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Review/Reseña

Walter D. Mignolo. *The Idea of Latin America*. (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005)

A Post-Occidentalist Manifesto

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This book assembles a series of polemical arguments about the location of “Latin America” in the Western construction of history and knowledge. Its central theme is “the idea of Latin America,” a concept whose meaning, genealogy and implications the author endeavors to unpack and unravel. The book is divided into three parts, corresponding to the shifts in the meaning and geo-political location of the “idea” of the subcontinent. At first the concept “America” is presented as a derivative of the expansion of Christian Europe in the sixteenth century and, consequently, as an invention saturated by racism and religious categories. In a second moment, during the nineteenth century, as Creole intellectuals rush to appropriate European models for society, culture and politics, they redefined the subcontinent as the land of

“Latinidad.” This identity and location, constructed by the descendents of Europeans in the ex-Spanish and Portuguese colonies, was intended to oppose the growing hemispheric power of the United States. The third moment coincides with the contemporary period, a time in which Andean intellectuals, Latino/a writers in the US, and the Zapatista movement in Mexico are challenging the Western episteme and its development policies, demanding inclusion of other forms of knowing and of other histories. These other types of epistemologies, more responsive to the needs of racialized and excluded members of the population, point to the possibility of transcending the term—“Latin America”—and what is implied by it.

“The Americas”

Following O’Gorman, the author contends that “America” was an “invention” saturated with “coloniality,” that is, conceived at the intersection of the expansion of Europe over the New World, the campaigns to evangelize indigenous peoples, and the racism that emerged from Christian cosmology. History itself, with its new center or locus of enunciation—Europe—contributed to marginalize the languages, knowledge, and experiences of indigenous peoples as well as those of Africans brought as slaves. Sixteenth-century “America,” argues Mignolo, cannot be understood outside of the Christian division of the world. He shows how Spanish chroniclers tried to accommodate Christian conceptions of alterity—peoples and continents—to the novelty of the “fourth continent” and its inhabitants. An old explanation (about how the three sons of Noah populated the earth) is called to support the view that “the idea of America” was rooted from its inception in Christian Occidentalism. Japheth (Europe) was destined to expand in the West, while the descendants of Ham (Africa) were doomed to remain slaves. The *Indias Occidentales* became then a subordinated part of the West, united under the mantle of a Christian empire. Once absorbed under the history

and geography of the West, other conceptions of the subcontinent (such as *Anahuac* or *Tawantinsuyo*) were pushed into the dark side of “coloniality.”

“Latin America”

The radical potential the Creole Baroque posed for the revitalization of national culture within the late colonial context was lost with independence. The new Creole elites borrowed uncritically French and English models to organize their systems of government, societies, and cultures. Rather than establishing a separate intellectual path—as the US founding fathers did with regard to European ideas—the elites of Spanish and Portuguese America placed the European civilizing project in a privileged place, while subordinating and erasing the traces of Indian and African cultures. Having borrowed European republicanism and liberalism, the Creoles lived in the illusion of European modernity and, thus, failed to engage the colonial experience critically. In the late 19th century, as the US grew to become a powerful force in the region, the Creole elites also borrowed a pronoun (“Latin”) that made their identity a true hybrid: “Latin-American.” The Creole re-ordering of the conceptual framework of “modernity/coloniality” turned Indian civilizations into “ruins,” pushed *Kechua* and *Aymara* outside of modernity, and practically erased the marks of Africans in the new republics. In exchange, they got little, for “Latins” in the Americas became a sort of fifth race in the ethno-racial pentagon: not as White as Euro-American Whites; not as European as Europeans.

“After Latin America”

In the contemporary period, Mignolo suggests, an important shift in the geopolitics of knowledge is taking place. Intellectuals of indigenous and African descent have raised their voices to tell the story of their peoples’ exploitation, marginalization, and cultural displacement and to claim socio-

economic demands and “epistemic rights.” “Border thinking—writes Mignolo—is exploding now in the Andes under the name of *interculturalidad*” (9). Indigenous ways of organizing knowledge have reached the university in Ecuador. Guaman Poma’s utopian project of a co-existence between two civilizations and two forms of government (Spanish and Indian) is now being re-articulated by native intellectuals in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru, and replicated by the Zapatistas in the Lacandonian jungle. Afro-Colombian communities have obtained important cultural rights in that South American nation while philosophers of African descent are trying to building the architecture of Afro-Caribbean thought. Meanwhile, *Latinas* in the US have reached new comprehension about subjectivity, *mestizaje*, and politics. These movements and intellectual projects have started to disrupt the chief beliefs of European modernity (science, philosophy, economics, political theory, aesthetics) and are beginning to disarm the construct of a hegemonic “Latin America.”

