Coloniality: The Darker Side of Modernity

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I

I was intrigued, many years ago (around 1991), when I saw on the 'newsstand' of a book store the title of Stephen Toulmin’s latest book: Cosmopolis, The Hidden Agenda of Modernity (1990). I went to a coffee shop, across the street from Borders in Ann Arbor and devoured the book over a cup of coffee: what was the hidden agenda of modernity? was the intriguing question. Shortly after that I was in Bogotá and found a book just published: Los conquistados: 1492 y la población indígena de América (1992). The last chapter of that book caught my attention. It was authored by Aníbal Quijano of whom I had heard, but was not familiar. The article was titled ‘Coloniality and modernity/rationality’.1 I bought the book and found another coffee shop nearby, I devoured the article and the reading was a sort of epiphany. At that time I was finishing the manuscript of The Darker Side of the Renaissance (1995), but did not incorporate the article. There was much I had to think about and the manuscript was already framed. As soon I handed the manuscript to the press, I concentrated on ‘coloniality’, which became a central concept in Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledge and Border Thinking (2000). After the publication of the book, I wrote a lengthy theoretical article, ‘The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference’, published in South Atlantic Quarterly (2002). For Toulmin the hidden agenda of modernity was the humanistic river running behind instrumental reason. For me the hidden agenda (and darker side) of modernity was coloniality. What follows is a recap of the work I have since done in collaboration with members of the collective modernity/coloniality.2

The basic thesis is the following: ‘modernity’ is a European narrative that hides its darker side, ‘coloniality’. Coloniality, in other words, is constitutive of modernity — there is no modernity without coloniality.3 Hence, today the common expression ‘global modernities’ imply ‘global colonialities’ in the precise sense that the colonial matrix of power (coloniality, for short) is being disputed by many contenders: if there cannot be modernity without coloniality, there cannot be either global modernities without global colonialities. That is the logic of the polycentric capitalist world of today. Consequently, de-colonial thinking and doing emerged, from the sixteenth century on, as responses to the oppressive and imperial bent of modern European ideals projected to, and enacted in, the non-European world.

II

I will start with two scenarios — one from the sixteenth century and the other from the late twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first centuries.
2.1. Let's imagine the world around 1500. It was, briefly stated, a polycentric and non-capitalist world. There were several co-existing civilisations, some of long histories, others being formed around that time. In China, the Ming Dynasty ruled from 1368 to 1644. It was a centre of trade and civilisation of long history. Around 200 BC, Chinese Huángdinate (often wrongly called 'Chinese Empire') co-existed with the Roman Empire. By 1500, the former Roman Empire became the kind of capitalism of the German Nations, which still co-existed with the Chinese Huángdinate ruled by the Ming Dynasty. Out of the dismemberment of the Islamic Caliphate (formed in the seventh century and ruled by the Umayyads in the seventh and eighth centuries, and by the Abbasids from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries) in the fourteenth century three sultanates emerged. The Ottoman Sultanate in Anatolia with its centre in Constantinople; the Safavid Sultanate with its centre in Baku, Azerbaijan and the Mughal Sultanate formed out of the ruins of the Delhi Sultanate that lasted from 1206 to 1626. The Mughals (whose first Sultan was Babur, descend- ant of Genghis Kan and Timur) extended from 1526 to 1627. By 1520, Moscovites had expelled the Golden Horde and declared Moscow the 'Third Rome'. The history of the Russian Tsarate began. In Africa, the Oyo Kingdom (around what is today Nigeria), formed by the Yoruba nation, was the largest Kingdom in West Africa encoun- tered by European explorers. The Benin Kingdom, after Oyo the second largest in Africa, lasted from 1440 to 1897. Last but not least, the Incas in Tawantinsuyu and the Aztecs in Anáhuac were two sophisticated civilisations by the time of the Spanish arrival. What happened then in the sixteenth century that would change the world order transforming it into the one in which we are living today? The advent of 'modernity' could be a simple and general answer, but... when, how, why, where?

