its own truth or knowledge, its own values.

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9   UCT's 'Curriculum Change Framework' is available at http://www.news.uct.ac.za/images/ userfiles/downloads/reports/ccwg/UCT-Curriculum-Change-Framework.pdf (quoted phrase at p. 30).

10   For a theoretical approach more along these lines, see Foucault 1972.

Holding that the correctness or appropriateness of beliefs, theories and methods is intrinsically tied to geographical group identities (possibly including their ethnic diasporas), epistemic ethnonationalists apply nationalism's characteristic prescriptions – loyalty to one's own geographical group identity, non-defection to a foreign group identity – to people specifically in their capacity as knowers.

Both 20th-century Traditionalism and today's neo-Traditionalism are routinely characterised as being on the far Right end of the political spectrum. Decoloniality theory, by contrast, presents itself as on the progressive Left, identified with the causes of liberation, social equality and non-discrimination. My goal is to outline the fundamental theoretical architecture of neo-Traditionalism and Decoloniality theory. My focus here is not on the relationship between these bodies of theory and the societal contexts in which they arose, or on specific empirical claims about different ethnic groups which they make. Rather, by focusing on their internal structure, I mean to demonstrate the convergence of these two bodies of theory on epistemic ethnonationalism, and also to highlight some other striking similarities in theory design which they exhibit. As I go along, I shall attempt some brief assessment of both theories' justifiability and cogency.

For this kind of analysis, the Left-Right spectrum provides only limited help, and I shall not draw on it very much. That being said, if neo-Traditionalism is to be counted as a Rightist doctrine, it will be hard to avoid counting Decoloniality theory as a Rightist doctrine also. The epistemic ethnonationalism on which the two theoretical approaches converge is a distinctive kind of challenge to political liberalism; but it is discernibly a challenge from the direction of cultural authoritarianism, an angle of attack historically associated with the Right.

'Our special Russian truth'

Traditionalism is a current of 20th-century spiritual and political thought which sets its face against modernity.

Writing in the early 1950s, Julius Evola attributed "the disorder of our age" to "*the subversion introduced to Europe by the revolutions of 1789 and 1848*". But, like his forerunner René Guénon, Evola believed it would not be enough simply to revive forms of societal order from the prerevolutionary past. Traditionalism can therefore only problematically be classified as a form of conservatism. Evola advocated instead for government according to "the tradition", constituted by "foundational principles" which have never yet been satisfactorily implemented – he happily grants that, for instance, "Italy lacks an authentic 'traditional' past". Guénon and Evola both reject the ideals of equality and personal liberty associated

with the French Revolution. "The beginning of the disintegration," writes Evola, "of the traditional sociopolitical structures, or at least whatever was left of them in Europe, occurred through *liberalism*." And the classic Traditionalist thinkers reject democracy as a political system. Evola declared that the state should be manned by a "true political class", which he compares to a "knightly Order", a group of individuals with the knowledge and confidence to mould society to fit "the Idea" (Evola 2002: 112, 116, 121, 129-31, 133).[11]

Evola is less clear about the content of this 'Idea', or which traditional values in particular the new (but traditional) society, moulded from above by its 'true political class', should embody. We learn that it should be hierarchical and should be in a state of "high tension"; but the basis for the hierarchy and cause of the tension remain vague. Where concrete details are called for, Evola's exposition delivers only metaphors about masculine *vs.* feminine, organic *vs.* mechanical (Evola 2002: 126, 130, 146; Evola 2013: 35, 45, 78).

Evola is equally unclear about whether societies in Asia, Africa and the Americas should also be run according to the values of "the great European political tradition". Whereas Guénon was a Perennialist, believing that one body of tradition was at the root of every valid spiritual or political outlook worldwide, Evola sometimes suggests that people in different parts of the world should live and be governed by their own values and traditions. For example, he deplores the fact, as he sees it, that "a series of non-European peoples" are "renouncing their traditions, which date back for ages," and have "Westernised, adopting the culture, ideologies, political forms and lifestyles of White peoples" (Evola 2013: 27, 98).

The notion that there exists a multiplicity of different but equally valid traditions, at most hinted at or entertained by classic Traditionalism, has become the centrepiece of contemporary neo-Traditionalism. By the beginning of the 21st century, Aleksandr Dugin, a dissident during Soviet times, had concluded that "[f]or Russia, liberalism does not fit". But, he reflected, "Communism and fascism are equally unacceptable". So he set himself the task of formulating a "Fourth Political Theory". Dugin remained a Traditionalist, and his Fourth Political Theory was to be "on the side of Tradition". "'Ancient' means good," he asserts in *The Fourth Political Theory*, "and the more ancient – the better" (Dugin 2012: 14, 24, 28). Yet he was also drawn to the 19th- and 20th-century thinkers, including Konstantin Leontiev and Nikolai Danilevskii, who emphasised Russia's unique civilisation and claimed for it a special cultural and political leadership role in Eurasia (Sedgwick 2004: 226; Laruelle 2019: 159-60). Dugin came to regard

