

# Bullshit Arguments

A Theoretical Self Defence Zine

Version 1.0

An increasing number of politicians, journalists, academics and other public figures are attacking protests with decolonial demands. It is notable that movements such as Black Lives Matter, Rhodes Must Fall, and protests against the ongoing Palestinian genocide, unlike most other protests, are criticised for their association with postcolonial, decolonial and critical race theory. Because of their association with race and racism, these theories are regarded 'political' rather than academic; they are portrayed as emotional 'grievances' rather than substantiated rational arguments. There are different ways to approach this argument, depending on personal preference and situation: for example, one could point to the misguided perception of emotion as an invalidating state (further reading keywords: affective turn; emotional geographies); or one could play with the racist appeals to 'rationality'.

In this zine, we are presenting a few pointers for countering such 'bullshit arguments' that seek to invalidate the foundations, methods and even legal support of necessary protests. Although it is infuriating to read bad and offensive theoretical arguments, they are useful as practice grounds for 'live' arguments. Since this text is written from a particular kind of experience, there are likely to be other strategies and better ways of communicating (further reading keywords: decolonial graphic design; open source). Feel free to scan and modify this text, adding your own designs and suggestions. This zine will go into postcolonial, decolonial, critical race, feminist and queer theory, and show how strategies such as pinkwashing or selective histories work.

A note on readings: you don't have to stick to books. There are equally useful videos, podcasts, films, TV series, theatre plays etc. that also engage in theorisation. Theorisation happens everywhere, including in everyday conversation (also see 'organic intellectual', Antonio Gramsci).

>> "Race does not exist. But it does kill people." (Colette Guillaumin)

The UK and US governments both target critical race theory. The German and Israeli governments target postcolonialism. But it does not need governments to spread the most bizarre arguments about race and colonialism. As the Nazis already realised, lies need to tap into an existing prejudice to be effective. So why are people who claim to be anti-racist reacting so hysterically to theories dealing with race and colonialism?

There are many dimensions to this phobia, such as economic advantages, scapegoating and not wanting to be seen to be benefitting from racist structures. Geographical context also plays a big role. Theories such as postcolonial, decolonial and critical race theory can help us see through this mess, from different angles. Through them, we can make a few useful generalisations that can also equip you to adapt things for your own specific situation.

First of all, we need to establish a useful working definition of race (further reading: Nell Irvin Painter 'The History of White People'). Racism is a global phenomenon, and does not have to involve skin colour.

"Racism can be marked by colour, ethnicity, language, culture and/or religion." (Ramon Grosfoguel, 2016, "What is Racism?")

Many academics argue that racism is not only distributed across the globe ('every country has racism'), but that it is also global in nature, because it is closely associated with a Western/Christian and capitalist/colonial world view. Let me explain a bit more what I mean by that:

## >> Function of Race

Racialisation is a means of oppression and limiting access to resources. While you also have racialisation that allows for greater access to resources, this tends to apply only to 'noble bloodlines' or imagined superbeings like 'Aryans'. This is why the UK freaked out over Megan Markle, and why 18<sup>th</sup> century Europeans/European settlers freaked out over King Henry I of Haiti - they mix up categorical directions.

White racism on the basis of skin colour is partly linked with the growing Christianisation of the Americas which destabilised the Christian/barbarian binary that justified oppression. It is also closely connected to European economic expansion and inherited slavery. The Jamaican-British cultural theorist Stuart Hall suggests that this can be illustrated through the history of sugar production. When Europeans learned to cultivate the Asian sugar cane in the Middle Ages, the initial production took place in the Mediterranean. When the areas of cultivations became cut off through the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, production was moved to the newly discovered Americas. Due to labour shortage from the combined effects of the plague in Europe and genocide of American indigenous populations, Africans were imported as slave labour. In order to break solidarity between indentured workers from different parts of the world, and to give European settlers exclusive access to colonial wealth, African slaves were given a different legal status: their condition was inherited. In order to justify legal discrimination and economic exploitation, science was called upon to prove the White European superiority vis à vis 'inferior races', which particularly referred to people of African descent, who constituted the biggest source of cheap labour by the 18th century. Similar practices were implemented in other colonies such as India, Australia, New Zealand.

