Historical truth as a tool for decolonisation

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Tine Destrooper: Welcome to Justice Visions and to this last episode of our short series on historical truth in postcolonial context, where we have been looking at formal and informal truth initiatives that have been set up in a number of European countries to deal with settler and overseas colonial legacies. And we've been talking in the past episodes about the Nordic countries, as well as about the case of Portugal. And in an earlier episode, we also covered the Belgian case together with Liliane Umubyeyi. These of course, are very different in nature, both in terms of the actors who promoted the and engaged in the initiatives, but also in terms of the colonial past which these processes are dealing with. Where in the Nordic countries we see that we're talking about settler welfare colonialism, whereas in Portugal and Belgium, for example, we're looking at cases of overseas imperial colonialism. And then, of course, also the methods and the approaches adopted in the various processes that we discussed are different. But what we've also seen is that despite all these differences, there are some elements cutting across different contexts. So for today's episode, we'll zoom out from these specific countries and the empirical question surrounding them, and we'll be looking at the overarching topics and the kind of paradigm shifts inspired by these specific cases. And we will do this together with Olivia Rutazibwa, who was interviewed by Cira Palli-Aspero, during a recent visit to Belgium. Olivia is an assistant professor in human rights and politics at the London School of Economics, and her work focuses on ways to decolonise, especially international solidarity. Building on epistemic blackness as a methodology, she turns to recovering and reconnecting philosophies and practices of dignity and repair and retreat and postcolonial to theorize solidarity anti-colonial.

Cira Palli-Aspero: A very warm welcome, Olivia.

Olivia Rutazibwa: Thank you so much for having me.

Cira: I would like to start this conversation talking about your work. In particular, about the *Decolonising Strategy Framework*, which seem extremely relevant when we think about how, and more importantly why, different actors engage with historical truth-seeking initiatives in the post-colonial state. When I think about the work of these initiatives the framework keeps coming back to me. Could you tell us a bit about this framework and how do you see it link with historical truth initiatives?

Olivia: I don't think I would ever have called it a framework myself. It's more that I was trying to find a language for myself an analytical language, I guess, to think what could decolonisation look like when we do research or when we try to engage the world, make sense of the world, anything like that. And I came to it through the long struggle of my 12 years of Ph.D. work. But I was interested in

international relations, especially the relations between the European Union, sub-Saharan Africa. And you end up somehow in development studies that even though you don't want to study that necessarily. And I was inspired by the work of a colleague of mine, Meera Sabaratnam, who approached decolonisation or decoloniality as a whole set of strategies that you can keep in the back of your mind when you're doing research. Who do you choose to engage? Where do you start the story? I think she had like five different entry points and I made them into three to make it even more simple and trying to think what the different levels of knowledge-making that we need to make very explicit when we try to decolonise. But the other aspect of it is the fact to keep on realising that when we try to decolonise within research or analysis, it's just a tiny corner of the whole decolonial project that society should engage with, right? I think state and civil society initiatives are obviously much bigger maybe than just research. But at the level of research, I was thinking philosophically we engage with, not always explicitly, but questions of how we think the world is. How do we get to these questions or these understandings of how the world works? That's very much informed by how we produce knowledge or how we engage knowledge. And that's sometimes, quite literally, who do we give the microphone to? Who don't we? Who is systematically out of the picture? So that's the epistemological aspect of it, to try and think mostly who is not around the table, rather than: whose voices are overrepresented. But then I was thinking, those two are very much at the level, again, of cognition, of thinking, but to not lose sight of the fact that even decolonisation within research should really foreground the purpose. The decolonial approach is very much *about the explicit,* about the extent to which you see your project either contributing to the status quo or actively be against it, and the status quo is defined as a colonial status quo.

Cira: In the last two episodes of this miniseries, we have seen how, in most cases, these formal initiatives are a response to the demands that civil society organisations have been advocating for decades. And on the other hand, informal initiatives often, if not always, emerge to challenge the inaction of the state. I would like to ask you how do you see this relationship between formal and informal initiatives?

