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A Brief History of Decolonial Studies

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Art and descolonization

Afterall and Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP) are working together to explore new artistic and curatorial practices that explicitly question and critique colonial legacies in art, curation and critical art writing. The project Art and descolonization is building a critical forum for cultural theorists, curators and artists to raise questions and formulate proposals for the reinterpretation of exhibitions and museum collections in non-canonical ways by promoting workshops, seminars and publishing essays. It is intended that the events promoted by this collaboration will stimulate further discussion and research on decolonization, de-colonial and post-colonial studies.

A Brief History of Decolonial Studies

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AND PAZ CONCHA ELIZALDE

INTRODUCTION¹

1. An extended version of this work was previously published by the Group of Studies on Coloniality (GESCO) in number 6 of *Kula: Revista de Antropología y Ciencias Sociales*. Besides reducing the original, this version updates some publications and references until 2015.

2. ESCOBAR, Arturo. *Más allá del Tercer Mundo. Globalización y diferencia*. Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia—Universidad del Cauca, 2005

In the end of the nineties, investigations by Aníbal Quijano (1928-2018) on coloniality inaugurated a set of studies that since then has tried to open a series of social-historical problems that were thought to be closed or resolved in Latin American social sciences. The revision of the historical constitution of modernity and its transformations in the region is the axis around which these problems have been articulated, in light of the category of *coloniality* as the downside of modernity. The later conformation of what Arturo Escobar² called the Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality (MCD) project brought forth the deepening and systematic expansion of these lines. This also meant that the initial approaches to this topic have grown and spread beyond the borders of the Americas, gradually becoming a subject of debate and a category of common use. Presently, there is a large number of professionals—from various disciplines—committed to the work on coloniality and its concomitants, besides an increasing presence of collectives and groups of debate, research and praxis, as well as research centers and institutes involved with this approach.

In many cases, this expanding trend converges with critical traditions that have different genealogies and interests, such as subaltern studies and postcolonial studies. Notwithstanding the similarities that can be noticed at first sight, it is necessary to draw a distinction between these different tendencies. The name of Edward Said (1935-2003) is usually associated with the founding of both sets of critical theories; however, despite the influence that the Palestinian intellectual and activist exerted on them, Said always detached himself from such production, recognizing its contributions while maintaining his own reflections at cautious distance. On the one hand,

3. GROSFUGUEL, Ramón. "La descolonización de la economía política y los estudios postcoloniales: transmodernidad, pensamiento fronterizo y colonialidad global". *Tabula Rasa*, n. 4, 2006, pp. 17-48.

4. MIGNOLO, Walter. "Cambiando las éticas y las políticas del conocimiento: lógicas de la colonialidad y poscolonialidad imperial". *Tabula Rasa*, n. 3, 2005, pp. 47-72.

5. There is no agreement, in Spanish, about the categories of decolonial/descolonial; both forms refer to the dissolution of structures of domination and exploitation configured by coloniality and the dismantling of their main devices. Aníbal Quijano, among others, refers to "descolonialidad," while most authors use the idea of "decolonialidad." According to Catherine Walsh (WALSH, Catherine (org.) *Interculturalidad, Estado, sociedad: luchas (de)coloniales de nuestra época*. Quito: Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar-Abya-Yala, 2009), suppressing the "s" does not mean adopting an anglicism, but rather introducing a difference in the Spanish "des," because more is intended than just disassembling or undoing the colonial.

6. ESCOBAR, Arturo, 2005, *op. cit.*

subaltern studies inaugurated in India during the 1980s by the investigations of Ranajit Guha—with a strong influence of Gramscian Marxism—represented an important contribution to the criticism of Eurocentrism and the broader dynamics of colonialism. Nonetheless, the continuation of Guha's work in subaltern studies did not represent an attempt at criticism and decolonization starting from and with the subalterns, but was rather about the subalterns, and ended up being a carbon copy of the institutionalized area studies in the United States.³ Postcolonial studies, on the other hand, originated from important centers of academic production of the so-called "first world" and emerged with a strong influence of postmodernism and poststructuralism; therefore, they privilege the analysis of discourse and textuality. Experiencing greater public success than other critical trends in these global enunciation centers, postcolonialism has also had, since the 1990s, a strong influence on peripheral intellectual production—always attentive to the dominant discourse.⁴

The differences between subaltern studies, postcolonialism and decoloniality⁵ do not necessarily imply an impediment to their articulation, since in some cases the combined use of these approaches, far from hindering the analysis of coloniality, enhances it, thanks to the presence and integration of other analytical tools and critical traditions that can help understand the dynamics of coloniality. Bearing these clarifications in mind, by *decolonial studies* we refer here to the heterogeneous set of theoretical and investigative contributions on coloniality. These include historiographic reviews; case studies; the recovery of Latin American critical thinking; (re)conceptualizing formulations; and the revisions and attempts to expand and revise theoretical disquisitions. It is an enunciative space⁶ not exempt from contradictions and conflicts, whose point of coincidence is the problematization of coloniality in its different forms, coupled with a series of shared epistemic assumptions.

