KNOWLEDGE, POLITICS AND DECOLONIALITY

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On Decoloniality is the updated introduction to decolonial thought, written together by two of its key exponents, Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh. When we speak of decolonial thought, we are referring to the work of a group of scholars —including among the most renowned also Santiago Castro-Gómez, Ramón Grosfoguel, Enrique Dussel, Edgardo Lander and Boaventura de Sousa Santos— that starting from the mid 1990s finds a common ground of research around the work of the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (e.g. 2007, 2010) from one side, and, from the other, in the contributions of Latin-American and Afro-Caribbean intellectuals like Paulo Freire, Frantz Fanon, and Aimée Cesaire (Restrepo & Roja 2010).

Decolonial thought deals essentially with the analysis of colonization and its disastrous implications that the group sees as still standing today, beneath the enthusiast rhetoric of homogenizing globalism and interconnectedness. While the word decoloniality may sound "new", it focuses on the efforts to develop alternatives to the colonial endeavor that are at least five hundred years old and are, and have always been, both theoretical and practical. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) make clear in their introduction to the book (p. 5-6) that such a reflection is even more urgent today, since the unbalanced and disharmonious Western-centered world order created by colonization is no more secure in the hand of their creators, namely, the Europeans of the two sides of the Atlantic. While the principles on which it had been instituted are still alive and well, manifesting themselves in the hierarchization of humanity along the scale of development, the control over them is now open to contestation both from new protagonists in the geopolitical field, like Russia, China and Iran, and at the local level by re-emerging right-wing nationalist projects.

As the two authors see it, decoloniality is the effort to contrast the persistence of the colonial endeavor in contemporary times by placing themselves on the side of those who had been, still are, and cannot be anything else than, devalued by colonization. In this framework, what appears to be the most interesting contribution of decolonial thought is the understanding of colonization and Eurocentrism as an epistemic issue, i.e. the worldwide imposition of a local form of knowledge on all the others based on the assumption of its universal validity, that is, on its supposed ability to grant the same benefits to all the people of the world. Hence decoloniality, in Mignolo's words, needs to be declined as an act of "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo & Walsh 2018, p. 161; see also Mignolo, 2011), that is, refusing and contrasting the illusory universal character of the main tenets of Western knowledge. For this reason, both authors insist on the violation of the distinction between theory and praxis —which they see as re-producing the belief in a disembodied subject/knower and the belief in reaching a neutral and objective point of view—, and in conceiving them, in contrast, as a flux: "theory-and-as-praxis and praxis-and-as-theory, and [as] the interdependence and continuous flow of movement of both" (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 7). For the same reason, they do not conceive decoloniality "to be a modern theoretical proposal pretending to be universal and to dictate to everyone what decoloniality is or should be" (p. 107). They conceive it as "an option" instead of a "mission", aimed at reshaping Western universality into pluriversality. Given the centrality of knowledge in decolonial thinking, the following pages will focus on the characterization that *On Decoloniality* offers of the concept and on the relevance it assumes for decolonial politics from a theoretical point of view. Drawing from the second part of the book authored by Mignolo that explicitly address the theory-and-as-praxis flux starting from the side of theory, the following pages will also try to highlight themes and issues worth of further discussion.

Mignolo's contribution to the book is centered on addressing the link connecting the Western idea of knowledge —as something different from, and superior to, mere opinion and belief— to the idea of modernity. The main question posed by the author can be expressed as: "when and how is that Western knowledge acquires its essential feature, that is, to be universally valid?". Mignolo's thesis can be probably summarized by saying that it happened with modernity, both in a historical and genealogical sense, and to the point that in the Western perspective there is no difference between modernity and knowledge. Hence the need to develop a critique of the concept of modernity, and of the ways in which it has been understood along a line that goes from Kant and Hegel to

