



The Coloniality of Political Theory: Unpacking the Eurocentric Conundrum in Post-colonial Africa.

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Abstract

*This article develops the concept of the **coloniality of political theory** to critique the universalist assumptions embedded in idealism and its principal ideological formations, liberalism and neoliberalism. It argues that these traditions are not philosophically neutral or universally applicable models of political order, but historically situated expressions of Western modernity that have achieved global authority through epistemic domination. By presenting particular European historical experiences as universal standards of political legitimacy, they marginalize alternative political traditions and sustain a coloniality of knowledge that renders Indigenous political rationalities epistemically subordinate.*

Drawing on Foucauldian genealogy, decolonial political thought, and world-systems analysis, the article examines how Eurocentric political theory reproduces its dominance through three interrelated mechanisms: moral hierarchy, juridical universalism, and market rationality. Together, these mechanisms establish a hierarchy of political reason in which Indigenous institutions and moral philosophies are often represented as pre-political, irrational, or deficient rather than as legitimate traditions of political thought.

Using Ethiopia and Somalia as diagnostic cases, the article demonstrates how the transplantation of universalist political models has generated tensions between imported institutional frameworks and locally grounded political ontologies. Against this epistemic closure, the article advances the Gadaa system of Ethiopia and the philosophy of Ubuntu in Southern Africa as philosophically robust alternatives that reconceptualize authority, justice, community, and political obligation beyond the idealist ontological assumptions of Western liberal modernity. It concludes by proposing a decolonial political theory grounded in epistemological pluralism, arguing that African political thought should be recognized not merely as empirical or cultural knowledge but as a legitimate source of normative political philosophy capable of informing more contextually grounded and democratically responsive approaches to governance and state–society relations in postcolonial Africa.

Keywords: Coloniality of political theory, Idealism, Liberalism, Neoliberalism, Genealogy, World-systems analysis, Decoloniality, Africa



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Introduction

The political economy of foreign interventions inspired by idealism, liberalism, and neoliberalism has long been presented as universal pathways to peace, democracy, and development in postcolonial Africa. Whether expressed through liberal peacebuilding, constitutional reform, democratization, human rights promotion, or market-oriented structural adjustment programs, these interventions have been justified on the assumption that top-down and highly institutionalized approaches embedded in Western political theory possess universal validity. Yet their implementation across postcolonial African states has frequently produced weak institutions, recurrent political crises, social fragmentation, and persistent dependency rather than the promised political transformation and sustainable peace. Conventional explanations attribute these failures to weak institutions, poor implementation, corruption, or a lack of political commitment among African political elites (World Bank 1981; Keohane 1984). Such explanations assume that Western political theories are universally applicable and therefore locate failure within African societies rather than within the theories themselves.

This article challenges this dominant interpretation by arguing that the recurrent failures associated with idealism, liberalism, and neoliberalism in postcolonial Africa originate from a deeper structural problem: the coloniality of political theory. Drawing inspiration from Quijano's (2000) concept of the coloniality of power, the article argues that colonial epistemic hierarchies did not disappear with formal decolonization but instead became embedded within modern political theory itself. Categories such as sovereignty, the modern state, constitutional order, democracy, individual rights, and the market emerged within historically specific colonial relations yet continue to be presented as universally valid. In doing so, they privilege Western political experiences while rendering alternative political ontologies irrational, incomplete, or politically unintelligible.

Although scholarship on decolonization has extensively examined the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the coloniality of political theory as both an intellectual discipline and an ideological framework. Existing critiques of idealism, liberalism, and neoliberalism generally assess these traditions as normative or empirical projects whose shortcomings become visible only during implementation. This article advances a different argument. It suggests that the repeated failures associated with these political ideologies are neither accidental nor simply the consequence of poor implementation. Rather, the conditions for failure are embedded within their epistemological constitution because they universalize historically contingent Western political experiences while simultaneously excluding alternative forms of political reasoning.

From this perspective, idealism, liberalism, and neoliberalism should not be understood merely as successive stages in the evolution of modern political thought. Instead, they represent

different expressions of a broader colonial political rationality that governs through claims to universality (Foucault 1991; Harvey 2005). Idealism universalizes hierarchical moral order through civilizational discourse (League of Nations 1920). Liberalism institutionalizes an abstract conception of the autonomous individual while obscuring its imperial origins (Keohane 1984; Mamdani 1996). Neoliberalism extends this logic by redefining political legitimacy according to market compliance, economic conditionality, and externally prescribed standards of governance (Harvey 2005). Despite their differences, these traditions share an epistemological foundation that normalizes Western political experience while rendering alternative political orders illegible (Quijano 2000; Wynter 2003).

Conceptualizing political theory through the lens of coloniality requires a methodology capable of uncovering the historical conditions under which universal claims emerged and continue to exercise authority. Accordingly, this study combines three complementary methodological traditions: Foucauldian genealogy, decolonial theory, and world-systems analysis. Rather than treating political ideologies as coherent traditions evolving toward normative refinement, these approaches expose the historical contingencies, relations of power, and colonial encounters through which universal political concepts were produced, institutionalized, and normalized.

