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The *Ego Conquiro* as the Paradigm of Modern Imperialism and its Violence Against the Struggle for Epistemic Justice

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Abstract

This article begins with a discussion of the implications of Enrique Dussel's "I conquer, therefore I am" (*ego conquiro*) thesis as the paradigm of modern imperialism. According to Dussel, underlying the "myth of modernity" (*mito de la modernidad*) is an epistemological structure of a substantive ego that naturalizes European colonial expansion. Dussel admits that the "I conquer, therefore, I am" thesis began earlier than Descartes's account of the *cogito*, which was theorized after the Spanish colonization of the Americas, but the substantive "I" that constitutes the *ego conquiro* nonetheless represents a theory of knowledge that served and continues to serve the political domination of bodies that have been historically victimized. Couched within the epistemic structure of Descartes's *cogito* is a duality between soul and matter, where the former represents an immortal substance detached from the body, taken to be the recipe for rational truth, while the latter is reduced to a quantifiable object occupying a "zero-point" geometrical space. But the *cogito* became the epistemological standpoint that allowed for the justification of the many hidden forms of domination around the world, because it masks the social, economic, and geopolitical contexts and their history to the modern subject. This article will investigate the *ego conquiro* thesis and its link to epistemic violence, namely, epistemic racism and epistemicide, and will argue as a concluding point for a method of resistance that foregrounds philosophical pluralism to disrupt the internalization of the epistemologies of the Global North as the common-sense position(s) of today.

Keywords: Ego Conquiro; Modern Imperialism; Decolonial Resistance; Capitalist Modernity; Transmodern Pluralism

Introduction

This article begins with a discussion of the implications of Enrique Dussel's "I conquer, therefore I am" (*ego conquiro*) thesis as the paradigm of modern imperialism. According to Dussel, underlying the

“myth of modernity” (*mito de la modernidad*) is an epistemological structure of a substantive ego (i.e., Descartes’s *cogito*) that naturalizes European colonial expansion. While Dussel admits that the *ego conquiro* began earlier than Descartes’s own account of the *cogito*, which was theorized after the Spanish invasion of the Americas, the substantive “I” that constitutes the *ego conquiro* nonetheless represents a theory of knowledge that served and continues to serve the political domination of bodies that have been historically victimized. By taking a bird’s-eye view of the world and thereby masking its own social, economic, and geopolitical context and history, the *ego conquiro* functions as an epistemic logic for the modern subject to assume its own (solipsistic) consciousness has access to universality, while the Other occupies a place of non-being, critiqued for its irrational existence, and thereby “locked out” of universality.

Dussel’s reading of modernity and Cartesian history flies directly into the face of the narratives that presume Descartes single-handedly jump-started the intellectual movement of the world towards the Enlightenment (Alcoff, “Philosophy, the Conquest, and the Meaning of Modernity” 62). In fact, Dussel’s thesis about the historical and material priority of the *ego conquiro* to the *cogito* is part of a larger world-historical and world-systems theory that is not only directed against Enlightenment thinkers like Kant and Hegel, but also against more contemporary thinkers like Habermas and Taylor who think of modernity as an endogenous process that emerges from the French Revolution, the Reformation, and the (French and German) Enlightenment (Maldonado-Torres, “Enrique Dussel’s Liberation” 6-7).¹ In this regard, Dussel’s thesis opposes a de-historicized and de-materialized periodization of the rise of modernity, such as linking Descartes to the origins of modernity, instead calling for a world-historical analysis of the material conditions that gave rise to modernity. A secondary point that Dussel raises here is that by arguing that modernity begins with the French Revolution, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment, such thinkers of modernity end up gerrymandering Spain and Portugal from modernity, and thereby, excluding European colonialism as a “material condition of possibility” of modernity.

This discussion of the implications of the *ego conquiro* becomes important for scholars who are working to decolonialize philosophical thought because it makes explicit the relationship between the *cogito* and epistemic violence. What this article will discuss, then, are the more serious forms of epistemic violence of the *ego conquiro*, particularly what decolonialists call “epistemic racism” and “epistemicide,” which have led to a homogenization of philosophy and knowledge around the world to the point of internalizing the epistemologies of the Global North as the common-sense position(s). This article will draw out the links between “epistemic racism,” “epistemicide,” and Dussel’s *ego*

conquiro thesis, and then argue as a concluding point for a method of resistance that foregrounds philosophical pluralism to disrupt the common-sense viewpoint that champions the epistemologies of the Global North.