This is a reason why Black slavery carries more stigma than White slavery. (Most slaves in Europe were White until the mid-15th century, and they mostly came from or through the Crimea region - hence the term slave/Slav. Even in America, the majority of unfree labour in America was White, until the 18th century. Slavery in the Ottoman empire, which covered parts of Europe, did not officially stop until the 1890 Brussels Conference Act, and unofficially not until the early 20th century). As racial science became increasingly invalidated, racists started claiming a 'racial spirit' that marked people apart (the Nazi's construction of the 'Aryan' is an example of this 'spiritual racism').

>> So what does this have to do with people going crazy over these theories?

Theories that seriously deal with race and colonialism maintain that structural racism still exists and still shapes current geopolitics. This can be illustrated through an example that I borrow from the geographer Adam Elliott-Cooper:

'Think about what happens when Barak Obama travels to different countries, and where he is positioned in the racial hierarchy. If he wasn't a former president of the United States, what sort of status or access to resources would he have?'

But references to race and colonialism go much deeper and are often quite invisible that even many of those affected by them may not notice them. They are embedded in things such as street and food names, typeface styles (further reading keywords: decolonial typography, decolonial design), urban design. The acceptance of such references is symbolic of the wider acceptance of racism. People do not have to make mental gymnastics - things are pretty engrained until something makes things visible. Here, theorists and the examples they focus on do important work.

For many, this process is uncomfortable, because 'seeing race' makes demands on them. Like in the film 'The Matrix' people have to make a decision whether to stay in their blissful matrix or not (further reading keyword: red pilling). As a result, theoretical insights on race and colonialism are being deflected by portrayed as things that disturb the peace, extremist or historic grievances that have no place in the present. Examples of how 'progressive' newspapers and parliamentary debates are portraying theories include:

- 'seeing things in black and white' instead of 'nuances'
- making people racist because these theories make people see race
- not reflecting lived reality - 'I have a black friend/colleague'
- not being relevant in countries that didn't have slavery
- colonialism was too short to be relevant

To give you a concrete example, let's look at Israel/Palestine. First of all, it is portrayed as a total minefield, so most people do not even dare to engage in the debate. Germans, in particular, will often say 'I can't discuss this, my family is full of Nazis'. Technically, it should make you want to join the debate especially, because you might want to oppose another genocide. However, the fear of being accused of antisemitism is so great, and I would argue greater than empathy for Jewish people, since many critical Jewish people in Israel, Germany and elsewhere have been shunned or shut down by White Germans. Further, German journalists, academics and politicians have rallied against theories of race and colonialism, because they claim that Israel should not be put in the context of colonialism. To call Israel or Zionism a settler colonial project would be akin to an antisemitic position.

This partly has to do with the post-WW2 infantilisation of Jews (they can't do bad things, they need help), and partly with the fact that Germany, the US, the UK and other countries have consistently supplied Israel with arms to oppress the Palestinian population. What if people suddenly have to admit that a genocide is happening that they themselves have been advancing? It would be a horrifying situation that no one wants to deal with, and especially not on a geopolitical level. Germany does not even want to give reparations to Namibia for the colonial Herero and Nama genocide. If the government suddenly 'saw' colonialism and on-going racial oppression, they would have to be accepting of Muslim Germans, Afro Germans and other so-called 'Germans of colour'.

>> So what do these theories actually say, and are there differences between them?