2.2. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the world is interconnected by a single type of economy (capitalism) and distinguished by a diversity of political theories and practices. Dependency theory should be reviewed in the light of these changes. But I will limit myself to distinguishing two overall orientations. On the one hand, the globalisation of capitalist economy and the diversification of global politics is taking place. On the other, we are witnessing the multiplication and diversification of anti-neo-liberal globalisation (e.g., anti-global capitalism).

On the one hand, the globalisation of capitalist economy and the diversification of global politics is taking place. On the other, we are witnessing the multiplication and diversification of anti-neo-liberal globalisation (e.g., anti-global capitalism). On the first orientation, China, India, Russia, Iran, Venezuela and the emerging South American Union have already made clear that they are no longer willing to follow up on unidirectional orders coming from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank or the White House. Beneath Iran there is the history of Persia and the Safavid Sultanate; beneath Iraq the history of the Ottoman Sultanate. The past sixty years of Western entry in China (Marxism and capitalism) did not replace China's history with the history of Europe and the United States since 1500; and the same with India. On the contrary, it reinforced China's aim for sovereignty. In Africa, the imperial partition of Western countries between the end of the nineteenth and the early-twentieth century (that provoked the First World War) did not replace the past of Africa with the past of Western Europe. And so in South America, 500 years of colonial rule by peninsular officers and, since early 1900, by Creole and mestizo elites, did not erase the energy, force and memories of the Indian past (cf., current issues in Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, South of Mexico and Guatemala); neither did it erase the histories and memories of communities of African descent in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela and the insular Caribbean. Moving in the opposite direction was the emergence of the state of Israel in 1948, which exploded toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

On the second orientation, we are observing many non-official (rather than non-governmental) transnational organisations not only manifesting themselves 'against' capitalism, globalisation and questioning modernity, but also opening up global but non-capitalist horizons and de-linking from the idea that there is a single and main modernity surrounded by peripheral or alternative ones. Not necessarily rejecting modernity but making clear that modernity's hand with coloniality and, therefore, modernity has to be assumed in both its glories and its crimes. Let's refer to this global domain 'de-colonial cosmopolitan- ism.' No doubt that artists and museums are playing and have an important role to play in global formations of trans-modern and de-colonial subjectivities.
16 See for instance the symposium on Global Modernity, a conceptual debate on Alternatives: Take Triennial 2000 Exhibition (http://www.tan.org.uk).


26 Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher to the collapse of the George W. Bush administration with the failure in Iraq and on Wall Street), exemplifies the logic of coloniality taken to its extreme: to the extreme of revealing itself in its own spec-tacular failure. The economic failure of Wall Street coupled with the failure in Iraq, opened up the gates to the postcolonial world order.

27 In summanation, modernity/coloniality are two sides of the same coin. Coloniality is constitutive of modernity; there is no modernity, there cannot be, without colo-niality, Postmodernity and altermodernity do not get rid of coloniality. They only present a new mask that, intentionally or not, continues to hide it.

28 V. Because the idea of modernity was built as solely European and, in that argument, there was and is just a ‘singular’ modernity; it engendered a series of latercomers and wannabes (e.g., alternative, peripheral, subaltern, altermodernities). All of which reproduce the vexing question on ‘modernity and tradition’, a question you do not find much debated among Euro-American intellectuals. For that very reason, the debates about ‘modernity and tradition’ were and still are a concern, mainly, of intellectuals from the non-European (and US) world.
Basically, the problems and concerns with modernity and tradition are enunciated from or in relation to the ex-Third World and of non-European histories — Japan, for example. In, for Japan, modernity was and is an issue extensively explored and debated. Harry Harootunian explored the issue in detail in his book Overcome by Modernity. History, Culture and Community in Interwar Japan (2000); in Russia, modernity was an issue since Peter and Catherine the Great who wanted to jump on the band-wagon of European modernity, but it was too late and ended up in reproducing, in Russia, a sort of second-class modernity.22 China and India are not exempt. I have mentioned de-Westemisation arguments advanced in East and South East Asia. Sanjib Baruah recently summarised ‘India and China’ debating modernity. In a section revealingly entitled ‘engaging the modern’, Baruah observes that India is — in spite of its recent corporate face — the home of strong intellectual opposition to ideas of development and modernisation, following the teaching of Mahatma Gandhi.23 His analysis points toward conflicting scenarios confronting arguments in defence of ‘wanting to become modern and to develop’ with those engaging in radical criticisms of modernity and development.24 The scenario is a common one in Africa and in South America. But in that general scenario, what is really at stake in modernisation is vested in economic development. Baruah writes:

Critics of modernity enjoy quite a bit of intellectual prestige in India (though this should not be confused with an actual adherence to their ideas). India is home to sophisticated intellectual and activist opposition to mainstream ideas on development and modernisation. As the China-historian Prasenjit Duara points out, counter narratives to modernity have ‘almost as much visibility as the narrative of progress’ in India. Viewed comparatively, the ‘general acceptability and prestige’ of Gandhi’s anti-modern ideas in India is remarkable, even though policymakers ignore his ideas in practice.25

In England, Anthony Giddens ended his argument in his celebrated book of Modernity: The Collective Subject (1990) by asking himself: ‘Is Modernity a Western Project?’ He sees the nation-state and systematic capitalist production as the European anchor of modernity. That is, control of authority and control of economy grounded on the historical foundation of imperial Europe. In this sense, the answer to his question was ‘a blatant yes’.26

What Giddens says is true. So, what is the problem? The problem is that it is half true: it is true in the story told by someone who dwells, comfortably one should think, in the house of ‘modernity’. If we accept that ‘modernity’ is a Western project let’s then take responsibility for ‘coloniality’ (the darker and constitutive side of modernity): the crimes and violence justified in the name of modernity. ‘Coloniality’ in other words is one of the most tragic ‘consequences of modernity’ and at the same time the most hopeful in that it has engendered the global march toward de-coloniality.

VI.

If you dwell in the history of British India, rather than in Britain, the world doesn’t look the same. In Britain you may see it through Giddens lenses; in India probably through Gandhi’s lenses. Would you make a choice or work with the undeniable conflictive co-existence of both? Indian historian and political theorist, Partha Chatterjee addresses the problem of ‘modernity in two languages’. The article, collected in his book A Possible India (1998), is the English version of a lecture he delivered in Bengal and presented in Calcatta.27 The English version is not just a translation but also a theoretical reflection on the geo-politics of knowledge and epistemological and political de-linking.

Unapologetically and forcefully, Chatterjee structured his talk on the distinction between ‘our modernity’ and ‘their modernity’. Rather than a single modernity defended by postmodern intellectuals in the ‘First World’ Chatterjee plants a solid pillar to build the future of ‘our modernity’ — not independent from ‘their modernity’ (because Western expansion is a fact), but unapologetically and unashamedly ‘ours’. This is one of the strengths of Chatterjee’s argument. But remember, first, that the British entered India, commercially, toward the end of the eighteenth century and, politically, during the first half of the nineteenth century when England and France, after Napoleon, extended their tentacles in Asia and Africa. So for Chatterjee, in contradistinction with South American and Caribbean intellectuals, ‘modernity’ means Enlightenment and not Renaissance. Not surprisingly Chatterjee takes Immanuel Kant’s ‘What is Enlightenment’ as a pillar in the foundation of the European idea of modernity. For Kant, Enlightenment meant that Man (in the sense of the human being) was coming of age, abandoning its immaturity, reaching his freedom. Chatterjee points out Kant’s silence (intentionally or not) and Michel Foucault’s short sightedness when reading Kant’s essays. Missing in Kant’s celebration of freedom and maturity and in Foucault’s celebration was the fact that Kant’s concept of Man and his freedom was based on a Europe free of humanity from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and not in the ‘lesser humans’ that populated the world beyond the heart of Europe. So, ‘enlightenment’ was not for everybody, unless they become ‘modern’ in the European idea of modernity.