The *Ego Conquiro* in Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation

Dussel's historical investigation of the origins of modernity is an attempt to refute the standard narrative of modernity that maintains that its historical construction can be found in Northern Europe prevailing since the 18th century (see Dussel, 1492 *El Encubrimiento* 13-37).² What is made explicit in Dussel's refutation, in particular, is the geographic-ideological relationship Europe had with the rest of the world: namely, that Europe was never the center of world history as Kant, Hegel, and Marx had theorized, but rose to prominence as a result of the Spanish colonization of the Americas (Dussel, "Meditaciones anti-cartesianas" 156-59). That is to say, European modernity was predicated on colonialism, and so we cannot speak of modernity without speaking about colonialism. Following the Spanish colonization of the Americas, Descartes's development of the *cogito* would begin to function as the epistemological structure for further generating the colonial projects of Europe that resulted in the modern center-peripheral (e.g., North-South) relationship. Was Descartes the first modern philosopher? Dussel says "no,"³ because there were intellectual antecedents, both from the West and the Mediterranean, that provided the source material for the *cogito*—particularly Descartes's own educational training in a Jesuit school. In fact, on this very point, the influence of Jesuit thought is rather visible in the "Cartesian argument," according to Dussel, where ritualized prayers and contemplation practices focusing on the self-reflection of one's own subjectivity mirrored the philosophical development and structure of the *cogito* ("Meditaciones anti-cartesianas" 160-61). But more than this even, Jesuit thinkers like Francisco Suárez (1548-1617) and Francisco Sánchez (1551-1623), along with Jewish philosopher Gómez Pereira (1500-1567), wrote philosophical works on metaphysics, methods, and doubt that would provide the inspiration and theoretical resources for Descartes's own discourse and concerns that would give birth to the *cogito* (Gordon, "Thoughts" 67).

In general, Dussel's *ego conquiro* thesis is a political-phenomenological argument about how Cartesian subjectivity is, above all, part of a larger practice of the self, that, when reduced to an epistemic function, conceals the broader and anterior practices of constituting social agents when relating to themselves and others. In other words, there was a conquering or imperial subject that existed prior to the disembodied, epistemic subject of the *cogito*, but the Cartesian subject not only masks this historical connection but furthers its logic of being. One way to make sense of the historical

connection, however, is to draw out the intellectual connections: while the more common intellectual history around Descartes describes influences that go back to Aristotle, Stoicism, and St. Augustine, what is largely ignored in all of this is how his Jesuit influences can be more directly linked to the solipsistic consciousness of the modern ego. As Dussel claims, Descartes was unable to resolve the aporia of needing the “*ego* of the *ego cogito* to be a soul independent of all materiality” (“Meditaciones anti-cartesianas” 164)⁴ because as Descartes theorized the soul as a *res*, an immortal thing or substance separate from the body, he also needed to ensure some unity of the soul with an equally substantive body. Dussel argues that Descartes’s philosophical resolution would end up with an accidental unity of soul and body that guarantees certainty without doubt (“Meditaciones anti-cartesianas” 164). Dussel then adds: “pero la *union* del cuerpo y el alma se fundaba en el presupuesto de un *mundo exterior* al que nos abrimos por los sentidos, la imaginación y las pasiones que han sido puestos en cuestión por el *cogito*” (“Meditaciones anti-cartesianas” 164). Therefore, the body, as a result, would become a pure epistemic machine without any identifiable qualities—that is, a mere quantitative object in geometrical space. What was launched from here on is the “zero point” position of the modern philosophical subject where the skin color, race, gender, or sex of the *cogito* remains covered over while the dominant ideologies rooted in objective rationality function as the default stance of the world—a point that will be elaborated later on. The modern ego, or the Cartesian ego rather, therefore, becomes a solipsistic consciousness because it fails to bake the Other—particularly, the social, political, and geographical contexts that give rise to it—in its epistemic structure of the world.

Interestingly enough, this core-periphery relationship instantiated by Europe and its colonies would not only enter the language of subsequent philosophers like Hegel and Kant in their pursuits to rationalize European supremacy but would also go unnoticed to their critics—for instance, Karl Marx, who ends up inaugurating their developmental view of world history through his use of the dialectic. This is because such thinkers were preceded by the epistemological and ontological foundation posited by Descartes, which was what provided the preconditions and theoretical structure for situating Europe at the center of the world and justifying its imperial being. Since Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am” thesis itself concealed how its political function was that of “I conquer, therefore I am,” the *cogito*, which thinks of itself as placeless in spatiotemporal terms despite operating from its own geopolitical position, would epistemically grant Europe the privilege to justify its ruling of the world. And given that the conditions of possibility for Descartes’s *cogito* were the Spanish invasion of 1492, Descartes’s own quest to resolve the paradigmatic crisis of the “first modern philosophy” would have its origins in the discourses of Francisco Suárez, Ginés de Sepúlveda, and

Bartolomé de las Casas, all of whom sought to make sense of Southern Europe's relationship to the Indigenous people of the Americas.

Lying underneath all modern philosophy (from the 16th century to the 21st century) is this belief that the dominant culture must bestow the benefits of civilization to the backward cultures of the world (to what Kant describes as *Unmündigkeit*). In fact, Kant himself would blame the victims for their own conditions of exploitation and subordination in his argument that Enlightenment is the departure from a self-incurred immaturity (*Kindheit*). But this sort of logic can be traced back even further: for instance, Ginés Sepúlveda mastered the rhetoric of this language game by claiming that barbarians must learn to respect the rules of reason and civilization, and those who resist such an empire would be subjected to violence and bloodshed (Dussel, "Meditaciones anti-cartesianas" 166). In other words, the benefits of Western civilization must be imposed on them by any means necessary, especially by means of arms, because the civilizing project is inevitable and morally desirable. And yet the cause for war and violence had nothing to do with any real sense of truth but rather with the belief that the barbaric were uncivilized. As decolonial scholar Linda Martín Alcoff describes it:

Success at overcoming other societies is itself taken as sufficient proof of merit. But such reasoning is no better than the reasoning that holds a victim of torture is more likely to tell the truth, or that a woman with rocks tied to her ankles who does not float when thrown into a pond is thereby proved to be a witch. ("Philosophy, the Conquest, and the Meaning of Modernity" 60)

But in the end, the barbarians were the ones who were blamed for their opposition to the civilizing process, which in turn rendered the modern subject innocent and absolvable from engendering violence and the so-called "just wars."

