



## COLONIALITY AND MODERNITY/RATIONALITY

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## COLONIALITY AND MODERNITY/ RATIONALITY

With the conquest of the societies and the cultures which inhabit what today is called Latin America, began the constitution of a new world order, culminating, five hundred years later, in a global power covering the whole planet. This process implied a violent concentration of the world's resources under the control and for the benefit of a small European minority – and above all, of its ruling classes. Although occasionally moderated when faced with the revolt of the dominated, this process has continued ever since. But, now during the current crisis, such concentration is being realized with a new impetus, in a way perhaps even more violent and on a much larger, global scale. The 'Western' European dominators and their Euro-North American descendants are still the principal beneficiaries, together with the non-European part of the world not quite former European colonies, Japan mainly, and mainly their ruling classes. The exploited and the dominated of Latin America and Africa are the main victims.

A relation of direct, political, social and cultural domination was established by the Europeans over the conquered of all continents. This domination is known as a specific Eurocentered colonialism. In its political, above all the formal and explicit aspect, this colonial domination has been defeated in the large majority of the cases. America was the first stage of that defeat, and afterwards, since the Second World War, Asia and Africa. Thus the Eurocentered colonialism, in the sense of a formal system of political domination by Western European societies over others seems a question of the past. Its successor, Western imperialism, is an association of social interests between the dominant groups ('social classes' and/or 'ethnies') of countries with unequally articulated power, rather than an imposition from the outside.

However, that specific colonial structure of power produced the specific social discriminations which later were codified as 'racial', 'ethnic', 'anthropological' or 'national', according to the times, agents, and populations involved. These intersubjective constructions, product of Eurocentered colonial domination were even assumed to be 'objective', 'scientific', categories, then of a historical significance. That is, as natural phenomena, not referring to the history of power. This power structure was, and still is, the framework within which operate the other social relations of classes or estates.

In fact, if we observe the main lines of exploitation and social domination on a global scale, the main lines of world power today, and the distribution of

resources and work among the world population, it is very clear that the large majority of the exploited, the dominated, the discriminated against, are precisely the members of the 'races', 'ethnies', or 'nations' into which the colonized populations, were categorized in the formative process of that world power, from the conquest of America and onward.

In the same way, in spite of the fact that political colonialism has been eliminated, the relationship between the European – also called 'Western' – culture, and the others, continues to be one of colonial domination. It is not only a matter of the subordination of the other cultures to the European, in an external relation; we have also to do with a colonization of the other cultures, albeit in differing intensities and depths. This relationship consists, in the first place, of a colonization of the imagination of the dominated; that is, it acts in the interior of that imagination, in a sense, it is a part of it.

In the beginning colonialism was a product of a systematic repression, not only of the specific beliefs, ideas, images, symbols or knowledge that were not useful to global colonial domination, while at the same time the colonizers were expropriating from the colonized their knowledge, specially in mining, agriculture, engineering, as well as their products and work. The repression fell, above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual. It was followed by the imposition of the use of the rulers' own patterns of expression, and of their beliefs and images with reference to the supernatural. These beliefs and images served not only to impede the cultural production of the dominated, but also as a very efficient means of social and cultural control, when the immediate repression ceased to be constant and systematic.

The colonizers also imposed a mystified image of their own patterns of producing knowledge and meaning. At first, they placed these patterns far out of reach of the dominated. Later, they taught them in a partial and selective way, in order to co-opt some of the dominated into their own power institutions. Then European culture was made seductive: it gave access to power. After all, beyond repression, the main instrument of all power is its seduction. Cultural Europeanisation was transformed into an aspiration. It was a way of participating and later to reach the same material benefits and the same power as the Europeans: viz, to conquer nature – in short for 'development'. European culture became a universal cultural model. The imaginary in the non-European cultures could hardly exist today and, above all, reproduce itself outside of these relations.

The forms and the effects of that cultural coloniality have been different as regards to times and cases. In Latin America, the cultural repression and the colonization of the imaginary were accompanied by a massive and gigantic extermination of the natives, mainly by their use as expendable labor force, in

addition to the violence of the conquest and the diseases brought by Europeans. Between the Aztec- Maya-Caribbean and the Tawantinsuyana (or Inca) areas, about 65 million inhabitants were exterminated in a period of less than 50 years. The scale of this extermination was so huge that it involved not only a demographic catastrophe, but also the destruction of societies and cultures. The cultural repression and the massive genocide together turned the previous high cultures of America into illiterate, peasant subcultures condemned to orality; that is, deprived of their own patterns of formalized, objectivised, intellectual, and plastic or visual expression. Henceforth, the survivors would have no other modes of intellectual and plastic or visual formalized and objectivised expressions, but through the cultural patterns of the rulers, even if subverting them in certain cases to transmit other needs of expression. Latin America is, without doubt, the most extreme case of cultural colonization by Europe.

