

Problematic People and Epistemic Decolonization:  
Toward the Postcolonial in Africana Political Thought

Lewis R. Gordon

Introduction

The relationship between the West and the rest in political thought has been one of the constructions of the world in which the latter have been located outside and thus, literally, without a place on which to stand. Hidden parenthetical adjectives of “European,” “western,” and “white” have been the hallmarks of such reflection on political reality and the anthropology that informs it. For the outsiders, explicit adjectival techniques of appearance thus became the rule of the day, as witnessed by, for instance, “African,” “Asian,” or “Native,” among others, as markers of their subaltern status in the supposedly wider disciplines. The role of these subcategories is, however, not a static one, and as historical circumstances shift, there have been ironic reversals in their various roles. In the case of (western and white) liberal political theory, for instance, the commitment to objectivity by way of the advancement of a supposedly value-neutral moral and political agent stood as the universal in an age in which such a formulation did not face its own cultural specificity. Where the parenthetical adjective is made explicit by critics of liberal political theory, such a philosophy finds itself in the face of its own cultural particularity, and worse: It finds itself so without having done its homework on that world that transcends its particularity. On the one hand, liberal and other forms of western political theory could engage that other world for the sake of its own rigor or, more generously, rigor in general. But such an approach carries the danger of simply systemic adjustment and application; it would, in other words, simply be a case of re-centering the west by showing how the non-west offers ways of strengthening western thought, much like the argument used in elite universities, that the presence of children of color will enhance the education of white children. On the other hand, there could be the realization of the ongoing presence of the non-western in the very advancement of the western. Just as the assertion of “white” requires the dialectical opposition of black (as the absence of white), the coherent formulation of western *qua* itself requires its suppressed or repressed terms. Modern western discussions of freedom require meditations on slavery that become more apparent in their displacements: Think of how slavery in the ancient Greek world has received more attention from western political thinkers, with few exceptions such as Marx and Sartre, than the forms of enslavement that have marked the modern world.<sup>1</sup>

Yet even here there is a misrepresentation in terms of the very structure of exclusion itself. The “outsider” is, after all, paradoxically also an “insider.” For alongside white western political thinkers have always been their Africana counterparts, hybrids of the

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1. For discussion of these themes of recognition and their limitations, see Lewis Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence* (2006, especially the final chapter) and Gordon and Gordon (eds.), *Not Only the Master's Tools* (2005).