But wherever there is domination, there is also resistance. Dussel tells us that the first anti-discourse of early modernity was developed by Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566), whose originality was not in the terrain of producing metaphysical treatises or systems of logic, but rather located in the intersections of ethics, politics, and history. What Las Casas represents in this moment of modernity, according to Dussel, is "an *I criticize* in the presence of the *ego conquiro* that inaugurated Modernity" ("Meditaciones anti-cartesianas" 171),⁵ with his claim that the Indigenous were not barbaric or irrational, but rather subjects that enjoy reason and dialogue around morality and political discourse (Camelo Perdomo, "Enrique Dussel" 105). Or, to put it another way, the critique that was advanced by Las Casas was an ethical-political one, which sought to unmask the subjectivity of the Other. But to what extent was this critique successful? Dussel himself ponders this question when he writes:

“Toda la Modernidad, durante cinco siglos, quedará en ese estado de una *conciencia ético-política* en situación «letárgica», como «dormida», sin «sensibilidad», ante el dolor del mundo periférico del Sur” (“Meditaciones anti-cartesianas” 171). What Dussel is suggesting here nonetheless is that Las Casas’s critique functions not unlike Levinas’s ethics-first philosophy: namely, how any imposition of a theory onto an Other by arms is taken to be an expansion of “the Same” *qua* “the same,” and that the only way to attract members of a foreign culture to a specific doctrine is by means of persuasion (“Meditaciones anti-cartesianas” 175).⁶ Such an approach to people, of course, was a threat to the absolute power of the King and represented a direct refutation against the justifications for Europe’s colonial project.

But the more universally driven consciousness, as Dussel insists, is the critical consciousness of the Indigenous themselves—that is, the victims themselves who utter the critique (“Meditaciones anti-cartesianas” 179). According to Dussel, those who directly experience the trauma and violence of the *ego conquiro* stand in a unique position against modernity, because they can speak about their suffering first-hand as existing from the “radical exteriority.” Dussel here mentions Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, an Indigenous person who understood the traditions of the oppressed, to be the first to have produced a critical narrative that contains an ethical and political viewpoint rooted in its local culture. By showing how the Indians fulfilled the obligations of the Christian “commandments” where the conquistadors failed, Guamán Poma demonstrates the contradictions of modernity. As Dussel writes: “Se critica entonces la praxis de dominación de los mismos cristianos españoles partiendo de su propio texto sagrado: la Biblia” (“Meditaciones anti-cartesianas” 181). Guamán Poma would not only provide a sketch of the cultural-political order prior to the Spanish conquest in his *Chronicles*, but would also expose the atrocities of the empire, while explaining the possible solutions to the disaster of colonial unrest (“Meditaciones anti-cartesianas” 182). But more importantly, Guamán Poma’s work would uncover the hidden epistemic logic of the *ego conquiro* that naturalizes the colonial domination of the south. Dussel explains:

Guamán descubre el proceso que pasa del *ego conquiro*, subjetividad creciente, auto-centrada, desoforada en superar todos los límites en su soberbia, hasta que culmine en el *ego cogito* fundado en Dios mismo, como su propia mediación reconstituir el mundo a su dominio, a su servicio, para su explotación, y entre ellos las poblaciones del Sur. (“Meditaciones anti-cartesianas” 187).

In terms of epistemic violence, all of this represents a critique from the “radical exterior” that can serve as a “future reserve.” While Descartes’s *cogito* set in place a much stronger disposition of a substantive being within modernity that “would situate the corporality of colonial subjects as exploitable machines” (“Meditaciones anti-cartesianas” 194),⁷ the critical wisdom of the Indigenous themselves, exemplified by Guamán Poma, set in place positions of potentiality for philosophical decolonization and the overcoming of Eurocentric capitalist modernity. But to further understand this relationship between the *cogito* and colonial domination, we have to further clarify the phenomenological structure constituting the *ego conquiro* to the *cogito* and the relationship the *ego conquiro* has to the material conditions that generated the European invasion of the Other.

The *Ego Conquiro* as an Epistemic Logic of Europe’s Colonial Expansion

As Dussel sees it, the *cogito* itself, as an epistemic logic succeeding a prior imperial being, provided the gestated source material for modern Europe’s colonial expansion—particularly Northern Europe’s colonial expansion.⁸ But this process of colonial expansion, as this section seeks to clarify, should be thought of as more of a parasitic cycle embedded in a dialectical relationship of domination with the Other, where the *cogito*, as a solipsistic, objective consciousness, survives on reproducing its own being and rational reflections on existence in history at the expense of affirming the Other’s life-existence and epistemic understanding of the world. Like a miser who cannot accumulate enough wealth and power, the *cogito* itself functions as if it is self-replicating and parasitic, feeding on everything it acquires from itself and the world without much (ethical) regard for what exists outside of itself. Within the cycle of reproducing its own objective being, the subjectivity of the Other remains hidden, critiqued for its irrational existence. In other words, if the *cogito* represents the subject of rationality, the Other represents the place of irrationality, thereby subjected to the parasitic and insatiable tendencies of the *cogito*.