One point in Chatterjee’s insightful interpretation of Kant-Foucault is relevant for the argument I am developing here. I would surmise, following Chatterjee’s argument, that Kant and Foucault lacked the colonial experience and political inter- est propelled by the colonial wound. Not that they had to have it. But yes, that their view cannot be universalised. If you have been born, educated and your subjectivity formed in Germany and France, your conception of the world and feeling will be different from someone born and raised in British India. Thus Chatterjee can state that ‘we — in India — have built up an intricately differentiated structure of authori- ties which specifies who has the right to say what on which subjects’.28 In ‘Modernity in two languages’ Chatterjee reminds us that the ‘Third World’ has been mainly ‘consumer’ of First World scholarship and knowledge: Somehow, from the very beginning, we had made a shrewd guess that given the close complicity between modern knowledge and modern regimes of power, we would for ever remain consumers of universal modernity; never would we be taken as serious producers.29 Chatterjee concludes that it is for this reason that ‘we have tried, for over a hundred years, to take our eyes away from this chimera of universal modernity and clear up a space where we might become the creators of our own modernity’.30 I imagine you are getting the point. ‘The other’ (the anthropos) decided to disobey: epistemological and political disobedience that consist of the appropriation of European modernity while dwelling in the house of coloniality.


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27 Ibid. p. 273-74.

28 Ibid. p. 275.

29 Ibid.
It is not common to think of international law as related to the making of 'modernity'. I will argue in this section that international law (more exactly legal theology) contributed in the sixteenth century to the creation—a creation demanded by the 'discovery' of America—of racial differences as we sense them today. What to do, Spanish legal theologians asked themselves in the 'Indians' (in the Spanish imaginary) and, more concretely, with their land? International law was founded on racial assumptions: 'Indians' had to be conceived, as humans, as not quite rational, although ready for conversion.33 Modernity' showed up its face in the epistemic assumptions and arguments of legal theology to decide and determine who was what. Simultaneously, the face of 'coloniality' was disguised under the inferior status of the invented inferior. Here you have a clear case of coloniality as the needed and constitutive darker side of modernity. Modernity/coloniality is articulated here on the ontological and epistemic differences: Indians are, ontologically, less human beings and, in consequence, not fully rational.34 Conversely, museums have been counted in the making of modernity.35 However, questions about museums (as institutions) and coloniality (as the hidden logic of modernity) have not been asked. It is taken for granted that museums are 'naturally' part of the European imagination and creativity. In VII.1 I attempt to unveil coloniality under international law regulating international relations. And in VII.2, I open up the question about museums and coloniality. Museums, as we know them today, did not exist before 1500. They have been built and transformed—on one hand—to be the institutions where Western memory is honoured and displayed; whereas, European modernity conserves its tradition (the colonisation of time) and—in the other hand—to be the institutions in which the difference of non-European traditions is recognised.36 The open question is then how to de-colonise museums and to use museums to de-colonise the reproduction of Western colonisation of time and space.37

VII.1

Francisco de Vitoria is rightly celebrated mainly among Spanish and other European scholars for being one of the fathers of international law. His treatise, Relatio de Indis is considered foundational in the history of the discipline. Central to Vitoria's argument was the issue of ius gentium (rights of the people or rights of nations). Ius gentium allowed Vitoria to put at the same level of humanity both Spaniards and Indians. And he did not pay attention to the fact that, by collapsing Quechuas, Aymaras, Nahuahtls, Mayas, etc. under the label 'Indians' he was already stepping into a racial classification. So it was not difficult for Vitoria to slide smoothly into the second step of his argument: although equal to Spaniards in the domain of ius gentium, Vitoria concluded (or he knew it first and then argued it) Indians were sort of childish and needed the guidance and protection of Spaniards. Epistemically, it is assumed that inferior human beings are rational and aesthetically deficient.44

38 Thus it is not surprising to find today growing concerns, and a number of scholars, working on the de-colonization of international law. Brannen on the making of international law. (De-colonization International, Ramey and Littfield Publishers Inc., 2006)