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11   On Guénon, see Sedgwick 2004.

the US-backed economic reforms, political liberalisation and democratisation of the Yeltsin era as the imposition on the former USSR of "what are actually local and historically specific values – democracy, the market, parliamentarianism, capitalism, individualism, human rights". Viewed in this light, he saw there was potential for a critique of the post-Cold War order which invoked liberal egalitarianism's own commitment to non-discrimination. "Globalisation," charges Dugin, "is [...] nothing more than a globally deployed model of Western European, or, rather, Anglo-Saxon ethnocentrism, which is the purest manifestation of racist ideology" (Dugin 2012: 45).

Dugin's Eurasianism is thus, in the first place, a programme for government of the Eurasian 'Great Space' centred on Moscow according to its own distinctive body of ancient tradition – not that of outsiders. In the second place, though, it is also something more theoretically ambitious: it is the doctrine that *every* 'ethnos' has its own 'Tradition', its own values, which it is right for it to live and be governed by, and which can never legitimately be criticised based on, or held to be inferior than, the values or tradition of an outsider ethnos. Dugin proposes that "we accept the *ethnos* as the historical subject" and "view the *ethnos* in the plural, without trying to establish any kind of a hierarchical system". There is, he affirms, "no common or universal measure to judge different ethnic groups. When one society tries to judge another, it applies its own criteria, and so commits intellectual violence" (Dugin 2012: 48, 195). His *ethnos relativism* is not restricted to moral and political values, but applies to concepts, theories and methods in general:

> Eurasianism, in itself, is gnoseological plurality. The unitary episteme of modernity – including science, politics, culture and anthropology – is opposed by the multiplicity of epistemes, built on the foundations of each existing civilisation – the Eurasianist episteme for Russian civilisation, the Chinese for the Chinese, the Islamic for Islam, the Indian for the Indian, and so on (Dugin 2012: 99).

In a 2016 BBC *Newsnight* interview, Dugin revealed just how far he is willing to take his doctrine of 'gnoseological plurality'. Asked by a British journalist whether he believed Russian media reports about the war in Syria, Dugin states: "We have our special Russian truth, that you need to accept as something that maybe is not *your* truth [...]. The truth is relative."[12]

The resultant political theory exhibits a striking ambivalence towards liberal values – which contrasts with classic Traditionalism's outright condemnation.

12   www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGunRKWtWBs.

On the one hand, they are the legitimate values of the 'Atlantic' or 'Anglo-Saxon' ethnos, valid within their ethnic sphere: "a cultural system that has a right to exist in its own historical and geographical context, but only alongside other civilizations and cultural systems". The only objection to liberal values, from this point of view, is that these inherently local "values pretend to be 'universal' ones", thus committing "ideological aggression against the multiplicity of cultures and traditions" (Dugin 2012: 99, 193; Dugin 2014: 31, 44). On the other hand, Dugin at times alleges that liberalism's emphasis on personal freedom, "calling for the liberation from all forms of collective identity in general, is entirely incompatible with the *ethnos* [...], and is an expression of a systemic theoretical [...] ethnocide"; indeed, that, as an ideology of modernity, liberalism is one of "the causes of the coming catastrophe of humanity" (Dugin 2012: 47; Dugin 2014: 101).[13] These statements are hard to reconcile with his official view that the values and episteme of an ethnos can legitimately be judged only by its own standards.

When Dugin attributes specific ideas and values to ethnos *E*1, others to ethnos *E*2, and so on, the attribution is not tautological. It is not, in Dugin's eyes, by accepting or espousing a specific set of ideas and values that one comes to be of a particular ethnos. Otherwise it could not have happened that, as Dugin recounts, Russian (and consequently "Eurasian") reformers of the 1980s and 1990s espoused "liberal-democratic policy", the "structure and logic" of "the West". Nor could so many Georgians have embraced "Atlanticist" values (and their government have sought "a partnership with the United States and NATO"), despite Georgia's being "Eurasian" (Dugin 2014: 22-23, 35, 52-53). Dugin does not ascribe ethnos-membership to persons based on what they overtly say or the values which consciously guide their behaviour, but rather based on their "deep identity" – "an organic, existential, basic identity that lies below diffused identity". "Deep identity," he writes, "is what causes a people to be what it is. It is the essence of the people, something that transcends the collectivity in its actual state" (Dugin 2014: 117).