Although the *cogito* represents the “second moment of modernity” (Dussel, 1492 *El Encubrimiento del Otro* 11; Dussel, “Meditaciones anti-cartesianas” 194-95), as the epistemologization of a prior imperial being, it nonetheless reflects a paradigm of consciousness that sees itself as a universal standpoint, and thus wholly superior, that which cannot be questioned or displaced from the outside. So, when the Other is confronted by the *cogito*, its customs, beliefs, and values are viewed as cruder and more primitive, interpreted as cultural practices that need to be channeled into the right path of reason and civilization (Montano, “El ego conquiro como inicio de la modernidad” 18). Even resistance to domination itself is considered to be an irrational act from the standpoint of the *cogito*,

which further justifies its projects of annihilation. And in the *cogito*'s pursuit to impose its rational way of being onto the irrational Other, the *cogito* will also take the Other's possessions—its land or territory—for its own purposes. Seeing that the Other are thought to live in a state of nature, and their land not based on natural law, such land must, therefore, become the property of the *cogito*.

But what are the ontological and epistemological assumptions constituting the *cogito*? And how is the *cogito* ontologically linked or phenomenologically structured to its previous logic of imperial being? Let us answer the first answer now. As briefly mentioned already, Dussel and other decolonialists discuss solipsism as one of the presuppositions of modernity subjectivity. Although it is possible that Descartes would deny it as such, the *cogito* assumes that any knowledge existing “out there” can only be true if it is revealed as innate ideas observed within the knower itself. Trust or faith in the Other holding perfect knowledge is thereby viewed with suspicion and judgment. Objectivity, the second presupposition of the *cogito*, exists, but it exists because the knowledge about the nature of reality comes from ideas formed by the intellect, not by external senses that are held to be imperfect. The foundation of knowledge, then, depends on the third presupposition: on controlling human emotions and passions that would otherwise trigger the knower to make judgments too hastily. But this foundation can only be secured if we “demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations” (Descartes, *The Philosophical* vol. 2, 12). In this moment to “start again right from the foundations,” Descartes posits doubt in the form of the “I-think,” because doubt itself represents an unshakeable certainty (that doubt itself cannot be doubted to exist). But the certainty of doubt of the *cogito* becomes an Archimedean point within the knower's inquiry for apprehending the world's truth. From that standpoint, the knowledge formed within the knower's mind becomes perfect, while knowledge developed outside of itself becomes viewed as imperfect and corruptible. Even though scholars of Descartes reject the idea that he succeeded in theorizing a substantive being, a reified “I,” as it were, the historical reality following the development of the *cogito* tells us otherwise: that a substantive “I” was truly formed as the foundation of modernity that served to justify modern Europe's colonial invasions. Decolonial scholar Ramón Grosfoguel reminds us that the formulation of Cartesian philosophy in the mid-17th century coincided with Holland becoming the core of the world system at that time (“Decolonizing Western Uni-versalisms” 89). This is all to say that an epistemic and ontological being arose from the certainty of “I-think” that fully believes it has the capability to discover the truth of the world and, as such morally licensed to force others to adopt this final truth.

However, the ontological link between the *cogito* and its prior imperial being, in particular, can be found in their shared historical connection to the logic of capital expansion. As Dussel holds, European colonialism functioned like Marx's capital in the sense that it needed to expand itself in order to feed itself and thus maintain its core position in its relationship with the periphery.⁹ Capitalism, therefore, is like a vampire, surviving on the blood of the victims (of the Other). Of course, Dussel does not reduce the process of colonial expansion to mere material production; to the contrary rather, Dussel's re-reads Marx by starting with Part 2 of Volume 1 in *Das Kapital*, where he begins with an analysis of the relationship between living labor and capital, as a form of objectified labor, instead of departing from the analysis of the commodity, as normally construed in the Marxist tradition (Dussel, *Hacia un Marx* 293-97).¹⁰ The idea, nonetheless, here is that the *cogito* mimics this process of capital accumulation, where it seeks to produce and consume knowledge, not just from inside its own imagination, but also from the outside world in order to remain itself. Thinking begets thinking, which does serve the process of consumption, but the cyclical process of production and consumption is more directly related to the feeding of the *cogito* on objects from the outside, from the exterior. Marxist scholars recognize that capitalism produces desires, and in the case of Dussel's and other decolonialists' critique, the desires of the *cogito* are one of them. In a Cartesian world, there is an insatiability to the "I-think," a lack, so to speak, that can never be fulfilled, but nonetheless continuously motorizes the *cogito* to produce and consume without limits. If the "I-think" takes itself to be the center of the world, then all objects produced and consumed in the search for eternal satisfaction constitute the desires that drive imperial existence. But in the process of objectifying all objects (in the form of commodities), derived from living labor, the "I-think" simultaneously objectifies itself against the world, dividing itself apart from fully recognizing the subjectivity of the Other. This is why when the subjectivity of the Other is masked in the process of objectification, the *cogito* converts its own standpoint of the world into a universal foundation (i.e., the God-eye view of knowledge) from which all objects of history are then viewed and judged (hence why Hegel would position world spirit within the West).¹¹