In Asia and in the Middle East, the high cultures could never be destroyed with such intensity and profundity. But they were nevertheless placed in a subordinate relation not only in the European view, but also in the eyes of their own bearers. Through the political, military and technological power of its foremost societies, European or Western culture imposed its paradigmatic image and its principal cognitive elements as the norm of orientation on all cultural development, particularly the intellectual and the artistic. That relationship consequently became a constitutive part of the conditions of reproduction of those societies and cultures that were pushed into Europeanisation of everything or in part.

In Africa, cultural destruction was certainly much more intensive than in Asia, but less than in America. Nor did the Europeans there succeed in the complete destruction of the patterns of expression, in particular of objectification and visual formalization. What the Europeans did was to deprive Africans of legitimacy and recognition in the global cultural order dominated by European patterns. The former was confined to the category of the 'exotic'. That is, doubtless, what is manifested, for example, in the utilization of the products of African plastic expression as motive, starting-point, source of inspiration for the art of Western or Europeanized African artists, but not as a mode of artistic expression of its own, of a rank equivalent to the European norm. And that exactly identifies a colonial view.

Coloniality, then, is still the most general form of domination in the world today, once colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed. It doesn't exhaust, obviously, the conditions nor the modes of exploitation and domination between peoples. But it hasn't ceased to be, for 500 years, their main framework. The colonial relations of previous periods probably did not produce the same consequences, and, above all, they were not the corner stone of any global power.

## **'Race' and coloniality of power**

Coloniality of power was conceived together with America and Western Europe, and with the social category of 'race' as the key element of the social classification of colonized and colonizers. Unlike in any other previous experience of colonialism, the old ideas of superiority of the dominant, and the inferiority of dominated under European colonialism were mutated in a relationship of biologically and structurally superior and inferior.<sup>1</sup>

The process of Eurocentrifcation of the new world power in the following centuries gave way to the imposition of such a 'racial' criteria to the new social classification of the world population on a global scale. So, in the first place, new social identities were produced all over the world: 'whites', 'Indians', 'Negroes', 'yellows', 'olives', using physiognomic traits of the peoples as external manifestations of their 'racial' nature. Then, on that basis the new geocultural identities were produced: European, American, Asiatic, African, and much later, Oceania. During European colonial world domination, the distribution of work of the entire world capitalist system, between salaried, independent peasants, independent merchants, and slaves and serfs, was organized basically following the same 'racial' lines of global social classification, with all the implications for the processes of nationalization of societies and states, and for the formation of nation-states, citizenship, democracy and so on, around the world. Such distribution of work in the world capitalist system began to change slowly with the struggles against European colonialism, especially after the First World War, and with the changing requirements of capitalism itself. But distribution of work is by no means finished, since Eurocentered coloniality of power has proved to be longer lasting than Eurocentered colonialism. Without it, the history of capitalism in Latin America and other related places in the world can hardly be explained.<sup>2</sup>

So, coloniality of power is based upon 'racial' social classification of the world population under Eurocentered world power. But coloniality of power is not exhausted in the problem of 'racist' social relations. It pervaded and modulated the basic instances of the Eurocentered capitalist colonial/modern world power to become the cornerstone of this coloniality of power.

## **Eurocentrism, cultural coloniality and modernity/rationality**

During the same period as European colonial domination was consolidating itself, the cultural complex known as European modernity/rationality was being constituted. The intersubjective universe produced by the entire Eurocentered capitalist colonial power was elaborated and formalized by the Europeans and established in the world as an exclusively European product and

as a universal paradigm of knowledge and of the relation between humanity and the rest of the world. Such confluence between coloniality and the elaboration of rationality/modernity was not in anyway accidental, as is shown by the very manner in which the European paradigm of rational knowledge was elaborated. In fact, the coloniality of power had decisive implications in the constitution of the paradigm, associated with the emergence of urban and capitalist social relations, which in their turn could not be fully explained outside colonialism and coloniality particularly not as far as Latin America is concerned. The decisive weight of coloniality in the constitution of the European paradigm of modernity/rationality is clearly revealed in the actual crisis of that cultural complex. Examining some of the basic questions of that crisis will help to illuminate the problem.