Dugin's Eurasianism can seem benign when it urges that each ethnos show respect for the outlook and practices of all the rest. But its message to members of an ethnos who have embraced ideas and values which are not, in Dugin's view, proper to that ethnos, is rather more disconcerting. "Rapprochement and dialogue between [...] peoples should be achieved, but not at the price of losing our identities," he stresses. "We insist that maintaining one's identity is the highest value." According to Dugin's neo-Traditionalism, Eurasians who espouse Atlantic values, but also Atlanticists who accept Eurasian theories, or Euro-Africans who adopt Pacific-Far East beliefs, for that matter, are making a terrible

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13   See also Carvalho and Dugin 2012: 162.

mistake. They are making a mistake not because their views are unevidenced or ill-founded (after all, truth is relative), but rather because to espouse views from an 'episteme' other than that proper to one's own ethnos is to fail to live up to "the highest value" – it is to be a traitor to one's "deep identity" (Dugin 2014: 39, 117).

Epistemic *compradores*

Decoloniality theory has, like Traditionalism, undergone a transition from universalism to relativism in the past three or four decades. Decoloniality theory's starting point was the universalist theses of Marxism.

Aníbal Quijano first introduced the concept *coloniality* or *coloniality of power* in the context of his study of economic underdevelopment. Working within the broadly Marxist school of dependency theory, Quijano used the concept to refer to two related structuring phenomena in Europe's colonies. First, *coloniality* involves "the codification of the differences between conquerors and conquered in the idea of 'race,' a supposedly different biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to others". Accompanying widespread belief in a natural race hierarchy is a second aspect of *coloniality*: a systematic division of labour, both within nations and internationally, on the basis of this hierarchy. It was, Quijano argues, widespread acceptance of the existence of a natural race hierarchy as a basis for labour control which made societally possible the compresence of free and compulsory forms of labour required by global capitalism throughout most of the modern period: "each form of labor control was associated with a particular race". In the Americas, slave labour came to be assigned to "the 'black' population brought from Africa", "serfdom" was largely reserved for the indigenous "American Indians", and "paid labor was the whites' privilege" (Quijano 2000a: 533, 536-39).[14]

Coloniality, as Quijano understands this phenomenon, outlasted the formal political relations of colonialism, and provides the explanation for why industrial waged labour was concentrated for so long in predominantly white Europe and North America. There is thus, in Quijano's eyes, no adequate *purely economic* characterisation of the modern world-system; rather, the modern world-system is constituted by an economic structure and a racialised social order which are "mutually reinforcing" (Quijano 2007: 171; Quijano 2000a: 538, 540; Quijano 2000b: 216). The second generation of Decoloniality theorists has gone further, affirming the explanatory *primacy* of ideas and beliefs – "the epistemic domain".

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14   See Hull 2021: 65-68, on which I draw here, for a more detailed discussion of Decoloniality theory's emergence from dependency theory.

While the Marxist position would be that epistemic or ideological content such as the notion of a race hierarchy was generated by the world-system, considered as an economic configuration, for the sake of its self-reproduction, contemporary Decoloniality theorist Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni asserts that "the modern world system and the global order are epistemic creations" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020: 1, 3).

The second generation of Decoloniality theorists has generalised Quijano's conclusion about racial concepts and their role in coloniality in an unexpected way. In a recent definitive statement of his Decoloniality theory, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, Walter Mignolo writes:

> Race and gender are two concepts of Western modernity that make us believe they "represent" something that exists. Behind race there is an implied logic of classification (the logic of coloniality) assuming that people belong to different races and the markers are blood and skin color. Behind gender there is an implied logic of classification assuming that there are women and men. The classifications shape and guide our perception of society. However, decolonial gnoseological assumptions say that names and classifications *do not refer to what there is* but *frame what we perceive* (Mignolo 2021: 85).

Rather than holding simply that races and genders, at least as commonsensically conceived of, do not exist, Mignolo adopts the far more radical position that concepts and categories across the board are incapable of pointing us to actual commonalities and differences in the real world. Quijano's objection to belief in races had been *empirical*: he agreed with mainstream biology since at least the 1970s that the idea of race "has nothing to do with the biological structure of the human species" (Quijano 2000a: 575n6). Mignolo's objection, by contrast, is *metaphysical*: he denies the capacity of concepts as such, and therefore the beliefs in which they figure, to refer to objective reality.

This is one instance of a general tendency in the second generation of Decoloniality theorists towards *hyperphilosophism*.[15] The first generation, still close to dependency theory and world-systems analysis, criticised not only racist doctrines but also certain orthodox doctrines of political economy for being, in the first place, false, and in the second place, likely, when pervasively believed, to advance the economic interests of the core of the world-system over those of the periphery. Decoloniality theory's second generation, from the same evidential basis, has drawn the drastically undermotivated metaphysical

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15   See Hull 2021: 68-72.

conclusion that beliefs are not the kind of thing which can ever be outright true or false. Seeking to "dispel the myth of universality", the most second-generation Decoloniality theorists are prepared to grant beliefs is, in Mignolo's phrase, "truth in parenthesis". Beliefs, according to Mignolo, cannot be objectively and universally true, but at most "valid for Westerners" or valid for those from some other geographical group identity (Mignolo 2011: xvi, 294; Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 216).