Habermas and post-modern or post-structuralist accounts, that takes into account the perspective of those who experienced it in ways different from Europeans, namely, as a condemnation to subjugation rather than as a promise of progress and liberation. As commentators note (see e.g., Ascione, 2014, p. 32), while modernity broadly understood is usually conceived as the process of overcoming a stage of immaturity through the use of reason and the achievements of science and technics proceeding from the supposed natural potentialities of human beings and leading to their self-realization in the field of history, following the decolonial perspective the concept is neither neutral nor merely descriptive of historical dynamics. Rather, modernity is an ethnocentric concept, and namely a Eurocentric one, disguising itself as universal, and hence universally applicable, assuming Western modernity as the naturally desirable state for all human beings. It is in its supposed universal applicability, presenting itself as something objective, that modernity reveals to be an epistemic category, that is, a way to objectively explain and understand the world rather than simply describing it.

According to the decolonial account, in short, modernity acquires its universal status through a fundamental omission. It implicitly presupposes and obscures the land-appropriation, the domination over its inhabitants and the exploitation of resources conceived as completely legitimate acts and perpetrated by Europeans starting from the so-called discovery of the American continent. In this sense, the building block of what we call Western modernity, what characterizes it essentially with all its specific implications (capitalism, constitutionalism, natural rights, democracy, just to mentions relevant concepts from the point of view of political philosophy), are not be found in the Reformation, in the Enlightenment, in the French Revolution, or even in the invention of prisons or other totalizing institutions like mental asylums and hospitals, but rather in the peculiarities of the encounter between Europeans and native peoples of America:

It is generally taken for granted that the sixteenth century in Europe was a time of unprecedented changes. [However,] only half of the unprecedented changes are located in the history of Europe itself. The other half, the missing chapter, is less visible when sixteenth-century Europe is celebrated. It involves the invention of America, the massive slave trade, the massive appropriation of land, the pulling to pieces of the great civilizations of Mesoamerica and the Andes, the two foundational genocides of Western civilization (of Indigenous people and enslaved Africans), and the historical foundation in the Atlantic (the Americas, South and North, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe) of a new type of economy: economic coloniality, also known as capitalism.

An enormous "change" in economic knowledge both in the regional history of Europe and in the changes that European expansion imposed in non-European economies. (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 178)

For decolonial authors the origin of modernity, as well as that of Western knowledge, lies not in the natural potentialities of human beings, but in the political act of classifying the Indigenous people and the enslaved Africans according to a colonial logic, that is, not only as different from, but also and simultaneously as inferior to Europeans. This kind of classification finds its fundamental premise in the Spanish Renaissance with the forced expulsion of Moors and Jews from Castile enacted by Christians, and was initially organized around two basic and interrelated evaluation criteria: the first was *limpieza de sangre*, mutuated from horse breeding and pertaining to the body, and the second was theological (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 181, see also Mignolo, 2012), that is, referred to religious belonging and based on Christian knowledge. In other words, between the fourteenth and fifteenth century a link was established for the first time between the tangible domain of physical appearance (for example, skin color) and the intangible one of values, behavior and culture, in such a way that the one necessarily implicated the other, so becoming available to work as a regulator of power relations among groups of people and individuals, and as the legitimation for the exercise of power from one party over the other.

It is important to signal here that by highlighting the double nature of the criteria of classification developed in Spain with the expulsion of Moors and Jews from Castile, Mignolo, and decolonial thinkers more in general, refuse to understand modernity according to the traditional dialectic between the religious/irrational and the secular/rational sphere, thus dismissing altogether with what has been called the theological-political problem —see Lutz (2018) for an introduction—. Not only the colonized, as has been shown by Fanon (see Luce, 2018), was included in none of the terms standing for, respectively, Christianity and rationalism. Rather, the very philosophical concept of dialectic shows itself unable to grasp what happened in the colonial world where religion and rationalism were allied to foster the unproblematic appropriation and exploitation of the American continent, thus revealing a validity confined to the European boundaries. In this sense, one may say, the very notions of secularization and dialectic may appear merely as emerging from internal processes limited to Europe that have been triggered by the encounter with an unknown continent called America.

