

How to think about colonialism: An interdisciplinary seminar

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Colonialism is both a historical phenomenon and a significant concern in contemporary debates. As such, it is an object of study for multiple disciplines, which treat colonialism in considerably different ways. One controversy between the disciplines is whether colonialism needs to be analysed with the same methodological procedures as any other phenomenon, as is widespread in analytical philosophy, or whether colonial continuities and legacies *within* scientific disciplines, notably in the social sciences and the humanities, should lead to a reconsideration of how science and research is practiced. A key question in the social sciences working on Africa and the so-called global south, for instance, is how to deal with the fact that scientific concepts are charged with assumptions from the so-called global North? Is this relevant to philosophy as well? And what implications would result from this?

This seminar, taught by an analytical philosopher working on ethics and a social scientist working on West African social dynamics, will address these issues as a concrete occasion to ask core interdisciplinary questions: how and to what end do we study a topic like colonialism? How do we go about philosophical and historical accounts that may complicate some of the comparatively clear-cut moral judgements made intuitively? How does our positionality impact our approach to, and understanding of, colonialism?

To discuss these questions, we will dive into specific debates in analytical ethics and in the social sciences as test cases. For example, we will discuss papers on the question of what, exactly, is morally problematic about colonialism (Ypi 2013; Moore 2016, 2019). Here, we will get to know the ethical perspective. In the social sciences, we will discuss the role of unions in West-Africa in the 1950s and how their leaders used the European equality vocabulary to fight for higher wages and better working conditions. We also address the topic of “decolonization” and what is meant by “postcolonial” thought. We will use these debates as test cases in order to then discuss the meta question of how to think about colonialism.

Suggested reading (a detailed reading list will be provided in due course)

Cooper, Frederick. 2005. “Labor, Politics, and the End of Empire in French Africa.” Chapter 7, pp. 204-231 in *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mbembe, Achille, Olivier Mongin, Nathalie Lempereur, and Jean-Louis Schlegel. 2006. "What is postcolonial thinking?: An interview with Achille Mbembe." *Esprit* (12):117–33. doi:[10.3917/espri.0612.0117](https://doi.org/10.3917/espri.0612.0117).

Moore, Margaret. 2016. "'Justice and Colonialism.'" *Philosophy Compass* 11 (8): 447–61. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12337>.

Moore, Margaret. 2019. "The Taking of Territory and the Wrongs of Colonialism." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 27 (1): 87–106. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12156>.

Wiredu, Kwasi. 2002. "Conceptual Decolonization as an Imperative in Contemporary African Philosophy : Some Personal Reflections." *Rue Descartes*, no. 36: 53–64.

Ypi, Lea. 2013. "What's Wrong with Colonialism." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 41 (2): 158–91. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12014>.