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TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World

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Journal

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 1(2)

ISSN

2154-1353

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Publication Date

2011

DOI

10.5070/T412011810

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Shifting the Geography of Reason in an Age of Disciplinary Decadence

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This essay addresses some recent theoretical developments that are laying an important role in the decolonization of knowledge. That knowledge has been *colonized* raises the question of whether it was ever free. The formulation of knowledge in the singular already situates the question in a framework that is alien to precolonial times, for the disparate modes of producing knowledge and notions of knowledge were so many that knowledges would be a more appropriate designation. Unification was a function of various stages of imperial realignment, where local reflections shifted their attention to centers elsewhere to the point of concentric collapse. On their way, those varieties of knowledge coalesced into knowledge of the center, and successive collapses of centers under the weight of other centers led, over time, to the global situation of *the center* and its concomitant organization of knowledges into knowledge. This path has not, however, been one exclusively built upon alienation, for along with the strange and the alien were also the familiar and the, at times, welcomed.

Enrique Dussel is a member of a community of scholars who have questioned the logic of self reflection offered by the most recent stage of centered productions of knowledge.¹ The philosophical framework of such rationalization is familiar to most students of Western philosophy: René Descartes reflected on method in the seventeenth century, grew doubtful, and articulated the certainty of his thinking self in opposition to the fleeting world of physical appearance. A result of such intellectual labor is a shift of first questions from meditations on what there is to what can be known. This focus on epistemology as first philosophy charted the course of philosophy in modern terms against and with which contemporary philosophers continue to struggle and grapple. For political thinkers, the new beginning is a little earlier, in the late fifteenth- through early sixteenth-century reflections on politics by Niccolò Machiavelli. Against these intellectualist formulations of modern life, Dussel raises the question of its underside, of the geopolitical, material impositions and the unnamed millions whose centers collapsed not simply from the force of ideas but sword and musket. That modernity was ironically also identified by Machiavelli but often overlooked through how he is read today: in *The Prince*, Machiavelli wrote of the effects of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella's victory over the Moors in the Iberian Peninsula.² His focus on the repression wrought in the name of Christendom presumed, however, the continued significance of the Mediterranean in the commerce of world-constituting activity. Dussel's work argues that the continued conflict spread westward across the Atlantic Ocean, and by October of that year, 1492, a series of new relations were established with a New World that de-centered the Mediterranean, stimulated a new economy and, with it, an organization of its management (new epistemologies), and re-aligned the western peninsula of Asia into a new political territory in the form of a continent, namely, Europe.

Prior to the emergence of Europe, there were maps of the Mediterranean that would have to

be turned upside down to be familiar to contemporary travelers, for, as was the case with ancient organizations of locations of regions that included northeast Africa, whose most known civilization was Egypt, “upper” pointed south, and “lower” northward.³ One, in other words, traveled *up* to what became known as Africa and *down* to what became known as Europe. The birth of new centers produced new geopolitical relations, and as focus on the New World eclipsed the effort to establish trade with southwest and middle Asia, the burgeoning economies affected the cultural life as well. In the production of cultural considerations also emerged those of new forms of life. A transition followed from Jews, Christians, and Muslims to Europeans, Asians, Africans, and New World peoples forced into some variation of the last as Indians or “red savages” at first along old Aristotelian categories of developed versus undeveloped “men.” This movement, negotiated through conquest, disputations, and enslavement, brought to the fore reflections of “man” on “man,” with constant anxiety over the stability of such a category. In such study, the process of discovery, of uncovering, also became one of invention and production: The search to understand “man” was also producing him. Its destabilization was inevitable as his possibilities called his exclusion of “her” into question. The concomitant reorganization of understanding him and her is oddly a schema that befits the dominating knowledge scheme of the epoch: Science.

