

HERETIC-EROTIC ALLIANCES ON DECOLONIALITY

Gennaro Ascione

(Università degli Studi di Napoli "l'Orientale")

To intellectual *vincula*, with love

When I first met the word *decolonial*, I was a confused PhD student. It was 2005. For the first time I was paid a salary to study instead of paying taxes for studying; the magic of online libraries was disclosed in front of my eyes; and the journal *Nepantla, views from the South* mediated my encounter with Catherine Walsh and Walter Dignolo. *Nepantla* happened to be a major discovery about the Decolonial option within the borders of an Italian national debate where, at the time, only the name of Enrique Dussel circulated amongst small circles of theoretical and political philosophers. *Nepantla* existed from 2000 to 2004, therefore I met her with a sense of sudden loss, which made me even more confused than I already was. I was confused because of the pressures that the colonial capitalist mode of production imposes on intellectual workers, artists, writers, translators or creatives in general: a monster whose name is Originality. *Search for something original!, Write something original!, Bring in something original!, Let us discuss something original!*. A pure nightmare: the first step into the publish-or-perish machine that neo-liberal academia endorses nowadays. Yet, I was confused also because *Nepantla*, which sounded fresh and new to me, was at the same time anachronistic: finished just before I could perceive myself contemporary to it. For both feelings, discovery and anachronism, Decoloniality, the conceptual matrix who gives name to the volume discussed herewith, has been crucial. It dramatically changed my views from the South, not only the Global South. Not only the South where I was thinking from: the Christian, Northern side of the Mediterranean. Also the south without a capital S: the south that stands for a transient condition of disempowerment that anyone can experience according

to the shifting concrete historical hierarchies of power wherein each of us is constrained, in a way or another: no one is fully master nor fully slave, as far as a relation of any kind is concerned. Not even death, as necropolitical boundary suffices to annihilate the transformative potential of relations, since even the ghostly presence of materially extinguished connections are able to over-determine the present as well as the future.

Decoloniality looks genuinely devoted to in-discipline human and social sciences by merging economists and sociologists, anthropologists and literary critics, historians and political scientists, without any attempt at reproduce the academic identity games of reciprocal recognition that underlie the pitfalls of multiculturalism (Ascione, 2014). Moreover, Decoloniality offers a theoretical guide into the political laboratory of Latin America where, since the turn of XX century, political forces have attempted at placing the indigenous question at the center of state politics. An attempt that suffers a violent backlash in the last years. Walsh and Mignolo pioneered the praxis of sustaining this indigenous and for-indigenous epistemological struggle by giving full theoretical legitimacy to other knowledges, both from Los Andes and from Selva Lacandona. Finally, the Decolonial option, as it was called earlier, was an alternative to postcolonial thought, which I was familiar with thanks to prof. Iain Chambers in Naples, yet not fully satisfied with, for one single reason: the problem of the unit of analysis. Differently from postcolonial thinkers, Decolonial thinkers had no issues in formalizing the world as a manifold spacetime singularity constituted by knowledges and processes occurring in the long distance and in the long run, with a planetary significance. Postcolonial critics, instead, kept on being more attached to “deconstruction”, in the broad sense of being allergic to whatever formalization that could somehow aspiring at shaping a methodological approach, even before this hypothetical methodology being explored, understood and eventually dismissed (Ascione, 2008). Moreover, being born at the crossroad between Indian Subaltern Studies historiography and Anglophone comparative literature studies, postcolonial studies repulsed historical sociology as an imperial discipline while, and this was a limit in my view, they only spoke the language of the empire: English. For me, who was approaching global modernity from a world-systems analysis background, this decolonial methodological flexibility and the ability to transgress the linguistic barrier between Neo-Latin languages and English at the global academic level provided me with a plausible pathway, whose entry point was the essay “Americanity as a concept”, by Anibal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein (1992)¹.