Theories are like tools in your toolbox against a system stacked against most people. What the theories specifically focus on depends on the time and the place where they came into existence (check out [globalsocialtheory.org](http://globalsocialtheory.org) for theorists/ theories from around the world). Postcolonial theory, for example, followed in the wake of 20<sup>th</sup> century decolonisation from European powers - it emerged from a context where colonisation has, at least officially ended. Decolonial theory emerged from Latin America and other places that exist under conditions of settler colonialism - the coloniser has never officially left. Critical race theory came from legal studies where scholars looked at systemic racism. Its theoretical basis are social movements and the theories connected with them. Because of these different backgrounds, these theories can be responsive to different situations, so let's look at the specific tools they can give you:

## >> Postcolonial Theory: against "the West and the Rest"

Because it is tied to the post-decolonisation context, postcolonial theory stresses that decolonisation is incomplete both on a material and cultural level. Many of the initial authors came from, or were part of the diaspora of, the Middle East and South Asia, and were concerned by the on-going hold of the colonial imagination on formerly colonised populations. In response, they pursued a project of challenging European/Western ways of seeing the world by writing from the perspective of the colonised. A famous example is the book *Orientalism* (1978) by Palestinian-American author Edward Said. In this book, Said shows how Europeans have exoticised the Middle East and other geographical areas as a backward 'Other'. This idea has served Europeans to assert their superiority and impose a 'civilising' mission that went hand in hand with subjugation and economic exploitation.

A key strategy used by postcolonial authors is rendering strange. Their aim is to destroy the illusion that the Western perspective is the only valid or 'modern' one, and that only the cultured West can properly produce history. The move to question the centrality of Europe and see it just as one of many important geographic constellations is also called 'provincialising Europe' (after Dipesh Chakrabarty). Ideally, postcolonial theory works to remove brain-washing in both directions: both coloniser and colonised need to realise that Western superiority is effectively a myth or temporarily successful 'gaslighting' that continues, for instance, through the idea of 'development'.

Tools: spotting 'orientalism' (especially in the context of Islamophobia); denaturalising Western superiority; identifying whitewashing of history



>> Decolonial Theory: modernity is coloniality, decolonisation is not a metaphor

Because of its focus on the Americas and other areas colonised from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, scholars of decoloniality argue that modernity cannot be thought without coloniality. By coloniality they mean the way Europeans have related to other people, environments and knowledges, is mostly as property. This is meant quite literally, but also has the result that colonised people's ideas and achievements were never integrated equally within world history. A major cause for this suppression is the maintenance of European economic superiority. Capitalist relations were imposed on colonised populations early on, disrupting kinship pattern and other ways of relating to the world. One banal is the imposition of the dog tax in Aotearoa. It was a means of enforcing a Western capitalist worldview and its instrumental way of valuing relations. Through such measures, modernity saw a global proliferation of sexism, racism, genocide, ecocide, forced migration etc.

The aim of decoloniality is to disentangle both mentally and materially from the condition of coloniality (more on the 'coloniality of gender' below). Examples of decolonial activism include the Zapatista movement and other Indigenous autonomy movements. Indeed, many decolonial theorists draw on Indigenous knowledge frameworks. To disentangle anything from this colonial matrix is immensely difficult. It is so ingrained at any scale, from the geopolitical to the personal, that it takes effort to notice it, especially for those who benefit from it.

Tools: denaturalising heteronormative structures, denaturalising capitalist worldview, validating Indigenous knowledges, cultures and experiences

>> Critical Race Theory: moving beyond institutional racism

Since Critical Race Theory (CRT) came out of US legal studies in the 1980s, it primarily examines institutional racism and the processes that continue to benefit white people. As put by the author Toni Morrison, CRT sees the world as 'wholly racialised'. It looks at who benefits from racialisation (you may have come across the phrase 'white privilege') and who continues to have an interest in maintaining it. Institutional processes that critical race theorists are examining include the education system, migration, prisons and the workplace.