MODERNITY, COLONIALITY, DECOLONIALITY

Decolonial studies share a systematic set of theoretical postulates that revisit the question of power in modernity. These conceptual procedures are: (1) Situating the origins of modernity in the conquest of America and control of the Atlantic by Europe, between the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century, rather than in the Enlightenment or

7. QUIJANO, Aníbal. "Colonialidad del poder y clasificación social". In: CASTRO-GÓMEZ, Santiago; GROSFUGUEL, Ramón (orgs.). *El giro Decolonial. Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global*. Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana/ Siglo del Hombre, 2007, pp. 93-126.

8. QUIJANO, Aníbal. "Eurocentrismo y América Latina". In: LANDER, Edgardo (org.). *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas latinoamericanas*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2000a, pp. 203-41.

the Industrial Revolution as it is commonly accepted; (2) Giving special emphasis to the structuring of power through colonialism and the constitutive dynamics of the modern/capitalist world-system and its particular forms of accumulation and exploitation on a global scale; (3) Understanding modernity as a planetary phenomenon constituted by asymmetric relations of power, and not as a symmetrical phenomenon produced within Europe and subsequently extended to the rest of the planet; (4) Considering that the asymmetric power relations between Europe and its others represent a constitutive dimension of modernity, and therefore imply a necessary subalternization of the practices and subjectivities of dominated peoples; (5) Considering that the subalternization of the majority of world's population is established by two structural axes based on work control and intersubjectivity control; and (6) Designating Eurocentrism/Occidentalism as the specific form of production of knowledge and subjectivities in modernity.

The category of *coloniality of power* proposed by Quijano to refer to the pattern of global domination that constitutes the hidden side of modernity is the central notion that interweaves previous epistemic operations. A notion that allows us to name the power matrix specific to modernity, which since its founding permeates every area of human social existence. The coloniality of power is shaped by the conquest of America, in the same historical process where global interconnection (globality) starts, and in which the capitalist mode of production begins to be constituted. The main consequence of these central movements is the emergence of an unprecedented system of domination and social exploitation, and, along with it, a new model of conflict. In this general historical scenario, coloniality of power is shaped by the conjugation of two central axes. On the one hand, the organization of a deep system of cultural domination that controls the production and reproduction of subjectivities under the guidance of Eurocentrism and modern rationality, based on the hierarchical classification of the world population.⁷ On the other hand, the formation of a system of global social exploitation that articulates all known and current forms of labor control under the exclusive hegemony of capital.⁸ In this sense, coloniality of power, as conceptualized by Quijano, is the analytical key that allows us to visualize the space of confluence between modernity and capitalism, and the field formed by this structural association. It is precisely in this field of confluence and conjunction that all areas of social

9. QUINTERO, Pablo. "Notas sobre la teoría de la colonialidad del poder y la estructuración de la sociedad en América Latina". *Papeles de Trabajo*, n. 19, Rosario, 2010, pp. 3-18.

existence, such as sexuality, collective authority and "nature" are affected, in a heterogeneous but continuous manner, in addition, of course, to work and subjectivity.⁹

This presupposes the existence of a colonial matrix of power in the social fabric that constitutes the history of Latin America; a matrix in the sense of an organizing and cumulative system of social relations and disposition of power. With the emancipation of Latin America at the beginning of the 19th century, a process of partial decolonization began as the republics managed to dissociate themselves from the political hegemony of metropolises; nevertheless, coloniality and its fundamental effects continue to ordain Latin American societies, producing different social structures with a colonial matrix over time. It is clear that colonialism as a historical phenomenon precedes and produces coloniality as a matrix of power; coloniality, however, outlives colonialism.