1. A previous version of the concept of “Americanity” was exposed in the previous Quijano (1991).

From then, onwards, I have followed the path of theoretical decolonization of concepts and methodologies. In so doing, I have constantly confronted with a heuristic device that in the book *On Decoloniality*, Walsh and Mignolo reconfigure in an outstanding, deeper and thoughtful way: the concept of “relation” through the prism of *vincularidad*. For it is the way relations are concerned that informs the possibility of decolonizing knowledge about and within the planet. And the very notion of relation finally shows its inability to come to terms with the project of unthinking modernity in its constitutive colonial epistemological matrix.

Decolonizing *relation*: the coloniality of method

The legitimacy of the Eurocentric construction —therefore destruction— of the planet is safeguarded in surreptitious ways. It is buried under the methodological assumptions whose constitutive logic is what I have named the *coloniality of method*. The coloniality of method consists in the ability to mortify the transformative potential of the colonial difference both historically and epistemologically. The coloniality of method legitimates and incorporates the asymmetries of power formed through, and by, colonialism into categories of analysis. This colonial construction becomes invisible because epistemic violence dissolves into apparent conceptual neutrality and terminological transparency. The term *coloniality of method* conceptualizes and systematizes a wide range of criticisms that in recent decades have denounced the complicity of modernization and globalization theories with the Eurocentric construction of the social sciences. The coloniality of method operates through three devices: *negation*, that is, the assertion of the irrelevance of colonial relations in causal explanations and historical narratives; *neutralization*, that is, the acknowledgment of colonialism as a worldly relation of asymmetric power distribution, together with the simultaneous presumption of the irrelevance of non-dominant agencies within the colonial relation; *sterilization*, that is, the exoticization of non-dominant epistemologies and their displacement from the realm of theoretical production to that of particularistic cultures, standpoints, and spacetimes unable to express transformative universalisms.

Methodological issues thereby become strictly connected to historiographical and epistemological issues. In historiographical terms, an alternative genealogy of the notion of relation, from modernization theories to Decoloniality becomes legitimate. Modernization theories, in the context of emerging U.S. world hegemony, silenced

colonial relations of dominance that shaped the worldly distribution of wealth: development and underdevelopment were simply phenomena dependent on endogenous factors. Contrarily to what the disciplinary histories of western social theory claims since the 1970s, modernization theories were the ideological reaction to the early formulations of the center-periphery concept, and not vice versa. A closer philological and historical investigation into the politics of theory of the debates about the terms-of-trade controversy within the embryonal institutions of the United Nations since 1941 demonstrates it. This has major implications for the way relations are concerned: modernization theories attempted at silencing the relations between development and underdevelopment that scholars such as Folke Hilgerd, Hans Singer and Raúl Prebisch had already discovered. This means that diffusionism, that is the idea that core economic and cultural processes originated in the West to later spread across the entire world, is not simply wrong, yet it is a strategy to be read against the grain, which ends up demonstrating the quintessential constitutive role of relations in global history. Modernization theories were effective in crystallizing into method the North American critical onslaught against the first elaboration of the decolonization of theory, applying a radical state-centrism that negated the colonial question. It was against this neglect that Dependency theories during the 1960s reacted politically. This uprising took momentum since it came to be institutionally supported by the vivid ferment of Thirdworldism and Non-Alignment Movement that formed a major threat to the established U.S. world hegemony, across the 1960s and the 1970s. Yet, once again, Western/Northern/Colonial social theory reacted with a new methodological as well as ideological turn: thinking the world in terms of a “system” (Moore, 1966). The epistemological backbone for the logic of “system” was provided by von Bertalanffy’s *General System Theory* (1950). The notion of system was, in fact, first of all ontological: it affirmed the real existence of an integrated global super-system of relations called “the world”. It also implied holism, that is, the epistemological priority of the whole over the parts that form it, and the irrelevance of the latter outside the integrating understanding of the former. On the other hand, systems theory buttressed methodological relationalism, that is, the prevalence of forming relations over formed entities. It followed that social wholes were thought of as integrated systems whose dimensions and activities were defined in space and time by the extension and duration of their constitutive relations. World-systems analysis during the 1970s and 1980s inherited the western hegemonic rigidity of systemic holism, even though it endorsed relations as indispensable heuristic device. Even world-systems analysis