Methodologically, critical race theory has a strong focus on theory as activism, and activism feeding into theory. For example, you will find social movements such as Black Lives Matter and lobby groups such as The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) influenced by, but also significantly feeding into CRT. Further, CRT places and emphasises on sharing and analysing historical and current examples of experimental institutions, economics and other systems, such as African American co-operatives (check out the work of Jessica Gordon Nembhard) or Black Panther Party health care and school programmes (excellent book on this by sociologist Alondra Nelson). While CRT comes out of the US context and the frustrations of black activists with lack of progress following the civil rights era, it has been taken up amongst other 'minorities' (e.g. LatCrit) and by activist-scholars across the world. What CRT asks you to do is to analyse supposedly 'neutral' processes such as law and organisational structures and show how skewed, exclusionary, unstable and lethal they are.

Tools: legal challenges; identifying White privilege; 'follow the money'; 'follow the networks'; social movement links

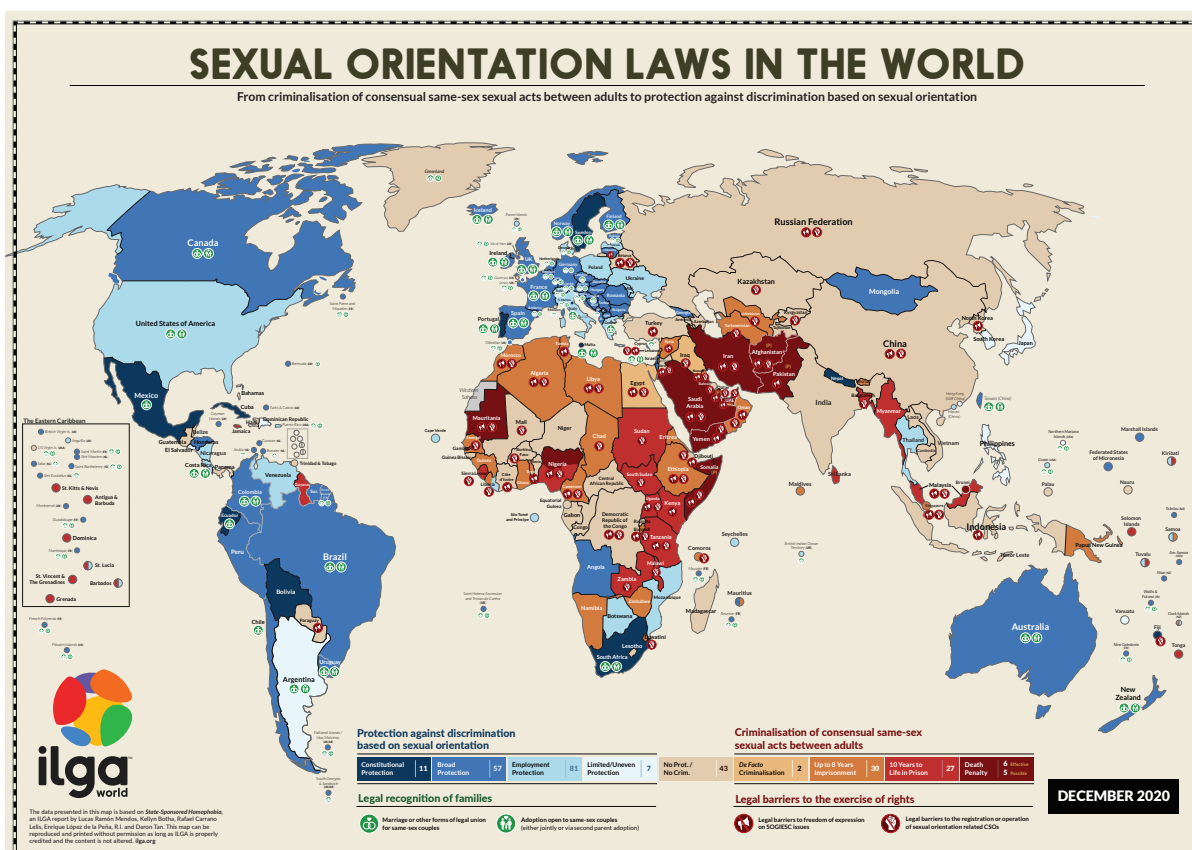
>> "Not seeing race does little to deconstruct racist structures... Seeing race is essential to changing the system." (Reni Eddo-Lodge)