Coloniality, as a pattern of power, brought along profound consequences for the constitution of Latin American societies, for it cemented the conformation of the new republics by modeling their institutions and thereby reproducing historical and structural dependence. Through the imposition of reproduction, subsumed to capitalism, of other forms of labor exploitation, a model of socioracial stratification between "whites" and other "racial typologies", considered inferior, was developed. Although in each of the different societies they were a small minority of the total population, the white sectors exercised domination and exploitation of the majority of indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and *mestizos* that inhabited the nascent republics. These majority groups did not have control of the means of production, and were forced to subordinate the production of their subjectivities to the imitation of European cultural models. In other words, the coloniality of power has rendered a real democratization in these nations historically impossible. Thus, Latin American history is characterized by the partiality and precariousness of nation-states, as well as by inherent conflict proneness in their societies.

DECOLONIAL STUDIES

The development of decolonial studies has so far followed mainly two paths. The first one relates to the growth and expansion of the conceptual and theoretical baggage of decoloniality. Taking the category of coloniality of power as a reference, the use of the noun "coloniality" has been

10. LANDER, Edgardo (org.). *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas latinoamericanas*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2000.

11. MALDONADO-TORRES, Nelson. "Sobre la colonialidad del ser: contribuciones al desarrollo de un concepto". In: Santiago CASTRO-GÓMEZ; Ramón GROSGOQUEL (orgs.). *El giro Decolonial. Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global*. Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana—Siglo del Hombre, 2007, pp. 127-67.

12. DUSSEL, Enrique. *El encubrimiento del otro. Hacia el origen del mito de la modernidad*. Quito: AbyaYala, 1994.

expanded and applied to other dimensions and fields that, despite their articulation with the phenomenon of power, are usually treated as different areas. This has led to the proposition of four concepts, namely: coloniality of knowledge; coloniality of being; coloniality of nature and coloniality of gender. The first has been treated with some systematicity in Edgardo Lander's compilation.¹⁰ The *coloniality of knowledge* would be represented by the Eurocentric character of modern knowledge and its articulation with forms of colonial/imperial domination. This conceptual category refers specifically to the forms of knowledge control associated with the global geopolitics disposed by the coloniality of power. In this sense, Eurocentrism works as an epistemic *locus* where a knowledge model stands; this model, on the one hand, universalizes the European local experience as a normative model to follow and, on the other hand, designates its knowledge devices as the only valid ones. The specific connection between knowledge and power also rests on the naturalizing efficacy of the discursive construction of modern social knowledge, which legitimizes the current asymmetric relations of power.

The *coloniality of being*, as proposed by Nelson Maldonado-Torres,¹¹ understands modernity as a perpetual conquest where the "race" construct serves to justify the prolongation of the non-ethics of war, which allows a complete domination of the other's humanity. Maldonado-Torres emphasizes the relationship between coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of being, arguing that the centrality of knowledge in modernity authorizes an epistemic disqualification of the other. Such disqualification represents an attempt at ontological denial. The coloniality of being as an analytical category reveals the *ego conquiro* that precedes and survives the Cartesian *ego cogito*,¹² for the statement "I think, therefore I am" conceals the validation of a single thought (others do not think properly or simply do not think) that grants the quality of *being* (if others do not think properly, then they do not exist or their existence is dispensable). Thus, not thinking in modern terms translates into not being, and ultimately justifies domination and exploitation.

The *coloniality of nature* seeks to systematically address the ecological question, that is, the consideration of the environmental dimension of coloniality conformation patterns. Although "nature" has entered Quijano's theorization very early on, its treatment within his work and the set of MCD productions remains marginal, since it is usually considered

13. ESCOBAR, Arturo, 2005, *op. cit.*

14. LANDER, Edgardo. "La utopía del mercado total y el poder imperial". *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales*, v. 8, n. 2, 2002, pp. 51-79. "Los derechos de propiedad intelectual en la geopolítica del saber de la sociedad global". In: WALSH, Catherine; SCHIWY, Freya; CASTRO-GÓMEZ, Santiago (orgs.). *Indisciplinar las ciencias sociales: geopolíticas del conocimiento y colonialidad del poder*. Quito: Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar–Abya-Yala, 2002, pp. 73-102. "La ciencia neoliberal". *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales*, v. 11, n. 2, 2005, pp. 35-69.

15. ALIMONDA, Héctor (org.). *La naturaleza colonizada. Ecología política y minería en América Latina*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2011.

16. CURIEL, Ochy. "Crítica poscolonial desde las prácticas políticas del feminismo antirracista". *Nó-madas*, n. 26, 2007, pp. 92-101.

17. LUGONES, María. "Colonialidad y género: hacia un feminismo descolonial". In: MIGNOLO, Walter (org.). *Género y descolonialidad*. Buenos Aires: Del Signo, 2008, pp. 13-54.