The word “science,” although also meaning knowledge, reveals much in its etymology. It is a transformation of the Latin infinitive *scire* (“to know”), which, let us now add, suggests a connection to the verb *scindere* (“to divide”—think, today of “schism”), which, like many Latin words, also shares origins with ancient Greek words, which, in this case would be *skhizein* (to split, to cleave). Oddly enough, this exercise in etymology is indication of a dimension of epistemological colonization. Most etymological exercises report a history of words as though language itself is rooted in Greco-Latin classicism. The tendency is to find the sources of meaning from either the European side of the Mediterranean or from the north. There is an occasional stop off in Western Asia, but for the most part, the history of important terms suggest a geographical movement that is oddly similar to the movement of *Geist* in Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.⁴ Some further inquiry reveals, however, the relationship of the Latin and Greek words to a more ancient, Egyptian words *Crethi* and *kotket* by way of the Hebrew *Crethi*, which was derived from the root *carath*, which means to cut. The word *Crethi* referred to the ancient Egyptian royal armies, which were split into two classes.⁵ We thus see here a transition from one form of ancient center to various others on a course to modern times. Oddly enough, there is an etymological link during the Latin transition with another Latin infinitive, *secare* (which also means to cut), through which is more transparently connected to the Hebrew *carath* (if one imagines ‘*cara*’ as a possible spoken form). *Secare* is the source of the English word *sex*. A link between science and sex brings biology to the fore and the question of life sciences. Such a consideration indicates the importance life reflections on the unfolding developing of systematic inquiry: As the question of G-d motivated theological reflections and metaphysical inquiry, so, too, did concerns over the generation of life initiate scientific inquiry, although life was loaded with metaphysical content as anxieties and fear over the salvation of the soul without the theological guarantees attest to this day.⁶

The subsequent unfolding story is familiar to most of us who study colonization. Along with

the expansion of Christian kingdoms into nation-states and their colonies which resulted over the course of a few hundred years into European civilization on a global scale was also a series of epistemological developments that have literally produced new forms of life: new kinds of people came into being, while others disappeared, and whole groups of them occupy the age in an ambivalent and melancholic relationship.⁷ They belong to a world that, paradoxically, they do not belong. These people have been aptly described by W.E.B. Du Bois as “problems.”⁸ They are a function of a world in which they are posited as illegitimate although they could exist nowhere else. I am speaking here primarily of blacks and Indians/Native Americans, and by blacks I also mean to include Australian Aboriginals and related groups in the South Pacific and Indian Ocean. Such people are treated by dominant organizations of knowledge as problems instead of people who face problems. Their problem status is a function of the presupposed legitimacy of the systems that generate them. In effect, being perfect, the systems resist blame for any injustice or contradiction that may be avowed by such people. They become *extraneous* to its functions in spite of having already been generated by such functions. The contradictory nature of such assessments distorts the process of reasoning and the production of knowledge into doubled structures of disavowals and concealment, at times even with claims of transparency, and more problem people result. A consequence of such reflection is the proliferation of more kinds of problem people. Since 2001, when the War on Terror was inaugurated, the production of such people has increased.

At this point, I should like to make some distinctions that may anchor some of the abstract terms of this discussion. That modes of producing knowledge can be enlisted in the service of colonization is evident. Frantz Fanon, for instance, reflected, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, that methods have a way of devouring themselves.⁹ In doing so, he brought into focus the problem of evaluating method itself, of assessing methodology. If the epistemic conditions of social life are colonized, would not that infection reach also the grammatical level as well? Put differently, couldn't there also be colonization at the methodological level? If so, then, any presumed method, especially from a subject living within a colonized framework, could generate continued colonization. To evaluate method, the best “method” is the suspension of method. This paradox leads to a demand for radical anti-colonial critique. But for such a reflection to be radical, it must also make even logic itself suspect. Such a demand leads to a distinction between rationality and reason. The former cannot suspend logic, for to be what it is, it must, at minimum, demand consistency. The demand for consistency eventually collapses into maximum consistency, in order to be consistent. In effect, this means that rationality must presume its method, and it must resist straining from its generating grammar. Reason, however, offers a different story. To be maximally consistent, although logically commendable, is not always reasonable. Reasonability can embrace contradictions. Even more, it *must* be able to do so in order to evaluate even itself. This means that the scope of reason exceeds rationality.