As you have hopefully seen, these three theoretical approaches are far from simplistic. They show how racial divisions have become naturalised, from a local to a global level. A deliberate misunderstanding of their complexity points to a desire to hide something. For example, where postcolonial theory is accused of being 'divisive', it is most likely not postcolonial theory that is creating this division. In combination, the three theories equip you with tools to spot where the real issue lies. Your 'first aid' is basically:

- 1) 'follow the money' (look at economic benefits of making particular claims) and 'follow the networks' (who are they associated with) → CRT
- 2) Denaturalisation: to denaturalise means to expose complicity and guilt. Are you dealing with a guilt management strategy? → decolonial theory
- 3) Maintenance of White/European superiority: does the person want to prevent giving equal rights to racialised people? Do they not see othered knowledges as equally valid? → postcolonial theory

You can see how postcolonial, decolonial and critical race theory allow you to spot bullshit. One of my favourite bullshit spotters is the German critical race theorist Fatima El-Tayeb. Her dissection of German racism in her book 'Undeutsch' ('Ungerman') gives great clarity to a messy situation. Her English book 'European Others' expands her critique to Europe. Another thing that these theories allow you to do is to attach them to other theoretical constructs in order to interrogate them. Examples include Black Marxism (further reading keyword: racial capitalism), postcolonial feminism and decolonial queer theory. Here is an example of how this works in practice:

>> "Bombing for feminism" (after Arundhati Roy)



Source: [ilga.org](http://ilga.org)

Countries in the Global South are frequently accused of sexism and homophobia. The argument usually goes that these countries are barbaric and need the West to ensure equality. This is often used as support for military intervention. The map above is an example of how the 'civilised' nature of the West vs the 'barbaric rest' is illustrated. The year 2018 when 'Geography: Mapping our world' was the theme of LGBT+ history month, this argument about barbarism was repeated across social media. What gets omitted is not just the colonial history of homophobic legislation, but also on-going Western money flows that lead to a new wave of oppression.

In his book *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* (2020), political scientist Rahul Rao takes a critical look at Ugandan anti-homosexuality legislation (dubbed by the media as the 'Kill the gays bill') by following the money. He traces it to conservative US American religious and 'family planning' organisations. Rao also remains critical of international anti-Ugandan activism organized by Western governments that threatened to withdraw development funds in response to the country's human rights abuses. He also makes connections to India and Britain and their respective colonial legacies.

As Rahul Rao and authors such as Arundhati Roy, Maria Lugones, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí or Jasbir Puar have shown, there is much more depth to issues of gender and sexuality. Under colonialism, European ideas about gender and race were imposed on colonised societies. Before, there was a much greater diversity of gender identities and relations; some cultures even did not see gender as a significant marker, because they focused on others, such as age, instead. Imposition was not always through obvious violence - sometimes people reoriented their cultural practices in order to avoid genocide or gain an advantage during negotiations (further reading keywords: choiceless choices, decolonising gender, decolonising sexuality). As the Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson (2014) has shown, Europeans often would not accept land claims by women and, as a consequence, many matriarchal structures changed to patriarchal.

I hope this example illustrates how theories (e.g. feminist and queer theories) that are already designed as tools to spot bullshit, are further enhanced by the combination with postcolonial, decolonial and critical race theory and vice versa.