The study adopts Foucault's genealogical method because genealogy investigates the historical constitution of knowledge rather than assuming the existence of timeless political truths. As Foucault (1977: 117) explains, genealogy is “a form of history that can account for the constitution of knowledge, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject that is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history.” Following Foucault (1991), this article treats political theory not merely as a body of ideas but as a form of governmentality that constructs authoritative understandings of political legitimacy, order, citizenship, and governance.

Genealogical analysis is complemented by decolonial theory, particularly Quijano's concept of coloniality of power and Wynter's (2003) critique of the universal figure of “Man.” Quijano (2000) demonstrates that colonial patterns of domination survived formal decolonization by becoming embedded within modern systems of knowledge, authority, capitalism, and statehood. As Quijano (2024: 267–268) further argues, coloniality continues through structures in which race, capitalism, and Eurocentric rationality “become hegemonic as they attain a universality, insofar as they prescribe an intersubjective model for humanity spreading globally.” Political theory therefore becomes a crucial site through which coloniality continues to organize political imagination and institutional legitimacy.

World-systems analysis provides the third methodological foundation by situating universalist political theory within the historical development of global capitalism. Wallerstein's

(2004, 2006) analysis of universalism demonstrates how modern knowledge systems reproduce the hierarchical organization of the world economy through epistemological claims that appear politically neutral. As Wallerstein (2006) argues, universalism is a formal epistemological subvariant of the larger geoculture: a binary taxonomic system that overlays an epistemic-normative matrix on the world-system. Humanist universalism established the epistemological foundations of the liberal arts and social sciences, whereas Scientific universalism legitimized reductionism and linear determinism. Together, these forms naturalize core-periphery hierarchies by presenting historically situated European experiences as universal models of political organization.

Methodologically, this article does not evaluate idealism, liberalism, and neoliberalism as competing normative theories. Instead, it analyzes them as historically contingent discursive formations whose claims to universality emerged through colonial encounters, imperial expansion, and institutional power. Consequently, the empirical cases are not designed to test theoretical propositions but to expose the silences, exclusions, and contradictions embedded within universalist political theory. The analysis focuses on discursive formations, governing rationalities, institutional logics, legal assumptions, policy frameworks, intervention practices, and classificatory regimes through which political legitimacy, order, and failure are defined. The methodological objective is therefore diagnostic: to reveal how universalist political theory governs by defining what counts as legitimate politics while foreclosing alternative political ontologies.

Within this framework, Ethiopia and Somalia function as complementary epistemic sites rather than comparable empirical cases. Each illuminates a distinct dimension of the coloniality of political theory. Ethiopia demonstrates how colonial epistemic structures can govern political life even without formal colonial occupation, revealing the authority of imported political concepts despite the country's distinctive historical trajectory (Mamdani 1996). Somalia, by contrast, exposes the limits of universalist assumptions regarding sovereignty, statehood, and governance by illustrating how plural political orders become classified as failure when measured against statist, juridical, and market-centered standards (Jones 2008; Bayart 2009). The two cases therefore perform different analytical functions within the genealogical argument.

By bringing genealogy, decolonial theory, and world-systems analysis into conversation, this article makes three principal contributions. First, it shifts explanations of postcolonial political failure from institutional implementation to the epistemic structures through which political knowledge is produced (Quijano 2000). Second, it extends decolonial scholarship into political theory by demonstrating that political ideologies operate not merely as normative doctrines but also as technologies of governance (Foucault 1991; Wynter 2003). Third, it

repositions African political experience from being an apparent deviation from universal political theory to becoming a critical standpoint from which the historical limits of universality can be interrogated (Mamdani 1996; Bayart 2009). Rather than calling for more effective implementation of inherited doctrines, the article argues that meaningful political transformation requires a fundamental rethinking of the epistemological foundations through which politics has been theorized, governed, and universalized.

The Coloniality of Political Theory

The field of contemporary political theory is heavily influenced by a legacy of colonialism, which continues to universalize state-society relations and global governance while reinforcing epistemic hierarchies. While formal territorial colonialism largely ended in the twentieth century, coloniality—the underlying matrix of power, knowledge, and racial/civilizational hierarchy—remains embedded within the foundational architecture of political theory and global order. Hence, decolonial theory convincingly demonstrates that colonial domination did not terminate with formal decolonization; rather, it persists through ongoing structures of power (Quijano 2000; Wynter 2003). Quijano's (2000) concept of the coloniality of power describes a system defined by racial hierarchies and capitalist relations that systematically undermined alternative Indigenous knowledge systems during and after colonialism. Wynter (2003) extends this insight by demonstrating how colonial domination anchored a specific, exclusionary understanding of “the human” “Man” as the sole foundation of knowledge creation. Despite these contributions, their full implications for political theory remain inadequately explored. This article addresses that gap by developing the concept of the coloniality of political theory: an enduring epistemological structure wherein Western political categories are treated as universal and neutral, while non-Western political ontologies are marginalized or rendered incomprehensible (Quijano 2000; Wynter 2003).