Having relieved itself of the necessity of checking theories for objective factual correctness, contemporary Decoloniality theory advocates instead for the application of standards of justice to theories, belief-systems, or "knowledges". Ramón Grosfoguel deplores the fact that "European/Euro-American colonial expansion and domination was able to construct a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge", correlated with and objectionable in the same way as the hierarchy of "superior and inferior people around the world" posited by colonial racism. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni agrees that a hierarchical "coloniality of knowledge" accompanies and correlates with the "coloniality of power", and writes that "[t]he ultimate goal, decolonially speaking, is to put all onto-epistemic traditions in a non-dominant and equal position" (Grosfoguel 2007: 214; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: xii, 7; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020: 150). This articulation of what one might call *discourse egalitarianism* puts flesh on the bones of Mignolo's programmatic statement that "the sense and force of decoloniality come from its being used to articulate a new politics of knowledge rather than new contents" (Mignolo 2011: 58).

But Decoloniality theorists do not advocate for what might be called *straight discourse egalitarianism* – the view that every theoretical approach or body of beliefs should be equally influential, equally broadcast, equally taught. Rather, just as in Dugin's Eurasianism, "knowledges and worldviews", "modes of knowing", "epistemologies" are in Decoloniality theory not to be detached from their geographical qualifiers (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 8, 21, 48). In South America, "the Spaniards managed to impose their concept of time", which differed from "Andean time"; the "imposition of Western epistemology" marginalised "African modes of knowing"; "American ideas" are to be combated with "a new African episteme" (Mignolo 2011: 156, 169; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 8, 59, 62). Decoloniality theory's discourse egalitarianism looks to these geographical qualifiers on discourses – 'African', 'American', 'Andean', 'European/Euro-American', *etc.* – not only to determine *which* discourses' influence should be equalised, but also *where* or *among whom* each discourse ought to exercise its influence.

Decoloniality theorists particularly deplore the "universalizing" of "Western particularism". Since, in Mignolo's words, "there is no one way, or truth without

parenthesis, of what constitutes 'valid' knowledge", and, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni stresses, "all human beings were born into valid and legitimate knowledge systems", it is an impermissible form of arrogance for a thinker, on the basis of evidence or argument, to put forward a conclusion as being potentially correct universally – *i.e.*, no matter where it is uttered or by whom (Mignolo 2011: 50; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 38; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020: 154). "Decoloniality," decrees Mignolo, "shall dispel the myth of universality", and accordingly he sets out to put overstepping thinkers in their place: for instance, he insists that "[t]he Kantian legacy should be reduced to its proper localism" (Mignolo 2011: xvi, 331). Even Quijano, the father of Decoloniality theory, came around to this way of thinking towards the end of his career, writing:

> Nothing is less rational, finally, than the pretension that the specific cosmic vision of a particular ethnie should be taken as universal rationality, even if such an ethnie is called Western Europe because this is actually pretend [*sic*] to impose a provincialism as universalism (Quijano 2007: 177).

Decoloniality theory has come to espouse what can be called an *ethnie-relative discourse egalitarianism*. Just as in Dugin's Eurasianism, discourses and worldviews are to be restricted to their proper (ethnic) localism, and there is to be no hierarchy among the discourses or epistemes proper to each 'ethnie'.

The striking transformation which Decoloniality theory has undergone in the past three or four decades can be illustrated in the figure of the *comprador*. In classic dependency theory, the *comprador* bourgeoisie plays the role of an indispensable intermediary for global capitalism. A small entrepreneurial class in a country of the economic periphery, the *comprador* bourgeoisie makes a tidy profit facilitating the export of local raw materials to, and the import of manufactured goods from, the economic core, also pressuring its government to keep in place international trading relations which are ultimately detrimental to its country's economy.[16] Quijano initially added to this picture the thesis that reasons of economic self-interest were, on their own, not enough to motivate or ensure the success of the *compradores*: the additional, ideational factor of racial solidarity was, in his view, indispensable. (Quijano was thinking specifically of white racial solidarity between Latin American governing and business elites and Europeans in the metropole, which he also considered to be a barrier to Latin American nation formation) (Quijano 2000a: 562-69).