42 Two examples of de-colonial uses of museums installations are Fred Wilson's Mining the Museum (http://www.cimam.org).


44 Legal scholar Anthony Anghie has provided an insightful analysis of the historical foundational moment of the colonial difference.44 A nutshell the argument is the following: Indians and Spaniards are equal in the face of natural law as both, by natural law, are endowed with ius gentium. In making this move, Vitoria prevented the Pope and divine law from legislating on human issues. However, once Vitoria established the distinction between ‘principes Christianos’ (as well as Castilians in general) and ‘los bárbaros’ (the anthropos), and on the other, and he made his best effort to balance his arguments based on the equality he attributed to both people by natural law and the difference, see Nelson Maldonado-Torres, ‘On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept’. Cultural Studies vol. 21, nos. 2-3, 2007, pp. 240-70.

45 Thus, for example, when an institution was transferred to non-European people or rights of nations). Ius gentium allowed Vitoria to put at the same level of humanity both Spaniards and Indians. And he did not pay attention to the fact that, by collapsing Quechuas, Aymaras, Nahuahtls, Mayas, etc. under the label ‘Indians’ he was already stepping into a racial classification. So it was not difficult for Vitoria to slide smoothly into the second step of his argument: although equal to Spaniards in the domain of ius gentium, Vitoria concluded (or he knew it first and then argued it) Indians were sort of childish and needed the guidance and protection of Spaniards. Epistemically, it is assumed that inferior human beings are rational and aesthetically deficient.44 Legal scholar Anthony Anghie has provided an insightful analysis of the historical foundational moment of the colonial difference.44 A nutshell the argument is the following: Indians and Spaniards are equal in the face of natural law as both, by natural law, are endowed with ius gentium. In making this move, Vitoria prevented the Pope and divine law from legislating on human issues. However, once Vitoria established the distinction between ‘principes Christianos’ (as well as Castilians in general) and ‘los bárbaros’ (the anthropos), and on the other, and he made his best effort to balance his arguments based on the equality he attributed to both people by natural law and the difference, see Nelson Maldonado-Torres, ‘On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept'. Cultural Studies vol. 21, nos. 2-3, 2007, pp. 240-70.

46 Clearly, then, Vitoria’s work suggests that the conventional view that sovereignty doctrine was developed in the West and then transferred to the non-European world is, in important respects, misleading. Sovereignty doctrine acquired its character through the colonial encounter. This is the darker history of sovereignty,
which cannot be understood by any account of the doctrine that assumes the existence of sovereign states.

Briefly stated: if modernity is a Western invention (as Giddens says), so too is coloniality. Therefore, it seems very difficult to overcome coloniality from a Western modern perspective. De-colonial arguments are pressing this blind spot in both right-wing and left-wing oriented arguments. 48

VII. 2
In the contest at hand, ‘museums’ as we know them today (and their forerunner — Wunderkammer, Kunstkammer) have been instrumental in shaping modern colonial subjectivities by splitting Kunstkammer into ‘museums of arts’ and ‘museums of natural histories’. 49 Initially, Peter the Great’s Kunstkammer was put in place toward 1720, while the British Museum (founded as a Cabinet of Curiosity) was created later (toward 1750). However, the institution of Kunstkammer in the West became the locale for curiosities brought from European colonies, most of the time, by looting. The history of the building, Le Louvre, goes back to the Middle Ages. But the museum, Le Louvre, came into being after the French Revolution.

