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# DECOLONIAL THINKING & PRACTICE



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Decolonial thinking and practice, also the modernity / coloniality / decoloniality (MCD) project, is the collective project of a group of South- and Central-American (or "Latin American") thinkers, writers and activists, that gained momentum in the period post-2000, but has only broken the horizon of visibility in the Anglo-American academy in the last ten years or so. It is associated with such key figures as the Argentine-Mexican writer and philosopher, Enrique Dussel, the Peruvian Sociologist, Anibal Quijano, the Colombian Philosopher, Santiago Castro-Gomez, the UC Berkeley-based Sociologist, Ramon Grosfoguel, and the Rutgers University-based Philosopher, Nelson Maldonado-Torres [Shepherd in press]. The English-language publications of Walter D. Mignolo, based at Duke University, have done a great deal to broaden the appeal of this important critique [Mignolo

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1999, 2003, 2005, 2011], as have two further key publications: the 2008 publication in English of the Colombian-American Anthropologist Arturo Escobar's major work *Territories of Difference: Place, Movement, Life, Redes*; and the publication in the same year of the volume *Coloniality At Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate* [Morana et al 2008]. Apart from these more self-consciously academic framings, decolonial thinkers point to deeper points of origin, including the Bandung Conference, the work of the anticolonial and antiracist thinker and revolutionary Frantz Fanon, and the thinking and practice of Amilcar Cabral, Aimé Césaire, Rigoberta Menchú, Gloria Anzaldúa, amongst others.

One way of understanding the scope and originality of the MCD project (or "decolonial thinking and practice") and of distinguishing it from other, similar projects - like postcolonial theory - is to follow some of the conceptual moves that decolonial thinkers make in their critique of colonial modernity. The first of the three conceptual 'moves' that I will outline here is a geographical/temporal move that serves to reframe our understanding of the relationship between colonialism and modernity. Canonical postcolonial thinkers have tended to focus on the British and French colonial experiences and empires. For Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), this meant the Levant, North Africa and the "Near" and "Middle" East (the spatial locators, of course, reference Europe). For Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, in different ways, this meant the British colonial

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experience in India. For other postcolonial thinkers, especially scholars of postcolonial literatures (and it has preeminently been the fields of Literary Studies and Comparative Literature that have driven the postcolonial project) the comparatively late colonial experience in Africa has been important. One unintended consequence of this focus is that it has done little to disturb the orthodox account of the relationship between colonialism and modernity. According to this narrative – relayed to all of us at some point in the course of our training – modernity is a phenomenon that begins in Europe, and is associated with various advances in technology and the world of ideas: the secularization of knowledge, the rise of the individual, a new trust in the scientific process, and the idea of progress linked to technological developments that promised to unlock the [Delanty 2007, Giddens 1990, 1998]. In this perspective, colonialism becomes an epiphenomenon, a "secondary symptom" of modernity; unfortunate, but not causally related to the main event, which is modernity itself. In part, this is achieved through a temporal sleight of hand: the British, French, and even the Dutch colonial empires, tend to post-date major events in the timeline of European modernity. Thus, the first move carried out by decolonial thinkers is to shift attention to the Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires inaugurated by the Colombian crossing of the 1490s, and the almost simultaneous rounding of the Cape of Good Hope [Mignolo 1999, 2005, 2011]. They argue that the flow of wealth from the New World to

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the Old, and from the plantation economies of the Atlantic World, were key drivers of European modernity, along with flows of people, ideas, technologies, pathogens, and new, exploitable plant and animal species. In this perspective, colonialism is present as an economic and political institution at the birth of modernity, and far from being an epiphenomenon becomes its inescapable other "face", albeit a face that is generally disavowed in conventional narratives of modernity. As Mignolo puts it: "there is no modernity without coloniality". He writes: "The basic thesis is the following: 'modernity' is a European narrative that hides its darker side, 'coloniality'. Coloniality, in other words, is constitutive of modernity – there is no modernity without coloniality" [Mignolo 2008: 39].

