

Ramón Grosfoguel

THE EPISTEMIC DECOLONIAL TURN

Beyond political-economy paradigms¹

In October 1998, there was a conference/dialogue at Duke University between the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group and the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group. The dialogue initiated in this conference eventually resulted in the publication of several issues of the journal NEPANTLA. However, this conference was the last time the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group met before their split. Among the many reasons and debates that produced this split, there are two that I would like to stress. The Latin American Subaltern Studies Group composed primarily by Latinamericanist scholars in the USA. Despite their attempt at producing a radical and alternative knowledge, they reproduced the epistemic schema of Area Studies in the United States. With a few exceptions, they produced studies *about* the subaltern rather than studies *with* and *from* a subaltern perspective. Like the imperial epistemology of Area Studies, theory was still located in the North while the subjects to be studied are located in the South. This colonial epistemology was crucial to my dissatisfaction with the project. As a Puerto Rican in the United States, I was dissatisfied with the epistemic consequences of the knowledge produced by this Latinamericanist group. They underestimated in their work ethnic/racial perspectives coming from the region, while giving privilege to Western thinkers. This is related to my second point: they gave epistemic privilege to what they called the 'four horses of the apocalypse',² that is, Foucault, Derrida, Gramsci and Guha. Among the four main thinkers they privilege, three are Eurocentric thinkers while two of them (Derrida and Foucault) form part of the poststructuralist/postmodern Western canon. By privileging Western thinkers as their central theoretical apparatus, they betrayed their goal to produce subaltern studies.

Among the many reasons for the split of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, one of them was between those who read subalternity as a postmodern critique (which represents a Eurocentric critique of eurocentrism) and those who read subalternity as a decolonial critique (which represents a critique of eurocentrism from subalternized and silenced knowledges) (Mignolo 2000, pp. 183–186, pp. 213–214). For those of us that took side with the decolonial critique, the dialogue with the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group as well as with the South Asian Subaltern School made evident the need to epistemologically transcend, decolonize the Western canon and epistemology. South Asian Subaltern School main project is a

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critique to Western European colonial historiography about India and to Indian nationalist eurocentric historiography of India. But by using a Western epistemology and privileging Gramsci and Foucault, constrained and limited the radicality of their critique to eurocentrism. Although they represent different epistemic projects, the South Asian Subaltern School privilege of Western epistemic canon overlapped with the sector of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group that sided with postmodernism. However, with all its limits, South Asian Subaltern Studies Group was part of an intellectual movement known as postcolonial critique (a critique of modernity from the Global South) as opposed to the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group postmodern critique (a critique of modernity from the Global North) (Mignolo 2000). These debates made clear to us the need to decolonize not only Subaltern Studies but also Postcolonial Studies (Grosfoguel 2006).

This is not an essentialist, fundamentalist, anti-European critique. It a perspective that is critical of both Eurocentric and Third World fundamentalisms, colonialism and nationalism. What all fundamentalisms share (including the Eurocentric one) is the premise that there is only one sole epistemic tradition from which to achieve Truth and Universality. However, my main points here are three: (1) that a decolonial epistemic perspective requires a broader canon of thought than simply the Western canon (including the Left Western canon); (2) that a truly universal decolonial perspective cannot be based on an abstract universal (one particular that raises itself as universal global design), but would have to be the result of the critical dialogue between diverse critical epistemic/ethical/political projects towards a pluriversal as oppose to a universal world; (3) that decolonization of knowledge would require to take seriously the epistemic perspective/cosmologies/insights of critical thinkers from the Global South thinking *from* and *with* subalternized racial/ethnic/sexual spaces and bodies. Postmodernism and poststructuralism as epistemological projects are caught within the Western canon reproducing within its domains of thought and practice a coloniality of power/knowledge.

However, what I have said about the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group applies to the paradigms of political-economy. In this article, I propose that an epistemic perspective from racial/ethnic subaltern locations has a lot to contribute to a radical decolonial critical theory beyond the way traditional political-economy paradigms conceptualize capitalism as a global or world-system. The idea here is to decolonize political-economy paradigms as well as world-system analysis and to propose an alternative decolonial conceptualization of the world-system. The first part is an epistemic discussion about the implications of the epistemological critique of feminist and subalternized racial/ethnic intellectuals to western epistemology. The second part is the implications of these critiques to the way we conceptualize the global or world system. Finally, the last part is a discussion of global coloniality today.

