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Towards a decolonial political theory: Thinking from the zone of nonbeing

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Abstract

This article offers to outline a direction for a decolonial political theory based on Aimé Césaire's and Frantz Fanon's thoughts. In doing so, I will first discuss some work of comparative political theory that could be associated with an attempt to decolonize political theory. Rather than a systematic critique of these works, this article aims to outline some of their limits from a decolonial perspective, such as their embedment in a continental ontology/logic, and their over-emphasis on methodology that can lead to an instrumental account of politics. In contrast, I will argue for a decolonial existential political theory that grounds its investigation in what Frantz Fanon called 'the zone of nonbeing' and that takes politics as first philosophy. To make my point, I will discuss Aimé Césaire's *Letter to Maurice Thorez* and Frantz Fanon's Political Theory of the *Damnés*.

Keywords

decolonial thought, phenomenology, existential philosophy, political theory, comparative political theory

In 2015, Charles Mills published an article proposing to decolonize Western political philosophy. This important text focused on the Anglophone analytic tradition of political philosophy and one of its most prominent proponents, John Rawls. In his essay, Mills criticized the analytic philosophers' turning away from issues such as imperialism and colonialism, which were important themes of the continental tradition, with authors such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Hannah Arendt. Moreover, Mills proposed to acknowledge the racial dimensions of the canon and to unsettle the coloniality[1] of Rawls' normative assumptions. In other words, his work was about critiquing the Eurocentrism of (analytic)

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political philosophy. Attention to the coloniality of Euromodern political theory and Western political concepts and categories is not new and has been pursued by several scholars since Anibal Quijano's canonical article on the coloniality of power (Quijano 1992; Quijano and Ennis 2000). Following from this, decolonial thinkers have coined concepts and theories such as the coloniality of being, the coloniality of human rights, and the coloniality of gender (Lugones 2016; Maldonado-Torres 2007, 2017). In other words, the point is to unsettle the underside or dark side of Modernity (Dussel and Mendieta 1998; Mignolo 2011). Yet, some theorists like David Meyer Temin argue that decolonizing a discipline such as political theory must go beyond undoing Eurocentrism. For him, 'the decolonization of political, social, and cultural theory has largely proceeded as an enterprise directed at a critique of the parochial viewpoints of Western political theorizing' (Temin 2023, 236). In other words, for Temin, decolonial theory, in practice, often represents only an epistemological critique of the Eurocentric universalism of political concepts. Using the example of developmentalism and the work of Walter Rodney, Temin thus argues that the project of 'decolonizing' should consist of an effort 'to rework developmental categories in service of worldly projects of decolonization in practice' (2023, 236). From Charles Mills and Walter Mignolo to David Meyer Temin, then, the dispute is about the meaning of 'decolonizing'. Accordingly, and as I will discuss in this article, those disputes address metatheoretical matters as they delve into the question of the formulation of a theory by interrogating its foundations.

More generally, it could be argued that these attempts to decolonize political theory have been carried out within a new form of political theory called comparative political theory (CPT). Indeed, CPT has been developed for several decades with the promise 'to correct political theory's parochialism' (Ilieva 2022, 698). This is an attempt to diversify, expand and pluralize political theory by using a comparative method. According to Evgenia Ilieva, CPT pursues two agendas. The first one seeks 'to transform the disciplinary mainstream of political theory into a less geo-culturally exclusive landscape', willing 'to explode the boundaries and practice of political theory'. The second one does not aim 'to transform political theory per se but merely to create a space for encounter within which other traditions can be meaningfully engaged' (Ilieva 2022, 700). These two agendas are thus metatheoretical and epistemological. They respectively aim to change the landscape of knowledge (production) by expanding it, and in the same move, to provincialize Europe and North America, and create the possibility of a West/Non-West dialogue without reproducing epistemic colonialism. These agendas can take different forms such as the critique of Eurocentrism along the lines of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (2003). It can also take the form of revisiting a concept from a Global South perspective such as Temin's account of development from the perspective of Walter Rodney that I mentioned above. Or it can be illustrated by the attempt to go beyond the critique of Eurocentrism by building a practical political theory of decolonization based on the anti-colonial politics of Fanon and Gandhi (Getachew 2019; Getachew and Mantena 2021), creating a South-South dialogue. However, some scholars such as Sanjay Seth (2020) argues that political theory is inherently Western and the very fact of deparochializing political theory tends to impose a Western view on non-Western thinkers which results in a distortion of the understanding of non-Western traditions and thoughts. From the

perspective of the creolization of political theory, Jane Gordon argues that 'comparative political theory still needs geopolitical-spatial designators of the "near" and the "far"' (J.A. Gordon 2014, 210) even if it can seek to overpass it by creating a dialogue. Therefore, the need to create an 'inter-civilizational dialogue' (Bowden 2008; Dallmayr and Manoochehri 2007; J.A. Gordon 2014) paradoxically rigidifies the categories it seeks to overcome. Following in the footsteps of these works, this article will offer a critique of some work from comparative political theorists and propose an alternative direction for a decolonial political theory. To be clear, this is not a rejection of CPT per se but an emphasis on what I consider to be some of its limits from a decolonial perspective.

To elucidate this, I will first look at Fred Dallmayr's and Farah Godrej's work to highlight some of those limitations. My main point will be that there is a transformation of political-social problems (colonial geography) into methodological problems. Consequently, I will argue that they offer a methodological solution to a colonial-political-social problem. In other words, those works are embedded in what Nelson Maldonado-Torres called a continental ontology/logic (Maldonado-Torres 2006). In contrast, this article will suggest an alternative direction to political theory. To develop this new direction, I will look at Aimé Césaire's *Letter to Maurice Thorez* (1956) and argue for a political theory that takes politics rather than epistemology as first philosophy. Ultimately, the article will look at what I call Frantz Fanon's *political theory of the damnés* and argue for a decolonial political theory that entertains a phenomenal relationship to reality. In other words, the article will outline an existential decolonial political theory based on Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire.