Modern political theory does not merely describe reality; it actively constructs politics by defining legitimate authority, rational political subjects, and valid practice (Foucault 1991). Emerging in colonial modernity, these definitions endure in contemporary state-society relations long after the formal demise of empire (Mamdani 1996). Modern Western political theory developed alongside European imperialism, generating a universalizing discourse of “sovereignty,” “state,” “citizenship,” and the “individual” that distinguished “effective subjects of political reason” from colonized populations (Keohane 1984; Mamdani 1996). Consequently, colonial rule was sustained not only by force but also by epistemic rule—the capacity to classify, grade, and govern in the name of “universal” truth. World-systems analysis further enriches this understanding. Wallerstein (2004) argues that universalism serves as a key epistemological pillar

of the modern world-system: “a binary taxonomic system that superimposes an episto-normative grid upon the world-system” (Wallerstein 2006: 48). Capitalist world-economy required this original, non-neutral epistemology to naturalize core-periphery hierarchies (Wallerstein 2006: 48). As Wallerstein (2006: 70) notes, “The evolution of the structures of knowledge is simply a part of and an important part of the evolution of the modern world-system. The structural crisis of one is the structural crisis of the other.”

The operation of coloniality in political theory functions along three primary lines. First, naturalization presents emergent Western historical developments such as territorial states, juridical individualism, and market-mediated sociality as universal phenomena (Quijano 2000; Wynter 2003). Second, delegitimization constructs alternative political rationalities as pre-political, traditional, informal, or dysfunctional rather than coherent governance systems (Mamdani 1996). Third, epistemic asymmetry treats Western political theory as authentic knowledge while relegating non-Western experience to raw data, case studies, or problems to be solved (Bayart 2009). This framework accounts for the systematic misdiagnosis of institutional failures in postcolonial societies. When Western-derived political institutions underperform, failure is routinely attributed to corruption, weak capacity, culture, or a lack of political will never to flaws within the underlying theory itself (World Bank 1981; Keohane 1984). The universal validity of Western theory remains protected, while postcolonial societies are pathologized for failing to meet its criteria.

Understanding political theory as a site of coloniality requires rethinking dominant ideologies. Rather than treating idealism, liberalism, and neoliberalism simply as normative frameworks that rise and fall historically (Keohane 1984; Harvey 2005), this article conceptualizes them as interconnected modalities of colonial political reasoning. Idealism established moral hierarchies by mapping civilizational differences onto political legitimacy (League of Nations 1920); liberalism institutionalized an abstract, rights-bearing individual formed through imperial social relations (Keohane 1984; Mamdani 1996); and neoliberalism reconfigured sovereignty by subordinating political legitimacy to market rationality (Harvey 2005). All three govern by rendering Western political experience normative and alternative forms deviant (Quijano 2000). Drawn from Foucault’s (1991) governmentality, political theory acts as a tool of governance that sets the epistemological limits of what is politically conceivable.

Critiquing this Eurocentric dominance neither rejects universalism entirely nor adopts epistemological relativism (Wynter 2003). Instead, exposing the coloniality of political theory enables the pluralization of political ontology—treating non-Western political systems as theoretical subjects rather than empirical anomalies. Universalist political theories do not simply fail postcolonial contexts; rather, their interaction with African, Asian, and Latin American

politics exposes their inherent limitations (Mamdani 1996; Bayart 2009). Ultimately, destabilizing these universalist assumptions provides the necessary foundation for analyzing the specific colonial trajectories of idealism, liberalism, and neoliberalism in the following subsections.

Idealism as a Modality of Colonial Political Reason

Standard accounts view idealism as a normative tradition emphasizing moral progress and the capacity to overcome “the logic of power politics” through international law, attributing its failures to weak institutional design or realist state interests (Keohane 1984, 2017). Read through coloniality, however, idealism reveals itself not as an unrealized universal ideal, but as a colonial ideology anchored in civilizational hierarchy and epistemic foreclosure (Quijano 2000; Wynter 2003). Developed within an imperial world order, idealist theory asserted universal moral principles while political action remained differentially allocated along racial lines (League of Nations 1920; Mamdani 1996). Although idealism proclaimed the formal equality of all peoples, it paradoxically presupposed a division between societies capable of self-governance and those requiring “tutelage” or “wardship.” By embedding universal norms within Western political experience, idealist doctrine denied non-Western societies effective political subjectivity, casting them as conditional actors within the international arena (Quijano 2000).

The League of Nations exemplified this contradiction, operationalizing idealism’s colonial logic through its mandate system by framing colonial administration as a moral duty to civilize (Mamdani 1996). Under this framework, sovereign legitimacy depended on conformity to Western standards of statehood, law, and ethics (Keohane 1984). Political entities falling outside these normative parameters were positioned as conditional subjects rather than full participants in global politics (Wynter 2003). Consequently, mechanisms like collective security operated selectively, as evidenced by institutional inaction toward aggression in non-European territories (League of Nations 1920). Rather than temporary lapses, these omissions reflect a structural epistemic regime that uses moral universalism to justify political exclusion. Therefore, from a coloniality perspective, idealism’s critical failure was not its naivety, but its universalist ontology—one that modeled order exclusively on Western concepts of reason, morality, and self-government (Mamdani 1996; Quijano 2000).

