Decolonising politics with insights from Indigenous Studies

Maria Bargh

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

BOOK REVIEW

Decolonising politics with insights from Indigenous Studies, by Robbie Shilliam, Polity Press, Cambridge UK, 2021, 181 pp., $22.95 (paperback), ISBN-13: 978-1509539390

Internationally, calls are growing to decolonise numerous academic disciplines (Ruru and Nikora 2021; Dudgeon 2021; Mataamua 2021; Xavier et al. 2021; Elkington et al. 2020; Moosavi 2019; Tuck and Yang 2012)). There are several strands to the literature; 'decolonising' is conceptualised in many different ways and what are seen as the essential elements also differs. Robbie Shilliam's book *Decolonizing Politics* adds a further contribution to this growing field but should be reflected on in the context of insights about decolonising from Indigenous Studies.

Indigenous Studies have engaged in particularly intricate debates about the complexities of decolonising in settler colonies (Smith 1999; Alfred 1999; Trask 1999). The nearly inextricable connection between decolonising and the issue of which are the best avenues and strategies, whilst in the ongoing presence of settler colonialism, is of crucial importance to many Indigenous Studies' scholars (Alfred 1999; Alfred 2005; Moreton-Robinson 2016).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the calls for decolonising academic disciplines are gaining momentum, spurred by many factors, including decades of work by Māori for recognition of rights arising from *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (signed in 1840 between Māori and the British), and recently within universities from Māori scholars in Law Faculties. Following the lead of Indigenous legal scholars in Canada and Australia, Māori legal scholars have called for the teaching of law in universities to be bijural, bicultural and bilingual (Ruru et al. 2020). They argue that these changes must be Māori led and move well beyond simply incorporating aspects of Māori law as a show of 'cross-cultural competence' to a re-envisioning of the teaching of law and a transfer of resources and decision-making power to Māori (Ruru et al. 2020). In response, the New Zealand Council of Legal Education has resolved that *tikanga* Māori (Māori law) will be included in the core law subjects taught in universities as part of the professional requirements for lawyers (New Zealand Council of Legal Education n.d).

These changes and debates can present insights for other academic disciplines. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori and non-Māori researching and teaching politics, international relations and public policy are in the early stages of considering the impacts of these moves on their disciplines. The question of 'who' leads the decolonising has been raised by Indigenous scholars who see leadership as a role for Indigenous peoples. This also reflects Indigenous scholars' views of the very political nature of researching, writing and teaching.

Indigenous Studies' scholars tend to see the act of research, writing and teaching as political. A textbook for students of politics would be seen as very political in nature. The role of the scholar in research and writing is pivotal in shaping a decolonising world, supporting ongoing colonialism or a bit of both (Smith 1999).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, this practice of identifying one's positionality, or identifying your genealogy, and importantly where you have obligations, and your place in the political ecosystem, is a key feature of cultural traditions. Without this identification it is difficult to assess where someone else fits in a political ecosystem. In Aotearoa New Zealand, it is commonplace for people to identify and acknowledge their ancestors and there are growing numbers of non-Māori who identify themselves as *Pākehā* (of European descent). The positioning of oneself is not for blame or honour to be bestowed on people or to assume some essentialised identity but rather more practical – so people have a sense of where you have obligations, where you may have received privilege, where you literally sit on political matters and most importantly, in order to be able to assess and build a relationship of the appropriate type, with oneself. Relationships are central to Māori law.

One of the challenges I found with Robbie Shilliam's book was the absence of this discussion. I met Shilliam during his time at Victoria University of Wellington and therefore know a little about him but in the context of *Decolonizing Politics* the reader should be introduced to Shilliam as part of the subject matter and particularly given the suggested aims of the book. Without overtly explaining the rationale for not addressing this aspect, Shilliam takes the role of a hovering narrator such as neutral, objective, clever and humorous.

It is difficult to imagine that positionality and genealogy were deemed insignificant to the topic of decolonising, as each of the core chapters of the book involved tracing back dominant colonial thinkers and thinking to their origins and interrogating their place in colonial history. Similarly, those critiquing the dominant colonial voices, described as 'those on the margins', were also contextualised within the political ecosystem. The identities of people and their context were clearly seen as important in understanding their place in the past and in the future of understanding and writing about political science – but not the narrator.

While it is commonplace in Indigenous Studies to reflect on one's own subject position in relation to the topic of research, it is also the case in many other disciplines, including parts of political studies, social sciences and the humanities (Smith 1999; Thomas 2020).

This move to acknowledge one's positionality is replicated outside universities in Aotearoa New Zealand too. Increasing numbers of non-Māori in New Zealand are describing themselves as *Pākehā* and *Tangata Tiriti*, people of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*. For many, this descriptor highlights their willingness to journey towards decolonising. It also has practical implications for research funding, in an environment where the New Zealand Government has introduced policies to support *mātauranga* Māori, Māori knowledge systems (Ministry of Research, Science, Technology 2007) and scholars are now attentive to the issues involved in knowledge production and Indigenous rights.

Decolonisation is also about the change that communities and individuals need to make in their own lives alongside change in academia. Shilliam hints at this in the last paragraphs of the book with instructions for what readers should do next; however, the book itself could, in the way it was constructed, have better enacted this. As I suggested the silence on the positionality of the author appeared inconsistent with the common trends to acknowledge the pivotal role of the scholar in writing or re-writing decolonisation and the status quo. The position Shilliam took, as an objective, hovering narrator, models the idea of a neutral guide – something which unfortunately lends itself easily back to the dominant practices and long-standing assumptions of colonisation and the idea that scholarly work can objectively describe the world as separate from oneself (Gerth and Mills Wright 1948).