This rereading of the *cogito* as an *ego conquiro* can also be made explicit in those historical moments before the rise of Cartesian philosophy. Here we can cite Grosfoguel's work again, who mentions the four genocides of the 16th century as instances where the *ego conquiro* historically mediates the projects launched from the side of the core with violent events occurring on the periphery (see Grosfoguel, "The Structure of Knowledge" 78-89).¹² But we can also discuss more contemporary political-economic history where a repetition of the epistemic violence and conquest of the *cogito* is

clearly seen: namely, the rise of environmental racism both in and between the North and South as well as the ongoing American militarization and policing of the world. What all of these forms of violence have in common is that they emerge out of the constructed needs of the ego, whose desire to control, dominate, or exterminate the Other is not only an attempt to fulfill the insatiability of the “I-think,” but also attempts to free itself from ever having to face its own moral demons. If the external world is perceived as lifeless matter, a quantifiable object that can be exploited by the desires of the ego, then no guilt can ever arise in the destruction of the Other, or if it does arise, it can easily be perceived as another emotion or passion that needs to be controlled in pursuit of rational truth.

The epistemic logic of the *ego conquiro* is stronger than ever today, where it continues to serve the ideological foundation for capitalist society and its push for neo-colonial domination. Neo-liberal discourse or anarcho-capitalist libertarianism, for instance, are radical derivatives of the Cartesian paradigm, which takes individual freedom and choice to be the basis of this perfect truth. But the Cartesian inquiry for objective truth mirrors the idea that individuals can acquire perfect knowledge and thereby make proper social-economic choices for themselves because they are inherently rational. It is no wonder then that neo-liberalism and anarcho-capitalist libertarianism are most often the ideology of the ruling class in the Global North: such is because they rationalize the political-economic inequities within and between capitalist societies of the North and South. And yet, if individual freedom and choice take precedence above everything else, then society and economic production themselves are thought to be nothing more than a collection of individual beliefs and desires. A reduction occurs in this process: from the social-economic field to the solipsistic individual, that which is decontextualized from social, political, economic, and geographical history. Of course, this is not to say that neo-liberalism and anarcho-capitalist libertarianism are inherently Cartesian or that Descartes was a libertarian before libertarianism, but rather that these discourses cannot exist without the epistemological foundation of the *ego conquiro*. But what makes the *ego conquiro* so difficult to uproot is the way it has pervaded Western epistemology—namely, by how it frames intellectual debates and discussions today. This is why Marxist geographer David Harvey once described the zeitgeist of the time as “we are all neo-liberals now” (*A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism* 13). That is, the common-sense standpoint in the field of economics in the North, or perhaps even in most parts of the world today, is either neo-liberalism or a softer version of it. This is to say that the epistemologies that still dominate the Euroamerican world are directly linked to the *ego conquiro* in that they are dependent on its logic for their own existence. What will be discussed next is how the *ego conquiro* served and continues to serve as the fuel for the various forms of epistemic violence today.

The Link between the *Ego Conquiro* and Epistemic Violence

So far, this article has discussed how the *ego conquiro* has operated as the ground of knowledge to the point of epistemic and cultural dominance, where the philosophy and knowledge of the North have now been internalized as the world's common-sense position(s). The consequence of this particular form of epistemic hegemony is the duality formed within our “common sense” that holds a distinction between “epistemic privilege” and “epistemic inferiority”; that is, an epistemic privilege is the knowledge position that is more likely deemed “legitimate,” whereas epistemic inferiority is the knowledge position that is more likely deemed “illegitimate,” based on a certain set of assumptions regarding truth-claims. And yet, as Grosfoguel reminds us, such “legitimate knowledge” only really comes from 5 countries that hold less than 12 percent of the world’s population (“Epistemic Islamophobia” 31). Such a dichotomy between epistemic privilege and epistemic inferiority, nonetheless, has set the stage for “epistemic racism,” which is the framework the Western world has inherited from the *ego conquiro* that presupposes the view that non-Western knowledge and philosophy are not worthy traditions of thought because they lack access to universal truth (Grosfoguel, “Epistemic Islamophobia” 29). How this is all linked to the *cogito* is the way the “I-think” theorizes itself as “neutral,” when in fact it is not. In fact, as previously discussed already, the “I-think” hides or conceals the geopolitical contexts and historical relationships between core and periphery. Grosfoguel clarifies this process succinctly:

Western philosophy's “ego-politics of knowledge” has always privileged 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. (“Decolonizing Post-Colonial” 4-5)

In other words, by masking its own economic, social, and geopolitical position in the world, the *cogito* that floats without context tends to function in the service of the de facto institutions of power, while the Other is turned into an inanimate being, something that can be used for the *cogito*'s own economic, political, and social purposes. But since the link between epistemic privilege and the *ego conquiro* is based on this assumed “objectivity” and “neutrality” of the *cogito* that mask the position of the speaker

or thinker within a multitude of power relations, epistemic racism becomes a natural outgrowth of this entire process.

By placing the Cartesian ego or subject at the foundation of knowledge, whatever internal discussion that exists within the solipsistic consciousness of the *cogito* remains monological, not dialogical, within the philosophical arena, because the *cogito* remains insulated from social, political, geographical, and economic relations, as it is believed to be self-generated. Since the ego of the solipsistic consciousness often refuses to question its own existence, there is a hubris to the Cartesian subject, namely, to the “inhabitants of the zero-point (enlightenment philosophers and scientists) [because they] are convinced that they can gain a point of view toward which no point of view is possible” (Castro-Gómez, *Zero-Point*, 8). Since the *cogito* only grants its own standpoint the procedures for thinking it has access to universal truth, especially in moments when it recognizes itself as the methodological victor, whatever epistemologies and philosophies that exist outside of the solipsistic consciousness are therefore deemed epistemically inferior and thus naturalized as illegitimate knowledge systems (and thus unworthy of being a dialogical partner).

