

Decolonization

a Primer and Discussion Guide



What is Decolonization:

If you weren't familiar with the ideology of "Decolonization" before October 7th, you've probably experienced a rude awakening. A concept you might have previously thought of as the process of removing a foreign power and dissolving its authority or 'ownership' over its former colony, denoting the independence of a country from its former colonial power, has in the past few decades been broadened and co-opted. And if you've been paying attention, you've no doubt heard the term used to suggest the dismantling of Israel and, really, all Western civilization.

Decolonization and the Progressive Left

Taking their cue from [postmodernism](#), Progressive ideologues have taken 'decolonize' to mean not only the removal of the physical presence of an imperial power but the removal, or 'deconstruction' and 'dismantling', of the social, political and moral values associated with or ascribed to that imperial power.

Why the focus on the West?

For those who subscribe to this idea of decolonization, it is the West, because of its colonial projects which spanned the 15th to 20th centuries, which is the imperial power to be dismantled. It is the West, through its sins of colonialism, which has lost all claim to any moral, political or social value. Therefore, it is not just the physical presence of Western imperial power that must be dismantled, but the political, social and moral ideas which underpin them.

According to this ideology, Western colonialism benefits white people. The 'systems' of colonialism which are left behind are systems of oppression of minority groups. Therefore, it is not enough simply to remove the colonial power from the colonized people but also to remove any institutions, ways of thinking, ways of learning, societal assumptions etc. which are left behind by that power.

The foundations of society must be completely rebuilt to 'dismantle the structures of oppression' of Western colonialism. Some may think decolonization comprises the 'benign' idea of decentering the thoughts and experiences of white people and instead 'centering' those of others. However, this is not a benign concept. We must 'decolonize' the way we think, the way we learn, the way we speak and engage with each other. We must move away from 'Western' traditions of thought, argument and morality.

This includes Liberalism.

Whereas it was previously believed that Liberalism--as a set of political values and beliefs about the world and a guiding principle of academic inquiry--could be universally applied, now Liberalism is understood as another remnant of colonialism which

must be dismantled. Liberalism only reinforces colonial white privilege and the oppression of non-whites.

This is why, for example, the School of Social Work at University of Buffalo, thinks it is important to produce '[A Social Worker's Guide to Decolonizing the](#)



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[Field of Social Work](#)' because 'social work has...perpetuated colonialism'. Those who want to decolonize social work want social workers to move away from helping clients cope and adjust to society and societal institutions to agents in an effort to dismantle the institutions that have oppressed them. As Dr. Asher Blackdeer stated in the introductory [interview](#) to the guide: '...white supremacy is a manifestation of settler colonialism....I think we have to decolonize social work because colonialism makes the world white. And so we have all been impacted by settler colonialism. So it's the responsibility of all of us to undo colonialism. And that's essentially what decolonization is. It's the return to our traditional ways of being. It's addressing our internal colonial mindset. And the logical endpoint of decolonization would be to dismantle harmful structures or these systems of oppression....'



It is why [Nature](#) magazine released a ‘Decolonizing science toolkit’ to help institutions and educators address racism in science and ‘decolonize’ their curricula. It is why the University of Notre Dame offers a [workshop](#) on decolonizing the syllabus which includes resources such as ‘decolonization is not a metaphor’ and an article called ‘not just the syllabus, throw the whole discipline in the trash.’ It is why there is a movement to ‘decolonize’ mathematics and most every other subject. It is why [Bryn Mawr’s](#) teaching and learning institute has tools and suggestions for educators to ‘de-colonize’ their syllabus because ‘whiteness is the real issue...whiteness is an artificial set of principles and practices that makes possible the oppression of others...People who inhabit these principles and practices are performing whiteness and upholding the system of white supremacy.... in order to do the real work of decolonizing, we must all come to terms with the ways that whiteness has been created and pervaded the world, especially in education.’

What does decolonization ‘look like’ ?

Decolonization is not relegated to universities or school curricula. Every aspect of life should be decolonized. After the October 7th massacre, a swathe of [activists](#) cheered on Hamas’ actions arguing that ‘decolonization’ was not a metaphor.

Indeed, as Dr. Asher Blackdeer goes on to say in her interview at the University of Buffalo :

‘Decolonization is not diversifying your syllabus because, again, diversity again privileges white ways of knowing ...or white whiteness as neutral. And so everybody else is now diverse. And then if we think about decolonization is not equity. Decolonization is the verb or like the pathway to achieve equity, to achieve liberation and sovereignty. Decolonization is also not inclusion. Right? So we’re not going to this is the thing where people think that they’re decolonizing by adding, we’re including more people into our broken system. Right. It’s like decolonization wants to fix the system. Right? We don’t want to be included into your problem. It’s a broken system.’

We must undo and unlearn all ‘Western’ ways of thinking and being in the world. That is decolonization. We must upend and remove the system which ‘privileges’ white people over all others.