Contemporary Decoloniality theory does not regularly employ the *term* 'comprador'. But it is clear who, following Decoloniality theory's epistemic turn,

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16 See, *e.g.*, Amin 1990: ch. 1.

the structurally analogous groups of people are. "The success," writes Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "of colonialism and coloniality in the domain of knowledge was and is always dependent on winning some of the colonized people to its side." The epistemic *compradores* are those members of a Global South society who, in Ndlovu-Gatsheni's words, though "socially located on the oppressed side of the colonial difference", "think and speak epistemically like those on the dominant positions" – such as the post-independence "African elites" who "displayed problematic colonial consciousness". In Mignolo's description, they are "natives" who are not "locals", "non-Westerners who have been taught to despise their [narratives] and accept the 'true' one, which is the Western local narrative"—*i.e.*, the narrative "valid for Westerners". They are, for instance, citizens of African countries who think within "the Western episteme" rather than the "African episteme" (Mignolo 2011: 330; Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 216; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 21-22, 59; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020: 8, 155).[17] Just like classic dependency theory, contemporary Decoloniality theory blames its *comprador* class for consigning its society to economic dependency and underdevelopment. But contemporary Decoloniality theory's *ethnie relativism* provides it with a prior, more immediate reason to condemn the epistemic *compradores*: here are thinkers and reasoners whose curiosity has led them to stray beyond a proper localism, to go beyond the pale, seeking enlightenment in ideas outside the episteme proper to their own ethnie.

The bearer of culture

Neo-Traditionalism begins from a conviction that modernity must be overthrown and an ancient but eternally valid Tradition revived. Decoloniality theory begins from a conviction that national and transnational forms of exploitation, oppression and discrimination must be exposed and halted. From these very different starting points, the two bodies of theory have, in their most prominent contemporary forms, arrived at strikingly similar positions.

Both hold that each human 'ethnos' or 'ethnie' has values and an episteme which are specific to it, valid or true relative to it, and not to be universalised as though they could apply to any other ethnos/-ie. This position can appear benign insofar as it prescribes acknowledgement, respect and toleration of different cultures. But for individual persons – who are assigned to an ethnos/-ie independent of what their beliefs and convictions may be – it prescribes conformity to the values and belief system alleged to be proper to their ethnos/-ie.

17   See also Grosfoguel 2007: 213.

Both neo-Traditionalists and Decoloniality theorists owe us an account of the bearer of culture (*i.e.*, the bearer of an episteme, of values, concepts and beliefs), which would explain why a specific cultural content (a specific episteme, specific values and beliefs) is intrinsically proper or suited to each such bearer. Other theories have called on the biological concept of *race* to play this role, claiming that the different inherent biological characteristics specific to different human lineages make different cultural and political forms intrinsically better suited to different groups of humans. But neo-Traditionalists and Decoloniality theorists, their ethnic terminology notwithstanding, do not posit race as the bearer of culture, because they repudiate not only the idea of a natural race hierarchy but also the idea of race itself.[18]

Of course, one option would be to stipulate that an 'ethnos' or 'ethnie' simply *is* a culture, or simply *is* the group of people who happen to espouse that culture. However, if an ethnos/-ie simply is all the people who espouse particular beliefs and values, then our two bodies of theory would lose their ability to say that there is something wrong with persons of ethnos/-ie *E*1 who have adopted the beliefs and values proper to ethnos/-ie *E*2: if what it is to belong to *E*2 is to espouse particular beliefs and values, then there is no room left for saying that such persons are still *really* (as a matter of 'deep identity') of *E*1, or that they are 'natives' who are not 'locals'.

Both theoretical approaches require a culture-bearer which is substantial enough to stay constant across changes in cultural content borne, and which can support normative judgements about what cultural content *ought to be* borne – but which is not empirically discredited, like race. In their quest for such a culture-bearer, both theoretical approaches have turned to metaphysics. Specifically, both have turned to existential phenomenology's transcendental accounts of what must be true of any possible agent or subject of lived experience. Though initially surprising, this turn to metaphysics has potential advantages. A metaphysical account of the culture-bearer is likely to be immune to natural-scientific disconfirmation of the kind which has discredited race. Moreover, existential phenomenology's transcendental style of argumentation, if sound, might indeed ground normative judgements of the form that person *P* must embrace content *C* if they are to be authentically who – as a matter of 'deep identity' – they are.

The turn to metaphysics is most straightforward in Dugin's neo-Traditionalism. "[E]thnicities," claims Dugin, are "the subjects of history", and each "possesses its own *Dasein*" (Dugin 2014: 54, 105). *Dasein* (German for 'existence' or 'being there') is the philosopher Martin Heidegger's proposed advance on the primarily

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18   See Quijano 2000a: 575n6; Carvalho and Dugin 2012: 164; Dugin 2012: 43-44.

