

The Cultural Hegemony of Colonialism

by Alain Policar

The decolonial movement is diverse and often highly fragmented. Nevertheless, it remains a major theoretical force, one concerned with tracking down all forms of Eurocentrism and showing how knowledge is always necessarily situated.

About: Stéphane Dufoix, *Décolonial*, Paris, Anamosa, 2023, 102 p., 9 €.

At a time when critics are quick to describe decolonial thinkers as impostors or to disqualify them on the grounds of their supposed lack of rationality, few take the trouble to read the texts themselves. The first virtue of Stéphane Dufoix's book is his exceptional mastery of the decolonial corpus. This mastery allows him to reveal the corpus's extreme diversity (even though most decolonial thinkers hail from Latin America), not only in terms of the disciplines involved (philosophy, sociology, history, semiotics, anthropology, pedagogy, and even theology), but also in terms of inspiration (philosophy of liberation, dependency theory, postcolonialism). In just a few pages, Dufoix clearly lays out the logic behind the decolonial approach, whereas most are content to denounce its excesses.

First and foremost, let us clarify the terminology. In France, some use the term "decolonialism," as I myself once did, to designate the approach in question. For his part, Dufoix prefers the term "decolonial," as is reflected in the title of the book. Indeed, the first term is a polemical construction¹ aimed at disqualifying those

¹ See the chapter in which Dufoix perfectly describes the mechanisms of this construction (pp. 24-38). Later in the book, Dufoix rightly emphasizes the role that the French advocates of "republican

concerned with the persistence of systemic discrimination; above all, it presupposes a non-existent homogeneity when, in fact, the second term posits no such homogeneity. In addition, Dufoix's stance has the merit of being consistent with the way decolonial authors refer to themselves. I have decided to endorse his terminological choice for the reasons above and, most importantly, because the term "*decolonial*" invites us to delve deeper into [the movement's] history" (p. 23),

Such a historical dive is precisely what Dufoix does by clarifying the nature and critical power of the interpellation that decolonial thinkers have addressed to the West.

A Defense and Illustration of the Decolonial Paradigm

Decolonial thinkers' foundational thesis is that *coloniality*² and modernity are inseparable, which explains why they systematically privilege 1492 as the inaugural year of a colonial order founded on the development of the transatlantic triangular trade. This thesis is rooted in factual reality: It is precisely during this period that the European identity was forged, an identity that pitted "us against the rest of the world" and that justified the enslavement of certain populations in the name of their supposed inferiority. It follows from this that *coloniality* is not a consequence, but a constituent part of modernity.

If coloniality is not a residue or legacy of the original violence of colonialism, then decoloniality is not synonymous with decolonization. More to the point, since coloniality outlasted colonialism, decoloniality requires completing the legal and political decolonization of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by focusing on epistemology (the coloniality of knowledge, as per Edgardo Lander³) and on ontological negation (the coloniality of being, as per Walter Mignolo and Nelson

universalism" (in reality an "emaciated" universalism) have played in the anti-decolonial offensive since the end of the 1990s. These are the same actors who were behind the creation of the *Printemps républicain* and then the *Observatoire du décolonialisme*, which held the conference "After Deconstruction" (equated with destruction!) at the Sorbonne in January 2022.

² The term "coloniality" is derived from the concept of "internal colonialism," which refers to the persistence of the racial-colonial system in the post-independence era.

³ Edgardo Lander (ed.), *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas Latinoamericanas*, Buenos Aires, CLACSO, 2000; and Walter Mignolo, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101(1), Winter 2002: 57-96.

Maldonado-Torres⁴). As Enrique Dussel sums up, “the indigenous peoples suffered the denial of their rights, civilization, culture, and gods [...] in the name of an innocent victim [Christ] and for the sake of universal rights.”⁵

This perspective profoundly alters the analysis of modernity. Here, modernity is no longer seen as the product of processes internal to the development of Europe, but as emerging from the latter’s encounter with America. The notion of periphery was created in that very encounter, when “[b]y controlling, conquering, and violating the Other, Europe defined itself as discoverer, conquistador, and colonizer of an alterity likewise constitutive of modernity.”⁶ Accordingly, one cannot only focus on the dispossession of land: People were also dispossessed of their cultural identities. These mechanisms are described with clarity and erudition in the book.

Dufoix also rightly stresses the existence of real “epistemic” injustices characterized by unequal access to academic positions of authority based on race (or gender) (pp. 61-70). These include “*testimonial injustice*,” a mechanism by which some people’s views are invalidated due to doubts about their credibility, and “*hermeneutical injustice*,” whereby some people lack the interpretive resources to communicate their experience. There is therefore a dichotomy between the knowledge and theories produced by the West and what the “others” can offer, whether in terms of religions, folklore, or myths. The decolonization of knowledge requires “a good understanding of the mechanisms through which cultural hegemony has taken root and been able to perpetuate itself” (p. 68). In other words, it entails what Dufoix calls an “epistemopolitics” (p. 70), namely a project that draws on, among others, the “sociology of absences” developed by the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (pp. 75-81).⁷

The critique of Eurocentrism—or the taking into account of local epistemes—allows to establish an epistemic viewpoint other than the one produced by modernity.⁸

⁴ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the development of a concept,” *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), March/May 2007: 240-270, and Norman Ajari, “Être et race. Réflexions polémiques sur la colonialité de l’être,” *Revue d’études décoloniales*, 1, 2016: 87-100.