## >> Practising self defence

- Take an offensive article or interview and see what kinds of statements people are making. Then 'translate' them with the help of postcolonial, decolonial and critical race theory. E.g. 'people talking about racism are the ones creating the divisions' = 'I'm very comfortable right now, please don't make me see the racism I am oblivious to.' A lot of arguments are quite repetitive, so this practice helps familiarise yourself with the most common arguments.
- Perform different positions amongst each other. The better you understand the complexity and the references of the people you are normally opposed to, the stronger you can make your arguments. Try not to work with caricatures, they make it easier for others to invalidate your arguments. To be nuanced, even in relation to your opponents, does not mean to have less sharp argument. To the contrary: the closer you are to the complexity of a hostile argument, the more destabilising your own refutation will be.
- Remember that most people do not actively want to be assholes. They are often just lacking knowledge or confidence, because they are surrounded by bullshit. While that is draining and infuriating, it is necessary to try to find something in the other person's argument that you can hook into as a common basis. This does not mean to comfort them - that's not your job, and you have probably done enough of this labour all of your life (see Reni Eddo-Lodge 'Why I'm no longer talking to White People about Race'). What we are looking for, to put it in Noam Chomsky's words: to use people's own arguments to 'expand the floor of [their] cage'.

- Of course there are people who actively want to destroy you and hold on to the system. When you encounter these self-aware people, the strategy is basically to win a public argument, not to waste energy. Often people will try to drain you with bullshit questions, so take care to identify them. Bo Seo has a number of helpful videos on efficient and 'dirty' debating e.g. on YouTube.
- Create more tools for other people. You can copy, modify or make an altogether different zine. Maybe one that has much better graphics. Videos can also be produced. They are often even more effective. Sometimes, even a casual conversation in which you carefully drop references can be a lifeline.
- As with 'real' self defence, take care to breathe. Activism is incredibly hard work that takes as much of a physical and emotional toll as it is liberating and enriching. Most 'professional' activists have specific spaces for this. These can be community spaces such as an LGBTIQ+ centre, a music club or a mosque. Do try to find out about them if you are not already aware of them. There is also guidance online.
- Do stuff at your own pace. Not everybody has the same resources, and you will also notice that you yourself will vary in energy reserves. Of course, there are moments where these things are out of your control, but, wherever possible, check in on yourself and listen to others if they become concerned about your well-being. That also means being mindful of other people's pace. Don't be frustrated if messages are not answered - it's not your fault or their unwillingness. Sometimes people just need some time. This is also true for recruiting people to your cause:

- Finding 'your people'. This is useful for maintaining energy and morale levels. Finding a community can sometimes be harder than it sounds, but there are a variety of tools at your disposal, from carrying the symbols of your cause, carefully dropping hints, or going on social media. Further, while the majority of people will be genuine in their motivations, be careful, but not overly paranoid, about undercover surveillance. Try to come up with strategies to keep each other safe.
- If you are unable to locate people, you may want to look at historical examples that relate to your cause. While people from the past cannot directly jump to your rescue, their experiences may make you feel less alone and more validated. You may even be able to borrow and adapt strategies, including how to work under conditions of censorship.
- It is useful to know your local rights and to have legal advice at hand. You may have noticed that many protests have legal observers. Here, it is also useful to try to subvert things tactically, for example, by altering slogans that they will be understood, but still remain within the legal framework. This is not 'selling out', but trying to win a game in order to win for the cause. An example here is the White Paper Movement in China.
- Lastly, to be an anti-racist also means that it is important to acknowledge that you can also at some point say something racist, sexist or otherwise offensive. It is better to start from this premise than to act in defensive ways. If you or your co-activist notice something, continue educating yourself and allow yourself to be educated.