Comparison as method

Comparative Political Theory was created as a way to deparochialize and criticize Political Theory's Eurocentrism. However, this field is broad and heterogeneous. Indeed, some competing interpretations exist as well as internal critiques. The problems raised by comparative political theorists can be as diverse as how to translate a concept into a context and vice versa, how to create a dialogue between different conceptual genealogies, etc. Basically, how to deal with the West/non-West comparison, in order to extend or transform political theory's geo-cultural landscape, as Ilieva's characterization of CPT's agenda testifies. The purpose of this article is not to provide a systematic critique of CPT but rather to see if its most basic paradigm, namely a comparison that takes the form of dialogue, can be seen as useful for a decolonial political theory. In doing so, I will focus on two main authors of that field, Fred Dallmayr who participated to its creation and problematization, as well as Farah Godrej who pushed further the problematization of two binaries constitutive to CPT, namely Self/Other and West/non-West. I will argue that those authors mainly suggest methodologically solving the problem of West/non-West dialogue and division without digging into its political foundations and implications. Indeed, as Andrew March argues, 'comparison must be, *in the first place*, a method' (March 2009, 537). Accordingly, this section will follow the hypothesis that CPT transforms a political problem (West/non-West divide) into a methodological problem by the very move of willingness to solve this problem methodologically. I will ultimately argue that it leads to

(1) a displacement of politics that is now considered as a means-end and (2) a displacement of the initial problem that concerns decolonial theorists, namely, the racial/colonial division of the world, hence the West/non-West divide. To elucidate this, I will show that the problem of location can be explained by what I think to be CPT continental logic/ontology. Thereafter, I will look at how this problem is dealt with methodologically, which leads to an instrumental conception of politics.

As it should be clear by now, the specificity of CPT is the importance of expanding the theoretical dialogue beyond the Eurocentric Western monologue. And because CPT, as a project, is constituted by this objective, it is dependent on a specific cartography, one that divides the West and the rest in a West/non-West or Global North/Global South axis. Let me first exemplify this statement by looking at Fred Dallmayr's work. His proposition of a comparative political theory emerged 'in contrast to hegemonic and imperialist modes of theorizing', to suggest a dialogical and hermeneutic theory which relies 'on mutual interpretation' (Dallmayr 2004, 249). Dallmayr found the philosophical inspiration for this opening of the West towards the rest in Continental Philosophy, and mainly in the work of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Indeed, following those authors, Dallmayr takes hermeneutics as 'an understanding through an intensive dialogue, or encounter […] between self and other' (2004, 250–1). Another source of inspiration is found in Charles Taylor's multiculturalism which highlights 'dialogical encounter and recognition' (Dallmayr 2004, 252). The aim of this relational ontology is to move towards a universalism that takes into account cultural differences and takes the question of 'otherness' seriously. In other words, this Self-Other ontology that guides Dallmayr's work as well as other theorists assumes a logic of recognition of differences that will shape the dialogical relation between the Self and the Other. From Dallmayr's perspective, CPT is conceived as a dialogical practice that is marked by cross- and inter-cultural understandings (2004, 249). However, as one can imagine, this dialogical logic is not between two different Western thinkers or cultures, at least not in CPT. Indeed, while the method could be applied to it, the point is not to create a cross-cultural dialogue between Anglo-American and French Continental philosophy. In Dallmayr's word, we must take the world, in its 'ongoing process of globalization', as a 'global village' (2004, 249). While, within the frame of CPT, this approach is valuable to deparochialize political theory as well as to displace its Eurocentrism, from a decolonial perspective, I believe that this approach is problematic because it remains embedded in a continental logic, meaning that it reifies the West/non-West as an almost natural cartography, where we just need to acknowledge and mutually learn from our differences.

Let me start by saying that this cartography has a history; it is not a pure data or a natural law that transcends history. Indeed, the West/non-West map is inherited from colonial conquests characterized by the exploitation and appropriation of lands, resources, and people. Prior to that, other geographies or organizations of locations that did not put Europe at its center, or even in the north existed (L.R. Gordon 2011; Sonneborn 2006). From that perspective, geography is not only about latitude and longitude but also about the political organization of the world and the relationship between different locations (Rose-Redwood et al. 2020). For instance, the West is also a political category. As Walter Mignolo argues, 'cartography appropriated space in the name of geography' (2011, 185).

On the other hand, by looking at the work of the 16th-century geographer Abraham Ortelius, Monica Matei-Chesnoiu argues that geography is a practice that 'orders and represents physical, social, and imaginative worlds' (2012, 13). From that perspective, Matei-Chesnoiu follows, geography and cartographies are instruments that *rationalize* our understanding of the world (2012). Accordingly, the comparison in CPT can be considered as a shifting of the geographical framing of comparison, and not a shift in cartography. Or to put it differently, it is not a shifting of what Lewis Gordon calls the geography of reason (L.R. Gordon 2011). Indeed, by rationalizing our understanding of the world, 'location' is understood from a certain geographical perspective as a disciplinary truth that narrates the West/non-West divide as a natural geographical divide and hides its political dimension. Therefore, it allows its reification. Indeed, cartography is not just a neutral zero-point of observation 'from which the world can be named', but it was 'tied to a strategy of military and ideological control over other populations' (Castro-Gómez 2021, 199).