18. QUIJANO, Aníbal, 2000a, *op. cit.*

19. QUIJANO, Aníbal. "¡Que tal raza!". *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales*, v. 6, n. 1, 2000b, pp. 37-45.

as a derivative issue of capitalism trends. An increasingly growing body of work from the perspective has considered this debate. Escobar himself¹³ has authored a series of interesting proposals in this regard. Mention should be made of the work of Edgardo Lander¹⁴, who focused on these issues by associating the colonization of nature with globalization tendencies of capital and neoliberalism and the current conditions of hegemonic knowledge geopolitics. Very recently, Héctor Alimonda¹⁵ has been individually and collectively responsible for fostering these concerns, trying to articulate the decolonial perspective with Latin American political ecology and environmental history. The recent developments of Alimonda allow us to understand how nature is affected by coloniality—it is seen as a subaltern space that can be exploited or modified according to the needs of the capitalist accumulation regime of the moment.

The *coloniality of gender* (and sexuality) is certainly one of the least worked questions in current decolonial studies, despite the many points of contact between some of the central MCD approaches, contemporary Latin American feminist theory and postcolonial trends. This distraction has received numerous criticisms, the most famous ones by Curiel¹⁶ and Lugones,¹⁷ particularly based on the formulations of power made by Quijano in one of his most widespread texts.¹⁸ Criticism to the decolonial perspective points mainly to its tendency not to properly historicize modern relations of gender and their correlates, while noting the little treatment that decolonial studies give to these questions. Quijano, however, had dealt with these issues in a previous work,¹⁹ where he partly addressed issues that would later be brought by these critics. Nonetheless, general negligence of gender issues by part of the decolonial studies is, to date, clear. Zulma Palermo²⁰ and Rita Segato²¹ have tried to articulate part of the decolonial proposals, observing some contributions of feminism and trying to weave connections and critical networks between both projects.

Amid the theoretical expansion advances, there were various attempts to recover and update Latin American critical thinking along certain critical lines. Although we can not find works entirely devoted to this question, it is possible to point out a transversal tendency in decolonial studies, particularly interested in revisiting critical thinking works from the "South" that were forgotten in their time. This effort to trace the subaltern analytical archive includes the revitalization of works

20. PALERMO, Zulma. "Inscripción de la crítica de género en procesos de descolonización". In: PALERMO, Zulma (coord.). *Cuerpo(s) de mujer: representación simbólica y crítica cultural*. Córdoba: Universidad Nacional de Salta-Ferreira Editor, 2006, pp. 237-65.

21. SEGATO, Rita. "Género y colonialidad: en busca de claves de lectura y de un vocabulario estratégico

descolonial". In: QUIJANO, Aníbal e NAVARRETE, Julio Mejía (orgs.), *La cuestión descolonial*. Lima: Universidad Ricardo Palma, 2010.

22. MIGNOLO, Walter. "Desprendimiento y apertura. Un manifiesto". In: CASTRO-GÓMEZ, Santiago; GROSFUGUEL, Ramón (orgs.). *Op. cit.*

23. PALERMO, Zulma. *Op. cit.*

24. DUSSEL, Enrique. *Op. cit.*; *Ética de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y de la exclusión*. México: UAM/Trotta, 1998.

25. MIGNOLO, Walter. *La idea de América Latina. La herida colonial y la opción decolonial*. Barcelona: Gedisa, 2007.

26. CASTRO-GÓMEZ, Santiago. *La hybris del punto cero: ciencia, raza e ilustración en la Nueva Granada (1750-*

1816). Bogotá: PUJ, 2007.

27. *Idem*. *Tejidos oníricos: movilidad, capitalismo y biopolítica en Bogotá (1910-1930)*. Bogotá: PUJ, 2009.

ranging from Waman Puma²² (1534-1615) to Cornejo Polar (1936-1997),²³ and going through a very diverse set of intellectual proposals. In this context, *Ediciones del Signo*—a series of publications coordinated by Walter Mignolo—, has addressed, since it was first published in 2006, studies on different Latin American regions and issues, emphasizing, however, the search for alternative thoughts rather than the deepening or application of coloniality as a theoretical framework.

On the other hand, the expansion of decolonial studies, besides being linked to the growth of theoretical production and its derivatives, has been characterized by historical research, both in the sense of a framework of global processes and in the study of locally situated cases. Enrique Dussel²⁴ is probably the one who developed—in a set of diverse publications related to his impeccable philosophical production—the main characteristics of coloniality in historical investigation. While Quijano's model of the coloniality of power represented a historical understanding of the world-system central processes, some of the works mentioned by Dussel deepened this general view. In one of his recent works, Walter Mignolo²⁵ delves into the specific history of Latin America, within the processes of constitution of the coloniality of power, paying special attention to the construction of the always-elusive Latin American identities.