Science is more at home with rationality than it is with reason. Departure from consistency-maximization would disintegrate an important foundation of modern science, namely, the notion of a law of nature. A law in this sense cannot have exceptions. Since reason at times demands exceptions, a marriage between science and reason would be short lived. The project of much of

modern European philosophical thought, however, has been the effort to cultivate such a marriage. Toward such a goal, the instruments of rationality are often unleashed with the result of the effort to yoke reason to rationality. This effort could be reformulated as the effort to colonize reason.

The effort to colonize reason has had many productive consequences. Many disciplines have been generated by this effort. On one hand, there are the natural and exact theoretical sciences. On the other, there are the human sciences. The former set seems to behave in a more disciplined way than the latter. Although disciplining the latter has resulted in a variety of disciplines, the underlying goal of maximum rationalization has been consistently strained. The source of such difficulty, reality, has been unremitting. Karl Jaspers, in *Philosophy of Existence*, summarized the circumstance well: reality is bigger than we are.¹⁰ Any discipline or generated system for the organization of reality faces the problem of having to exceed the scope of its object of inquiry, but since it, too, must be part of that object (if it is to be something as grand as reality), it must contain itself in a logical relationship to all it is trying to contain, which expands the initial problem of inclusion. There is, in other words, always *more* to and of reality.

Failure to appreciate reality sometimes takes the form of recoiling from it. An inward path of disciplinary solitude eventually leads to what I call *disciplinary decadence*.¹¹ This is the phenomenon of turning away from living thought, which engages reality and recognizes its own limitations, to a deontologized or absolute conception of disciplinary life. The discipline becomes, in solipsistic fashion, the world. And in that world, the main concern is the proper administering of its rules, regulations, or, as Frantz Fanon argued, (self-devouring) methods.¹² Becoming “right” is simply a matter of applying the method correctly. This is a form of decadence because of the set of considerations that fall to the wayside as the discipline turns into itself and eventually implodes. Decay, although a natural process over the course of time for living things, takes on a paradoxical quality in their creations. A discipline, e.g., could be in decay through a failure to realize that decay is possible. Like empires, the presumption is that the discipline must outlive all, including its own purpose.

In more concrete terms, disciplinary decadence takes the form of one discipline assessing all other disciplines from its supposedly complete standpoint. It is the literary scholar who criticizes work in other disciplines as not literary. It is the sociologist who rejects other disciplines as not sociological. It is the historian who asserts history as the foundation of everything. It is the natural scientist who criticizes the others for not being scientific. And it is also the philosopher who rejects all for not being properly philosophical. Discipline envy is also a form of disciplinary decadence. It is striking, for instance, how many disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences are now engaged in intellectual history with a focus on the Western philosophical canon. And then there is decadence at methodological levels. Textualism, for example, infects historiography at the level of archival legitimacy. Or worse, in some forms of textualism, the expectation of everything being contained in the text becomes evident in work in the human sciences that announce studying its subject through an analysis of exclusively on texts on the subject. There are scholars in race theory, e.g., who seem to think that theorizing the subject is a matter of determining what has been said on it by a small set of canonical texts. When appearance is reduced to textual appearance, what, then,

happens to inquiry? What are positivism and certain forms of semiological imitation of mathematical phenomena but science envy? When biologism, sociologism, psychologism, and many others assert themselves, to what, ultimately, are they referring? In the human sciences, the problem becomes particularly acute in the study of problem people. Such people misbehave also in disciplinary terms. The failure to squeeze them into disciplinary dictates, from a disciplinarily decadent perspective, is proof of a problem with the people instead of the discipline. It serves as further “proof” of the pathological nature of such people.