The shift in location is operated within what Maldonado-Torres called a continental ontology or logic (2006, 2011). Here, I understand 'continental ontology' both as a specific philosophical tradition and as a specific mapping of the world. Moreover, I put that both are related to each other. Indeed, for instance, Dallmayr extensively refers to Gadamer, who is a major name of continental philosophy, for two main reasons. First, for his hermeneutic approach, and second to mention his observation of the world as a 'worldwide network of communications', understood as a 'unity in diversity', after the independence of formerly colonized countries (Dallmayr 2009, 32–3). In that sense, Gadamer exemplifies what Maldonado-Torres understand by continental logic, as both a philosophical tradition and a colonial cartography. The problem with the continental ontology is that it tends to take continents (Europe, Asia, Africa, etc.) as natural geographical coordinates in which people happen to live. Indeed, there are Western thinkers and non-Western thinkers. However, what is forgotten here, is that the West/non-West locations are political. For instance, as Nelson Maldonado-Torres reminds us, 'African unity was for [Fanon] strictly a political project driven by interests in decolonization, not an ontological reality' (2006, 3). Therefore, a continental ontology creates a symmetry between locations as they both are different from each other. In that sense, it is a 'unity in diversity' as Dallmayr said (2009, 33), following Gadamer.

From that perspective, a geographic symmetry displaces a political asymmetry. And it is precisely what geographical rationalization is about, making it seems as if the West and non-West are purely natural geographical locations. The symmetry makes it seem that the non-West was an Other that is to be understood to create a dialogue with its Other which is the West. In that sense, 'Self' and 'Other' are interchangeable positions. Here we find Dallmayr's reference to Taylor's recognition of differences. However, as I said earlier, this geographical distinction is the result of colonialism and is still a sign of a (neo)colonial partition of the world. Moreover, if one follows Enrique Dussel (1995), colonialism is less a pure antagonism between colonized and colonizers (Self-Other) than a totalization, understood as an eclipse of the Other, of Alterity, within one paradigm. Indeed, colonized people do not exist without colonizers, and conversely. Therefore, the non-West is not to be understood as the Other of the West, but as its

'constitutive sub-other' (Maldonado-Torres 2006, 4). To put it differently, the West is constitutive of the non-West as much as the latter is constitutive of the former. Yet, this co-constitution is not symmetrical but a relationship of exploitation-of resources, lands, and people. As Lewis Gordon put it, 'the black is […] indigenous to a world that rejects blacks' (2023, 132). That said, I want to illustrate how this problem of location is solved, or intended to get solved, by focussing on the work of Farah Godrej who relies on Dallmayr. My argument is that because of this continental logic that displaces a colonial political geography to a cartography of natural spaces, the dialogical problem of the recognition of differences, or basically the question of how to create a unity in diversity is solved by the means of method. Accordingly, I believe that this does not address the problem of the colonial geography but reifies it.

It has already been highlighted by some scholars such as Roxanne Euben that comparative political theory 'has been accompanied by a disproportionate focus on methodology' (2022, 3). Indeed, when we look at recent and less recent academic productions, there is a heavy focus on how to do comparative political theory, or considering the ancient Greek etymology of method, *methodos* (μεθοδος), literally what way to follow to pursue research in CPT. Some argue for a hermeneutic circle to create a West/non-West dialogue (Godrej 2011; Ilieva 2015, 2022), others for a critical and re-constructive paradigm (Getachew and Mantena 2021), and some for a contextualized approach (Little 2018), amongst other methods. Indeed, Ilieva explains the sometimes-conflicting approaches within CPT as a commitment to find 'more adequate methods' (2022, 699), regarding the different challenges posed by CPT. Roxanne Euben called this overemphasis a 'methodological machine' that aims to make political theory 'more hospitable to quantification' (2022, 4) and, most importantly, closer to the other subfields[2] of political science that we find in North American universities. Following Lewis Gordon's work, this way to flatten political theory so it can fit better in political science, in general, could be associated with an ontologization of the discipline. And this is precisely the point of what Gordon called disciplinary decadence which is 'the ontologizing or reification of a discipline' (2006, 4), as the search for a disciplinary purity. In other words, by overly focussing on method, the expansion of political theory into comparative political theory would paradoxically be a way to rigidify the discipline itself. Here, my purpose is to take seriously and extend Euben's thesis on the 'methodological machine' by saying that this overemphasis on method tends to put epistemology as first philosophy.

The problem is not to look at method as such but to put epistemology as the first philosophy. From that perspective, the non-Western thoughts that CPT aims to discover, explain, and add to knowledge, become the problem of inquiry. Du Bois argued that black people were not only a problem to theorize or to know about, but also people having problems. Following the same idea, the dialogical logic of recognition, non-Western thinkers are not viewed as thinkers facing problems, but as a problem to solve. For Lewis Gordon, 'they [non-Western thinkers here] become *extraneous* to its [the system] function in spite of having already been generated by such functions' (2011, 97). To put it differently, *political theory* generates non-Western thinkers and thoughts as *extraneous*, so the problem of *contemporary political theory* is how to deal with this externality or exteriority. In other words, the first problem is methodological: 'How to deal with difference?'.

To illustrate that point, let me focus on two important methodological points made by Farah Godrej in her book *Cosmopolitan Political Thought* (2011). The work of Farah Godrej is interesting in that it actively problematizes the 'West/non-West' and 'Self/Other' binaries by bringing a cosmopolitan approach to comparative political theory. Following Fred Dallmayr, she suggests a hermeneutic approach to Otherness that is, I believe, best illustrated by her ideas of 'self-dislocation' and 'self-relocation'. According to her, the former is a 'metaphorical dislocation of the self from the comforts of disciplinary home and training, from settled practices of intellectual production, and from settled vantage points about such production'. In other words, it is a reflection of one's own practice 'from *within* the very civilizations that confront us with their otherness' (Godrej 2011, 38–9). On the other hand, the self-relocation 'allows one to resituate oneself within familiar debates with a reconstituted vision that brings new methodological and substantive insights to bear on them' (Godrej 2011, 75). To put it differently, it is a way to bring a new vision to one's disciplinary home. This methodology was offered by Godrej to answer a possible problem of mistranslation and misinterpretation in comparative political theory (2011, 51). Therefore, this dialectic between self-dislocation and relocation is a response to the problem of 'how to deal with the externality of non-Western thought' that I mentioned above.