Olivia: I've been thinking about this specifically, I think after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, I was actually at that time in South Africa, and I was looking at the rest of the world reacting to something that unfortunately was not new? I think for the last two decades we've been writing Op-Eds about these things, we've been screaming from the rooftops that these things happen, continue to happen, explained often the same things. I think the biggest challenge is to think how do we transform the momentum is something that sticks. It helps for me to think about it in more cyclical terms, in terms of a lot of the work that we, my generation in their forties have been able to do builds on the work in the successes of those that came before us and vice versa. And then the state navigates that with different levels of opportunism, political salience at that particular moment… but it's also very fleeting, right? So when that interest evaporates, maybe funding stops as well. Whether it's the state or whether it's our universities that want to decolonise everything now, or whether it's companies that they have diversity plans in there… all of that. If you walk into these spaces with a purpose, then it's not about the amount of good or bad intentions the individuals in these

structures might have, but how can we get what we what we want. It's about being pragmatic about these things. And maybe also, accept that we might not see the full picture or the full like it's not a linear thing that, you know, if we do X, Y, Z, and then we're successful or decolonised, that will never happen. But being intentional about trying to contribute that large amount of people can survive in dignity. This global order that was not designed for that to happen, I think that's, for me, the crux of the decolonial project.

Cira: I'm listening to your answer, and I inevitably think one of the common objective is to achieve social change, right? But as you were saying there are very different actors that are engaged in this, in these sorts of initiatives, and they might give meanings to this seemingly shared notion of social change. Are we all speaking the same language? What do actors mean by achieving social change or by pursuing social change? How do these meanings can relate to one another?

Olivia: I think social change might be too wide. Let's say that you are in a progressive moment in history where the state is on the progressive side to give social services and all of that. Conservative forces in society, but also in political parties at that time, they also are advocating for social change. But so often when we use social change, we assume that it's a progressive move. It isn't. I think that that might not be sufficient for us as a vision or as a goal, and so the social change that we look for is one that dismantles colonial power dynamics. And the claim would be that even though we had formal decolonisation and all of that, there is a continuity in colonial violence that's embedded in many of our institutions. So I would say that on the whole, we might have individuals within our different institutions, even in government, that might be personally committed to wanting progressive or anti-colonial social change. But institutions in and of themselves have never been built for change. Structures are put in place to make sure that not too much changes, right? Again, to come to the moment of George Floyd's murder, Black Lives Matters, we see our governments suddenly being open to have a Lumumba square or any of these things. We have to assume that part of that has much more to do with a need to be able to stay as a player, than generally wanting social change. But it's actually and the organisation understanding that if we if you don't jump on that wagon, we become irrelevant. Hence, it's important for us to have a progressive message and to contribute to that. So, I think that's really the balancing act that as activists or as thinkers, we have to do how to recognise when status quo is at play, even when seemingly we seem to be making all this progress.

Cira: Just tease the topic a bit more. Let's assume that we have these historical truth initiatives, whether formal or informal, that are working towards the dismantlement of colonial dynamics. With this assumption, in which ways do you see that historical truth can contribute to this dismantling of the colonial dynamics?

Olivia: The historical truth is a tool, is not necessary an institution in and of itself. And then let's say a government can organise a truth commission and that commission will be an institution, right? So that that might be already a good distinction to make. But as anti-colonial strategy, forms of truth telling, and I think *truth* should be sort of in the plural, because it's very difficult to just, you

know, also aim for one truth or something like that, which is violent in and of itself. And I will give the example again that I am most, I guess, familiar with is the one to do with what the international industry around aid and development is set out to do. Classic handbooks would start in 1950 modernisation theories and, after the war and all of that and the different stages of development; World Bank comes in, IMF [International Monetary Fund], whatever. So that's somehow the introduction to development studies. Many books are organised around that. At some point when engaging more with decolonial thought, I asked myself the ontological question: Where do we start the story? So, if you want to start the story about fighting poverty, you might also be interested in how we got to this super unequal world, right? So that's why I started now in first year, the introductory classes in 1492 rather than in 1950 with the Modernisation theories. That's an example of truth telling in the sense that you will also teach first and foremost where all the choices were made historically to extract wealth from one side of world to the other, rather than immediately start with so-called solutions to that poverty. So for me, that's an example of a historical truth telling that goes way beyond trying to point who are the good guys or the bad guys? But let's assume that were all the good guys. Very gendered. And then what is it that we want to see change? But we need other stories to be able to do that.