Readers familiar with Mignolo’s previous books (*The Darker Side of the Renaissance* and *Local Histories/Global Designs* in particular) will recognize some of his central arguments about the underside of modernity (“coloniality”), about the importance of epistemic violence during the conquest, about shifts in the “geo-politics of knowledge,” about the contemporary persistence of “coloniality,” and about the emergence of “border thinking.” In this new book, these concepts are re-articulated into the form of a manifesto and placed at the service of a more particular problematic: to explain the genealogy, contemporary meaning, and possible dismantling of a geo-political episteme, the location of the subcontinent in the Western paradigm. One of the virtues of the book is to make accessible to a wider public—in a purposefully controversial but clear language—ideas that had taken the author two decades of work.

In the preface, the author states his aim of explaining how the “idea of Latin America” came, but the book offers more than

this—much more. *The Idea of Latin America* is a true manifesto for the de-colonization of knowledge *in* and *about* the Americas. It is a claim for locating in a different place the center of interest and the perspective for looking at the subcontinent, its peoples, experiences and aspirations. That privileged place of observation and enunciation is the site where inhabitants of African and indigenous descent chose to struggle in order to denounce and undo the implications and effects of colonialism. It is a post-Occidental manifesto to the extent that it gestures towards a radical shift in the geo-politics of knowledge—one that would put the work of indigenous and Afro-Latin American intellectuals in the subcontinent at center stage. Mignolo argues for an “epistemology of the South,” new perspectives on regionally-based knowledge that could overcome the limitations of Western universalizing and exclusionary categories.

The book endeavors to describe and define what these other perspectives, cognitive practices, and concepts are. Mignolo believes that there is a set of Afro-Latin American and Andean understandings about “Latin America” and that, currently, these other perspectives and epistemologies are coming into the open. New projects of knowledge more in tune with the needs of indigenous peoples, those who suffered centuries of colonial oppression and postcolonial indifference, are now being implemented by the Universidad Inter-cultural of Ecuador, by the Zapatista movement and their *juntas de buen gobierno*, by the groups working on the reconstitution of *ayllus* in Bolivia. The author also endorses the rooting of philosophy in Afro-Caribbean experience. Mignolo sees the changes towards a reconfiguration of the locus of enunciation of master narratives and knowledge facilitated by the shift from neo-liberation to radical populism in South American politics. Presidents who defy IMF mandates undermine the foundations of expert ideas or, at least, create the possibility for other perspectives.

To achieve this objective, Mignolo borrows concepts, reproduces arguments, and challenges contemporary critics. He borrows critically from Gloria Anzaldúa, Aníbal Quijano, Boaventura dos Santos, and others. He takes issue with Huntington's fears of destiny and identity of "America" and debates Said on the question of Orientalism. And he rescues intellectuals from the past to test the limits of Western categories and arguments. Absorbed by the notion of class, Marx did not see the importance of the colonial question, Las Casas defined New World "barbarians" in terms of a Christian cosmology, and Guaman Poma was unable to disengage his ideal of good government from the Spanish empire. In provocative passages, Mignolo compares Anzaldúa and Descartes, Marx and Guaman Poma, Las Casas and Subcomandante Marcos, using spatial and temporal displacement to highlight the two sides of the modernity/coloniality duality. With good analysis and appropriate quotations, he strives to demonstrate that there has always been room for the "paradigm of co-existence." Against the exclusionary nature of Western epistemology, he presents the pluri-versal nature of "border thinking," a terrain where different perspectives and epistemologies co-exist on an equal level.

This book is a superb guide and reading material for seminars dealing with Latin American Studies, colonialism, languages, and knowledge. For it clearly demarcates the main arguments, creates interest in certain authors and works, and engages readers both at the political and philosophical levels. At the forefront of current struggles, he argues, are the questions of knowledge and language. Those who see three ideological moments in the deployment of modernity, he says, always forget to include colonialism. Those who take for granted the universality of English or naturalize Spanish as the language of Latin America should think again about the linguistic implications of colonialism. These are strong propositions that are certain to generate debate, in the classroom and outside of it. To the scholar,

this book offers a synthesis of a complex set of arguments about modernity/coloniality and its forms of knowledge (to borrow from Bernard Cohn) and, as such, it will serve as a necessary point of reference for contemporary debates on the nature of area studies, Euro-American hegemony, the subordination of the humanities, and other related themes. I found myself often arguing with the author about interpretation, methodology, and the implication of his propositions. Here are some of my critical observations.