This entails the question: can method solve a political problem? From that perspective, CPT bears the risk to become a discipline that is mainly concerned with methods and the assessment of those methods. By focussing on methodology, the inquiry focuses on a potential specific relationship to reality. However, this overemphasis on method bears the paradoxical risk to leave reality, understood as existence, aside. This is why Fanon (2015, 5) urged us to leave methods behind to focus on the lived experience, but I will discuss that later. Indeed, method posits a law, a norm, to respect because 'it is governed by repeatability, as a function of experimentation and prediction' (L.R. Gordon 2006, 44–5). A law predicts what it will realize; therefore, it needs a set of norms, if not ontologies, that are true every time. For example, creating the best way to conduct a West/non-West dialogue postulates a homogeneity of the West/non-West, that does not consider non-Western elements in the West and conversely, especially if one takes the case of internal colonialism.[3] To be clear, my purpose is not to say that CPT cannot be useful, but my claim is that this overemphasis on method is limited when it comes to a decolonial political theory, also because of the relationship that is entertained between method and politics.

The tendency to put method as a norm can be translated into an instrumental account of politics as well, precisely because a method makes explicit a specific relationship to reality that is potentially considered the best or more accurate. Following Bonnie Honig's formula (1993), Roxanne Euben argues that this over-emphasis on method operated a displacement of politics, which is 'a displacement of the locus of politics from the world of lay people and practices to that of academics' (2022, 5). Basically, politics becomes a methodological problem. Here, I want to suggest that this normative and instrumental account of politics leads to leaving the lived experience, or the phenomenal reality, aside. Indeed, the 'methodological machine' entails a certain rationalization of politics that changes its locus from the lived experience to a disciplinary method. Moreover, this focus

on method is not unfamiliar to the history of philosophy and knowledge. At the beginning of Euromodernity, some philosophers felt the need to depart from the scholastic Aristotelianism and articulate a practical dimension to philosophy. At the intersection of *scientia* and *techne*, philosophy was conceived to solve practical problems by using 'systematic procedure, or method' (Kisner 2005, 138). In other words, epistemology became the first philosophy.

In a recent article, Adom Getachew and Karuna Mantena aimed at constituting an anti-colonial political theory as a critical and reconstructive project by relying on Gandhi's and Fanon's work, acknowledging their different geo-political situation and theoretical approaches. Yet, for the authors, both Fanon and Gandhi are committed to a critical and reconstructive approach. Briefly, their project could be associated with a political theory of decolonization that takes the question of imperialism seriously from a non-Western perspective. Their work is about going beyond the focus on Eurocentrism that can sometimes be present in comparative political theory to propose a paradigm that takes critique and reconstruction into account by looking at different authors, from different locations. In other words, the critique of Eurocentrism is associated with an enlargement of political theory's horizons to also offer a new scope in understanding imperialism, decolonization as well as anti-colonial nationalism (Getachew 2019). It is, in a certain way, a means to put together the two agendas of CPT that I described previously (p. 2). However, I believe that an element is missing in the equation, more precisely, what Fanon called *l'expérience vécue* (the lived experience) in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2015). For Getachew and Mantena, Fanon's account of the problem of Eurocentrism is tied to 'how the enthrallment to Western categories makes it impossible to properly cognize *alternative futures* and enunciate *strategies* needed to attain them', from that perspective, they submit that Fanon's critique is associated to 'analytical and political *models* that properly corresponded to the specificities of the (post)colonial context' (Getachew and Mantena 2021, 367). However, this understanding of an analytic-political model that would give a political strategy to follow is problematic because it misses Fanon's account of the lived experience that cannot be reduced to an analytic-political model, a method. It creates an account of politics where a model implies following a specific strategy to be attained. In that case, politics is understood as *poiesis*, it is a means-end activity rather than a *praxis*.

Thinking from the zone of nonbeing

So far, I described and criticized some theories that could be associated with a gesture of decolonization by raising points such as its continental logic as well as the overemphasis on method that displaces the locus of politics to method. In other words, a political problem becomes a methodological problem. In what follows, I will sketch another direction for a decolonial political theory that can be summarized by the formula 'thinking from the zone of nonbeing'. In doing so, I will specify what I understand by 'zone of nonbeing' by looking at Frantz Fanon's account of it, and I will argue for a 'post-continental' direction to political theory.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon defined the zone of nonbeing as 'an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born'