Rather than dismantling global hierarchy, idealism recast imperial domination into moral terms, establishing a legacy that persists in contemporary international relations (Wynter 2003). Concepts such as humanitarian intervention, good governance, and the responsibility to protect continuously reproduce these founding assumptions, positioning Western powers as the authoritative moral judges of world order. This ongoing coloniality perpetuates a profound

epistemic imbalance between actors authorized to define universal standards and those systematically subjected to them. Ultimately, idealism serves as an overarching account of the epistemic foundations of the international political system (Foucault 1991). The coloniality of idealism resides not in its underlying ethical aspirations, but in the universalist ontology through which those ethics were articulated, operationalized, and enforced globally.

Liberalism as Juridical Coloniality

Far from being a neutral framework for universal liberation, the liberal tradition functions as a sophisticated architecture of structural exclusion and legal domination. While liberal thought claims to guarantee autonomy, individual rights, and protection against arbitrary state power through constitutionalism (Keohane 1984; Sen 1999), critical analysis reveals that historical exclusions like colonial subjugation and racial hierarchies are foundational features rather than accidental flaws (Keohane 1984). Viewed through the analytical framework of coloniality, liberalism operates as a juridical system engineered to regulate political inclusion and exclusion through law (Mamdani 1996). By examining its conceptual origins, historical applications, and contemporary persistence, one sees how liberal legalism systematically constructs inequality under the guise of universalism.

The fundamental flaw of liberal jurisprudence lies in its abstract, seemingly neutral subject, which masks specific socio-historical origins rooted in European modernity, private property, and imperial expansion (Keohane 1984; Mamdani 1996). This liberal archetype demands capacities for rational self-interest and legal personhood that were historically denied to colonized populations, enslaved peoples, and women (Mamdani 1996; Quijano 2000). Consequently, colonialism did not merely breach liberal principles; it actively relied on a bifurcated legal structure that granted full rights to Europeans while subjecting colonized populations to the rule of exception. By converting deep political differences into technical legal judgments, liberalism renders alternative social organizations—such as communal obligations or customary systems—legally ineligible and branded as incomplete versions of true legality.

Imperial powers weaponized this legalism to frame conquest not as subjugation, but as a benevolent mission of legal modernization. Codified legal frameworks, property rights, and contractual authority systematically replaced indigenous normative systems, using Western rationality as an epistemological technology to overwrite local political structures (Wynter 2003). This institutional legacy endures in postcolonial state formation, where adherence to constitutionalism and rights language remains the sole metric of political legitimacy. When postcolonial states encounter governance crises under these transplanted models, mainstream

analysis blames internal corruption or cultural deficiencies (Keohane 1984), deliberately avoiding any structural critique of liberal legality itself.

At the global level, juridical coloniality enforces international hierarchies through conditional recognition, granting full sovereignty only to states that conform to Western standards of democracy and economic regulation (World Bank 1981; Keohane 1984). Non-conforming nations face intervention, sanctions, or international supervision framed defensively as the promotion of human rights and the rule of law (United Nations 2005). Ultimately, liberalism disguises coercive power dynamics behind an illusion of universal law, ensuring that global governance remains tethered to imperial hierarchies (Mamdani 1996).

Neoliberalism as Market Conditionality

By reframing neoliberalism through the lens of coloniality, we uncover how market rationality systematically replaces sovereign political authority with economic imperatives. While neoliberalism is commonly conceptualized as a theory of economics promoting market efficiency and deregulation since the late twentieth century (Harvey 2005), this standard definition obscures its profound epistemological power. More than a financial model, neoliberalism functions as a mode of market coloniality that establishes market rationality as the primary arbiter of political legitimacy (World Bank 1981; International Monetary Fund 1987; Harvey 2005). Under this paradigm, political definitions of value are reorganized around strictly economic metrics: state actors are evaluated based on their adherence to competitive values, efficiency, and fiscal prudence rather than traditional norms (Sen 1999; Harvey 2005). Consequently, legitimacy no longer stems from popular sovereignty, moral rightness, or statutory legality, but from compliance with global market standards. As Jones (2008: 180) observes, “The discourse of ‘state failure’ characterises conditions of crisis as local in origin, the product of culture or poor leadership. The current condition of structural crisis in so many of Africa’s neocolonial states must be situated in the imperial history of global capitalism.”