⁵ Enrique D. Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of “the Other” and the Myth of Modernity*, New York, Continuum, 1995, p. 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁷ See Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*, London, Routledge, 2014.

⁸ Dussel describes *transmodernity* as a project for apprehending modernity from its relative exteriority. See his article, “Transmodernity and Interculturality: An Interpretation from the Perspective of Philosophy of Liberation,” *Transmodernity*, 1(3), 2012: 28-59.

The aim, then, is not to universalize the European episteme, but to pluriversalize the world. *Pluriversalism*, “which over the last twenty years has become a key concept in the decolonial lexicon” (p. 45), is opposed to Eurocentrism—or, as it were, to monological universalism—and represents, in the minds of its advocates, true universalism. In other words, it is opposed to the adulterated version of universalism, a version which, for Dufoix, “is ultimately the product, not of a social contract or of the truth of rational principles, but of a history of domination of certain groups over others” (p. 60).

Is Epistemology Necessarily Situated?

However, one can wonder whether the decolonial approach does not entail moving from the necessary abandonment of universalism’s imperialist character—the decolonization of universalism—to the sacrifice of universalism *per se*. Dufoix is aware of that risk, but nevertheless seems untroubled by it, despite the arguments he puts forward to persuade us otherwise.

Much to its credit, the decolonial critique invites us to take seriously the emancipatory potential of traditions of thought considered to be peripheral and, therefore, to accept perspectives that challenge the ways we describe and analyze the world. But does it manage to avoid the trap of relativism? Dufoix deems this question unfounded on the grounds that the vast majority of decolonial thinkers do not explicitly embrace relativism (p. 81). This argument is not very convincing. Many authors, especially in the philosophy of science, are considered to be relativists even though they have refuted this charge (Kuhn, for instance, never claimed to be a relativist). We seem to find ourselves in a similar situation here: Is it relativist to question the ideal of objectivity in inquiry or to express doubts about the plausibility of scientific universalism as Dufoix himself does (p. 81)? Dufoix’s answer to this question is, of course, negative. What, then, should we call the skepticism about the possibility of a “point of view from nowhere” (to use the expression of Thomas Nagel)? And how should we interpret the following statements: “Building on the universalism of reason and rights, the universalism of science presupposes the equal applicability of concepts to all situations and all regions of the world” (p. 73) and “The weight of non-situated, detached, and objective ‘truth’ ignores or crushes differences that do not fit the norm” (p. 74)?

In my eyes, this insistence on the situated character of all utterances renders the desire to escape relativism perfectly pointless, and the idea that scientific universalism must be constructed “on the basis of the plurality of situations and ways of knowing” (p. 82) is a contradiction in terms. Is an epistemology that, in the words of Santiago Castro-Gomez, has “a race and a gender”⁹ really an epistemology? What value does it assign to knowledge? By their very nature, epistemic principles must apply independently of cultural context. If they do not, then the question of the truth value of propositions becomes unfounded. To treat every descriptive proposition as a performative statement is to deny the objective guarantee of assertability. In short, the thesis that language can be unmoored from the external world is profoundly relativistic. It forces us to define truth, along with Rorty, as that which conforms to our “cultural models.”¹⁰ As a result, it cannot avoid the disqualification of the notions of “knowledge,” “fact,” and “reason,” these being reduced to mere cultural constructs.

Dufoix does not own up to these consequences. His position seems to me unstable because there is a strong tension between, on the one hand, his defense of “lateral universalism” (as per Merleau-Ponty’s formula, later taken up by Souleymane Bachir Diagne), which rightly suggests that universalism must always be reconstructed, and, on the other, his privileging of “universality,” conceived as a middle way between “the universalism of nowhere and the autochtony of endemic thought” (p. 83), over universalism, understood as intrinsically hegemonic. Is this latter move not a way of dismissing universalism, of reducing it to its origins, or, in other words, of invalidating its project?

In fact, as Francis Wolff points out in his fine *Plaidoyer pour l’universel* (A Plea for Universalism), universalism does not belong to Europe, but to humanity, and first and foremost to the oppressed who are deprived of rights and of the freedom to act and to think—the vast majority of whom live outside Europe. In his inaugural lecture at the *Collège de France*, Antoine Lilti likewise emphasized that the Enlightenment was never an exclusively European heritage: “South American revolutionaries of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries translated and read Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, one of the main sources of republicanism from the Río de la Plata to Venezuela.”¹¹ The attempt to do away with the emancipatory narratives of

⁹ Santiago Castro-Gomez, “The Missing Chapter of Empire: Postmodern Reorganization of Coloniality and Post-Fordist Capitalism,” *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), April 2007: 428-448.

¹⁰ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979.

¹¹ Antoine Lilti, “Pluraliser les Lumières est la condition même de leur universalisation,” *Le Monde*, 9 December 2022.

republicanism and the class struggle, both of which were products of the Enlightenment, appears to result from the reduction of modernity to coloniality. The author's desire (which I share) to move "towards decoloniality"¹² (p. 84) does not, in my view, require such reduction.

Nevertheless, Dufoix did achieve the objectives he had set for himself: To make known an important current of thought and to release all of its critical power. The fact that I do not agree with all of his analyses is, in this regard, entirely anecdotal.

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¹² The conditions for this project are set out very precisely, and with a reasonable optimism that I myself share, in the final pages of the book (pp. 87-92).