(2015, 2). This citation says two things, 1) it describes the zone of nonbeing and 2) it outlines its potential agency, in terms of *praxis*. Here, I will focus on the first part and discuss the second later. There have been several interpretations of what Fanon meant by 'zone of nonbeing' (Hook 2020; Sexton 2016; Sithole 2016; Thame 2011). However, there is sort of a consensus over the fact that it was referring to the colonial racist process of dehumanization. This fact could be supported by another point made by Fanon where he stated that 'the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man' (2015, 83). Accordingly, the zone of nonbeing would be the zone of the lack of being. Now, there are two different ways to interpret that. First, from the Sartrean perspective where existence precedes essence and where the lack of being, of substance, is the very condition of being-for-itself as opposed to being-in-itself.[4] However, this interpretation would miss that there is no ontological resistance *in the eyes of the white man*. Hence, the lack of being is created. This could echo what Nelson Maldonado-Torres argued about the coloniality of being. Namely, the very construction of humanity (being) by the West depends on a below-humanity (nonbeing), so a process of dehumanization (Maldonado-Torres 2007). More precisely, it refers to what he called the sub-ontological difference as the 'difference between Being and what lies below Being' (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 254). Accordingly, Lewis Gordon put that 'this below-Otherness [… is] the zone of nonbeing' (2007, 10). Therefore, the zone of non/being can be described as two different modes of existence or being in- and of-the-world.[5] Moreover, the relationship between the two cannot be thought of as a Self-Other relationship. Indeed, thinking from the zone of nonbeing is not to think of alterity, but to look at this below-Otherness, this non-Being as both something constitutive of Being as well as the impossibility of Otherness. This is why there is a need for what Lewis Gordon called a shifting of the geography of reason. Because looking at below-Otherness implies a metatheoretical and philosophical shift.

Accordingly, my main aim is to (re)introduce to the category of lived experience, understood phenomenologically, that is not central in Comparative Political Theory, and to make it central to a decolonial political theory. However, one could argue that this phenomenal account of reality is still embedded in the continental logic, even if Fanon gave a non-Western account of it. Indeed, from what I have said so far, and my suggestion to focus on the lived experience, one could argue that I intend to displace political theory from an analytic to a continental logic or tradition. As a matter of fact, one could also ask why I want to push a continental political theory that would be decolonial. To answer these concerns, I will argue for a post-continental approach that could be illustrated by what Fanon called the 'zone of nonbeing'.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon argued that every ontology is unrealizable in a colonized and civilized society. Basically, ontology cannot explain the lived experience of the colonized (Fanon 2015, 107–8). Indeed, throughout his book, Fanon showed how Hegel's 'Being for Other' and Sartre's account of the negritude (reduced to a moment of class struggle) were not appropriate to understand the lived experience of the black man. His critique of ontology is directed at what could be called continental ontologies, or ontologies that belong to the tradition of continental philosophy. For Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Fanon's theorizing is post-continental as he worked 'to overcome continental thought' according to 'insight into the realities of colonized contexts and lived realities'

(2006, 4). What is interesting here is that the zone of nonbeing is not only a geographical space but a contextualized lived reality, or a disposition (des Portes 2022). In other words, it is a mode of existence. From that perspective, a post-continental philosophy is not only concerned with geographical brandings, since 'Asia', 'Africa' can also be framed or understood in terms of continental ontology as is the case in Hegel (2012), Kant (2013), or Heidegger's ontological nationalism (Maldonado-Torres 2004).

A critique of continental logic could then be associated with what is called a critique of Eurocentrism. However, by mainly focussing on that, it seems as if there would be a continental and a non-continental understanding of a specific geography, or a Eurocentric and a non-Eurocentric understanding. However, if one still follows Enrique Dussel, colonialism is less a pure antagonism between colonized and colonizers but a totalization, understood as an eclipse of the Other, of Alterity, within one paradigm. Indeed, colonized people do not exist without colonizers, and conversely. Hence, the dilemma is not continental vs. non-continental. In other words, the dilemma is not Eurocentrism vs. Afrocentrism but a 'post-continental philosophy [built] on this departure from the continental logic, thus helping to demythologize the idea of continents and put forward decolonized [or/and, I would add, decolonial] conceptions of space, time, subjectivity' (Maldonado-Torres 2006, 3). Therefore, a decolonial political theory does not only change the location but also the geographical (ontological) logic, the metageography (Lewis and Wigen 1997). And I believe that what I call 'thinking from the zone of nonbeing' is a departure from the continental logic that would say 'thinking from the West/non-West'. In other words, it requires a shifting of the geography of reason. Indeed, what Fanon called the zone of nonbeing is the perfect ground for it precisely because it rejects the ontologies of Being, as non-applicable to those who are within the zone of nonbeing. Hence, Being is not to be understood from the perspective of Being (continental philosophy), but from the one of nonbeing (post-continental philosophy), and it exceeds the West/non-West divide. Indeed, Being and non-Being can be found within the same location, if one takes a bus in the segregated USA with different places for black and white people. Accordingly, I suggest sketching a decolonial political theory that is interested in modes of existence in the zone of nonbeing, taken as the ground where decolonial politics happens, not only as a project to follow but also as *praxeis*.

To summarize, the zone of nonbeing is not just a geographical location, an opportunity to revisit the canons of political thought, or the location of the theorization of a normative decolonial model out of it, but an existential disposition where the decolonial can be theorized and understood within the colonial, or as directly addressing it. Indeed, the idea of coloniality does not only uncover Eurocentrism, but it also postulates that the organization of the world is still colonial in its structuration. Therefore, for something to be 'decolonial' it does not necessarily need to get 'decolonized'. For example, marronage can be seen as a decolonial *praxis* that still happens in a colonial world.[6] Yet, those decolonial *praxeis* question the continental ontology, the colonial organization of the world, and therefore they displace it and within the very action, they open the possibility of new geographies. In Fanon's definition, in the zone of nonbeing, 'an authentic upheaval can be born' (2015, 2). In other words, it is the ground of possibility-or the premises-of a counter-world, such as marronage was for Sylvia Wynter (Wynter 1970, 124).