This subtle shift in legitimacy underpins the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) imposed across Africa, transforming ideological policy choices into technical necessities. By framing economic restructuring as a neutral, scientific mandate, SAPs concealed the underlying processes of dispossession and distributional conflict embedded within privatization, trade liberalization, and austerity. These policy prescriptions were deployed as decontextualized, universal solutions to complex domestic crises, disregarding local histories and social ramifications entirely. Any political opposition was dismissed as irrational or economically irresponsible, entrenching the epistemic dominance of neoliberal theory while suppressing alternative political and economic imaginations. According to Wallerstein (2004), the market

coloniality of neoliberalism is sustained by foundational structures of knowledge within which the modern world-system's geoculture operates. A core epistemological device in this process is the reliance on "universalist claims [which] are part of the geoculture of the modern world-system" (Wallerstein 2006: 48). Ultimately, neoliberalism operates as market coloniality by weaponizing universal economic metrics to redefine state legitimacy, subverting local sovereignty to serve global capitalist structures.

Case Studies in Ideological Failure: Ethiopia and Somalia in Context

Within this framework, Ethiopia and Somalia are treated as complementary epistemic sites rather than comparable cases. Ethiopia demonstrates how coloniality can persist despite the absence of formal colonial rule, while Somalia exposes the limits of universalist assumptions about sovereignty, statehood, and governance. Together, they reveal that political failure in Africa is often produced not by the absence of governance but by dominant political theories' inability to recognize alternative political ontologies. Rather than representing exceptional cases, both countries expose the coloniality embedded within Western political thought.

The Ethiopian Experience: Coloniality without Formal Colonization

Ethiopia illustrates that coloniality is not synonymous with territorial colonization but operates through epistemic hierarchies that privilege imported political rationalities over indigenous systems of governance. The country's political history demonstrates how successive ideological projects—imperial modernization, Marxism-Leninism, and ethnic federalism—have marginalized indigenous political institutions while seeking legitimacy through globally dominant political paradigms. Ethiopia therefore reveals that the persistence of political instability is inseparable from the coloniality of political knowledge.

Although Ethiopia was never formally colonized by a Western power, its victory over Italy at the Battle of Adwa in 1896 became a powerful symbol of African resistance to colonialism and inspired Pan-African movements (Milkias and Metaferia 2005). Yet political independence did not prevent epistemic domination. Long before modern democratic theories emerged in Europe, the Oromo Gadaa system embodied sophisticated principles of governance, including eight-year generational leadership rotation, separation of powers, consensus-based decision-making, and peaceful transfer of authority (Legesse 1973; UNESCO 2016). Now recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the Gadaa system represents a complex democratic political ontology that has nevertheless been systematically marginalized by successive Ethiopian governments (Aliye 2020; Daraje and Kyi Phyu 2025).

The contradiction between indigenous governance and imported political ideologies became particularly evident during Ethiopia's successive political transformations. Similar to broader African nationalist movements, many Ethiopian intellectuals embraced Marxism, interpreting exploitation and inequality through the language of internal colonialism (Viratnen 2015). Earlier, the imperial state (1930–1974) attempted modernization by combining Western bureaucratic institutions with imperial traditions. As Clapham (2002: 87) observes, “it was a matter of the paradox of importing Western political institutions while maintaining essentially non-Western power structures.” The 1974 revolution replaced imperial rule with Marxist-Leninist centralism, while the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) introduced ethnic federalism in 1991. Despite their ideological differences, each regime either marginalized, selectively incorporated, or silenced indigenous institutions such as the Gadaa system because they remained unintelligible within political frameworks derived from European thought.

These recurring shifts demonstrate that Ethiopia's political challenges cannot simply be attributed to its political culture. Rather, they reveal the epistemic limits of universalist political theories that privilege externally validated institutions over locally grounded political practices. Imported models repeatedly sought legitimacy through international ideological struggles while remaining detached from indigenous mechanisms of participation, accountability, and political succession (Legesse 1973; Aliye 2020). Consequently, political failure appears less as an empirical deficiency than as an epistemic effect of theories incapable of recognizing alternative forms of political organization.

This coloniality also extends beyond Ethiopia's domestic politics into regional relations. Ethiopia's 2006 military intervention in Somalia, justified through the United States' counter-terrorism framework, illustrates how universalist political theories become instruments of regional power. Despite possessing indigenous governance traditions such as the Gadaa system, Ethiopian political elites adopted externally sanctioned notions of legitimacy to delegitimize the Islamic Courts Union in Somalia. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2026: 1) argues, this reflects the “comprador intellectual challenge,” whereby postcolonial elites internalize and reproduce Eurocentric assumptions regarding governance, development, and political legitimacy.

The exclusion of the Gadaa system therefore symbolizes more than the neglect of an indigenous institution. It exemplifies how coloniality survives through epistemic internalization rather than direct colonial domination. A governance system predating many European states is marginalized not because it lacks democratic capacity but because it does not conform to imported epistemological standards. In this sense, Ethiopia demonstrates that coloniality operates through political knowledge itself, producing governance failures by rendering indigenous political ontologies invisible.

Viewed from this perspective, Ethiopia reveals that the apparent crisis of governance is simultaneously a crisis of political theory. The country's experience demonstrates that ideological failure emerges not from the absence of democratic traditions but from the systematic privileging of externally validated political knowledge over indigenous epistemic foundations.