by Hopkins and Wallerstein embraced a diffusionist view. For them, the history of modern capitalism was the history of successive waves of incorporation of colonial worlds into the capitalist world-economy. However violent or not, the notion of incorporation conceals the colonial gaze and neutralizes the colonial difference by obscuring non-Western, non-capitalist agency. Incorporation overrides colonialism by reducing it to its function within capitalism. It simultaneously gives prominence to exploitation, domination and hierarchy formation, but it also neglects and mortifies the historical possibility of non-Western, postcolonial agency and the way these agencies co-produce social change in heterogeneous meta-geographies other than the core-periphery structure. Nominally, agency subordinates to the relations that produced it. This assertion conceals the fact that the same relation, as an object of analysis, is presumed analytically neutral and operationalized as such, whereas it is not neutral at all. The historical agency described as the dynamics of the colonial relation is implicitly coincidental with the dominant subjects, classes and groups that are located at the higher levels of power in the hierarchies that relationships inevitably design.

Since the 1990s, postcolonial and decolonial critiques to diffusionism, holism as well as systemic approaches coalesced. From a methodological point of view, the overall effects of these critiques have been the rupture of its core presumption; the breaking of the covalent holism-and-relationalism bond; and the disentanglement of relations from the whole. Relations do produce entities, which thus do not possess any essentialist innate trait as such; thus relations, rather than inner properties, determined the emergence of capitalism and modernity as significant long-term/large-scale worldwide processes of historical and social change; nonetheless, the global as a holistic construct does not provide a strong over-determining unit of analysis to which reference has to be constantly made as the prevailing horizon of sense.

Heretic alliances

This disentanglement has disclosed divergent ways of conceptualizing relations. From different standpoints, colonial, postcolonial or decolonial agencies have been reaffirmed on the global cartography of world history. In many accounts, relations include non-Western agency, yet the heuristic problem of explaining societal divergence in terms of fluctuating power differentials between advanced zones of the world, limits the relevance of this agency to those dominant social groups that are located outside Europe.

Only those non-Western agencies that could compete with the West on the terrain of modernization would be relevant. Only to the extent these alternatively hegemonic agencies concurred to form modernity through the conscious or unintended outcomes of their responses to the interaction between global connections, and local needs and pressures. So, the relevance of non-dominant agencies is relegated to the effects they produce in terms of pressures that exist locally, and is considered only in terms of their vertical dialectics with modernizing power, rather than their historical existence in a multiplicity of other ignored relations of social coextensiveness. Moreover, while these explanatory/narrative approaches share a tendency to neutralize all other forms of non-dominant agency, at the same time they also sterilize the transforming potential of existing epistemologies of otherness by never questioning the heuristic apparatus derived from the threefold conundrum of the breakthrough to modernity, the rise of the West and the transition to capitalism. Here, the notion of relations appears unable to radically question the coloniality of method.

Walsh and Mignolo (2018) overcome the limits of the heuristics of relationality through the notion of “vincularidad”. For them,

Vincularidad is the awareness of the integral relation and interdependence amongst all living organisms (in which humans are only a part) with territory or land and the cosmos. It is a relation and interdependence in search of balance and harmony of life in the planet. As such, and as we propose in this book and series, vincularidad/relationality unsettles the singular authoritativeness and universal character typically assumed and portrayed in academic thought. Relationality/vincularidad seeks connections and correlations. (p. 1)

In so doing, they call into question the entire construction of modernity either methodologically, or epistemologically, or ontologically. They basically affirm a relationality rather different than the one the hegemonic modern knowledge made us familiar with. It is relationality *in se* and *per se*, which connects the entire cosmos of living spaces-and-times entities. This alternative conception on relationality invokes the translation strategies across languages/logics enabling us to pragmatically elude the hegemony of modern/colonial/western/Christian epistemologies and ontologies. In fact, Walsh and Mignolo (2018) travels from Persian language to Kechua to propose an all-encompassing understanding of relationality through the noun *Runa*.