Before going further, I want to specify what I mean by 'the zone of nonbeing as an existential disposition'. Here, I follow Lewis Gordon's distinction between existentialism and existential philosophy. For him, 'the body of literature that constitutes European existentialism is but one continent's response [continental philosophy] to a set of problems that date from the moment human beings faced problems of anguish and despair' (2000, 7). Hence, existential philosophy, or the existential approach, cannot be reduced to a specific tradition and its location, it is rather a way to address problems of freedom, agency, or sociality 'through a focus on the human condition' (L.R. Gordon 2000, 7). Therefore, a post-continental investigation of the zone of nonbeing offers a specific way of investigating certain problems, which also entails a different relationship to reality. In a certain way, an existential approach would look at different *praxeis* such as freedom or violence and see how they enlighten our understanding of colonialism and the possibility of its dismantlement, or the decolonial modes of being and organization, decolonial sociality within a colonial society. All these problems assume a different way to look at, to investigate, and, as I said, a different relationship to reality, less normative and more phenomenal.[7]

Political theory of the *Damnés*

To summarize what I have said previously, the political theory that I am calling for entails an alternative relationship to reality, that takes its distance from the overemphasis on method and an instrumental account of politics, because the study of the human world is non-static, it is not a set of causalities or natural law, but a set of human actions which cannot be predicted. This is why, for Fanon, method needs to be left to the botanist and the mathematician (Fanon 2015, 5). He instead chose to focus on what he called, following the phenomenological tradition, the lived experience. Precisely because this phenomenological focus allows the thinker to 'suspend' ontological assumptions to offer a different account of reality, more phenomenal. Here, two 'suspensions', if you will, are needed. The suspension of the ontological account of politics as instrumental and the suspension of continental ontology. Accordingly, I will sketch an alternative direction for a decolonial political theory that needs to take *politics as first philosophy* rather than epistemology. I will make my point by showing how Aimé Césaire emphasized the importance of politics and how Frantz Fanon illustrated the 'thinking from the zone of nonbeing' by building a political theory of the *damnés* (damned). Namely, he showcased the constitution of a revolutionary subject from the zone of nonbeing (the *damnés*). This account of the *damnés* could also be taken as typical of a decolonial *praxis* in a colonial world. This means, that a political theory of the *damnés* would not be about the decolonization of *praxis* but about decolonial *praxeis*. In that sense, the focus on politics rather than epistemology makes the decolonial, as a political action, precede decolonization and not the other way around.

In *Existentia Africana*, Lewis Gordon argues that Du Bois created a humanistic social science, in other words, a social science that puts human beings as human beings at the center of the investigation. This statement echoes what I said earlier about seeing non-Western thoughts as a problem to solve that also creates an instrumental relationship

between theory and practice by seeing politics as a means-end activity. As I argued previously, the political problem is the continental logic, namely, the colonial/racial structuration of the world that could be assimilated to what Du Bois called 'the color line' (2008). To put it differently, the question we must face now is metatheoretical. Following Lewis Gordon, the metatheoretical question we answered is 'How theory is formulated?' (2000, 79) Indeed, the problem would be to see the non-West as a problem of Otherness to solve. In contrast, the decolonial political theory that I suggest proposes a different metatheoretical approach, that does not intend to methodologically solve a political problem. Rather it is one that, if you will, looks at political responses to political problems. As much as Lewis Gordon highlighted Du Bois' insistence on studying black people as having problems rather than problematic people, Aimé Césaire followed, what I consider a similar approach in his *Letter to Maurice Thorez*, which is his resignation letter from the French Communist Party (PCF). To elucidate this, I will show how Aimé Césaire addresses the problematic dimensions of the zone of nonbeing. Basically, what are the problems of people in that zone and what are the potential responses? In other words, I will define what could be the metatheoretical basis of a decolonial political theory that looks at the zone of nonbeing.

In his *Letter to Thorez*, Césaire described two problems with the French Communist Party (PCF). First, he talked about Stalinism and the relationship of the party with the people who have communism as an aspiration. He argued that this relationship transformed an ideal, a dream (socialism) into a nightmare (Stalinism). It is basically a critique of Stalinism and bureaucracy, as well as the incapacity of the PCF to make its autocritique. This first problem could be seen as internal to the PCF. However, Césaire raised another related problem that concerns those who are in the zone of nonbeing. He talked about problems that are related to '*his* quality of a man of color' (Césaire 1956). More than that, Césaire described two different ways, tracks, or paths. He opposed his 'ways' [*voies*] to those of French communism that cannot be confused. This statement comes from a consciousness, what one could call a racial or colonized consciousness of a specific disposition, a mode of being in and of-the-world, in the zone of nonbeing. This mode of existence cannot be confused with the one from the zone of being precisely because of its singularities. Césaire talks about what could be considered as four singularities of the zone of nonbeing. One concerns its location (zone of nonbeing), one is social and political (specific social and political problems), one is historical (colonization, enslavement), and another is cultural. Following up on that, Césaire mentioned a principal question or questioning specific to the zone of nonbeing, that almost encompasses the four above-mentioned dimensions: the colonial question, which 'cannot be treated as a part of a bigger whole' (Césaire 1956). Here, there is an explicit critique of class reductionism, but one could also see an implicit critique of what I mentioned earlier. Indeed, what I called the non-West as a political problem to methodologically solve entails a consideration. It opens to the question 'Why does this problem need to get methodologically solved, and for what purpose?'. One could say, this problem needs to get solved to create a dialogue. For instance, in her book *Cosmopolitan Political Thought*, Farah Godrej suggested looking at Gandhi's account of non-violence which could be useful to solve Western problems. It is a way to find non-Western solutions to Western

problems (Godrej 2011, 73). However, this instrumental way of seeing the relationship between knowledge and practice can be related to the class reductionism that Césaire criticized. As much as race is seen as something that could help class struggle to move forward, a moment of class struggle[8] if you will, here, non-Western thoughts and practices are seen as a moment of Western thoughts or practices. However, Césaire's letter suggests another relationship between knowledge and practice, or theory and politics.