Somalia and the Limits of Universalist Governance

Whereas Ethiopia exposes coloniality without formal colonization, Somalia reveals the epistemological limits of universalist political theory itself. Frequently portrayed as the archetypal “failed state,” Somalia is commonly described through narratives of institutional collapse, violence, and humanitarian crisis (Bradbury 2008; Menkhaus 2014). Yet from the perspective of coloniality, Somalia represents not simply a failure of governance but a failure of dominant political theories to recognize forms of political order that exist beyond Western assumptions of sovereignty and statehood.

Following the collapse of central state authority in 1991, Somali society did not descend into political absence. Instead, governance evolved through a plural combination of clan institutions, customary law (xeer), Islamic law (Sharia), and locally embedded economic systems that continued to provide security, dispute resolution, and social regulation. Nevertheless, these institutions have consistently been dismissed within international governance discourse as informal, traditional, or even illicit (Chandler 2017). Jones (2008) argues that failed-state discourse characterizes crises as local in origin—the product of culture or poor leadership—rather than situating them within the imperial history of global capitalism.

The limitations of universalist theory become evident across the three ideological traditions examined in this study. Idealist peacebuilding has framed international intervention in Somalia as a moral responsibility to rescue a society presumed incapable of governing itself (Autesserre 2014). Humanitarian intervention and state-building consequently transform political difference into moral deficiency, while resistance to externally designed reforms is interpreted as irrational rather than as opposition to political domination. In this way, idealism functions as moral coloniality, legitimizing intervention through claims of ethical responsibility (Barnett 2011).

Liberal approaches similarly privilege centralized constitutional institutions, formal legality, and electoral governance as universal benchmarks of political legitimacy. Such assumptions marginalize the coexistence of xeer and Sharia by treating them as incompatible with liberal constitutionalism rather than recognizing them as legitimate normative orders (Paris 2004). This constitutes juridical coloniality, whereby legal pluralism is subordinated to an abstract, centralized conception of legality. Consequently, Somalia appears politically deficient because

its institutions do not conform to liberal legal categories rather than because political order is absent (Scott 1998).

Neoliberal governance reproduces a comparable hierarchy through economic rationality. Somalia's telecommunications sector, remittance networks, and informal commercial economy are frequently celebrated as examples of spontaneous market efficiency despite the absence of a centralized state. Yet these assessments privilege market performance while neglecting broader questions of social justice, political accountability, and distributive equity (Harvey 2005). Development becomes detached from citizenship, reinforcing what may be described as market coloniality.

The experience of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) further illustrates how universalist political theories become instruments of geopolitical power. Between 2000 and 2006, the UIC restored security, established functioning courts, and delivered public services across much of southern Somalia. Despite these achievements, it was delegitimized because it challenged liberal legal assumptions. The United States-backed Ethiopian military intervention in 2006, justified through counter-terrorism discourse, dismantled the UIC and contributed significantly to the emergence of al-Shabaab (Barnes and Hassan 2007; Haji Ingiris 2018; Mueller 2018). This episode demonstrates how regional elites operating within Eurocentric epistemological frameworks reproduce what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2026) identifies as comprador politics, using universalist political theory to delegitimize alternative African forms of governance.

Taken together, the Ethiopian and Somali experiences demonstrate that political failure is fundamentally an epistemic effect rather than merely an empirical condition. International interventions and domestic political reforms repeatedly impose moral hierarchies, juridical universalism, and market rationalities that displace indigenous political ontologies. Failure is then interpreted as evidence of African incapacity rather than as the consequence of political theories unable to recognize alternative forms of political organization.

This interpretation resonates with world-systems analysis. As Wallerstein (2006: 70) argues, "The evolution of structures of knowledge is simply a part of and an important part of the evolution of the modern world-system. The structural crisis of one is the structural crisis of the other." The crises observed in Ethiopia and Somalia therefore reveal not simply failures of governance but the structural limits of Western universalism itself. Rather than confirming the superiority of idealist, liberal, or neoliberal political thought, these cases expose their inability to accommodate political ontologies that lie beyond Eurocentric epistemological boundaries.

Decolonization of Contemporary Political Theory: An African Perspective

Contemporary political theory faces a profound epistemic crisis driven by the hidden power structures of global coloniality that persist long after formal decolonization. Traditional paradigms—including idealism, liberalism, and neoliberalism—share intrinsic limitations that render them ineffective for addressing urgent global crises such as systemic inequality, climate degradation, and rising authoritarianism. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013: 12) observes, “The contemporary world order and its knowledge production is still greatly shaped by the coloniality, or the surviving colonial matrices of power after decolonization.” This hegemony manifests not only in dominant Northern frameworks but also through subaltern epistemologies via a “cognitive empire” that produced a “stratum of African intellectuals, whose habitus, theoretical reflexes and citation practices remain organically tied to the metropole” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2026: 1). Addressing this comprador intellectualism, which manifests as conceptual dependency, distorted policy, and deferred epistemic freedom requires an analytical shift beyond mere inclusion toward a thorough decolonization of contemporary political thought.