The second of the three conceptual 'moves' carried out by decolonial thinkers is to foreground questions of knowledge in their analysis. This is in contrast to underdevelopment theory, world systems theory and Marxism and neo-Marxism, which tend to foreground questions of political economy and social organization. It is also in contrast to postcolonial theory, which has tended to focus on questions of culture and representation, rather than on knowledge *per se*. Decolonial thinkers tell the following story in relation to the coloniality of knowledge, which I will render here as a kind of fable. The founding move of Western knowledge is to universalize its terms, to become *all* knowledge. In its

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historical encounter with ways of thinking and being in other parts of the world, typically two things happen. The first is that it internalizes, or "eats" (or "cannibalizes") elements of local knowledge that it finds useful or compatible. This is almost always done in unacknowledged ways, and it almost always involves trimming or editing these elements of local knowledge of any radical or critical potential. In this way, Western knowledge appropriates core elements of local knowledge, in the process [reframing](#) these elements and claiming them for its own.

The second thing that typically happens in the encounter between Western knowledge reframed as universal knowledge, and local knowledge, is that Western knowledge subalternizes or destroys (or "extirpates") local knowledge traditions and practices. The particular form in which this subalternization of local knowledge takes place is instructive. Local knowledge practices are placed under the heading of culture, tradition, or belief; in other words, they figure as forms of "non-knowledge". As such they become the object of study of the discipline of anthropology [Shepherd 2016, Shepherd in press, Mignolo in press].

Apart from this historical drama, reproduced and recapitulated in encounters across the globe over the last 500 years, the other aspect of modern Western knowledge that decolonial thinkers critique is its

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tendency to operationalize itself around a series of key oppositions: subject vs. object, reason vs. emotion, mind vs. body, nature vs. culture, white vs. black, male vs. female, head vs. heart, present vs. past, and so on. These binary terms and their cascading systems of value create an "inside" and an "outside". To be "inside" is to be white, to be given to reason, to live in the present, to own and make culture, to be a subject of universal history, and so on. The territory outside is ceded to beings described as black, as well as to women, emotion, passion, the body, nature, and so on. One effect of this binary structure is to produce a radically restricted conception of what knowledge is and how knowledge proceeds. Knowledge becomes a matter of reason (not emotion), the head (not the heart), the mind (not the body). Exiled, or excluded from the knowledge relation are memory, experience, desire, imagination, the affect, and the senses; in fact, every aspect of our living, sensing, embodied selves that serves to distinguish us as beings located in particular ways in relation to other beings, and to histories of colonialism and modernity [Shepherd 2016, Shepherd in press, Mignolo in press]. When the senses are admitted to the knowledge relationship, it is most often via the eye, which becomes the sovereign of the senses in modern sensorial regimes [Clark 2007]. This myth of disembodied knowledge - the myth that we approach knowledge as abstracted minds and seeing eyes - is necessary in order to sustain the myth of Western knowledge as universal knowledge. For, argue the decolonial thinkers, how else could

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the Western self, with all the particularities of her/ his being, otherwise claim to be universally abroad in the world, "knowing", "seeing", making sense of phenomena? The disembodied self of Western knowledge becomes, in effect, the idealized subject of Castro-Gomez's "point zero" epistemology [Castro-Gomez 2008]. The corollary of this subject position is that, in order to join the club of Western knowledge, the non-Western self has to exclude from the knowledge relationship the very thing that so savagely marks her/ his experience of colonial modernity: embodied being in the world.

In his recent work, Mignolo has described the forms of knowledge attendant on colonial modernity as an "ego-politics of knowledge", grounded in the Cartesian dualism between mind and body. Against this ego-politics of knowledge he proposes a "body-politics of knowing/ sensing/ understanding", grounded in an understanding of the place from which knowledge proceeds [Mignolo 2013: 132]. In conversation, he talks of linked processes of "reasoning" and "emotioning" [Mignolo pers. comm. 2015, Shepherd and Ernsten 2016]. Some of Mignolo's most engaging writing takes place in his evocation of this embodied other place of knowledge, imagined not as an essentialized outside of Western reason, but as an embodied inside/ outside: the place of "border thinking" and of things known "in the bones". In the same passage on "The grammar of decolonial thinking" from which I have taken the opening