cognitive subject of conscious experience previous phenomenologists had taken as the basis for their theoretical work. If *Dasein* is a subject, it is a subject not primarily of detached states like perception or belief, but of "lived experience" (*Erlebnis*) – Heidegger was influenced by life philosophers such as Wilhelm Dilthey. *Dasein*'s characteristic structure is "care" (*Sorge*), of which cognitive attitudes like perception and belief are only very secondary varieties. *Dasein* is always already practically involved with and committed to worldly projects: it exhibits what Heidegger calls "being-in-the-world" (*In-der-Welt-sein*). The content of these projects and commitments will vary, depending partly on the contingent circumstances into which *Dasein* is "thrown". But Heidegger thinks that certain fundamental structures of *Dasein* and *In-der-Welt-sein* underlie, and can be shown to be conditions on the possibility of, the contingent variation in *Dasein*'s worldly engagement. He also was convinced that identifying these structures gives us our best philosophical lead as to the very nature of *being*. This is why Heideggerians take *Dasein*-centred phenomenology to be equivalent to fundamental ontology – the study of being itself (Heidegger 1962: 32-35, 67-80, 157, 223, 231).

For Dugin, then, it is not because of *physical* differences between "ethnicities", but because of something yet deeper, because of fundamental *meta*physical differences between them, that "every [...] ethnicity" has its "own truths" and its own "episteme" (Dugin 2012: 99; Dugin 2014: 39).[19]

Decoloniality theory invokes existential phenomenology not to differentiate between 'ethnies' directly, but to differentiate between colonisers and colonised. This is the role of the concept 'coloniality of being', as theorised especially by Nelson Maldonado-Torres. Maldonado-Torres has argued that there is a distinctive, phenomenologically verifiable "lived experience of colonization". In particular, the "lived experience of racialized people" – *i.e.*, those on the receiving end of the 'coloniality of power' – "is deeply touched by the encounter with misanthropic skepticism and by the constant encounter with violence and death". In an allusion to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1967), Maldonado-Torres calls the subject of this distinctive lived experience "the *damné*". "The *damné*," he writes, is "a transcendental concept", marking a kind of *Dasein* distinct from that described by Heidegger: "[t]he colonized is thus not ordinary Dasein". The concept of "the *damné* is not only of social significance but of ontological significance as well," Maldonado-Torres tells us, because, according to him, it reveals "[t]hat being has a colonial aspect" (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 242, 249, 251, 257, 259).

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19   See also Millerman 2020: 193-96.

Their reliance on existential phenomenology means that the fate of neo-Traditionalism and Decoloniality theory is tied to that of an idiosyncratic and controversial current of thought in metaphysics. However, even if we accept the central claims of existential phenomenology, it is in fact difficult to see how this approach to metaphysics can do the work our two theories both need it to – *i.e.*, how it can provide them with a bearer of culture meeting their desiderata.

If their claim is that extended exposure from birth to a distinctive cultural milieu, or to racism and colonial prejudice, would affect any individual subject or agent in the ways Dugin and Maldonado-Torres describe, then surely the distinctive aspects of lived experience these writers are pointing us to are not conditions on the very possibility of *Erlebnis* and *In-der-Welt-sein* quite generally, but rather contingent aspects of the subject's "facticity"—the worldly circumstances into which that subject is "thrown" (Sartre 2003: 103-108; Heidegger 1962: 82). Consequently, if Dugin and Maldonado-Torres were to persuade us that subjects who grow up in such circumstances relate to themselves, people around them, and the prospect of their own death in quite different ways from those described by classic existential phenomenologists like Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre (Millerman 2020: 197–98; Maldonado-Torres 2007: 249-51), then the conclusion we should draw is not that those subjects are 'ontologically' different, exhibiting a different form of *Dasein*, but rather that Heidegger and Sartre in fact failed to identify structural conditions on the very possibility of lived experience, and were instead recording contingent attitudes and experiences typical of their own cultural and social milieu. Far from being able to base themselves on existential phenomenology, the central claims of neo-Traditionalism and Decoloniality theory actually threaten to undermine this approach to metaphysics.

Decoloniality theory's use of existential phenomenology faces an additional challenge. Even if, contrary to what I have just argued, Maldonado-Torres' concept of the *damné* does succeed in driving a metaphysical wedge between the colonisers and the colonised, it still leaves a plurality of "non-Western cosmologies" and epistemes, on the latter side of the divide at least (Maldonado-Torres 2004: 51). The problem of identifying a suitable bearer of culture, with which we began this section, will recur in connection with these.

Relativist riddles

Both neo-Traditionalism and Decoloniality theory reject the notion that our beliefs or utterances could ever be objectively and universally true. The most, in the way of truth, which our two theories permit beliefs and utterances to possess is truth or validity *relative to* some framework of assessment. However, neither theory relativises the truth of beliefs and utterances ultimately to an *epistemic*

system. Neither, that is to say, holds their relative truth or falsity to be ultimately a matter of whether the utterance or belief in question coheres with the logical principles and meets the evidentiary standards which constitute a particular epistemic system.[20]

Individuals' and groups' epistemic systems can change as they get educated, or are persuaded to revise their opinions, or even adopt a different culture. Neo-Traditionalism and Decoloniality theory both require a framework of assessment which stays constant across such changes. This is why they relativise the truth of beliefs and utterances ultimately to an 'ethnos' or 'ethnie'. When they take the proximate framework of assessment for a given belief or utterance to be an epistemic system (or 'episteme'), this is always because they take this to be the epistemic system *belonging to* or *proper to* the relevant ethnos/-ie; the latter remains the ultimate framework of assessment.