Decolonizing political theory is not an additive exercise of incorporating non-Western thinkers into pre-existing Western frameworks; it demands questioning the very categories and presuppositions of political inquiry. Central to this project is Dussel’s (2002) concept of transmodernity, which advocates for transforming modernity through dialogue with marginalized peripheries rather than its total, insular rejection. In practice, this imperative requires centering issues marginalized by dominant paradigms such as historical reparations, ecological restoration, and the critique of comprador dynamics wherein African elites reproduce colonial epistemologies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2026). True decolonization disrupts the role of African intellectuals as mere epistemic brokers and alters the fundamental nature of knowledge production.

This disruptive imperative directly confronts long-standing debates regarding universalism and particularism. While liberal scholars like Rawls (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) defend universal principles such as human rights across cultural borders, critics highlight how normative claims can weaponize parochial norms. Communitarians like Sandel (1998) locate justice in specific traditions, whereas postcolonial theorists like Mohanty (2003: 17) warn against universalism acting as “a cover for Western cultural imperialism.” However, as Kapoor and Zalloua (2022) note via world-systems theory, universalism is not inherently oppressive; the flaw lies in constructing universality exclusively through Eurocentric epistemological tools.

Navigating this tension requires distinguishing false Eurocentric claims from emancipatory horizons. Sekyi-Otu (2018) differentiates between hegemonic universalism and a left-universalism that serves as a tool for liberation, while Mueller (2024) situates universalism

within the dynamics of the modern world-system. Quijano (2024 [1992]) critically exposes this foundational fallacy:

Nothing is less rational, finally, than the pretension that the specific cosmic vision of a particular ethnies should be taken as universal rationality even if such an ethnies is called Western Europe, because this is actually intended to impose a provincialism as universalism (84)

To resolve this provincialism, Quijano argues that “epistemological decolonization is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication . . . as the basis of another rationality that may legitimately pretend to some universality” (Quijano 2024 [1992]: 84). Nuanced frameworks navigate between dogmatic universalism and isolationist relativism: Sen (2009) offers a comparative approach centered on mitigating manifest injustices, while Santos (2014) proposes an “ecology of knowledges” that acknowledges the partiality of all perspectives while striving toward shared political horizons.

African indigenous political philosophies offer robust alternative ontologies that operationalize this transmodern, non-hegemonic universality. The Southern African philosophy of *Ubuntu* presents a direct alternative to liberal individualism. Ramose (2002: 41) defines Ubuntu (“I am because we are”) as a “root philosophical paradigm which puts community rather than individual at the heart of ethics and politics.” Unlike liberalism’s atomistic subject, Ubuntu grounds political legitimacy in social interdependence, relational accountability, dialogue, and restorative justice. It does not reject human dignity; rather, it reconceptualizes universality through relationality rather than individual autonomy, disrupting the ontological foundations of colonial political theory.

Beyond Ubuntu, indigenous African governance institutions demonstrate sophisticated operational models of pluralism and justice. A prominent example is the Gadaa system of the Oromo people in Ethiopia (Aliye, 2020), recognized by UNESCO (2016) as an intangible cultural heritage. The Gadaa system rotates leadership every eight years through structural separation of powers, consensus decision-making, and peaceful successions—principles analogous to democracy yet rooted in a distinct epistemology (Daraje and Kyi Phyu 2025). Described by Asmarom Legesse as “one of the most astonishing and instructive turns the evolution of human society has taken” (1973, p. 2), recent research confirms Gadaa’s deeply egalitarian character regarding accountability, leadership training, and systemic inclusion (Daraje and Kyi Phyu 2025). In Ethiopia a historical space of “coloniality without colonization,” Gadaa proves that sophisticated governance models exist independently of Eurocentric paradigms.

Broad comparative research refutes colonial mythologies that portray indigenous African politics as primitive or non-existent. Osabu-Kle (2000) demonstrates that systems among the

Ovimbundu, Zulu, Ashanti, and Ga shared structural consensualism and mechanisms designed to prevent power abuse. Contemporary scholarship continues to examine indigenous institutional durability, including the Manden Charter and Issa Xeer (Iye and Holl 2024), empirical institutional continuity under differing colonial regimes (Neupert-Wentz and Müller-Crepon 2024), and ongoing confrontations between indigenous leadership models and Eurocentric structures in Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Rwanda (Mawere and Mukonza 2024). Together, these systems establish that Africa possesses rich, indigenous political models capable of informing contemporary political theory.