That said, now I want to emphasize an important philosophical dimension of the letter. More precisely, the dimension that enlightens a specific relationship between practice and knowledge for Césaire. In an article, Nelson Maldonado-Torres argued that Césaire constructed an anti- or counter-Cartesian system that he called Cesairian mediation. For Maldonado-Torres, the *Discourse on Colonialism* is 'the response of a black colonial subject to the Cartesian project' (2016, 438). In other words, Césaire offers another method, a new discourse on method that radically differs from Descartes because he introduced 'a new type of critical reason, which rest on the "clarity" that colonized subjects have of the perversity of the European civilization project' (Maldonado-Torres 2016, 438). However, while I am sympathetic to Maldonado-Torres' argument, I think that Césaire's move is more fundamental than a new discourse on method. Indeed, by placing Césaire's work on the epistemological ground of Descartes, I believe that a fundamental philosophical switch operated by Césaire is occluded, namely, the change of first philosophy. More precisely, I believe that Césaire made politics[9] as first philosophy instead of epistemology. The problem of placing epistemology as first philosophy has been discussed extensively above. The question of first philosophy is related to the question of truth. For Aristotle, metaphysics was the first philosophy as 'the human attainment of truth is an achievement that goes beyond any physical process' (Sokolowski 2010, 6). On the other hand, for Descartes, epistemology was the first philosophy, which would mean that the attainment of truth is achieved through method. This is why, according to what I have said previously, political problems are to be solved by methodological means. Following that, philosophers such as Heidegger suggested putting ontology as first philosophy, and others like Levinas, proposed ethics as first philosophy, but that is not the subject matter here. Now, I want to suggest that the *Letter to Maurice Thorez* describes more explicitly than the *Discourse on Colonialism* politics as first philosophy.

In the letter, Aimé Césaire advocated a Copernican revolution characterized by what he called a 'right to initiative' [*droit à l'initiative*]. This right to initiative is mainly political in Césaire's letter but it could also be considered from a theoretical perspective. Indeed, specific political problems (colonization) are to be addressed politically *and* theoretically from the zone of nonbeing. In other words, people in the zone of nonbeing are considered as people having problems and addressing them, rather than problematic people. Moreover, this right to initiative is, for Césaire, attached to responsibility. Namely, to attune thoughts and actions 'to the political realities of Martinique' (Kemedjio 2010, 89), so to the zone of nonbeing. What is expressed here is the coincidence of theory and practice in their mode of being in- and of-the-world. This statement goes against the constitution of a purely normative theory that would make the relationship between the

bios theoretikos and the *bios politikos* instrumental. Moreover, this instrumental relationship assumes a separation between the two since a theory can be implemented in different contexts. Some could argue that rather than a pure imposition, there is a *translation* of theory to different contexts. Yet, in Césaire's, there is a coincidence of thought and action, thinking/theorizing cannot be simply translated in a different context as the French '*bonjour*' is translated into '*hola*' or '*buenos manana*' in Spanish depending on the context. Rather, here the translation entails an actualization of the thought itself precisely because of its co-dependency to action. Therefore, it cannot be reduced to a methodological problem as autonomous from action. The question of truth is related to the one of political action in its openness. As I said, it goes against the purely instrumental view of politics. A specific theory is not something to be applied, the translation goes together with an actualization that could potentially totally transform the theory. To illustrate that point, one could look at Fanon's critique of Hegel's ontology of being-with as I argued previously. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon argued that Hegel's ontology cannot be used to understand black existence nor the possibility of black liberation precisely because the white/black relationship cannot be reduced to Hegel's ontology which presupposes a white/white relationship. Therefore, thinking phenomenologically about the being-with as well as the possibility of liberation needs an actualization, or, as Fanon argued, a departure from (Hegel's) ontology in general, that could take the form of what Lewis Gordon called an ontological suspension (2000, 79). Hence, the question is less about the 'how' of translation in general but more fundamentally about what can and cannot be translated. Following Césaire's letter, Marxism can only be translated to the price of its transformation/actualization precisely because some elements of Marxism cannot be translated. This point has been raised by Sylvia Wynter and can also be illustrated by the Black Marxist tradition and Cedric Robinson's work on racial capitalism (Myers 2022; Robinson 2021).

I believe that the displacement of epistemology for politics is made possible precisely because of the displacement of the metatheoretical question in the Letter. By seeing the (ex)colonized not as a problem but as people having problems, the problem is not primarily methodological but political. Precisely because the colonial division of the world is not naturalized but problematized as being political. This Cesairian meditation could be associated with what Frantz Fanon called 'sociogeny'. Indeed, as I said before, Fanon urged us to leave methods aside to study the social world, precisely because human actions create the world and not a set of causalities. There is a *socio-genesis* of the world. However, that said, Fanon also added an important account to the zone of nonbeing, its inhabitants, the *damnés*. Indeed, within a continental logic or ontology, there is a 'forgetfulness of the damned' (Maldonado-Torres 2004, 36). Therefore, for a decolonial political theory to put politics as first philosophy means to look at the *damnés* in the zone of nonbeing. There is the possibility to look at the political as political action alternatively. Indeed, because damnation has a non-dialectical character (Maldonado-Torres 2004, 42), the logic of self-other does not work and politics takes another perspective. This can be visible in what I call Fanon's political theory of the *damnés*. Indeed, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (2002), Fanon described the emergence of a new revolutionary subject and *praxis*, especially through his account of violence. Looking at the question of violence

from the perspective of epistemology would be to ask whether violence is necessary or a good method or not to achieve political ends. However, looking from the perspective of politics as first philosophy offers another stance. As Lewis Gordon argues, in the zone of nonbeing, the debate is not about 'violence or nonviolence' precisely because 'there is no room to appear nonviolently' (2007, 11). Therefore, looking at the question of violence from the perspective of the zone of nonbeing gives a different account of reality and political action. It is not about the justification or legitimation of violence. The question would be, what does violence, as a political action, or as what Fanon called the 'absolute *praxis*' tells us about reality.