### **The question of the production of knowledge**

For a start, in the current crisis of the European paradigm of rational knowledge, the latter's fundamental presupposition is questioned: *vis. knowledge as a product of a subject-object relation*. Apart from the problems of validation of knowledge implied, that presupposition raises other problems worthy of a brief presentation here.

First, in that presupposition, the 'subject' is a category referring to the isolated individual because it constitutes itself in itself and for itself, in its discourse and in its capacity of reflection. The Cartesian '*cogito, ergo sum*', means exactly that. Second, the 'object' is a category referring to an entity not only different from the 'subject'! individual, but external to the latter by its nature. Third, the 'object' is also identical to itself because it is constituted by 'properties' which give it its identity and define it, i.e., they demarcate it and at the same time position it in relation to the other 'objects'.

What is in question in this paradigm is, firstly, the individual and individualist character of the 'subject', which like every half-truth falsifies the problem by denying intersubjectivity and social totality as the production sites of all knowledge. Secondly, the idea of 'object' is incompatible with the results of current scientific research, according to which the 'properties' are modes and times of a given field of relations. Therefore there is not much room for an idea of identity as ontologically irreducible originality outside the field of relations. Thirdly, the externality of the relations between the 'subject' and the 'object', founded on differences of nature, is not only an arbitrary exaggeration of the differences, since current research rather leads to the discovery that there exists a deeper communication structure in the universe. Much more important and decisive, is that in such a cognitive perspective it is implied a new radical dualism: divine reason and nature. The 'subject' is

bearer of 'reason', while the 'object', is not only external to it, but different nature. In fact, it is 'nature'.

One can, of course, recognize in the idea of 'subject' as an isolated individual, an element and an instance of the process of liberation of the individual with respect to the ascriptive social structures that imprisoned it in Europe. The latter condemned the individual to one single place and social role during its entire life, as happens in all societies with rigidly fixed hierarchies sustained by violence and by ideologies and corresponding imagery. This was the case of the premodern European cultures/societies. That liberation was a social and cultural struggle associated with the emergence of social relations of capital and of urban life. But, on the other hand, that proposal is today inadmissible in the current field of knowledge. The differentiated individual subjectivity is real', but it is not an entity, so it doesn't exist only *vis-a-vis* itself or by itself. It exists as a differentiated part, but not separated, of an intersubjectivity or intersubjective dimension of social relationship. Every individual discourse, or reflection, remits to a structure of intersubjectivity. The former is constituted in and *vis a vis* the latter. Knowledge in this perspective is an intersubjective relation for the purpose of something, not a relation between an isolated subjectivity, and that something.

Probably it is not accidental that knowledge was considered then in the same way as property – as a relation between one individual and something else. The same mental mechanism underlies both ideas at the point when modern society was emerging. Nevertheless, property, like knowledge, is a relation between people for the purpose of something, not a relation between an individual and something. These phenomena differ in that the property relation exists in a material as well as in an intersubjective manner; knowledge, on the other hand, only as an intersubjective relationship.

It seems, then, that one can demonstrate the association between individualism/dualism and the European social and cultural conflicts at the time when the main European paradigm of rationality was elaborated. But in that individualism/dualism there is another component, the explanation of which is not exhausted in the internal context of Europe: the 'other' is totally absent; or is present, can be present, only in an 'objectivised' mode.

The radical absence of the 'other' not only postulates an atomistic image of social existence in general; that is, it denies the idea of the social totality. As European colonial practice was to show, the paradigm also made it possible to omit every reference to any other 'subject' outside the European context, i.e., to make invisible the colonial order as totality, at the same moment as the very idea of Europe was establishing itself precisely in relation to the rest of the world being colonized. The emergence of the idea of the 'West' or of 'Europe', is an admission of identity – that is, of relations with other cultural experiences, of differences with other cultures. But, to that 'European' or 'Western' perception in full formation, those differences were admitted

primarily above all as inequalities in the hierarchical sense. And such inequalities are perceived as being of nature: only European culture is rational, it can contain 'subjects' – the rest are not rational, they cannot be or harbor 'subjects'. As a consequence, the other cultures are different in the sense that they are unequal, in fact inferior, by nature. They only can be 'objects' of knowledge or/and of domination practices. From that perspective, the relation between European culture and the other cultures was established and has been maintained, as a relation between 'subject' and 'object'. It blocked, therefore, every relation of communication, of interchange of knowledge and of modes of producing knowledge between the cultures, since the paradigm implies that between 'subject' and 'object' there can be but a relation of externality. Such a mental perspective, enduring as practice for five hundred years, could only have been the product of a relation of coloniality between Europe and the rest of the world. In other terms, the European paradigm of rational knowledge, was not only elaborated in the context of, but as part of, a power structure that involved the European colonial domination over the rest of the world. This paradigm expressed, in a demonstrable sense, the coloniality of that power structure.