This *ethnorelativism* is what compels both theoretical approaches to seek out a culture-bearer with quite special characteristics, as discussed in the previous section. But it is also worth pointing out some ambivalences and inconsistencies in neo-Traditionalists' and Decoloniality theorists' employment of relativism, which create problems quite independent of their quest for a metaphysical bearer of culture.

I have already noted that Aleksandr Dugin's official ethnorelativism sits uneasily alongside his more classically Traditionalist statements condemning the values and 'episteme' of one 'ethnos' – the 'Atlanticist' – from what purports to be an objective, universalist standpoint. Dugin's official doctrine does not allow such a standpoint to exist. A similar problem is to be found in Decoloniality theorists' writings. For instance, alongside Walter Mignolo's professions of relativism (*yes* to "pluriversality", *no* to "universal truth or truth without parenthesis"), we also encounter unqualified statements that, for example, non-Western "knowledge-making" is more conducive than Western to "well-being", "healthy bodies in harmony with Earth" and "the necessary balance of life". Mignolo owes us an explanation as to which "epistemology" or "cosmology" these statements, which sound like they are being made from a universalist bird's-eye view, are true relative to (Mignolo 2011: 71, 143, 175; Mignolo 2021: 80).[21]

While the above inconsistencies might perhaps be classed as incidental lapses, there is a further tension in our two theories' employment of relativism right at the heart of what they are trying to achieve. Apart from their ethnorelativism,

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20 Contrast Kusch 2020, a defence of relativism which takes epistemic systems to be the ultimate frameworks of assessment.

21 See also Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 207.

another departure from postmodernist or postcolonialist theory on the part of neo-Traditionalism and Decoloniality theory is that neither approach can dispense with what Jean-François Lyotard called *metanarratives*.[22]

Both theoretical approaches affirm that, over at least the past 500 years, the West has economically exploited and violently subjugated much of the rest of the world. What is more, the West has exported, promoted and sometimes imposed a set of beliefs, values and rational standards which are properly local to it – true or valid only relative to the Western ethnos/-ie. Worse still, the West has managed to convince some non-Westerners that not only their local beliefs and values, but even those of the West, are potential candidates for objective and universal truth. This global situation is described by Decoloniality theory as 'coloniality', and Dugin now also asserts that this situation means "we are still in colonisation" (Dugin 2021: 73). Both theoretical approaches affirm that there are instrumental economic and political reasons, but also deeper, intrinsic reasons of identity for overcoming this state of affairs through "epistemic disobedience" or "epistemological reconstitution" (Mignolo 2011: 122; Mignolo 2021: 53).

Whether or not one agrees with the above claims, it would be hard to deny that both Dugin's neo-Traditionalism and Decoloniality theory hold them to be true: indeed, they hold them to be true of the whole world, and true for everyone in it. But if they can grant that so many controversial propositions are candidates for objective, universal truth, we are entitled to ask why they will not allow us also to assess other propositions for objective and universal truth – rather than only to assess them on the basis of whether they are proper to our 'ethnos' or 'ethnie'.

Their ethnorelativism not only risks undermining neo-Traditionalism and contemporary Decoloniality theory's grand metanarrative. It also makes it impossible for either theory to reject as false (as first-generation Decoloniality theorist Aníbal Quijano had) the race categories and racist beliefs central to colonialism. As long as these remain part of the 'Western episteme', they will be true or valid relative to an ethnos/-ie – which is as much truth or validity as any beliefs can hope for under the ethnorelativist regime.

Relatedly, although Dugin and the Decoloniality theorists condemn as 'arrogant' the thought that beliefs or utterances could ever be objectively and universally true, as a matter of fact their ethnorelativism makes impossible the following thought, which universalism positively encourages: that not only an

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22 See Lyotard 1984. As Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni candidly puts it, "[w]hile postcolonial theorists are concerned with dismantling meta-narratives, decolonial theorists push forward an analysis predicated on questions of power, epistemology, and ontology" (2020: 37–38).

individual, but also a large group of people over many generations ('the West', or any other) could be entirely wrong in all, or almost all, of what they believe.