Accordingly, I intend to suggest another account of political reality that could be considered phenomenal. I have already mentioned the 'lived experience' extensively, but I will focus more systematically on it by looking at Fanon's account of violence. As Neil Roberts argues, Fanon's account of violence cannot be taken as instrumental (Roberts 2004). Indeed, Fanon's interest was not in a strategic/instrumental theory of violence[10] but in the nature or the reality of the constitution of violence in the Algerian context (Fanon 2002, 72). This entails a different relationship to reality. The reality of violence, for Fanon, is to be found in lived experience, not only as a set of empirical data or as a materiality of colonialism but also phenomenally. In other words, the questions are: what does colonial violence do to the colonized existence? How does violence inform their being-in-the-world? Indeed, in the chapter *On Violence* in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon showed that thinking about colonialism is not only a systematic thinking about institutions, the state, or government. Colonialism goes deep down to the bodily level, it affects and changes the body of the colonized as well his/her body schema and body image, meaning his/her possibility of motion in the world (Ataria and Tanaka 2020; des Portes 2023). Fanon used a bodily metaphor to describe the being in the world of the colonized, as a being in the zone of nonbeing. His description of the muscular tetany of the colonized goes hand in hand with the description of a squatting city. Colonialism is not just a mode of being *in*-the-world, but also *of*-the-world.

As a matter of fact, the chapter on violence could be divided into two parts, one on the city and one on the colonized in his/her embodiment. In other words, Fanon describes the mode of being disposed of the colonized. From that perspective, Fanon does not only offer a model or a normative account of colonialism but a phenomenal one as well. This means that politics is an action that informs and transforms the individual in relation to the collective and the world. He does not understand politics as a model to follow, but, in that case, as the process of mutation of colonial violence (Ajari 2014, 237). Fanon highlighted the raw embodied phenomenal reality of colonialism which echoes his formula 'O my body, make me a man who always questions' (2015, 181). This 'I am embodied therefore I think' displaces the Cartesian 'I think therefore I am' by placing the primacy on embodied existence, and in that case in its political dimension. However, it does not mean that there are no material and empirical dimensions to colonialism, but as Lewis Gordon argued, 'violence is fundamentally subjective apprehension of objective reality' (1996, 303). Therefore, colonialism is not just a politico-legal relationship but a mode of existence that has its own temporality, embodiment, and possibilities of upheaval. That second dimension of the zone of nonbeing, as a zone where an upheaval can happen, relates to

Césaire's right to initiative as it looks at how these initiatives, these political actions, both make us understand the reality of colonialism and how they shape reality and create new forms of life. To summarize, a political theory of the *damnés* is one that places politics a first philosophy and that does not think of the Being-with in terms of Self-Other dialectic but looks at political phenomena to enlighten reality or an understanding of reality. It is not an epistemic priority on positionality like standpoint epistemology, but a priority put upon political action as 1) response to political problems and 2) as the genesis of social reality and phenomena. In other words, it is not the individual that gives privileged access to political action and phenomena, but those political phenomena/actions that give privileged access to the relationship of the individual to others and the world.

Throughout this article, I suggested giving an alternative direction for a decolonial political theory. In doing so, I analyzed what I consider to be some limits of Comparative Political Theory from a decolonial perspective, which are its continental logic and its overfocus on methodology. As a result, I argued against the tendency to give methodological solutions to political problems by turning these political problems into methodological ones. Accordingly, I suggested putting politics rather than epistemology as first philosophy. By grounding my work on Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, I argued for a political theory that looks from the zone of nonbeing as a ground for thinking precisely because it goes beyond the continental logic. My aim was not to reject Comparative Political Theory but to propose an alternative way to look at reality from a decolonial perspective, in order to outline an existential decolonial political theory. I believe that these different approaches are complementary. If as Karl Jaspers (2010) had it, there is always more to reality, then a phenomenal account of reality is non-exclusive to an empirical, normative, or materialist one.

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Notes

1. The concept of 'coloniality' was coined by Anibal Quijano, it refers to the still existing/ongoing structure of colonialism after the formal decolonisation of ex-colonised countries.
2. Depending on the institutions, the subfields are American Politics, Comparative Politics, Political Behaviour, Political Methodology, and International Relations.
3. For Adam Burgos, 'Internal colonialism is, simply, the idea that a colonized population can exist within the state to which it ostensibly already belongs, as a community colonized by other members of the same society rather than by a foreign invader' (2023, 136).
4. For Sartre, the being-in-itself corresponds to a substance and the for-itself to pure existence without substance, to the nothingness from which a consciousness project itself in the future. For instance, a chair is a being-in-itself, however, the human being is a for-itself, and they live in bad faith when they escape the freedom of the for-itself, to find security in the in-itself. In other words, when their life is ruled by a preconceived role to follow leaving no space for freedom. See Sartre's example of the waiter in *L'être et le néant* (Gallimard, 1943).

5. This distinction comes from Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Human beings are not only *in-the-world* like a plate is on a table but also *of-the-world* as they are part of it.
6. See (Roberts 2015)
7. A phenomenological account of reality is about the '*how'* of our being in the world with others, *how* we experience the world we are in. Accordingly, 'phenomena are the ways in which we find ourselves being in relation to the world through our day-to-day living' (Vagle 2018, 20).
8. See Fanon's critique of Sartre's *Black Orpheus* in *White Skin, Black Masks*.
9. Here I understand politics as an action that has decolonization as a horizon.
10. By strategic/instrumental violence, I mean violence as a means-end activity. See (Ajari 2014).

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