As has been widely discussed, especially since the Second World War, the formation and the development of certain disciplines, such as Ethnology and Anthropology, have always shown that kind of 'subject-object' relations between the 'Western' culture and the rest. By definition, the other cultures are the 'object' of study. Such studies about the Western cultures and societies are virtually non-existent except as ironical parodies ('The ritual among the Nacirema' – an anagram of 'American' – is a typical example).

## **The question of totality in knowledge**

In spite of its absence in the Cartesian paradigm, the intellectual necessity of the idea of totality, especially in relation to social reality was present in the European debate; early on in the Iberian countries (Victoria, Suárez) and in the preservation of power defended by the Church and the Crown, and in France somewhat later (eighteenth century), and then already as a key element of social criticism and of alternative social proposals. Above all, from Saint-Simon, the idea of social totality was spread together with proposals of revolutionary social change, in confrontation with the atomistic perspective of social existence then predominant among the empiricists and among the adherents of the existing social and political order. In the twentieth century, totality became a perspective and a category generally admitted in scientific investigations – especially those about society.

European-Western rationality/modernity is constituted not only in a disputatious dialogue with the church and with religion, but also in the very



process of restructuration of power, on the one hand, in capitalist and urban social relations and nation-states; and, on the other, in the colonization of the rest of the world. This was probably, not divorced from the circumstance that the idea of social totality was developed according to an organicist image, which led to adopting a reductionist vision of reality.

In fact, that perspective was certainly useful to introduce and to fix the idea of social totality, i.e., society. But it was also instrumental in making the same with two other ideas: one, society as a structure of functional relations among each and every one of the parts, and therefore linked to the action of one sole logic, and therefore, a closed totality. It led later to a systemic idea of totality in structural- functionalism. The other idea was society as an organic structure, where the parts are related according to the same rules of hierarchy between the organs, as the image we have of every organism, and in particular the human one. Where there exists a part ruling the rest (the brain) – though it cannot expunge them in order to exist – the rest (in particular the extremities) cannot exist without being subordinately related to the ruling part of the organism.

It is an image diffused with the enterprise and the relations between entrepreneurs and workers, prolonging the legend of Menenius Agrippa's ingenious discourse in the beginning of the Roman Republic, which was to dissuade the first strikers in history: the owners are the brain, and the workers are the arms which form society together with the rest of the body. Without the brain, the arms would be meaningless, and without the latter the brain could not exist. Both are necessary in order to keep the rest of the body alive and healthy without which neither the brain nor the arms could exist. Kautsky's proposal, adopted by Lenin, is a variant of this image, where the proletarians are unable by themselves to elaborate their class-consciousness, and the bourgeois intelligentsia and/or the petite bourgeoisie are the ones who have to teach it to them. Not by accident Lenin explicitly argued already in his polemic with the Russian Populists ('Who are the Friends of the People'), that society is an organic totality. In Latin America, the image has been used repeatedly. Recently, for instance, by Jaime Paz Zamora, in a journalist interview, referring to the relation between the political parties and the trade unions, between the intellectuals and the workers in Bolivia: the parties are the head, the unions are the feet. This idea frequently impregnates the practices of most of the political parties and their popular 'bases'.

This organicist concept of social totality, of society, is not incompatible with the general paradigm of knowledge as a subject-object relation – nor its systemic variant. They are an alternative option in the atomistic perspective of reality, but they sustain themselves in the same paradigm. However, during the nineteenth century and a great part of the twentieth, social criticism and the proposals of social change could be propped up by the organic view, because the latter made manifest the existence of power as articulator of

society. It thus contributed to establishing and to debating the question of power in society.

On the other hand, those organicist ideas, imply the presupposition of an historically homogenous totality, in spite of the fact that the order articulated by colonialism was not homogenous. Hence, the colonized part was not, at bottom, included in that totality. As is well known, in the Europe of the Enlightenment the categories of 'humanity' and 'society' did not extended to the non-Western peoples, or only in a formal way, in the sense that such recognition had no practical effects. In any case, in accord with the organic image of reality, the ruling part, the brain of the total organism, was Europe, and in every colonized part of the world, the Europeans. The well-known claptrap that the colonized peoples were the 'white mans' burden' (Kipling), is directly associated with that image.