Decolonization and the Jewish Community

In decolonial thinking, white supremacy is a remnant of colonialism. Colonialism reinforced the power and privilege of white people in every facet of life – social, political, economic. Decolonization is the mechanism by which we end white supremacy. We dismantle the structures which uphold white power and white privilege.

Decolonial thinking always takes place in a binary – there is the oppressor and the oppressed; the colonizer and the colonized; the white and the non-white; the victimizer and the victim. Jews do not fit comfortably into this binary. But as everyone must be placed in the binary, it has been decided that Jews are in the ‘white/victimizer/oppressor/colonizer’ column. Why? Because the Jewish community’s relative economic, social, cultural success in the United States and other Western countries means that they have bought into the system of white privilege and supremacy and directly benefit from it. It is in their interest to maintain and perpetuate systems of colonial oppression.

For groups and individuals which believe in the idea of decolonization, Jews can never be true partners or ‘allies’ because they are on the wrong side of the binary.

As in those who see decolonization about ‘de-centering’ white people, some have attempted to use the language of ‘[decolonization](#)’ to speak about the need for more recognition of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish traditions and the Jewish heritage and relationship to Israel shared by all Jews. This misunderstands what is truly meant by those who use the term ‘decolonization’. Jewish organizations which engage in this rhetoric or partner with those who do should be aware that they are agreeing to, tacitly or explicitly, a worldview which places Jews as privileged, ‘white’, oppressors of minority groups.

In a [discussion](#) on ‘decolonizing’ Jewish practice in 2016, Rabbi Brant Rosen, an anti-Zionist associated with Jewish Voices for Peace, explains this position:

‘...white American Jews today enjoy the power and privilege that comes with being part of the white majority in this country....I think when we white Jews claim victim status or status of the oppressed while at the same time enjoying all of the power and privilege that comes from being white, we are able to play both sides of that coin, so to speak.’

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In 'decolonization' thought, Jews, particularly Ashkenazi Jews, are not a victimized or oppressed group. Jews benefit from and perpetuate white supremacy. Therefore, as with other aspects of 'whiteness', Jewish identity, as an outpost of white supremacy, holds no moral or social value. To redeem their value, Jews must decolonize themselves from their identity and connection to 'whiteness'.

Decolonization and Israel

This attitude towards Jews – particularly Ashkenazi Jews who are deemed 'white' – is carried across to Israel. As Rabbi Rosen goes on to say in that 2016 discussion, 'And when you consider that the state of Israel is an ethnic nation state created by white European Jews, this just makes it all the more complex to understand one's Jewishness within a decoloniality frame.'

In this reading of history, Israel was created by European powers and settled by white Europeans at the expense of the true indigenous population. Israel has taken on the sin of white privilege and settler-colonialism. Israel is an outpost of colonialism which must be physically dismantled.

As Mark LeVine, Director of the Program in Global Middle East Studies at UC Irvine, argues in an op-ed for Al-Jazeera, 'Israel is, of course, the quintessential settler-colonial society... Given the violence inherent to colonialism, Indigenous resistance has naturally been imagined by settler societies as the mirror image

of their eliminationist impulses and policies: We want them gone and will commit whatever violence is necessary to achieve that goal, so they must want and would do the same. Not surprisingly, when resistance does take the form of mass violence, as happened on October 7, that imagination is powerfully reinforced.' In other words, Israel, as a settler-colonial enterprise, wishes to 'eliminate' the indigenous population (the Palestinians). Israel's violence is an unacceptable consequence of its colonialism. Palestinian violence is resistance to settler-colonialism. Israel is the oppressor, the Palestinians the oppressed.

[Simon Sebag-Montefiore](#) perfectly describes the consequences of this belief: 'The decolonization narrative has dehumanized Israelis to the extent that otherwise rational people excuse, deny, or support barbarity. It holds that Israel is an "imperialist-colonialist" force, that Israelis are "settler-colonialists," and that Palestinians have a right to eliminate their oppressors. (On October 7, we all learned what that meant.) It casts Israelis as "white" or "white-adjacent" and Palestinians as "people of color."'

For people who believe in 'decolonization', Israel, its political, social, economic, cultural and religious structures, must be entirely dismantled. The country must be returned to its indigenous population. Only then will it be decolonized and freed from the oppression of the white supremacy and settler-colonialism of the Jews.

Discussion Questions

- Is it possible to adopt some of the premises of 'de-colonization' to further social justice advocacy or is it inevitably harmful to the Jewish community?
- Should the Jewish community attempt to reframe their position in the 'de-colonization' dialogue in order to partner with particular social justice and interfaith groups or should it instead reject the framing completely?
- Are Western countries the only colonizers or former colonizers? Can Muslim or Arab countries colonize as well? Have they?
- How can the Jewish community identify effective partners in the interfaith and social justice communities to work with? Who should they avoid?
- What is the best evidence and form of argument to use to counter the 'de-colonization' narrative?

Further Reading

'Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody', James Lindsay and Helen Pluckrose, Pitchstone Publishing, 2020

'The Decolonization Narrative is Dangerous and False', Simon Sebag Montefiore, The Atlantic, 2023



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