>> Further sources by argument (please add, especially examples in your language)

"The West has produced all of the modern philosophical revolutions"

- Jim Al-Khalili 'The House of Wisdom And The Legacy Of Arabic Science'
- Jerry Brotton 'The Renaissance Bazaar: From The Silk Road To Michelangelo'
- David Graeber 'Pirate Enlightenment, Or The Real Libertalia'
- Susan Buck-Morss 'Hegel, Haiti and Universal History'
- Julia Ng 'Daoism and Capitalism' blog [daoismandcapitalism.wordpress.com](http://daoismandcapitalism.wordpress.com)
- Peter K. J. Park 'Africa, Asia And The History Of Philosophy: Racism In The Formation Of The Philosophical Canon 1780-1830'

"Colonialism also had benefits for the population"

- Syed Hussein Alatas 'The Myth Of The Lazy Native'
- Shashi Thraroor 'Inglourious Empire: What The British Did To India'
- Albert Memmi 'The Coloniser And The Colonised'
- Frantz Fanon 'The Wretched Of The Earth'

"Colonialism only lasted a few years"

- David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen 'The Kaiser's Holocaust: Germany's Forgotten Genocide And The Colonial Roots Of Nazism'
- Olufemi O. Taiwo 'Reconsidering Reparations'
- Greg Rosalsky 'The Greatest Heist In History: How Haiti Was Forced To Pay Reparations For Freedom'
- Kehinde Andrews 'The New Age Of Empire'
- Edward Said 'Culture And Imperialism'

"Theories on race and colonialism do not apply to countries such as Germany"

- Fatima EL-Tayeb 'Things Are Different Here'  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsR2d9rNVV8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsR2d9rNVV8)
- May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye, Dagmar Schultz (eds)  
'Showing Our Colours: Afro German Women Speak Out'

"Israel is just defending itself against a pogrom"

- Rashid Khalidi 'The Hundred Years' War Against Palestine'
- Anton Loewenstein 'The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports The Technology Of Occupation Around The World'
- Ilan Pappé 'The Ethnic Cleansing Of Palestine'
- Edward Said 'The Question Of Palestine'
- Eyal Weizman 'Three Genocides'
- Ariella Azoulay 'From Palestine To Israel'

"To Support Palestine is antisemitic"

- Jewish Currents 'Bad Memory' [jewishcurrents.org/bad-memory-2](http://jewishcurrents.org/bad-memory-2)
- n+1 'A Dangerous Conflation: An Open Letter From Jewish Writers'
- The Jerusalem Declaration On Antisemitism

"The Left Is Antisemitic"

- Erica Lagalisse 'Occult Features of Anarchism: With Attention to the Conspiracy of Kings and the Conspiracy of the Peoples'
- Leandros Fischer 'For Israel And Communism? Making Sense Of Germany's Antideutsche'

"Islam is backwards"

- Roxanne L. Euben 'Premodern, Antimodern Or Postmodern? Islamic And Western Critiques Of Modernity'
- Mai Yamani (ed) Feminism and Islam: Legal And Literary Practices.

"You are supporting terrorism"

- Philosophy Tube 'Islamophobia - An Analysis'
- Amal Abu-Bakare 'Seeing Islamophobia In Black: Contesting Imperial Logics In The Anti-Racist Moment'
- Conor Gearty 'A Critique Of The Role Of Terrorism As An Idea In Law, Politics And International Relations.'

"Colonialism abolished barbaric gender relations such as the burning of widows in India"

- Sandeep Bakshi, Suhraiya Jivraj and Silvia Posocco (eds) Decolonising Sexualities
- Maria Lugones 'Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorising Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions'
- Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí 'The Invention Of Women'
- Angela Saini 'Patriarchy: How Men Came To Rule'
- Trinh T. Minh-ha 'Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality And Feminism'

"Refugees are bringing sexism and homophobia back to Europe"

- Rahul Rao 'Out of Time: The Queer Politics Of Postcoloniality
- Jasbir Puar 'Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism In Queer Times
- Sa'ed Atshan 'Queer Palestine And The Empire Of Critique'

"But Indigenous people now have rights - why are they still complaining"

- Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang 'Decolonisation Is Not A Metaphor'
- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'
- Teresia Teaiwa 'bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans'
- Glen Sean Coulthard 'Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition'
- Walter D. Mignolo 'The Darker Side Of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options'