Epistemological critique

The first point to discuss is the contribution of racial/ethnic and feminist subaltern perspectives to epistemological questions. The hegemonic Eurocentric paradigms that have informed western philosophy and sciences in the 'modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system' for the last 500 hundred years assume a universalistic, neutral, objective point of view. Chicana and black feminist scholars (Moraga & Anzaldúa 1983, Collins 1990) as well as thirdworld scholars inside and outside the United States (Dussel 1977, Mignolo 2000) reminded us that we always speak from a particular location in the power structures. Nobody escapes the class, sexual, gender, spiritual, linguistic, geographical, and racial hierarchies of the 'modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system'. As feminist scholar Donna Haraway (1988) states, our knowledges are always situated. Black feminist scholars called this perspective 'afro-centric epistemology' (Collins 1990) (which is not equivalent to the afrocentrist perspective) while Latin American Philosopher of Liberation Enrique Dussel called it 'geopolitics of knowledge' (Dussel 1977) and following Fanon (1967) and Anzaldúa (1987) I will use the term 'body-politics of knowledge'.

This is not only a question about social values in knowledge production or the fact that our knowledge is always partial. The main point here is the locus of enunciation, that is, the geo-political and body-political location of the subject that speaks. In Western philosophy and sciences the subject that speaks is always hidden, concealed, erased from the analysis. The 'ego-politics of knowledge' of Western philosophy has always privilege the myth of a non-situated 'Ego'. Ethnic/racial/gender/sexual epistemic location and the subject that speaks are always decoupled. By delinking ethnic/racial/gender/sexual epistemic location from the subject that speaks, Western philosophy and sciences are able to produce a myth about a Truthful universal knowledge that covers up, that is, conceals who is speaking as well as the geo-political and body-political epistemic location in the structures of colonial power/knowledge from which the subject speaks.

It is important here to distinguish the 'epistemic location' from the 'social location'. The fact that one is socially located in the oppressed side of power relations, does not automatically mean that he/she is epistemically thinking from a subaltern epistemic location. Precisely, the success of the modern/colonial world-system consist in making subjects that are socially located in the oppressed side of the colonial difference, to think epistemically like the ones on the dominant positions. Subaltern epistemic perspectives are knowledge coming from below that produces a critical perspective of hegemonic knowledge in the power relations involved. I am not claiming an epistemic populism where knowledge produced from below is automatically an epistemic subaltern knowledge. What I am claiming is that all knowledges

are epistemically located in the dominant or the subaltern side of the power relations and that this is related to the geo- and body-politics of knowledge. The disembodied and unlocated neutrality and objectivity of the ego-politics of knowledge is a Western myth.

Rene Descartes, the founder of Modern Western Philosophy, inaugurates a new moment in the history of Western thought. He replaces God, as the foundation of knowledge in the Theo-politics of knowledge of the European Middle Ages, with (Western) Man as the foundation of knowledge in European Modern times. All the attributes of God are now extrapolated to (Western) Man. Universal Truth beyond time and space, privilege access to the laws of the Universe, and the capacity to produce scientific knowledge and theory is now placed in the mind of Western Man. The Cartesian 'ego-cogito' ('I think, therefore I am') is the foundation of modern Western sciences. By producing a dualism between mind and body and between mind and nature, Descartes was able to claim non-situated, universal, God-eyed view knowledge. This is what the Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gomez called the 'point zero' perspective of Eurocentric philosophies (Castro-Gomez 2003). The 'point zero' is the point of view that hides and conceals itself as being beyond a particular point of view, that is, the point of view that represents itself as being without a point of view. It is this 'god-eye view' that always hides its local and particular perspective under an abstract universalism. Western philosophy privileges 'ego politics of knowledge' over the 'geopolitics of knowledge' and the 'body-politics of knowledge'. Historically, this has allowed Western man (the gendered term is intentionally used here) to represent his knowledge as the only one capable of achieving a universal consciousness, and to dismiss non-Western knowledge as particularistic and, thus, unable to achieve universality.