1. Perhaps one of the great merits of this book is to set the path or lay the foundations for an exploration of “coloniality” in the terrain of knowledge and subjectivity, what Mignolo calls “the geo-politics of knowledge.” Yet in doing so, the book presents a limited view of “coloniality,” one that emphasizes the categories, the concepts, the worldviews, and the theory over the more common forms of colonial exploitation and domination. “Coloniality” is “the logical structure of colonial domination” (7), pointing always to the terrain of language, philosophy, and categorical imperatives. However, its relationship with domination, exploitation, and exclusion in the spheres of production and reproduction, and the public space are far from clear. In Mignolo’s view the “coloniality of knowledge” results from the imposition of classifications inflected by race, and from a perspective biased by its locus of enunciation and its universal pretensions (Eurocentrism). Are we not caving into the notion of an “epistemic trap”? Is “coloniality” a meta-category intended to capture all that has been excluded and marginalized by the project of Western modernity? Is this the ultimate form of dependency? (The inability to think and write in our own terms and with our own language?)

If the terrain of contestation has moved into matters of language, cosmologies, and epistemologies, I am afraid that the “coloniality of knowledge” appears as too philosophical a matter to be tackled by the majority of readers. More importantly, the idea of “coloniality” as the logical structure of domination

reproduces once more the eternal divide between base and superstructure, or at least, fails to articulate well the worlds of every-day experience of colonized or racialized subalterns and the textual worlds where economies, societies, politics, and cultures are scrutinized, debated, and diagnosed by those who write in the dominant language. There are moments in the discussion when knowledge appears as something embedded in localities and cultures. But in other places, more frequently, the arguments move “up” into the philosophical atmosphere of epistemes, languages, and systems of classifications. Here Mignolo’s position becomes dualistic: it is either Western epistemology of modernity or a pluriversality of perspectives bringing *only* the voices and positions of the *damnés*. As the reader would probably agree, there is a much richer variation on both sides of the mirror.

2. A second observation refers to the question of History and to the long duration of “coloniality.” Following Frank and Wallerstein, Mignolo places the beginning of the capitalist world system in the sixteenth century. But he sees here also the beginning of a constellation of power-knowledge that structured the world into two sides of unequal weight: modernity and coloniality. While one of the sides (of this same coin) has shown some variation over time—there have been various waves of “modernity” from the sixteenth to the twentieth century—“coloniality” has remained practically unchanged since the sixteenth century. True, there have been changes in the nature and scope of capitalist exploitation and colonialism, and in the organization of ideas and knowledge. But these changes have not affected the logic of “modernity/coloniality”. The author exemplifies this long-held persistence by comparing the contemporary US War in Iraq with the campaigns for evangelization in the sixteenth-century Spanish colonies. Is this proposition tenable?

This long continuity may raise some doubts among historians and other readers willing to give credit to the idea that

different waves of modernization (state-building, nationalism, industrialization, urbanization, etc.) have actually transformed the material conditions in which people live and the relations among nation-states and knowledge-producing centers. It might well be that epistemes and worldviews only move slowly, but they move nonetheless. It is unclear, then, how the “logic” of the system (whether looked from above or from below) could have remained unchanged. The very examples the author provides to deal with the racialization of peoples of native-American or African descent and of their subcontinent show that categories in fact change. Las Casas’ four categories of “barbarians” did not persist into the nineteenth-century. The identification of Africans with slavery did not last much longer than the abolition of slavery in Brazil. And the racialization of Latin American republics as “second-class nations” changed significantly with the emergence of oil-rich or industrializing economies in the region. Historians could claim that the shift from the sixteenth century to the twentieth century regarding “modernity” was such that it erased any common denominators.

How could the Enlightenment be compared with sixteenth-century Evangelization? What are the points in common between nineteenth-century liberalism and sixteenth-century notion of Christendom? In other words, what is common about the different temporal manifestations of “modernity”? Only that they all have their darker side (“coloniality”)? And if so, what is persistent about this systemic logic? That the excluded and marginalized—the colonized—have “always” been prevented from writing their own history, educating themselves in their own languages, or using their own categories of thought? Or that these exclusions have always been authorized by some form of racism? My point is: only at the cost of great generalization (and hence the proportional loss of validity and historical depth) can we begin to accept the notion of an unchanging “coloniality.” And when we reach that point or level of generalization we have already

abandoned the historian, the political scientist, and the sociologist, and have only philosophers and critical theorists to talk to. We need to restore the historicity of the concept if we want to explain the tensions of modernity and its forms of knowledge.

3. In his effort to separate writers whose works illuminate the nature of modernity and its under-side—coloniality—Mignolo ends up elevating certain writers and works above others. Bilbao, Martí and Mariátegui get high marks for posing “Latin America” as a site of critical reflection, while Subcomandante Marcos and Gloria Anzaldúa are elevated even higher because of their ability to problematize the subjectivity of the border *mestiza* and to put in contemporary perspective the effects of colonialism on indigenous peoples. Writers representing alternative epistemologies are also celebrated, among them: Uruguayan critic Arturo Ardao and contemporary Mexican critic Bolívar Echeverría. The problem with this selective rescue operation is the disqualification of other forms of “native/local knowledge” as complicit with the project of “modernity/coloniality.” After reading this book one gets the impression that most of the Latin American intelligentsia could be placed under the reach of this uncomfortable accusation.