While Dussel does not fully elaborate on this link between the *ego conquiro* and epistemic racism, those who follow his work, like Grosfoguel, Alcoff, and Diego dos Santos Reis, do and tell us that epistemicide—this historical erasure of epistemologies from the Global South—was the direct result of the structures of Eurocentrism and epistemic racism. But even those philosophies and systems of knowledge that we think may be sympathetic to the marginal identities of the Global South remain entrenched to the “zero-point” standpoint of the *ego conquiro*. The “zero-point” standpoint that is being referred to here is not merely the default political or economic position of the speaker within a given polity, but the geopolitical position of the speaker within the various asymmetrical relations between the North and South that seek to assert its own being as well. To be sure, attempts have been made to include marginalized identities within many of the new frameworks of thought, but most still cling to the assumptions that generate epistemic racism: this assumption that the Western tradition is the only single epistemology that has access to universality (Grosfoguel, “Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political Economy” 94). Marxism and psychoanalysis (both of which are central pillars of the post-Marxist movement), for instance, still produce knowledge from this “zero-point” position, disguising the various places from where they enunciate, because they do not problematize the subject *qua* European, masculine, heterosexual, white, Judeo-Christian and so forth (Grosfoguel, “Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy” 93). We can see this point with Slavoj Žižek’s own innovations and developments within psychoanalysis and

Marxism, which are efforts to save and defend the legacy of Judeo-Christian thought from post-modern relativism.¹³

One thing to keep in mind here is that Dussel and the decolonial thinkers are not anti-European critics as such but rather critics of Eurocentrism as well as of the nationalists, colonialists, and fundamentalists of the Global South that mimic the absolutist claims of European modernity. What they all have in common, though, is this assumption that there is only one epistemic tradition that has access to truth and universality: in fact, the absolutists (e.g., modernists) and relativists (e.g., post-modernists) can be thought of as inverted mirrors of each other, both supported by the same solipsistic consciousness of the *cogito*. That is, both are authoritarian faces of the same Cartesian subject that imagines itself as the sole subject of truth—existing without an epistemic context, or rather, without social, political, economic, and geographical relations with the *epistemic* Other. While the affirmation of the truth-claims of the *cogito* visibly reifies its own standpoint by turning its own cultural particularity into an objective universal, the deconstructive negation of all truth-claims of the world outside of the *cogito* also invisibly reifies a particular standpoint, except that it turns its own cultural particularity into a subjectivized universal, thereby allowing for the default reflections of the *cogito* to smuggle themselves into the final standpoint of the world. In other words, in terms of the latter point, negating the claims of all others external to oneself clears the way for a re-assertion of the *cogito* to operate as a hidden epistemic foundation. Until the *cogito* negates its own particular projections onto the world and thereby opens itself up for dialogical transformation, the subject of the *cogito* will continuously insert itself as the epistemic ground of all historical knowledge.

This point with respect to the *cogito* has been made before in other areas of the world, particularly in the works of Takeuchi Yoshimi, which speak to a shared sense of concerns around the problem of the *cogito*'s monological nature.¹⁴ Literary critic Takeuchi Yoshimi, theorizes a logic of Asian resistance from a standpoint that takes self-negation seriously within the context of inter-cultural and inter-epistemic dialogue. In his famous lecture, “Asia as Method,” Takeuchi argues for a kind of resistance that “discerns the limits of the West” (“Asia as Method” 165; *Takeuchi Yoshimi Zenshū* vol. 5, 114), that which stands against the homogenization of the world. Such acts of resistance, as Takeuchi argues, should seek to “change the West in order to further elevate those universal values that the West itself produced” (“Asia as Method” 165; *Takeuchi Yoshimi Zenshū* vol. 5, 115) by facilitating a “rollback” or “turn-around” (*makikaeshi*) of cultural values that create a new type of universality. In other words, Takeuchi's view of resistance works to “overcome modernity” through a realization of universality among cultural particulars in self-negation. Here, Takeuchi is deploying

negation as the very method of resistance itself—negation *qua* “problematizing oneself” (i.e., self-negation)—in order to cultivate the process of the subject’s or the particular’s own self-formation. But such a process should not be viewed as an attempt to objectify any set of cultural values, because, as Takeuchi writes, “it is impossible to definitely state what this [method] might mean” (“Asia as Method” 165; *Takeuchi Yoshimi Zenshū* vol. 5, 115). Therefore, the method of negation itself is performed solely in the interest of generating new cultural and political possibilities with the aim of overcoming the logical traps of Western modernity, which includes its theories of emancipation that, on the surface, appear to be in the best interest of the Other. The point we can take from Takeuchi here is that the intervention needed to disrupt the *cogito* lying as the epistemic foundation is a resistance in the form of self-negation, or self-problematization, of the *cogito* itself.