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lines of this essay, he considers the relationship between European theorists of modernity and a project of critical theory, and decolonial thinking and practice. He writes: "The de-colonial shift belongs literally to a different space, to the epistemic energy and the lack of archive that has been supplanted by the rumour of the dis-inherited or the *damne ´s* in Fanon's conceptualization" [Mignolo 2007: 485], and continues: "The difference between the 'space of experience' and the 'horizon of expectations' is not the same for Koselleck, soaked to the skin in the memories and traces of European history, as for Lewis Gordon, flooded in the memories and traces of slavery in the Caribbean with all its past and current consequences and for Jacqueline Martinez, drenched with the memories and traces of Mexican-Americans and the meaning of homosexuality" [Mignolo 2007: 494].<sup>[1]</sup> Later in the same passage he writes: "In Munich, you do not see or feel coloniality. In La Paz, Bolivia, *you feel it all the way, all the time, in your bones*: modernity is constantly reproducing coloniality" [Mignolo 2007: 495, my emphasis]. As a source for these various ideas, Mignolo cites the "prayer" with which Fanon so memorably concludes *Black Skin, White Masks*:

"Oh my body, make me always a man who questions."



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He writes: this single sentence expresses "the basic categories of border epistemology" [ibid.].

A third 'move' performed by decolonial thinkers is to refuse the label of theory. The argument goes like this: in the world of the professionalized disciplines in the neoliberal academy, theory becomes a specialist language that marks off techno-scientific and critical elites and is often the final area of attainment for disciplinary neophytes. Students are taught the five or ten keywords and key concepts that characterize the latest stream of theory. They are also taught to pick and choose between multiple "schools" and "paradigms", sometimes drawing on and combining multiple aspects of theory. In this world, "theory" is opposed to "practice" and sits alongside "methodology", frequently becoming a chapter in a thesis or a sub-section in a proposal that requires filling out. As a result, students often "do" the theory last, adding references to thinkers and texts as an embellishment to what it is that they wanted to say in the first place [Shepherd in press].

Against this conception of theory, which we might describe as "theory as a game of words", the decolonial project situates its own conceptual practice, and is at once more and less ambitious. It is more ambitious in

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the sense that what it attempts to achieve is not just a new theoretical orientation, but the kind of total shift in perspective that makes it impossible for us to think about modernity in the same way again. As Mignolo and Tlostanova put it, the aim is to "change the rule(s) of the game – and not just the content" [Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006: 208]. We are asked to rethink modernity, as it were, from its underside, and from the logic of those whom it systematically enslaves, annihilates, exploits, and reduces to the condition of bare life: not as unintended consequence, but as systematic effect.

This is a strangely immodest claim. Decolonial thinkers seem to be refusing the label of theory only to claim something even more grand, an epistemology. A second reason for rejecting the label of theory qualifies this perception. Decolonial thinkers like Mignolo reject the label of theory on the grounds that their ideas should not constitute a new, hegemonic paradigm or school, understood to have universal applicability and relevance. Rather, decolonial thinking is a multi-stranded project, existing among many other schools, strands of thinking and projects, in a world characterized by "pluri-versality as a universal project". At root, this position is a rejection of the kind of abstract universalism that characterizes modern Western thinking. Mignolo writes: "Pluri-versality as a universal project is quite demanding. It demands, basically, that we cannot have it all our own way. The

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struggle for epistemic de-coloniality lies, precisely, here: de-linking from the most fundamental belief of modernity: the belief in abstract universals" [Mignolo 2007: 500].

From this brief introduction, we might note that decolonial thinking offers a critique in two directions: a critique of colonialism as historical project and formative ground for many disciplinary projects, and a critique of modernity as political, economic and epistemic project and as way of being in the world. In this sense, it might be thought of as harnessing or yoking together of two already existing lines of critique, the postcolonial and the postmodern (although many decolonial thinkers would likely reject this characterization). Certainly, it adds as a layer to anti-colonial and anti-racist critiques, the idea of an anti-modern (or non-modern, or counter-modern, or even an "off-modern") critique [Boym 2001].



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