Mignolo’s manifesto simplifies and reduces the diverse composition and history of Latin American intellectuals and their institutions of knowledge. For, if the typical intellectual of early twentieth-century Argentina and Brazil shared similar presuppositions about race, social problems, and positivist methods, the same could not be said of Bolivian or Guatemalan intellectuals. Certainly, European institutions, theories and methods exerted much influence on the national intelligentsias of the Latin American republics, but local conditions produced an adaptation of these preconceptions and categories that generate distinct policies and intellectual projects. The same could be said about their universities, libraries, and science laboratories. These institutions translated the project of modernity locally, generating

many scaled-down variations of the model principles and institutions. Only by reducing the search to a few exemplary authors, is one able to control the enormous diversity of local/native thought. But this is precisely what one should try to avoid: to place ideas, concepts, and authors into neatly separated compartments labeled “modernity” and “coloniality”.

The privilege attributed to certain authors who are representatives of races or peoples oppressed by centuries of colonialism (or the cognate idea that “mestizo” intellectuals working upon the “colonial wound” are truly uncovering the hidden history of “coloniality”) is a pill that is very hard to swallow. Why would the writings of a Bolivian sociologist writing in *Kechua* be more in tune with the needs of the oppressed than another Bolivian sociologist writing in Spanish, or for that matter, than a European sociologist writing in English or French? The possibilities are only two: either locality (language and community) gives the knower a privileged understanding over (and compassion with) a given subject; or the subject of observation and scrutiny is closed to outsiders (or speakers of another language). I do not find the idea of epistemic privilege entirely convincing. Nor do I find that a given community or locality is able to control and keep for itself its own perspective, knowledge, or categories. Local knowledge, as any other type of property, is subject to appropriation by outsiders.

To claim that there are some hidden truths that can only be understood from a certain position (cosmology, locality, *ayllu*, etc) implies that somehow the Empire has failed to “extract” these truths in the past. In my research I have found this not to be the case. During the late colonial period, New England visitors would disguise themselves as monks (and actually enter into convents) in order to know the practices of Catholics in the River Plate region. Similarly, a German anthropologist would go into the caves of the Peruvian mountains in order to denounce the stock-piling of arms by indigenous communities. Mayan archaeologists

would stop at nothing to obtain Mayan texts and decode them. And so forth. My point is: the citadel of local knowledge was invaded many times over the course of history. And that is why Western knowledge became a cabinet of curiosities coming from non-Western places.

4. Next, I would like to raise the question of whether *The Idea of Latin America* over-emphasizes the influence of race in the making of the epistemology and intellectual structure of Latin American modernity. The idea that the new identity “Latin America” became a fifth race in the ethno-racial pentagon (added to the pre-existing categories of Yellow, Black, Red, and White) is interesting, although not entirely accurate. For it is not the same thing to say that the term was racialized or had certain implicit racial connotations as to say that it was a newly invented “race.” US travelers to South America during the nineteenth and early twenty centuries emphasized the diversity of racial situations in the subcontinent. Some nations had a large Indian population, others showed an important proportion of people of African descent, but the majority of the “young republics” were characterized by a mixture of races. Whether the elite was more or less white mattered less to US observers than the surprising racial diversity of the working and peasant classes.

During most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the “color” of Latin America remained a problematic question. The territory itself was a virtual space for the contestation between the creative energies of two civilizations (encoded with racial terms, “Anglo-American” versus “Latin American”). But the question of governability and of economic change was the true measure of US superiority vis-à-vis South and Central America. Racial explanations served to “understand” underdevelopment and the inability to attain self-governance, but they were not central or indispensable to the architecture of the dichotomy between a rich “Anglo-America” and a disorganized and poor “Spanish America.” Differences in historical

experience—in which colonialism and nation-building figured prominently—attracted the attention of most commentators at the hour of settling the matter of the North-South difference.

In fact, one could argue that the conceptual architecture of the American Empire in Latin America in the twentieth century was a tributary of gender and family metaphors, more so than to racial metaphors. The US presided over a *Pax Americana* based on ideas of paternalism in the spheres of finance and government, and of the “good neighbor” in the sphere of international relations. Some Latin American nations were considered “children” who needed protection, but other progressive nations in the Southern Cone were presented as cooperative “sisters.” Cuba, Mexico and Central American nations were clearly racialized in cartoons and other media expressions, but this was not true of the Chilean or Argentine populations. The US, after all, was the “Good Teacher” of government, finance, technology and social management: its “children” need not necessarily be Black or Brown to seat at the classroom.