The classificatory scheme first elaborated in Spain, however, revealed its full potential only with its secularized transposition in the American continent, since it was there that it specified the cases under which the definition of both collective and individual identi-

ties should be uncompromisingly excluded from negotiation. It was there that religious conversion was no longer a viable alternative for Indigenous and enslaved Africans to escape subjugation and exploitation like it was for Moors and Jews. It was in the American continent, and more precisely in its southern part, that the classificatory scheme was useful to the justification of slave trade and to the imposition of an economic model based on the forced labor of Indigenous people, thus unfolding the very concept of *race*, which decolonial authors see as primarily modern (Quijano, 2007).

We may say that what decolonial thinkers see as primarily modern about this concept, along with those constituting the other two pillars of Western modernity, that is *sex* and *nature* as separated from culture, is the fact that all three establish the same necessary connection between the tangible and the intangible realms, and the fact that the dichotomies they frame out (white/non-white, male/female, nature/culture) have not the same oppositional and mutually excluding meaning —if they have any meaning at all, as it is the case with nature/culture, which finds no correspondence in Aztec, Maya, Mapuche or even Chinese cultures— beyond Western civilization (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 160). Taken together, race, sex and nature constitute the core of a model legitimating along the course of history the exercise of power from one pole of the couples they engender over the other. Following Quijano, decolonial authors name such model, which they see spreading worldwide since the sixteenth century, "colonial matrix of power", or "coloniality".

It is easy to see how the decolonial critique of modernity, while distancing from Marxism because of the shift of focus from class to classification which Mignolo attributes to Quijano (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 181), at the same time draws upon the tools developed by contemporary Western philosophies —in his works, for example, Mignolo often confronts himself with, and draws upon, Carl Schmitt's thought (see also Mignolo, 2012)— and may seem to come close to critical theory, post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-humanism and most notably post-colonialism, despite the efforts that decolonial authors make to distance from them. This is why decolonial thought is surrounded by debates centered on how much and in what sense its contributions should be reputed new or alternative, or compatible with that critical tradition (e.g., Bhambra 2014, Galceran Huguet, 2014, Andrade Guevara 2020, among others). Mignolo himself has clarified his position many times (see for example Mignolo 2012, p. xxiii, see also Dussel 1995), highlighting that while decolonial thought should not be seen in competition with the above-mentioned movements, it maintains with them important differences.

In the case of Western thinkers, such differences revolve around the persistence of the illusion "that the knower is a disembodied subject beyond location […] de-racialized, de-sexualized, gender-neutral, and unaware that such subject dwells in Europe" (Mignolo, 2012, p. xxiv), which leads them to exclude the colonial world from their analysis, thus reproducing the belief that what has happened in Europe is relevant for all the rest of the globe. With respect to post-colonial accounts, instead, the difference lies rather in the locus of enunciation of the critique itself. Suffice here to say that decolonial critique and understanding of modernity emerges from the experiences of those who "had to grapple with the colonial violence that modernity implied, often as a matter of the cultural life-and-death of their societies" (Kho, 2018, p. 142) suffering from the Spanish and Portuguese colonization beginning from the late fifteenth century, rather than from the later British one. Moreover, decolonial critique stems from, and incorporates, the intellectual work of thinkers like Guaman Poma de Ayala, Ottobah Cugoano, Lloyd Best, Césaire, Fanon, which predates both post-World War II decolonization processes and the rise of post-modernism and post-structuralism (Mignolo, 2012, p. xxvi).

In contrast to more usual accounts of modernity, the decolonial one stresses that the draining of resources from the "New" world to the "Old", was the necessary condition for the flourishing of European cultures and societies, thus laying the ground on which Europeans could arrive to perceive themselves as "modern" in opposition to a "pre-modern" dimension of being, conceived as something deemed to be overcome and/or to be nostalgically contemplated. For this reason, decolonial thinkers replace the concept of "modernity" with that of "modernity/coloniality". The coupling of the two terms reveals the omissions and the partialities embedded in traditional understandings of modernity, pointing to the fact that colonialism with all its horrors and robberies was not simply one of its epiphenomena, but rather *constitutive* of it: one could not have the first without the second (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 4).