Cira: I see that there might be other objectives that are at play when these formal and informal initiatives are being set up. For example, acknowledgement, recognition of these different temporalities, different histories, the wrongs that have been committed; reparations, reforms, all of which could be aligned with the core objective of transitional justice. And indeed, we are witnessing an increased use of this part of that to think about historical injustice. This was the case, for example, of the Belgian Special Commission on its colonial past, in which you were invited to join the group of experts, but you're declined for reasons that you explained in an open letter. My question here would be do you see the use of transitional justice paradigm suitable to think about historical injustices emerging from colonialism, or have been other frameworks that are more relevant for this type of enquiry?

Olivia: We might have a particular definition or even historical practise of what we would file under transitional justice, but nothing stops us from having a more expansive, both practise and definition. So in that sense, I'm not in favour against transitional justice, but I think it's again a good tool to try and think through what some initiatives might be wanting to do or not. And so for me, the Congo Expert Commission, it might be one of the first times that I think of it in terms of transitional justice because I did not recognise it as such. I don't think they were framing it like that in the beginning, but I can see it now that that could be framed as something that they had in mind. But also because I think also the way it was set up that it could never even reached the minimal conditions of something to do with transitional justice. I guess what, worried me the most is that for me, again, it was an example of how this initiative that people had been asking for so long, could so easily be deployed for the status quo. And in the letter, I explain, the tiny examples of how I think that would happen, but who sets the agenda? Who sets the timings, the speeds? Who gets to decide who's going to be around the table or not? And who's completely blindsided by their own lack of expertise to even have this conversation? A lot of these small decisions showcased how a seemingly

revolutionary act ended up confirming or reconfirming the status quo. And I think that, again, it's useful even when we look at any type of initiative of transitional justice, it will always contain potentials for actual radical change and potentials where the status quo is reproduced. It's both, both things are present. I think the radicalness of being forced to speak out loud that what was wronged by people that had been in positions of power for so long, it's not something we can dismiss either. Similarly, like I said, the sixties to actual decolonisation: kicking out the colonisers is not a small victory. It's huge. But everything we can see after that is how the system works through the same channels to keep everything the same, right? So I don't think that it's going to be either transitional justice that is the right thing or not, it's the meaning that we give to it and how vigilant we are in how the language and the practises of it contribute to the status quo or not.

Cira: To me, there are two aspects of the transitional justice framework that really stand out because of the relevance in the debates around colonial injustice. And they're very much linked with what you were saying just there. These are the notion of disruption and the notion of accountability. Let me let me try and formulate this into separate questions. So first, while the notion of disruption appears to be implicit in the work of a paradigmatic transitional justice, what does it mean when we transfer it in the post-colonial state? What exactly is being disrupted and by whom? And, probably linked to what you were saying there, are we counting on the state to disrupt its own status quo, to redress the colonial injustices?

Olivia: My first reaction would be we can think of the state on the one hand as official structures, the political parties, the people that work in that. But as a citizen, whatever that might mean, to have the non-passive approach to that would be to keep on studying what the state is doing or not doing, knowing that, again, it's a structure that exists to stay, to keep itself in power; but the shape that we give it is a shared responsibility, right? So we can say that indirectly, we demanded that that this Congo commission at some point in history was created. It was not just the state that thought of it itself. Similarly, you know, we have some instances where we can reject what the state is doing or not doing. I think for a lot of citizens in Africa, they could ask for accountability of their leaders. And they are. But those leaders are often structurally first accountable to international organisations rather than to their own people -and the flows of money, the little basis of tax, and all of that. So within that, if we didn't try and think about transitional justice as accountability, it's much more muddy in a way, but I would agree that some form of accountability should be at the heart of it. But we don't have to assume that it's something that the state at some point will willingly give to us. It's something we have to demand. Accountability is something that is demanded rather than good states doing it automatically.