A response to disciplinary decadence (although not often identified as such) has been interdisciplinarity. A problem with this response is that it, too, is a decadent structure. This is because presumed disciplinary completeness of each discipline is compatible with disciplinary decadence. Disciplines could simply work alongside each other like ships passing in the night. A more hopeful route is *transdisciplinarity*, where disciplines work *through* each other; yet although more promising, such a route is still susceptible to decadence so long as it fails to bring reality into focus. But doing that raises questions of purpose. It raises considerations that may need to be addressed *in spite of disciplinary dictates*. I call this process a *teleological suspension of disciplinarity*. By that, I mean the willingness to go beyond disciplines in the production of knowledge. This “beyond” is, however, paradoxical. In some instances, it revitalizes an existing discipline. In others, it generates a new one. For example, a teleological suspension of philosophy generates new philosophy in some instances, and in others, it may generate new social thought that may not be philosophical. A teleological suspension of topology, chemistry, and biology could offer much to genetics and other sequencing notions of life.

Teleological suspensions of disciplines are also epistemic decolonial acts. The discussion I have offered thus far places such acts squarely in, although not exclusive to, Africana philosophy. By Africana philosophy, I mean the exploration of modern life as understood through contradictions raised by the lived-reality of African Diasporic people. Because such people are often linked to many other communities whose humanity has been challenged, Africana philosophy is also a philosophy that speaks beyond the Africana community. Among the pressing themes of Africana philosophy are: (1) philosophical anthropology, (2) liberation, and (3) metacritiques of reason. Their presence in this discussion is evident, but to summarize: The first is raised by the dehumanization of people in the modern world; the second pertains to the transformation of that circumstance; and the third examines whether the first two, especially at the level of the reasons offered in their support, are justified. I cannot provide a detailed discussion of these thematics here because of limited space. Instead, I should like to close with several additional considerations.

The first is regarding the political significance of this critique. For politics to exist, there must be discursive opposition. Such activity involves communicative possibilities that rely on the suspension of violent or repressive forces. In effect, that makes politics also a condition of appearance. To be political is to emerge, to appear, to exist. Colonization involves the elimination of discursive opposition between the dominant group and the subordinated group. A consequence of this is the elimination of speech (a fundamental activity of political life) with a trail of concomitant conditions of its possibility. It is not that colonized groups fail to speak. It is that their speaking lacks

appearance; it is not transformed into speech. The erasure of speech calls for the elimination of such conditions of its appearance such as gestural sites and the constellation of muscles that facilitates speech—namely, the face. As faceless, problem people are derailed from the dialectics of recognition, of self and other, with the consequence of neither self nor other. Since ethical life requires others, a challenge is here raised against models of decolonial practice that center ethics. The additional challenge, then, is to cultivate the options necessary for both political and ethical life. To present that call as an ethical one would lead to a similar problem of coloniality as did, say, the problem of method raised by Fanon. Ethics, in other words, has been subverted in the modern world. As with the critique of epistemology as first philosophy, ethics, too, as first philosophy must be called into question. It is not that ethics must be rejected. It simply faces its teleological suspension, especially where, if maintained, it presupposes instead of challenges colonial relations. Even conceptions of the ethical that demand deference to the Other run into trouble here since some groups, such as blacks and Indians/Native Americans, are often not even the Other. This means, then, that the ethical proviso faces irrelevance without the political conditions of its possibility. This is a major challenge to liberal hegemony, which calls for ethical foundations of political life, in the modern world. It turns it upside down. But in doing so, it also means that ethics-centered approaches, even in the name of liberation, face a similar fate.

The second is about the imperial significance of standards. Consider the problem of philosophical anthropology. Simply demonstrating that one group is as human as another has the consequence of making one group the standard of another. In effect, one group seeks justification while the other is self-justified. The demonstration itself must be teleologically suspended. Shifting the geography of reason means, as we take seriously the South-South dialogue, that the work to be done becomes one that raises the question of whose future we face.

Third, at least at the epistemological level, every empire has a geopolitical impact by pushing things to its center. In the past, the range of empires was not global. Today, because global, we face the question of the traces they leave when they have dissolved. In the past, empires constructed civilizations that lasted thousands of years. Today, time is imploding under the weight of rapid and excessive consumption (with the bulk of natural resources being consumed in North America and increases on the horizon in Asia), and we must now struggle through a complex understanding of decay and the dissolution of empires. As with all empires, the consciousness from within continues to be susceptible to an inflated sense of importance, where the end of empire is feared as the end of the world.