The political imperative to reclaim these paradigms converged in the late 1990s under the banner of the “African Renaissance,” famously articulated by South African President Thabo Mbeki. In his seminal 1996 speech, *I Am an African*, Mbeki (1998) declared: “I am an African. My being owes its existence to the hills and valleys, mountains and glades, rivers, deserts, trees, flowers, seas, and the ever-changing seasons that shape the face of our native land” Mbeki (1998, p. 31). Beyond its poetic resonance, this project sought to reclaim dignity stripped by colonial subjugation through four interconnected pillars: cultural restoration, political democratization, economic independence, and continental unity (Mbeki 1998; Vale and Maseko 1998). Drawing from Pan-African traditions including Césaire and Senghor’s Négritude, Nkrumah and Du Bois’s Pan-Africanism, Biko’s Black Consciousness, and the relational ethics of Ubuntu the movement aimed to transcend the “coloniality of being” (Nkrumah, 1965; Wynter 2003; Letseka 2012).

However, the Mbeki-era Renaissance faced severe critique for remaining bound to the logic it sought to displace. Critics argued that its emphasis on market integration, neoliberal growth, and technocratic governance adopted the normative assumptions of Northern financial institutions (Vale and Maseko 1998). As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) incisively contends, the concept became:

A discourse of elite Africanism that ended up reproducing the colonial epistemologies rather than decolonizing the mindsets of Africans... the African Renaissance as articulated by Mbeki and his contemporaries remained trapped within the colonial matrices of power, reproducing the very Eurocentric categories it sought to transcend (89)

This critique underscores a central paradox: theoretical frameworks that attempt to construct alternatives while operating inside Western epistemological boundaries inevitably replicate colonial power matrices.

To overcome this limitation, recent scholarship seeks to radicalize the concept into an explicitly decolonial African Renaissance focused on epistemic liberation. Olukoshi (2003) reconceptualizes the Renaissance as a dual emancipation project against external domination and

internal authoritarianism. Similarly, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) defines a decolonial Renaissance through the lens of epistemic freedom:

The decolonial African Renaissance does not mean going back to some pristine African past; rather, it means rethinking Africa through the lens of African epistemologies and knowledge systems by simultaneously interrogating modernity (45)

This perspective requires shifting indigenous governance systems like Gadaa and Ubuntu from passive cultural artifacts to active foundations for theoretical innovation (Ramose 2002; Aliye 2020), directly challenging the asymmetry that reduces African political experiences to mere empirical data for Western theorizing. Ultimately, decolonizing contemporary political theory requires moving past elite-driven, Western-conformed iterations of renewal toward a radical reclamation of African political ontologies. By confronting comprador dependency, exposing false universalisms, and centering indigenous philosophies such as Ubuntu and the Gadaa system, African political thought offers vital conceptual tools for restructuring global political theory. The ongoing challenge for contemporary scholars is to realize a decolonial African Renaissance that does not merely adapt Eurocentric modernity, but genuinely reimagines human coexistence and governance from African epistemic vantage points (Santos 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

Conclusion and Implications

The critical genealogy presented in this study demonstrates that external Eurocentric ideologies crafted to serve imperial hegemonic interests can no longer be permitted to dictate Africa's developmental, political, and socioeconomic trajectories. As demonstrated by the empirical failures of Ethiopia's various imported models of state-society relations and liberal peacebuilding in Somalia, universalized neoliberal templates produce a profound structural mismatch that repeatedly yields unintended institutional crises. Utilizing world-systems analysis, this study confirms that the global geoculture weaponizes universalist claims to institutionalize core-periphery hierarchies. Pathologizing narratives like the "failed state" discourse deliberately frame systemic vulnerabilities as localized failures of culture or leadership (Jones 2008), strategically obscuring the global political economy that actively manufactures and reproduces these conditions.

To dismantle these structural traps, a radical shift in both the biography and geography of knowledge is paramount. Decolonizing African development does not demand a parochial rejection of universality; rather, as Quijano (2024) asserts, it demands its fundamental transformation. The core problem is not the search for broad principles, but the hegemonic

production of a single, provincial European frame masquerading as global reality—a monopoly that actively suppresses alternative political ontologies. Overcoming this requires confronting internal structural dependencies. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2026) highlights, African political elites and intellectuals frequently operate as comprador agents whose theoretical reflexes, research habitus, and citation practices remain organically bound to the metropole. Epistemological liberation must therefore begin from within, purging these internalized colonial paradigms to establish genuine intercultural dialogue grounded in a newly liberated rationality.

Ultimately, the path toward liberation relies on the radical pluralization of political ontology rather than swapping one monolithic universalism for another. Decolonial political theory does not retreat into a naive past or abandon the rigorous critique of Western thought; instead, it shifts the locus of critique, positioning African lifeworlds as foundational sites of theoretical innovation. Indigenous frameworks such as the Gadaa system and Ubuntu philosophy empirically prove that sophisticated, non-coercive systems of governance, ecological sustainability, and radical community cohesion exist outside Euro-American canons.

Rather than viewing the postcolonial political experience as a “deviation” or “aberration” from a universal Western standard, scholars and policymakers must recognize Africa as the critical vantage point from which the structural limits of Eurocentric theory are exposed. Genuine political transformation and emancipation will not spring from calibrating failed external frameworks, but from grounding future governance in plural epistemologies that restore African agency, justice, and self-determination.

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