Cira: Picking up on this notion of accountability. When we think about the whole structure of colonialism and how embedded it is in societies. What kind of accountability are we thinking about?

Olivia: When we think about justice, especially, you know, the westernised systems of different systems of justice that we have, we have a very - I'm going to simplify it… and no I'm going to butcher it – and it's going to sound horrible for

people that actually have legal background or knowledge. But, you know, the notion of people need to be punished, or rewarded and you have the perpetrator and victims. And I know it's much more complicated than that. But what I have been, I think learning slowly by engaging with when in decolonial thought we actually advocate for knowledges from outside the Western world. So, you know, like at least an expansion of that or a pluriversal approach to knowledge is, is very much this notion of there are other ways to think about even the same concepts what is accountability or justice. Those that are focussed on repair and on relationality and kinship, for instance, if we think of those ideas together with accountability, you have a different type of accountability. That is not just: I will hold you to account because I can identify you as a perpetrator and then to perpetuity you will be in debt to me to make something right. There's part of that there right then, obviously, especially, I think when we direct our demands to those that are so obviously much more powerful than us and sitting on all of the resources that supposed to be all ours, then I don't think that that language is too damaging. But I think as a society or as a goal in general, the idea of accountability as something that you have in a context of kinship or in context of relationality. But these ideas of relationality and kinship, what happens if we put that at the centre of our accountability conversations rather than individual rights or rights that an individual has in society.

Cira I really like this approach, especially presenting this idea of accountability to make it more conceptually thicker and richer, but also to broaden it to the collectively. As we are approaching the end of the episode, I have one last question I would like to ask you that we ask all our interviews, and this one is where do you, as a scholar, look for inspiration?

Olivia: I think the first answer to that for me, weirdly enough, would be my classroom. I feel it as a privilege to have, you know, always an excellent group of people to whom you are supposed to share your expertise. And I have to say that over the years it's made me hopeful to the extent that, you know, you can actually see young people genuinely committed to try and think differently, ask different questions. But also how a lot of the insights that we need, are already located amongst them. It makes me hopeful to see, or to be reminded that a lot of what we need to know is already in society. We don't have to invent it. And so and that's an idea about knowledge cultivation that is not necessarily central in academia because, you know, we are all rewarded to be the first one to have said something, to have published first on it and all of that. I guess once I got that insight also from reading, you know, colleagues like Robbie Shilliam, who did a lot of work in international relations, in decolonisation. He was inspired by Maori thinking about knowledge cultivation as something that is just having to unearth the knowledges that are already there.
And the other is obviously that we seem to have much more licence today to not have to be confined to the usual white canonical thinkers. I have nothing against them in and of themselves as an identity marker. That's not even the thing, but the joy that comes from being allowed to start knowledge somewhere else adds so much more and redimension them to a set of thinkers that are part of our collective way of thinking. I find that exciting. And that also includes the fact that a lot of non-academic knowledges are finding their way into the academy, which makes it much more interesting. I'm very happy that we can include films and

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videos and music and all of that in poetry. I think many of us are actually enjoying a lot of the labour that has been done by those that came before us to make space for us to make different choices. So the real challenge is, are we brave enough to actually do radically different things within the academy or within our activism? Or do we get stuck at just only saying what we're not allowed to do?

Cira: This is such a great note to leave our audiences with. Thank you so much for such an interesting conversation, Olivia.

Olivia: Thank you for having me.

Tine: This was our last episode of Justice Visions for this year. We'll be back in the New Year with a couple of interesting collaborations with other podcasts as well as our regular programming. Stay tuned.