In the line of specific historiographical studies, Santiago Castro-Gómez sought to dissect the particular routes of coloniality of power in local spaces, by trying to observe the processes of constitution of coloniality and to understand how they articulate with other forces, sometimes on a global scale. In order to do so, he first examines New Granada, from the middle of the 18th to the beginning of the 19th century,²⁶ and then the city of Bogotá in the first decades of the 20th century.²⁷ Trying to establish connections between Quijano's central ideas and the Foucauldian method,²⁸ the Colombian philosopher finds in these investigations a coloniality that had been articulated with different historical devices of power/knowledge. In other case studies, the historical dimension is not necessarily the common thread of disquisitions. At this point, we should mention the growing work on social movements and life alternatives carried out, among others, by Carolina Ortiz Fernández²⁹ and Catherine Walsh,³⁰ who collect trajectories of human collectives historically subordinated by coloniality. These works do not exclusively represent a description of the distinctive characteristics of the domination and exploitation to

28. *Idem*. "Michel Foucault y la colonialidad del poder". *Tabula Rasa*, n. 6, 2007.

29. ORTIZ FERNÁNDEZ, Carolina. *Procesos de descolonización del imaginario y del conocimiento en América Latina*. Lima: UNMSM, 2004.

30. WALSH, Catherine. *Interculturalidad, Estado, sociedad: luchas (de) coloniales de nuestra época*. Quito: UASB/ Abya-Yala, 2009.

31. ESCOBAR, Arturo. *La invención del Tercer Mundo*. Bogotá: Norma, 1998.

32. CORONIL, Fernando. *El Estado Mágico: Naturaleza, dinero y modernidad en Venezuela*. Caracas: UCV/Nueva Sociedad, 2002.

33. QUIJANO, Aníbal. "La nueva heterogeneidad estructural de América Latina". *Hueso Húmero*, n. 26, 1990; *La economía popular y sus caminos en América Latina*. Lima: Mosca Azul, 1998.

34. ESCOBAR, Arturo, 1998, *op. cit.*

35. MARAÑÓN, Boris. *Solidaridad económica y potencialidades de transformación en América Latina*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2013.

36. QUINTERO, Pablo. *Crisis civilizatoria, desarrollo y Buen vivir*. Buenos Aires: Del Signo, 2014; *Alternativas descoloniales al capitalismo colonial/moderno*. Buenos Aires: Del Signo, 2015.

which these populations have been subjected: they also try to recreate their survival strategies and alternatives.

The above is only a part of the decolonial studies carried out or in progress, in which the mentioned authors and others involved in the perspective participate. In some cases, one can identify a set of important contributions that, although not explicitly identified with decolonial studies or that do not resort to part of their theoretical-conceptual baggage, start from a deeply similar place of enunciation. This is the case for Escobar's³¹ important book, where he deconstructs the discourse of development with a radical criticism of modernity. One could also mention the famous work by Fernando Coronil³²—probably the most profound contemporary history of Venezuela written so far from a "post-Westernist" perspective, as Coronil himself acknowledges in his text.

Except for Quijano's classic research on the economic dimension³³ and Escobar's work on development,³⁴ issues that revolve around work as a basic area of social existence have been little addressed by the perspective. However, new inquiries on this aspect are beginning to develop. An interesting contribution was made by Boris Marañón³⁵ and the work group he coordinates. By criticizing the most visible trends within the diverse field of proposals for alternative economies, the work coordinated by Marañón attempts the double movement of recapitulating critical tendencies of modern economy, while also visualizing new analytical frameworks and proposals for what he calls "solidarity economy." This exploration is forwarded by Pablo Quintero,³⁶ who explores new forms of imagination and non-capitalist production from a decolonial perspective.

PABLO QUINTERO holds a PhD in Anthropology (Universidad de Buenos Aires), a master's degree in Social Sciences (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales), and a bachelor's degree in Anthropology (Universidad Central de Venezuela). He directed the Group of Studies on Coloniality (GESCO) of Universidad de Buenos Aires from 2006 to 2012, and developed most of his research on economies, interethnic relations, and coloniality together with indigenous populations of Latin America. He currently teaches at the Department of Anthropology at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. His latest book is *Alternativas descoloniales al capitalismo colonial/moderno* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Signo, 2016).

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