Fourth, subjects of dehumanizing social institutions suffer a paradoxical melancholia. They live a haunted precolonial past, a critical relation to the colonial world from which they are born, and a desire for a future in which, if they are able to enter, they are yoked to the past. A true, new beginning stimulates anxiety because it appears, at least at the level of identity, as suicide. The constitution of such subjectivity, then, is saturated with loss without refuge.

Fifth, the theme of loss raises challenges of what decolonial activity imposes upon everyone. I call this the Moses problem. Recall the story of the Exodus, where Moses led the former enslaved Hebrews (and members of other tribes who joined them) to the Promised Land, but he was not

permitted to enter. Commentary, at least at Passover Seders, explain that Moses' sense of power (and ego) got in the way, and he presented his might as a source of their liberation (instead of G-d). There is much that we who reflect upon decolonization, those of us who seek liberation, can learn from the mythic life of ancient people. Fanon paid attention to this message when he wrote the longest chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, namely, "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness."¹³ The message is this: Those who are best suited for the transition from colonization/enslavement to the stage of initial liberty are not necessarily the best people for the next, more difficult stage: Living the practice of freedom. It is no accident that instead of the end of colonization, new forms of colonization emerge. The movements, in other words, are as follows: from initial freedom to bondage/colonization, to decolonization/initial liberation, to neocolonization, to internal opposition, to postcolonization/concrete manifestations of freedom. What this means is that the more difficult, especially in political and ethical terms, conflict becomes the one to wage against former liberators. Like Moses, they must move out of the way so the subsequent generations could build their freedom. We see here the sacrificial irony of all commitments to liberation: It is always a practice *for others*.

And sixth, but not final, as a consequence of the problem of leadership, Fanon was critical of what is called postcolonial leadership and ruling groups in many Afro-majority societies. This leadership, whose moral evocations led the process of decolonization, continue to formulate capital in moral terms. Theirs is a supposedly *moral* leadership. The European bourgeoisie developed concepts, however, in coordination with infrastructural resources with great social reach. We see here another blow to the kinds of liberation argument that prioritize ethics over other modes of action and the organization of knowledge. The poor, as a category to stimulate an ethical response, need more than submission and tears from their leadership. Meditation on and cultivation of maturity, of how to negotiate, live, and transform a world of contradictions, uncertainty, and unfairness, may be the proverbial wisdom well sought.

Notes

¹ See, e.g., Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, ed. and trans. Eduardo Mendieta (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996). This community of scholars includes Linda Martín Alcoff, Paget Henry, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Eduardo Mendieta, and Walter D. Mignolo, works by all of whom, among others, I discuss in *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

² See, e.g., Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 76.

³ E.g., see, Liz Sonnet's discussion of the Medieval Islamic empires in the first two chapters of *Averroes (Ibn Rushd): Muslim Scholar, Philosopher, and Physician of the Twelfth Century* (New York: The Rosen Publishing Company, 2005).

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures in the Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956).

⁵ See The Academy of St. Louis, *Transactions of the Academy of Science of St. Louis*, vol. 1, 1856–1860 (St. Louis, MO: George Knapp and Company, 1860), 534.

⁶ Editor's note: G-d is a Jewish convention that refers to the same divine source as its counterpart with a letter "o" in place of the hyphen, but avoids having it as a proper name, which eliminates the possibility of its being destroyed or disrespected.

⁷ For more discussion, see, e.g., Lewis R. Gordon, "Not Always Enslaved, Yet Not Quite Free: Philosophical Challenges

from the Underside of the New World,” *Philosophia* 36.2 (2007): 151-166 and “When I Was There, It Was Not: On Secretions Once Lost in the Night,” *Performance Research* 2, no. 3 (September 2007): 8-15.

⁸ See W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903). For discussion, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), chapter 4, “What Does It Mean to be a Problem?”

⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markman (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

¹⁰ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Richard F. Grabau (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).

¹¹ For more detailed discussion, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

¹² See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, chapter 1.

¹³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

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