This epistemic strategy has been crucial for Western global designs. By hiding the location of the subject of enunciation, European/Euro-American colonial expansion and domination was able to construct a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge and, thus, of superior and inferior people around the world. We went from the sixteenth century characterization of 'people without writing' to the eighteenth and nineteenth century characterization of 'people without history', to the twentieth century characterization of 'people without development' and more recently, to the early twenty-first century of 'people without democracy'. We went from the sixteenth century 'rights of people' (Sepulveda versus de las Casas debate in the school of Salamanca in the mid-sixteenth century), to the eighteenth century 'rights of man' (Enlightenment philosophers), and to the late twentieth century 'human rights'. All of these are part of global designs articulated to the simultaneous production and reproduction of an international division of labor of core/periphery that overlaps with the global racial/ethnic hierarchy of Europeans/non-Europeans.

However, as Enrique Dussel (1994) has reminded us, the Cartesian ‘ego cogito’ (‘I think, therefore I am’) was preceded by 150 years (since the beginnings of the European colonial expansion in 1492) of the European ‘ego conquistus’ (‘I conquer, therefore I am’). The social, economic, political and historical conditions of possibility for a subject to assume the arrogance of becoming God-like and put himself as the foundation of all Truthful knowledge was the Imperial Being, that is, the subjectivity of those who are at the center of the world because they have already conquered it. What are the decolonial implications of this epistemological critique to our knowledge production and to our concept of world-system?

Coloniality of power as the power matrix of the modern/colonial world

Globalization studies, political-economy paradigms and world-system analysis, with only a few exceptions, have not derived the epistemological and theoretical implications of the epistemic critique coming from subaltern locations in the colonial divide and expressed in academia through ethnic studies and woman studies. They still continue to produce knowledge from the Western man ‘point zero’ god-eye view. This has led to important problems in the way we conceptualize global capitalism and the ‘world-system’. These concepts are in need of decolonization and this can only be achieved with a decolonial epistemology that overtly assumes the decolonial geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge as points of departure to a radical critique. The following examples can illustrate this point.

If we analyze the European colonial expansion from a Eurocentric point of view, what we get is a picture in which the origins of the so-called capitalist world-system is primarily produced by the inter-imperial competition among European Empires. The primary motive for this expansion was to find shorter routes to the East, which led accidentally to the so-called discovery and, eventual, Spanish colonization of the Americas. From this point of view, the capitalist world-system would be primarily an economic system that determines the behavior of the major social actors by the economic logic of making profits as manifested in the extraction of surplus value and the ceaseless accumulation of capital at a world-scale. Moreover, the concept of capitalism implied in this perspective privileges economic relations over other social relations. Accordingly, the transformation in the relations of production produces a new class structure typical of capitalism as opposed to other social systems and other forms of domination. Class analysis and economic structural transformations are privileged over other power relations.

Without denying the importance of the endless accumulation of capital at a world scale and the existence of a particular class structure in global capitalism,

I raise the following epistemic question: How would the world-system look like if we move the locus of enunciation from the European man to an Indigenous woman in the Americas, to, say Rigoberta Menchu in Guatemala or to Domitila in Bolivia? I do not pretend to speak for or represent the perspective of these indigenous women. What I attempt to do is to shift the location from which these paradigms are thinking. The first implication of shifting our geopolitics of knowledge is that what arrived in the Americas in the late fifteenth century was not only an economic system of capital and labor for the production of commodities to be sold for a profit in the world market. This was a crucial part of, but was not the sole element in, the entangled 'package'. What arrived in the Americas was a broader and wider entangled power structure that an economic reductionist perspective of the world-system is unable to account for. From the structural location of an indigenous woman in the Americas what arrived was a more complex world-system than what political-economy paradigms and world-system analysis portrait. A European/capitalist/military/christian/patriarchal/white/heterosexual/male arrived in the Americas and established simultaneously in time and space several entangled global hierarchies that for purposes of clarity in this exposition I will list below as if they were separate from each other:

- 1 a particular global class formation where a diversity of forms of labor (slavery, semi-serfdom, wage labor, petty-commodity production, etc.) are going to co-exist and be organized by capital as a source of production of surplus value through the selling of commodities for a profit in the world market;
- 2 an international division of labor of core and periphery where capital organized labor in the periphery around coerced and authoritarian forms (Wallerstein 1974);
- 3 an inter-state system of politico-military organizations controlled by European males and institutionalized in colonial administrations (Wallerstein 1979);
- 4 a global racial/ethnic hierarchy that privileges European people over non-European people (Quijano 1993, 2000);
- 5 a global gender hierarchy that privileges males over females and European patriarchy over other forms of gender relations (Spivak 1988, Enloe 1990);
- 6 a sexual hierarchy that privileges heterosexuals over homosexuals and lesbians (it is important to remember that most indigenous peoples in the Americas did not consider sexuality among males a pathological behavior and has no homophobic ideology);
- 7 a spiritual hierarchy that privileges Christians over non-Christian/non-Western spiritualities institutionalized in the globalization of the Christian (Catholic and later Protestant) church;

- 8 an epistemic hierarchy that privileges Western knowledge and cosmology over non-Western knowledge and cosmologies, and institutionalized in the global university system (Mignolo 1995, 2000, Quijano 1991).
- 9 a linguistic hierarchy between European languages and non-European languages that privileges communication and knowledge/theoretical production in the former and subalternize the latter as sole producers of folklore or culture but not of knowledge/theory (Mignolo 2000).

It is not an accident that the conceptualization of the world-system, from decolonial perspectives of the South will question its traditional conceptualizations produced by thinkers from the North. Following Peruvian Sociologist, Aníbal Quijano (1991, 1998, 2000), we could conceptualize the present world-system as a historical-structural heterogeneous totality with a specific power matrix that he calls a 'colonial power matrix' ('patrón de poder colonial'). This matrix affects all dimensions of social existence such as sexuality, authority, subjectivity and labor (Quijano 2000). The sixteenth century initiates a new global colonial power matrix that by the late nineteenth century came to cover the whole planet. Taking a step further from Quijano, I conceptualize the coloniality of power as an entanglement or, to use US Third World Feminist concept, intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989, Fregoso 2003) of multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies ('heterarchies') of sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation where the racial/ethnic hierarchy of the European/non-European divide transversally reconfigures all of the other global power structures. What is new in the 'coloniality of power' perspective is how the idea of race and racism becomes the organizing principle that structures all of the multiple hierarchies of the world-system (Quijano 1993). For example, the different forms of labor that are articulated to capitalist accumulation at a world-scale are assigned according to this racial hierarchy; coercive (or cheap) labor is done by non-European people in the periphery and 'free wage labor' in the core. The global gender hierarchy is also affected by race: contrary to pre-European patriarchies where all women were inferior to all men, in the new colonial power matrix some women (of European origin) have a higher status and access to resources than some men (of non-European origin). The idea of race organizes the world's population into a hierarchical order of superior and inferior people that becomes an organizing principle of the international division of labor and of the global patriarchal system. Contrary to the Eurocentric perspective, race, gender, sexuality, spirituality, and epistemology are not additive elements to the economic and political structures of the capitalist world-system, but an integral, entangled and constitutive part of the broad entangled 'package' called the European modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system (Grosfoguel 2002). European patriarchy and European notions of sexuality, epistemology and spirituality were exported to the rest of the world through colonial expansion

as the hegemonic criteria to racialize, classify and pathologize the rest of the world's population in a hierarchy of superior and inferior races.