Nowadays, a process of de-Westernisation has already begun. The hundreds of museums being constructed in China are part of this process. De-Westernisation is a process parallel to de-coloniality at the level of the state and of the economy. Kishore Mahbubani, quoted above, is one of the most consistent and coherent voices of de-Westernisation and the political, economic and epistemic shift to Asia. 50 One can ask, then, given this exhibition titled ‘Modernologies’ what is the place of museums and art, in general, in the rhetoric of modernity and the colonial matrix of power? How can museums become places of de-colonisation of knowledge and of being or, on the contrary, how can they remain institutions and instruments of control, regulation and reproduction of coloniality? 51 By asking these questions, we are entering here in plain territory of knowledge, meaning and subjectivity. If international law legalised economic appropriation of land, natural resources and non-European labour (of which ‘outsourcing’ today shows the independence of the economic sector from patriotic or nationalist arguments of ‘developed’ states) and warranted the accumulation of money, universities and museums (and lately mainstream media) warranted the accumulation of meaning. The complementarity of accumulation of money and accumulation of meaning (hence, the rhetoric of modernity as salvation and progress) sustains the narratives of modernity. While coloniality is the unavoidable consequence of the unfinished project of modernity (as Jürgen Habermas would say) — since coloniality is constitutive of modernity — de-coloniality (in the sense of global de-colonial projects) becomes the global option and horizons of liberation. The horizon of such liberation is a transmodern, non-capitalist world, no longer mapped by ‘la pensée unique’, adapting Ignacio Ramonet’s expression, neither from the right nor from the left: coloniality engendered de-coloniality.

VIII. Coda
I hope to have contributed to understanding how the logic of coloniality was structured during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; to understand how changed hands, was transformed and adapted to the new circumstances, although maintaining the spheres (and the interrelations) in which management and control of authority, of economy, of people (subjectivity, gender, sexuality) and of knowledge has been played out in building the mono-centric world order from 1500 to 2000; and how that order is being transformed into a polycentric one.

What is exactly the colonial matrix of power/coloniality? Let’s imagine it in two semiotic levels: the level of the enunciated and the level of the enunciation. At the level of the enunciated, the colonial matrix operates at four interrelated domains interrelated in the specific sense that a single domain cannot be properly understood independently from the other three. This is the junction between conceptualisations of ‘capitalism’ (either liberal or Marxist) and the conceptualisation of the colonial matrix, which implies a de-colonial conceptualisation. The four domains in question, briefly described, are (and remember that each of these domains is disguised by a constant and changing rhetoric of modernity that is, of salvation, progress, development, happiness):

1) Management and control of subjectivities (for example, Christian and secular education, yesterday and today, museums and universities, media and advertising today, etc.)
2) Management and control of authority (for example, viceroyalties in the Americas, British authority in India, US army, Politbureau in the Soviet Union, etc.)
3) Management and control of economy (for example, by reinvesting of the surplus engendered by massive appropriation of land in America and Africa; massive exploitation of labour starting with the slave-trade; by foreign debts through the creation of economic institutions such as World Bank and IMF, etc.)
4) Management and control of knowledge (for example, theology and the invention of international law that set up a geo-political arena of knowledge founded on European epistemic and aesthetic principles that legitimised the disqualifications over the centuries of non-European knowledge and non-European aesthetic standards, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and from the Enlightenment to neo-liberal globalisation; philosophy).

The four domains (the enunciated) are all and constantly interrelated and held together by the two anchors of enunciation. Indeed, who were and are the institutions and the agents that generated and continue to reproduce the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality? It so happened that, in general, the agents (and institutions) creating and managing the logic of coloniality were Western Europeans, mostly men; if not all heterosexual, at least assuming heterosexuality as the norm of sexual conduct. And they were — in general — mostly white and Christian (either Catholic or Protestant). Thus, the enunciation of the colonial matrix was founded in two embodied and geo-historically located pillars: the seed for the subsequent racial classification of the planet population and the superiority of white men over men of colour but also over white women. The racial and patriarchal underlying organisation of knowledge-making (the enunciation) put together and maintain the colonial matrix of power that daily becomes less visible because of the loss of holistic views promoted by the modern emphasis on expertise and on the division and sub-division of scientific labour and knowledge.

Global futures need to be imagined and constructed through de-colonial options; that is, working globally and collectively to de-colonise the colonial matrix of power; to stop the sand castles built by modernity and its derivatives. Museums can indeed play a crucial role in the building of de-colonial futures.