Recent developments in epistemic ethnonationalism

Both neo-Traditionalism and Decoloniality theory hold that a worldwide form of epistemic colonisation has occurred, is ongoing, and needs to be resisted and overcome. Neither advocates for epistemic decolonisation in order, by removing errors due to systematic bias, to attain to objective and universally true beliefs.[23] For both neo-Traditionalism and Decoloniality theory officially repudiate the very idea of universal truth. Both embrace *ethnorelativism* – the view that utterances and beliefs can at most be true *relative to*, not epistemic systems, but ultimately one's 'ethnos' or 'ethnie'.

Both theoretical approaches we have been considering go far beyond the plausible idea that current theories, academic disciplines and commonsense beliefs exhibit gaps and distortions due to past and present operations of sociopolitical power. Rather, they advance the ambitious conceptual doctrine that each 'ethnos' or 'ethnie' has values, knowledge, and an 'episteme' which are properly restricted to it. The *epistemic ethnonationalism* which neo-Traditionalism and Decoloniality theory have converged on tells each of us that what we ought to believe and what values we ought to espouse depend on what 'ethnos' or 'ethnie' we belong to.

In politics, epistemic ethnonationalism represents a challenge to the liberal idea that it is right for citizens to adopt beliefs and values based on their own appraisal of the evidence and their own convictions. Both Aleksandr Dugin's neo-Traditionalism and Decoloniality theory posit as a desirable end-state the expunging from each region of the world (as well—perhaps—as its ethnic diaspora) of acceptance or employment of ideas, concepts and beliefs which do not accord with that region's proper 'episteme'. As with other forms of nationalism, how extreme a form of politics epistemic ethnonationalism grounds will depend on what means are judged permissible to realise this end-state.

In the last couple of years, the degree of theoretical convergence between neo-Traditionalism and Decoloniality theory has markedly increased. Dugin now also uses the language of 'colonisation' and 'decolonisation'; he also makes more frequent appeals to justice in the epistemic domain, arguing now for a "redistribution of the system of values" to "recognise the full-scale dignity of non-Western political thought" (Dugin 2021: 73–74). Walter Mignolo, for his part,

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23   For an approach to 'conceptual decolonization' more along these lines, see Wiredu 1996: ch. 10.

has begun to draw explicitly on theorists of Germany's Conservative Revolution, especially Carl Schmitt and Oswald Spengler,[24] who have always been among Dugin's points of reference.

But the most striking new convergence is on the notion that the West itself is a victim of epistemic colonisation. In his latest book, Mignolo claims that one necessary step in overcoming the coloniality of knowledge is "appropriat[ing] Western concepts that have been destituted from the hegemonic vocabulary[...] – for example, *gnosis* and *aesthesis*". "Aesthetics colonized aesthesis" he asserts (Mignolo 2021: 54-55).[25] Dugin now also takes the position that "Western culture" has been "hijacked by modernity", indeed that "the West itself is colonised by modernity". Regarding the USA's contribution to Western epistemic imperialism, Dugin now sees himself as "*at war with the Democrats – with only half the US –not with the US as such*" (Dugin 2021: 63, 75-76). This was the longstanding view of President Bolsonaro's neo-Traditionalist advisor Olavo de Carvalho, with whom Dugin vehemently disagreed on just this point in a debate in 2011.[26] In reversing his position, Dugin has also further aligned himself with former US president Donald Trump's advisor Steve Bannon,[27] who Dugin salutes in his latest book as a fellow neo-Traditionalist, "inspired by serious anti-modernist authors such as Julius Evola" (Dugin 2021: 21).

As I noted at the outset, Decoloniality theory, though it has been a major inspiration for campus politics in the Global South, has not yet influenced national politics or government. In South Africa, that looks set to change. In January 2022, Tourism Minister Lindiwe Sisulu, who has hired erstwhile Rhodes Must Fall student activist Chumani Maxwele as an advisor (Benatar 2021: 381), opened her campaign for the presidency of the African National Congress, and thereby of the country, with a newspaper opinion piece expressing views which were decolonial in the epistemic ethnonationalist sense. For example, she wrote:

> The most dangerous African today is the mentally colonised African. And when you put them in leadership positions or as interpreters of the law, they are worse than your oppressor. They have no African or Pan African inspired ideological grounding. Some are confused by foreign belief systems (Sisulu 2022).

Sisulu's own presidential bid has not succeeded.[28] But the debate provoked by her article has made clear that there would be substantial support in South Africa for

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24   See, *e.g.*, Mignolo 2021: 1, 6-7, 356-57. On the Conservative Revolution, see Rose 2021: 6-8.

25   See also *op. cit.*: xvi.

26   See Carvalho and Dugin 2012: 33-34, 39-41, 59, 73-75.

27   See Green 2017: 204-208; Teitelbaum 2020: ch. 6.

28   See AmaShabalala 2022.

politics based explicitly on sentiments like these of Sisulu's. It remains to be seen whether, once its ethnonationalism begins to guide party-political campaigns and even government policy, Decoloniality theory can continue to present itself as a theory of the Left.

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