This conceptualization has enormous implications that I can only briefly mention here:

- 1 The old Eurocentric idea that societies develop at the level of the nation-state in terms of a linear evolution of modes of production from pre-capitalist to capitalist is overcome. We are all encompassed within a capitalist world-system that articulates different forms of labor according to the racial classification of the world's population (Quijano 2000, Grosfoguel 2002).
- 2 The old Marxist paradigm of infrastructure and superstructure is replaced by a historical-heterogeneous structure (Quijano 2000), or a 'heterarchy' (Kontopoulos 1993), that is, an entangled articulation of multiple hierarchies, in which subjectivity and the social imaginary is not derivative but constitutive of the structures of the world-system (Grosfoguel 2002). In this conceptualization, race and racism are not superstructural or instrumental to an overarching logic of capitalist accumulation; they are constitutive of capitalist accumulation at a world-scale. The 'colonial power matrix' is an organizing principle involving exploitation and domination exercised in multiple dimensions of social life, from economic, sexual, or gender relations, to political organizations, structures of knowledge, state institutions, and households (Quijano 2000).
- 3 The old division between culture and political-economy as expressed in post-colonial studies and political-economy approaches is overcome (Grosfoguel 2002). Post-colonial studies conceptualize the capitalist world-system as being constituted primarily by culture, while political-economy place the primary determination on economic relations. In the 'coloniality of power' approach, what comes first, 'culture or the economy', is a false dilemma, a chicken-egg dilemma that obscures the complexity of the capitalist world-system (Grosfoguel 2002).
- 4 Coloniality is not equivalent to colonialism. It is not derivative from, or antecedent to, modernity. Coloniality and modernity constitute two sides of a single coin. The same way as the European industrial revolution was achieved on the shoulders of the coerced forms of labor in the periphery, the new identities, rights, laws, and institutions of modernity such as nation-states, citizenship and democracy were formed in a process of colonial interaction with, and domination/exploitation of, non-Western people.
- 5 To call 'capitalist' the present world-system is, to say the least, misleading. Given the hegemonic Eurocentric 'common sense', the moment we use the word 'capitalism' people immediately think that we are talking about the 'economy'. However, 'capitalism' is only one of the multiple entangled constellations of colonial power matrix of the

‘European modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system’. It is an important one, but not the sole one. Given its entanglement with other power relations, destroying the capitalist aspects of the world-system would not be enough to destroy the present world-system. To transform this world-system it is crucial to destroy the historical-structural heterogenous totality called the ‘colonial power matrix’ of the ‘world-system’.

- 6 Anti-capitalist decolonization and liberation cannot be reduced to only one dimension of social life. It requires a broader transformation of the sexual, gender, spiritual, epistemic, economic, political, linguistic and racial hierarchies of the modern/colonial world-system. The ‘coloniality of power’ perspective challenges us to think about social change and social transformation in a non-reductionist way.

From global colonialism to global coloniality

We cannot think of decolonization in terms of conquering power over the juridical-political boundaries of a state, that is, by achieving control over a single nation-state (Grosfoguel 1996). The old national liberation and socialist strategies of taking power at the level of a nation-state are not sufficient because global coloniality is not reducible to the presence or absence of a colonial administration (Grosfoguel 2002) or to the political/economic structures of power. One of the most powerful myths of the twentieth century was the notion that the elimination of colonial administrations amounted to the decolonization of the world. This led to the myth of a ‘postcolonial’ world. The heterogeneous and multiple global structures put in place over a period of 450 years did not evaporate with the juridical-political decolonization of the periphery over the past 50 years. We continue to live under the same ‘colonial power matrix’. With juridical-political decolonization we moved from a period of ‘global *colonialism*’ to the current period of ‘global *coloniality*’. Although ‘colonial administrations’ have been almost entirely eradicated and the majority of the periphery is politically organized into independent states, non-European people are still living under crude European/Euro-American exploitation and domination. The old colonial hierarchies of European versus non-Europeans remain in place and are entangled with the ‘international division of labor’ and accumulation of capital at a world-scale (Quijano 2000, Grosfoguel 2002).

Herein lies the relevance of the distinction between ‘colonialism’ and ‘coloniality’. Coloniality allow us to understand the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations, produced by colonial cultures and structures in the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system. ‘Coloniality of power’ refers to a crucial structuring process in

the modern/colonial world-system that articulates peripheral locations in the international division of labor with the global racial/ethnic hierarchy and Third World migrants' inscription in the racial/ethnic hierarchy of metropolitan global cities. In this sense, there is a periphery outside and inside the core zones and there is a core inside and outside the peripheral regions.