The second element of Indigenous Studies' scholarship to consider in relation to *Decolonizing Politics* is the idea of centring Indigenous worldviews.

The most effective way to decolonise is always a difficult question as peoples all have a different reasons for supporting decolonising. Indigenous scholars spent many decades engaged in 'writing back' to the 'canon' of many academic disciplines and this was the key feature of postcolonial studies (Trask 1999; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1995).

One of the theoretical decolonising moves that scholars of Indigenous Studies have made in the last two decades is to shift to simply reaffirming Indigenous worldviews, methodologies, scholars and politics as an act of reasserting what Māori call '*rangatiratanga*' (self-determination) but other Indigenous peoples describe with their own terms (Simpson 2014; Andersen 2014; LaDuke 2005; Wilson and Yellow Bird 2005; Alfred 2005). Indigenous scholars have shifted themselves from 'the margins' to the centre. The structuring of *Decolonizing Politics* sits a little uneasily beside these moves to the centre.

The way *Decolonizing Politics* is structured begins with and centres colonial thinkers and thinking before providing the critiques from those described to be 'on the margins'. Despite the goal of disrupting the 'centre-margins' discourse and power dynamic, this structuring re-enacts the dynamic by reiterating it.

The second implication from this structuring is that those 'on the margins' tend to be categorised together, obscuring their differences, which in the context of settler colonialism are quite profound. Tuck and Yang argue that 'Homogenizing various experiences of oppression as colonization' (Tuck and Yang 2012, 17) unhelpfully lends itself towards turning decolonisation into a metaphor, which ultimately undermines Indigenous peoples aspirations for the actual return of their lands.

Decolonizing Politics presents plenty for students to consider and supports the small and large steps in many places to decolonise academic disciplines. Key lessons from Indigenous Studies also provide useful prompts for students to consider alongside this work.

References

Alfred, T. 1999. *Peace, Power and Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Alfred, T. 2005. *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*. Peterborough: Broadview Press.

Andersen, C. 2014. *Métis: Race, Recognition and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood*. Vancouver: University of British Colombia Press.

Ashcroft, B., G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin. 1995. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Edited by B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin. London: Routledge.

Dudgeon, P. 2021. "Decolonising Psychology." In *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies* , edited by B. Hokowhitu, A. Moreton-Robinson, L. T. Smith, and C. Andersen, 100–113. London: Routledge.

Elkington, B., M. Jackson, R. Kiddle, O. R. Mercier, M. Ross, J. Smeaton, and A. Thomas. 2020. *Imagining Decolonisation*. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books.

Gerth, H. H., and C. Mills Wright. 1948. *From Max Weber: Essays on Sociology*, Edited by H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills. London: Routledge.

LaDuke, W. 2005. *Recovering the Sacred: The Power of Naming and Claiming*. Cambridge M.A: South End Press.

Mataamua, R. 2021. "Matariki and the Decolonisation of Time." In *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies*, edited by B. Hokowhitu, A. Moreton-Robinson, L. T. Smith, and C. Andersen, 65–77. London: Routledge.

Ministry of Research, Science, Technology. 2007. *Vision Mātauranga*. Wellington: New Zealand Government. https://www.mbie.govt.nz/assets/9916d28d7b/vision-matauranga-booklet.pdf

Moosavi, L. 2019. "Decolonising Criminology: Syed Hussein Alatas on Crimes of the Powerful." *Critical Criminology* 27: 229–242. doi:10.1007/s10612-018-9396-9.

Moreton-Robinson, A. 2016. *Critical Indigenous Studies*, Edited by A. Moreton-Robinson. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

New Zealand Council of Legal Education, n.d. "Te Ao Māori and Tikanga Māori". https://nzcle.org.nz

Ruru, J., and L. M. Nikora. 2021. *Ngā Kete Mātauranga: Māori scholars at the research interface*, Edited by J. Ruru and L. M. Nikora. Otago: Otago University Press.

Ruru, J., M. Turei, C. Jones, and K. Quince. 2020. *Inspiring National Indigenous Legal Education for Aotearoa New Zealand's Bachelor of Laws Degree (Project Report)*. Wellington: Borrin Foundation. http://hdl.handle.net/10523/11985

Simpson, A. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Smith, L. T. 1999. *Decolonizing Methodologies*. London: Zed Books.

Thomas, A. 2020. "Pākehā and Doing the Work of Decolonisation." In *Imagining Decolonisation* , edited by B. Elkington, M. Jackson, R. Kiddle, O. R. Mercier, M. Ross, J. Smeaton, and A. Thomas, 107–132. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books.

Trask, H. 1999. *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaii*. Revised ed. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Tuck, E., and K. W. Yang. 2012. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (1): 1–40.

Wilson, W. A., and M. Yellow Bird. 2005. *For Indigenous Eyes Only: A Decolonization Handbook*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

Xavier, S., B. Jacobs, V. Waboose, J. G. Hewitt, and A. Bhatia. 2021. *Decolonizing Law: Indigenous, Third World and Settler Perspectives*, Edited by S. Xavier, B. Jacobs, V. Waboose, J. G. Hewitt, and A. Bhatia. Oxon: Routledge.

Maria Bargh

Māori Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand

✉ Maria.Bargh@vuw.ac.nz 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1559-1360