In this way, finally, the ideas of totality, which elaborated an image of society as a closed structure articulated in a hierarchic order with functional relations between its parts, presupposed a unique historical logic to the historical totality, and a rationality consisting in the subjection of every part to that unique total logic. This leads to conceiving society as a macro-historical subject, endowed with a historical rationality, with a lawfulness that permits predictions of the behavior of the whole and of all its part, as well as the direction and the finality of its development in time. The ruling part of the totality incarnated, in some way, that historical logic, with respect to the colonial world – i.e. Europe. Not surprisingly then, history was conceived as a evolutionary continuum from the primitive to the civilized; from the traditional to the modern; from the savage to the rational; from pro-capitalism to capitalism, etc. And Europe thought of itself as the mirror of the future of all the other societies and cultures; as the advanced form of the history of the entire species. What does not cease to surprise, however, is that Europe succeeded in imposing that 'mirage' upon the practical totality of the cultures that it colonized; and, much more, that this chimera is still so attractive to so many.

### **The epistemological reconstitution: de-colonization**

The idea of totality in general is today questioned and denied in Europe, not only by the perennial empiricists, but also by an entire intellectual community that calls itself postmodernist. In fact, in Europe, the idea of totality is a product of colonial/modernity. And it is demonstrable, as we have seen above, that the European ideas of totality led to theoretical reductionism and to the metaphysics of a macro-historical subject. Moreover, such ideas have been associated with undesirable political practices, behind a dream of the total rationalization of society.

It is not necessary, however, to reject the whole idea of totality in order to divest oneself of the ideas and images with which it was elaborated within European colonial/modernity. What is to be done is something very different: to liberate the production of knowledge, reflection, and communication from the pitfalls of European rationality/modernity.

Outside the 'West', virtually in all known cultures, every cosmic vision, every image, all systematic production of knowledge is associated with a perspective of totality. But in those cultures, the perspective of totality in knowledge includes the acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of all reality; of the irreducible, contradictory character of the latter; of the legitimacy, i.e., the desirability, of the diverse character of the components of all reality – and therefore, of the social. The idea of social totality, then, not only does not deny, but depends on the historical diversity and heterogeneity of society, of every society. In other words, it not only does not deny, but it requires the idea of an 'other' – diverse, different. That difference does not necessarily imply the unequal nature of the 'other' and therefore the absolute externality of relations, nor the hierarchical inequality nor the social inferiority of the other. The differences are not necessarily the basis of domination. At the same time – and because of that – historical-cultural heterogeneity implies the co-presence and the articulation of diverse historical 'logic' around one of them, which is hegemonic but in no way unique. In this way, the road is closed to all reductionism, as well as to the metaphysics of an historical macro- subject capable of its own rationality and of historical teleology, of which individuals and specific groups, classes for instance, would hardly be carriers or missionaries.

The critique of the European paradigm of rationality/modernity is indispensable – even more, urgent. But it is doubtful if the criticism consists of a simple negation of all its categories; of the dissolution of reality in discourse; of the pure negation of the idea and the perspective of totality in cognition. It is necessary to extricate oneself from the linkages between rationality/modernity and coloniality, first of all, and definitely from all power which is not constituted by free decisions made by free people. It is the instrumentalisation of the reasons for power, of colonial power in the first place, which produced distorted paradigms of knowledge and spoiled the liberating promises of modernity. The alternative, then, is clear: the destruction of the coloniality of world power. First of all, epistemological decolonization, as decoloniality, is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately pretend to some universality. Nothing is less rational, finally, than the pretension that the specific cosmic vision of a particular *ethnie* should be taken as universal rationality, even if such an *ethnie* is called Western Europe because this is actually pretend to impose a provincialism as universalism.

The liberation of intercultural relations from the prison of coloniality also implies the freedom of all peoples to choose, individually or collectively, such relations: a freedom to choose between various cultural orientations, and, above all, the freedom to produce, criticize, change, and exchange culture and society. This liberation is, part of the process of social liberation from all power organized as inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and as domination.

## Notes

Translated from the Spanish original by Sonia Therborn. This essay was originally published in *Globalizations and Modernities. Experiences, Perspectives and Latin America*, Stockholm, FRN-Report, 99: 5, 1.

- 1 Here is not the place for a more detailed discussion on the origins of the idea of 'race'. See Quijano (1992).
- 2 As for Latin America, see Quijano (1993).

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