Peripheral nation-states and non-European people live today under the regime of 'global coloniality' imposed by the United States through the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), the Pentagon and NATO. Peripheral zones inside and outside core zones remain in a colonial situation even though are not any longer under a colonial administration.

'Colonial' does not refer only to 'classical colonialism' or 'internal colonialism', nor can it be reduced to the presence of a 'colonial administration'. Quijano distinguishes between colonialism and coloniality. I use the word 'colonialism' to refer to 'colonial situations' enforced by the presence of a colonial administration such as the period of classical colonialism, and, following Quijano (1991, 1993, 1998), I use 'coloniality' to address 'colonial situations' in the present period in which colonial administrations have almost been eradicated from the capitalist world-system. By 'colonial situations' I mean the cultural, political, sexual, spiritual, epistemic and economic oppression/exploitation of subordinate racialized/ethnic groups by dominant racialized/ethnic groups with or without the existence of colonial administrations. Five hundred years of European colonial expansion and domination formed an international division of labor between Europeans and non-Europeans that is reproduced in the present so-called 'post-colonial' phase of the capitalist world-system (Wallerstein 1979, 1995). Today the core zones of the capitalist world-economy overlap with predominantly White/European/Euro-American societies such as Western Europe, Canada, Australia and the United States, while peripheral zones overlap with previously colonized non-European people. Japan is the only exception that confirms the rule. Japan was never colonized nor dominated by Europeans and, similar to the West, played an active role in building its own colonial empire. China, although never fully colonized, was peripheralized through the use of colonial entrepôts such as Hong Kong and Macao, and through direct military interventions such as the opium wars in the nineteenth century.

The mythology about the 'decolonization of the world' obscures the continuities between the colonial past and current global colonial/racial hierarchies and contributes to the invisibility of 'coloniality' today. For the last fifty years, peripheral states that are today formally independent, following the dominant Eurocentric liberal discourses (Wallerstein 1991a, 1991b, 1995), constructed ideologies of 'national identity', 'national development', and 'national sovereignty' that produced an illusion of 'independence', 'development', and 'progress'. Yet their economic and political systems were shaped by their subordinate position in a capitalist world-system organized around a

hierarchical international division of labor (Wallerstein 1979, 1984, 1995). The multiple and heterogeneous processes of the world-system, together with the predominance of Eurocentric cultures (Said 1979, Wallerstein 1991b, 1995, Lander 1998, Quijano 1998, Mignolo 2000), constitute a 'global coloniality' between European/Euro-American peoples and non-European peoples. Thus, 'coloniality' is entangled with, but is not reducible to, the international division of labor. The global racial/ethnic hierarchy of Europeans and non-Europeans, is an integral part of the development of the capitalist world system's international division of labor (Wallerstein 1983, Quijano 1993, Mignolo 1995). In these 'post-independence' times the 'colonial' axis between Europeans/Euro-Americans and non-Europeans is inscribed not only in relations of exploitation (between capital and labor) and relations of domination (between metropolitan and peripheral states), but in the production of subjectivities and knowledge. In sum, part of the Eurocentric myth is that we live in a so-called 'post'-colonial era and that the world and, in particular, metropolitan centers, are in no need of decolonization. In this conventional definition, coloniality is reduced to the presence of colonial administrations. However, as the work of Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano (1993, 1998, 2000) has shown with his 'coloniality of power' perspective, we still live in a colonial world and we need to break from the narrow ways of thinking about colonial relations, in order to accomplish the unfinished and incomplete twentieth century dream of decolonization. This proposal invite us to examine new decolonial utopian alternatives beyond Eurocentric and 'Thirdworldist' fundamentalisms.

Notes

- 1 The notion of 'Decolonial Turn' is a notion elaborated by Puerto Rican fanonian philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres. See his forthcoming book *Against War* (Duke University Press, 2006).
- 2 See the discussion of this term coined by Florencia Mallon (1994) in Ileana Rodríguez's (2001) introductory essay to the *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*.

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