Runa was and still is conceived in relation to and in *convivencia* (a literal translation would be “living-with-other-living-organisms,” but the term is generally translated as “coexistence” or “conviviality”) with *huacas* (deities, entities of the sacred sphere), *sallqa* (all living organisms), and the *Apu* (the tutelary spirit that inhabits the snowed peaks of the mountains). These organisms are all weaved together, for the metaphor of *tejido* (weaving) is commonly invoked to express *convivencia* and *vincularidad* (translated as “relationality”). (p. 166)

The lexicographic movement described herewith could appear a circular one: from relationality to *vincularidad* to relationality. Yet, “relationality” we come up with results ontologically different; it is augmented in a sense, by the exploration into the semantic field inhabited by the tensions translation enhances. It is not a circular movement, rather a spiral. And the transformation from the circle to the spiral happens if and only if the epistemological consequences are assumed of thinking relations as inextricable from a single immaterial yet concrete force who translates relations into *vincula*: love. What love, though? In order to qualify *love* and subtract its inference from the common use modernity relegates it, Walsh and Mignolo (2018) use the adjective *decolonial* in a consistent way:

Decolonial love implies it is enacted with dignified anger confronting the dismantling of the social fabric of civilizational tendencies that promote competition and war. Decolonial love moves in two simultaneous directions: one confronting and delinking from the meanings that the word love has in liberal and Christian discourses, both of them embedded in *cmp* [colonial matrix of power] and the other, accepting that re-existence and building communalities of all kinds demands respects, listening, cooperation, and care. This is the direction that decolonial love is taking in rebuilding what the principles and goals in the name of modernity destroyed and continue to destroy. (pp. 223-224)

Decolonial love lives on an inherent *vinculum* with love as Giordano Bruno, before being burnt as heretic in Rome on February 17th, 1600, conceptualized in his fundamental incomplete work *De vinculis in genere* (2009 [1591]). Here, Bruno defines *Eros* (love), as *vinculum vinculorum*: what connects all the connections; what relates all the relations. Therefore, the spiral that semantically transforms relationality into *vincularidad*, at the

same time connects the underside of Renaissance with Decoloniality. It makes possible an unprecedented alliance between heretic and decolonial knowledges across modernity. Here, heresy should not be conceived as the dominant knowledge thought us for centuries, that is, a doctrine that merely opposes the dominant one. Rather, a political and theoretical strategy that consists in taking seriously the words spoken by power and dismantle, reconfigure, transfigure and subvert their meaning by fighting for the full recognition of such excluded, marginalized, silenced, yet existing, uncanny, living, embodied presences, in order to claim the ontological presence of the multiversal historical connections conceptualized through Decoloniality.

References

- Ascione, G. (2008). *A sud di nessun Sud: postcolonialismo, movimenti anti-sistemici e studi decoloniali*. Bologna: Odoja.
- Ascione, G. (Ed.). (2014). *America Latina e modernità: L'opzione decoloniale, saggi scelti*. Salerno: Arcoiris.
- Ascione, G. (2016). Decolonizing the 'Global'. The Coloniality of Method and the Problem of the Unit of Analysis. In G. Ascione, & I. Chambers (Eds.), "Global Historical Sociology: Theoretical and Methodological Issues". In *Cultural Sociology*. Special 10th Anniversary Edition, 10(3), 317-334.
- Bruno, G. (2009). *Opere magiche*. Milano: Adelphi.
- Mignolo, E. W. & Walsh D. C. (2018) *On Decoloniality. Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Moore, W.E. (1966). Global sociology: The world as a singular system. *American Journal of Sociology*, 71(5), 475-482.
- Quijano, A., & Wallerstein I. (1992). Americanity as a Concept, or the Americas in the Modern World-System. *International Social Science*, 134, 549-557.
- Quijano, A. (1991). Colonialidad y Modernidad/Racionalidad. *Peru Indígena*, 13(29), 11-20.