But then again, overcoming the authoritarian tendencies of the *cogito* is not just a matter of negating the ego or solipsistic consciousness within the process of inter-epistemic and inter-cultural dialogue. While such a move is necessary, it is not sufficient. What is required, then, is a re-positioning of subjectivity to epistemically think from a subaltern location as well. Here, Grosfoguel reminds us of a distinction between “social location” and “epistemic location”: while the former locates itself on the oppressed side of power relations through a set of social (or economic) values, the latter locates itself in the space where subaltern epistemic perspectives coming from below produce a critical view of hegemonic knowledge of the power dynamics themselves (“Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies” 6). The former, although it is one step in the right direction, still defends Eurocentric perspectives because its social values demand the subaltern to epistemically think like the dominant positions. Such a framework, as Grosfoguel claims, has yet to move into the direction of a “geopolitics of knowledge,” where epistemic pluralism develops from the periphery, from the side of the victims of the modernity (“Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies” 5-6). As Dussel himself maintains, the peripheral culture that is oppressed by the imperial culture must be the starting point of any inter-cultural or inter-epistemic dialogue (“Transmodernidad e Interculturalidad” 7).

In this transition towards a “geopolitics of knowledge,” the decolonialists hold that it is important to prevent an “everything goes” to proliferate from the periphery—this idea that everything a subaltern subject says is equivalent to critical thinking (see Paraskeva, “Justicia contra el epistemicidio” 166-69). Decolonialists admit on these grounds that there is an ever-present danger of an “epistemic populism” emerging within a transmodern world, which does little to liberate the victims of modernity because such would end up consolidating power in the hands of a vanguard elite within that movement itself. Rather, the move towards a “geopolitics of knowledge” requires the victims to

speak for themselves by developing their own local forms of knowledge and accounts of resistance that also tear through the totalizing narratives centered in Europe. An overcoming of the *cogito* that lies at the epistemic foundation of modernity (and, to some extent, post-modernity) takes nothing less than an inter-epistemic dialogue among knowledge producers from different epistemic traditions of thought, where all epistemic traditions seek to learn from each other without having to recur to European categories as an epistemological center. But this is not just about being open to cultural differences; rather, this is about seeing the Other as a teacher, where the self learns from the Other.

When Dussel talks about the “future reserves” of those critiques existing at the “radical exterior,” what is referred to here are those subaltern or southern epistemologies that enrich conversations in ways that spark a transformation of all cultural particulars in the service of building a pluralistic world (e.g., a transmodern pluriversalism). Boaventura de Sousa Santos describes this process of learning from the “radical exterior,” or from the South rather, in three important ways: 1) learning that the South exists, 2) learning to go to the South, and 3) learning from and within the South (see Santos, “If God were a Human Rights Activist: Human Rights and the Challenge of Political Theologies is Humanity Enough? The Secular Theology of Human Rights” 1-42).¹⁵ In fact, what we have seen emerge after decades of decolonial thinking is a strong ecological tradition from out of South America’s Indigenous thinking, where environmental justice is theorized, debated, and mobilized quite differently than in the North (see Vermeulen, “Environmental Justice and Epistemic Violence” 89-93), thus demonstrating how nuanced and localized the struggle for environmental justice really is. To privilege the knowledge of the North over the local experiences of the South therefore repeats the epistemic violence that leads to misrecognition between people (between North and South) and thereby reduces the possibility for any pluralistic transformation.

But this also means that a new age of economic relations must unfold. That is to say, a transmodern pluralism depends on overcoming capitalism and embracing a participatory form of democracy that goes beyond the limits of liberalism (Dussel, “Agenda for a South-South Philosophical Dialogue” 26). Towards this end, the decolonialists of the North have a role in this political-economic transformation through their own forms of resistance as well. When Japan was pursuing its own colonizing mission during the Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa periods, for instance, Japanese Marxist Tosaka Jun bravely launched a critique against the various iterations of Japanism and liberalism that explicitly or complicitly supported empire-building. What Tosaka theorized can be insightful here for our own methods of resistance in the North. Namely, that Tosaka advanced a view of resistance grounded in a standpoint of the “people” (*minshū*), where Japan and its rulers must be judged from the position of

the “democratic masses that autonomously attempt to defend their daily lives” (*Tosaka Jun Zenshū* vol. 5, 3).¹⁶ According to Tosaka, people form political power when standing together with others in the struggle against the ideologies of colonial domination through their shared means of critical resistance. As a cultural critic and journalist for the anti-fascist movement, Tosaka would position the concept of resistance within the critical mindset natural to the “people” themselves, where they are equipped with a journalist framework that judges the present with philosophical scrutiny (*Tosaka Jun Zenshū* vol. 3, 131). The goal for Tosaka is not to popularize journalism, science, and philosophy for the sake of merely enlightening the ordinary citizen; the goal, rather, is to empower the “people” by converting their common sense into critical thinking tools aimed at destabilizing fascism, liberalism, and other ideologies naturalizing the repetitions and routines of everyday life under capitalism while forging new paths that will lead to the creation of new social, political, and economic conventions. Such is all to say that if the common-sense positions of today are the epistemologies of the North, then it is also incumbent upon the allies of the North to engage in a critical resistance that succeeds in overcoming capitalism through fostering inter-epistemic and inter-cultural dialogue between the North and South.