However, the concept of coloniality aims to grasp something quite different from colonization. While the latter indicates the appropriation of land and the economic and political domination over its inhabitants by a conquering society coming *de jure* to an end during the post-World War II era, the former denotes the persistence after decolonization of the status of inferiority (political, economic and cultural) of the peoples of the ex-colonies in comparison to Europeans, and particularly of the direct descendants of the natives and African slaves more than of the *mestizos*. In short, from the decolonial perspective armed invasion and imposition of economic models of production are

not enough to explain this persistency. What is needed is to grasp the parallel totalizing intrusion in the domain of knowledge:

> "The radical shift introduced in the Atlantic commercial circuit through the massive appropriation of land and the massive exploitation of labor runs parallel to the radical epistemic shift introduced by Renaissance men in Europe. The epistemic revolution that was taking place in the European Renaissance was extended to the New World during colonization. Four universities following the European model were founded in the sixteenth century (in Santo Domingo, Mexico, Peru, and Córdoba), and one in the first half of the seventeenth century (Harvard). Colleges and convents abounded. The consequences were similar to that of the coloniality of economy: just as economic coloniality made destitute existing economic formations, so too did the coloniality of knowledge make destitute existing epistemic formations". (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 183-184)

In this sense, according to the decolonial perspective, coloniality enforced itself in two different but entangled domains, the physical one of the organizations of labor, the appropriation of land and the extermination of peoples, and the domain of knowledge, via the imposition of the Western totalizing worldview over different ones labeled as pre-modern, and for this reason as ultimately irrelevant. Needless to say, in both domains the effectiveness of the colonial endeavor has been secured through the exercise of power along the above mentioned three pillars of race, sex and nature. But most notably, the domain of knowledge has a privileged position between the two, being like the puppeteer moving the puppets in the world stage (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 144). Indeed, one should not understand the imposition of knowledge as something happening merely in the disembodied field of ideas or cultures. As a matter of fact, it required the production of subjects who learned to hate and fear what came to be labeled pre-modern on the side of the colonizers, and, conversely, of subjects who learned to fear and hate themselves and their traditions, history and knowledges on the side of the colonized, according to a logic presenting such results as objective, valid everywhere and for everyone.

Coloniality of knowledge, therefore, is something concrete, which directly affects both the colonizer and the colonized. As Mignolo points out in the above quotation, it required and resulted in the establishment of a network of institutions like universities, schools, churches and the like, as well as the work of actors like professors, teachers,

priests who were precisely devoted to the production and reproduction of Western knowledge, and to the mission of civilizing the uncivilized. The connections between colonization and knowledge established by decolonial thinkers is without doubt one of their most interesting and challenging contribution. In their perspective, the colonial experience, the political act of conquering the American continent, was a necessary step for Western knowledge to acquire its fully modern status, namely the belief in its superiority over all other knowledges, based on the presumption to be universally valid and globally applicable.

Both conceptions, we may say, could be formulated only through the relative ease by which Europeans succeeded in the imposition of their dominion over the Americas, and both conceptions were simply unconceivable in the same terms before the so-called discovery of the "New" world, that is, before the very existence of a "globe" could be "demonstrated". The universality of modern progress and civilization (its desirability for all humanity, like it was a sort of manifest destiny) could be affirmed only developing a knowledge which omits coloniality (that is the exploitation and the genocide of the racialized peoples and of their lands, and the elimination of their knowledges), and consequently should be considered illusory. It's important here to stress that by triggering this train of thoughts decolonial thinkers do not want to suggest that the fact that we see the world as a "globe" is only an illusion produced by the hegemony of Western knowledge. Rather, they invite us to consider that conceiving the world to be "objectively" a "globe", meaning this objective fact to be its essential character, posits it in the realm of inanimate objects, thus devaluing and dismissing, for example, an understanding of it as a living organism and thus limiting or circumscribing in advance the validity of the elaborations that could be drawn from such and similar alternative ideas (see for examples Schultz, 2017). As Victor Andrade Guevara (2020) points out to summarize this trait of decolonial thought:

> La pretensión universalista del conocimiento occidental y del norte tiene como fundamento una relación asimétrica de poder, en la que el saber dominante se asume como válido a partir, no de su contrastación con la realidad compleja que caracteriza a todas las sociedades, sino de condiciones materiales y políticas que influyen en el asentamiento del predominio del saber occidental así como en el uso de conceptos y categorías de análisis que, referidas a la experiencia específica de las sociedades occidentales, pretenden aplicarse a todo tipo de sociedades. Ello tiene que ver también con la disposición de mayores recursos, medios de comunicación y espacios institucionales para producir y difundir su conocimiento, mientras las formas de

saber de los pueblos antaño colonizados se ven desplazadas o suprimidas. A esta relación asimétrica que tiene su efecto en la producción de los saberes, es aquella que los autores llaman una geopolitica del conocimiento. (p. 138)

So, moving from the rhetoric of christianization, progress and civilization of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries to the rhetoric of modernization and development which followed the decolonization era, decolonial thinkers see at work the same logic introduced by coloniality. The world is partitioned and classified according to a scheme that Mignolo defines geo-historical, in which the divide between developed and underdeveloped societies largely overlaps that between colonizers and colonized, thus justifying and regulating once again the use of power along the colonial power-relation, today mostly through the interventions of supra-national institutions —for example, the WTO or the WHO— rather than military intervention, but nevertheless still operating exclusively on the base of the supposed universal validity of modern knowledge.

Under this respect, one of the interesting aspects decolonial thought has for political philosophy, and which is surely worth of further analysis, is that, through the introduction of the concept of modernity/coloniality, it offers a tool to conceptualize and criticize power —for Mignolo's own understanding of the concept see Mignolo & Walsh (2018, p. 114)— not only focusing on its repressive/productive qualities —to use a Foucauldian jargon—, but also focusing on the cases in which it is exercised to reach beneficial aims, in the sense evoked by expressions like "peace enforcement" or "development aid" still embedding concepts largely defined unilaterally from the Western perspective. It is probably even more challenging to see how much this kind of reflection is needed, not only in the field of inter-state relations, but also at the local level, where the state and political power is today mobilized by legitimizing itself on the basis of a superior knowledge via the recruitment of experts and professionals, for example to foster the empowerment and the inclusion in Western societies of formerly colonized and racialized peoples, now labeled as "migrants".

As Mignolo reminds us, the entire vocabulary of scientific disciplines, as distinct from other forms of knowledge labeled as superstition or wisdom, is exclusively derived from Greek, Latin or other European languages and had been translated and redefined around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe:

The fact that none of the existing civilizational languages at the time (Mandarin, Hindi, Urdu, Persian, Arabic, Russian, etc.) are relevant in any of the disciplinary

formations confirms that Eurocentered knowledge asserts itself at the same time that it disqualifies the vocabulary (and logic) of other knowing praxis and knowledge and belief systems (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 113).

In conclusion, *On Decoloniality* offers a contribution to the affirmation of the partiality of all kind of knowledges by affirming the need to reduce to size the pretense of universality of western modern knowledge. From the other side, it also understands knowledge as the medium through which a world order systematically reproducing the logic of colonization reach its totalizing pervasiveness. But this is only part of the story. The ultimate challenge of decolonial thought is to show that there are viable alternatives to Western modernity, even that its own critical recipe could be easily misunderstood —see for examples Ortega (2017) and García & Baca (2019)—. Hence *On decoloniality* should be read also as a call to *act out and practice* epistemic disobedience, a call which, making knowledge and knowledge production the field of political struggle, should resonate particularly with Western scholars. While it presents a dark depiction of the political and bio-political order in which we are all immersed, by placing the field of political struggle and political action into knowledge, it politicizes at the same time academia and academics, and more in general all "knowledge-producers". An invitation that, as Walsh shows in the first part of the book, could be practiced following the path of a conscious and self-aware intercultural attitude, aimed at opening up disciplinary boundaries and, finally, one's own thinking horizons.

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