Conclusion

What this article discusses are the implications of Dussel’s *ego conquiro* thesis, which functions as the first paradigm of modern imperialism, and how the *ego conquiro* is linked to epistemic violence. According to Dussel, the *cogito* operates as an epistemic structure that naturalized Europe’s colonial expansion by concealing or masking the “zero-point” positions of the modern subject that rationalizes its own truth-claim within the geopolitical history of the core-peripheral relationship. But the epistemic violence generated by the legacy of the *ego conquiro* still reverberates today: rather than see a plurality of epistemologies or cultural philosophies from the periphery around the world, we see the knowledge that is still produced and formed within the parameters of European categories, crystallized as the common-sense standpoint(s) of today. What decolonial scholars call “epistemic racism” and “epistemicide” are precisely these violent phenomena or events of epistemic consolidation, which has led to a narrowing of epistemological knowledge rather than an expansion. But in a world where civilization is on the brink of collapse due to global climate change and unfettered capitalism, we are in desperate need of new epistemological voices that can help us think through the problems we face today, that which are not beholden to Western or European frameworks of thought.

But is another world possible? What Dussel and many of us decolonialists claim is that a transmodern pluriversalism is indeed possible but only through a new kind of a particular-universal

configuration that refuses to be monological or imperialist by design—that is, where one particular is universalized, and the rest follow suit. While it is impossible to fully de-link Western epistemology within the decolonial process, as some scholars would argue, it is possible to transform the North-South relationship in more equitable ways. This is because the central structure of the transmodern pluriversalism is that of movement, specifically the flow of knowledge between North and South, and between South and South, where there is a dialogical transformation between all cultural particulars, but with the mindset of maintaining cultural diversity and epistemological pluralism (and thereby preventing a restoration of Eurocentric categories as the universal) (e.g., see Dos Santos Reis, “Crossroads Knowledge” 14-15). The important thing is to recognize that this transmodern world cannot exist without seeing resistance against Eurocentrism as a radical struggle for egalitarianism and democratic participation, that which must move beyond the structures of capitalist modernity and all of its violent forms (e.g., patriarchy, racism, colonialism and so forth). Such a project is not utopian in nature, as it is not intended to be realized in the abstract universals of Western modernity, but rather realized in each and every moment of death of modernity among the people on the periphery that will give birth to a new (pluralistic) world beyond it.

Notes

¹ For Habermas and Taylor, modernity began in the 17th or 18th century.

² Dussel's book *1492 El encubrimiento del Otro: Hacia el origen del "mito de la modernidad"* and its translated version *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of the Other and the Myth of Modernity* make explicit what he is arguing: that in 1492, the so-called discovery of the New World was a "concealing" or covering over of the Other (the Indigenous people of the Americas) and that this concealment is the condition of possibility for the "myth" of modernity.

³ Neither can we think of colonial expansion as the result of Descartes's *cogito* as such. The *cogito* is the result, or culmination rather, of a prior history of colonial expansion, that would further accelerate the colonial domination of the Western world by functioning as the paradigm for modern imperialism.

⁴ The translation here is my own.

⁵ This translation here is my own.

⁶ While Las Casas did not believe in violence and coercion, he did think evangelization and conversion by means of persuasion was necessary.

⁷ The translations here is my own.

⁸ We have to be careful not to think of the early modern Spanish empire and the later British, Dutch, and US empires as operating in the same colonial fashion. The aim here is to discuss more on how the *ego conquiro* provided the epistemic logic for the "second moment of modernity"—for Northern Europe's history of colonial domination.

⁹ It is important to mention here that there is a mismatch between cultural and epistemic hegemony and the capitalist subsumption of other-life forms, hence, why the scholarship on the history of capitalism and the scholarship on decolonial and postcolonial histories are not always one and the same.

¹⁰ For Dussel, living labor is in fact the creative source that makes the valorization of capital possible, because capital alone cannot be the source of surplus-value, which otherwise would turn capital into an autocatalytic self-development; and so the production of surplus-value that is responsible for the development of profits depends more on capital subsuming the living labor coming from the exterior (Dussel, *Hacia un Marx desconocido* 67-69). That is, since living labor is the economic creative source, that which exists prior to and outside of capital, it should be the starting point for Marx's economic theory. But according to Dussel, this starting point of objectified (living) labor also represents a transcendental, ethical critique of capitalism because it seeks to include and unmask the perspective of workers from outside and external to capital, those who serve as the exploitation of living labor constituting the source of value and the bottomless growth of capital.

¹¹ The development theory of world history popular among German Idealists inherits Aristotle's logic of substance.

¹² The four events Grosfoguel mentions are the following: a) the genocide against Muslims and Jews in the conquest of Al-Andalus; b) the genocide against the Indigenous people of the Americas, followed by the Indigenous people of Asia; c) the violence against African people and their enslavement in the Americas; d) the violence against women in Europe accused of being witches and then were burned alive ("The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities" 77).

¹³ See Slavoj Žižek *Fragile Absolute or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting for?* New York and London: Verso, 2001.

¹⁴ We have to be careful not to assume that the theories of resistance and the decolonial thinking of Asia are the same as that of Latin America or that of Africa. All have their own distinct histories, with their own forms of resistance and decolonializing.

¹⁵ In other words, according to Santos, in order to learn from the South, we have to first let the South speak.

¹⁶ In fact, Tosaka's view of the people is similar to Dussel's concept of *el pueblo* in the struggle for epistemic justice, but with more emphasis on a resistance that is grounded in the "journalistic mindset" of the people themselves. See Stromback, "The Method of Political Resistance and the Concept of the 'People' in Tosaka Jun and Enrique Dussel" 85-110.

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