

The decolonial continent

Lola Yon-Dominguez

What does it mean to “decolonize knowledge”? What is the difference between “anticolonial,” “postcolonial,” and “decolonial”? To address the semantic confusion surrounding the term “decolonial,” Lissell Quiroz and Philippe Colin propose a genealogy of this current of thought, which emerged in Latin America in the 1990s.

Reviewed: Philippe Colin, Lissell Quiroz, *Pensées décoloniales. Une introduction aux théories critiques d'Amérique latine* (Decolonial Thoughts: An Introduction to Latin American Critical Theories), Paris, La Découverte, 2023, 240 p., 20, 50 €.

Ten years after its arrival in France, the term "decolonial" is still poorly understood and continues to be used carelessly in politics and the media. Thanks to Philippe Colin and Lissell Quiroz's book, the term is at last given a precise and rigorous meaning: decolonial thinking is a heterogeneous and multifaceted movement that appeared in Latin America in the 1990s, and represents the culmination of more than a century of Latin American critical theory. The book provides an invaluable key to understanding these theories, in addition to clarifying their contours. Addressing head-on the most common prejudice--that of a unified and dogmatic school of thought--the book's main contribution is to present, in a reasonable number of pages and a flowing style, a panoramic view of its various currents. The use of the plural in the title and subtitle emphasizes the fact that decolonial thought is, from both a

disciplinary and geographic perspective, a "diffuse and varied interpretive current" (p. 10).

In this vein, the authors propose a genealogy of its emergence and the theories that inspired it (chapter 1), followed by an analysis of the main figures of the first generation of the Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality movement and their now classic oeuvre (chapter 2). Colin and Quiroz conclude by considering its activist ramifications and the debates to which they have given rise (chapter 3).

The Latin American critical tradition

It must be first recalled that many of the main ideas of decolonial thought were already present in the tradition of Latin Americanism, which, as early as the nineteenth century, was characterized by the desire to develop a form of thinking distinct to the continent. *Nuestra América*, the famous book published in 1891 by the Cuban poet José Martí, already expressed a need for cultural emancipation from the European model and denounced the artificial nature of the "independence" that most Latin American countries achieved in the 1820s. Since *criollos* - descendants of colonists who were born in the colonies - usually led independences in these countries, -the role of indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants in anticolonial struggles was rendered invisible, even though the history of modern and contemporary Latin America, as Quiroz and Colin emphasize, is that of anticolonial resistance.

The critical theory elaborated in the next century was more focused on the interference and imperialist aspirations of the United States that contributed to keep Latin America in a state of economic dependence. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 and its extension by President Theodore Roosevelt ensured that American interventionism would last. In the 1970s and 80s, the geopolitical project of exporting neoliberalism and "shock therapy" was carried out in the name of democracy and the struggle against communism. In response to these interventions, a social and political critique, formulated by various thinkers embracing Marxism, emerged in Latin America over the course of the twentieth century. While third-worldism arose in the 1920s with the organization of the first congress against colonialism and imperialism, these years also witnessed the renewal of Latin American political theory inspired by a re-interpretation of Marxism, of the kind found in the thought of the Peruvian author Juan C. Mariátegui and his idea of "revolutionary indigenism."

Although it came in the wake of a long history of political action and reflection, the moment of gestation of decolonial thought narrowly construed was the 1960s and 70s. Dependency theory, the reputation of which extended beyond Latin America in the 1970s, was one of the most important theoretical contributions to the birth of decolonial thought. It maintained that the capitalist system is organized around an autonomous center and a dependent periphery and that one cannot exist without the other. Consequently, formerly colonized countries have been placed in a situation of underdevelopment from which they cannot escape. At the same time, another theory asserted the necessity of breaking with Western models: "Latin American liberationism" (p. 78). This social movement, first spearheaded by the Catholic church and championing the liberation of the oppressed, was reformulated as a secular theory by the philosopher Enrique Dussel in a work that became a cornerstone of decolonial thought: *Philosophy of Liberation*, published in 1977.

Consistent with the existing literature on the topic, Quiroz and Colin claim that decolonial thought was officially born in the 1990s, especially in the 1992 "moment." The year of the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the conquest of the Americas also witnessed counter-celebrations in which critical voices made themselves heard. Marches honoring 500 years of indigenous and popular resistance unsettled the official rhetoric and the Spanish government's appeasing attitude. Only in the early 2000s did the current formally organize itself into the Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality group, whose name was proposed by the anthropologist Arturo Escobar in an article that serves as its research program.

Conceptual contributions and the Dussel-Quijano-Mignolo triad

Throughout the book, the authors incrementally situate the decolonial turn in relation to the other two critical theories of colonialism from the second half of the twentieth century: subaltern studies and postcolonial studies. Distinguishing between the postcolonial and decolonial currents is particularly important in France, where they tend to be conflated. The first difference concerns their object of study and, thus, their historical period: whereas postcolonial studies are concerned with the British Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, decolonial studies seek to grasp the distinct characteristics and modalities of the Spanish and Portuguese colonial

enterprise between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The second difference concerns their respective epistemological approach. The idea of Eurocentrism and the contributions of postcolonial and subaltern studies pervade decolonial thought, but the latter seeks to differentiate itself, notably by radicalizing the postcolonial critique of Western modernity, criticizing its interpretation of history, and distancing itself from European authors.

Without question, the main contribution of the decolonial current is the notion of "coloniality," generally considered to have been coined by the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano. This idea turned out to be the result of a close collaboration in New York with the sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein and an engagement with the latter's concept of "world system," in a path-breaking article published in 1992 on the "coloniality of power." According to Quijano, the ethnicization of labor and the social order produced by racism were not just factors that allowed capitalism to function--they were its essence. Quijano, thus, argues that capitalism, racism, modernity, and coloniality are inseparable.

The concept of coloniality seeks to grasp a systemic phenomenon present at every level of society. Coloniality should be understood, following dependency theory, not only in economic and political terms, but also as shaping cognitive, symbolic, and cultural structures. Most importantly, the primary objective of this concept is to express the widespread persistence of colonialism. While it may be possible to assign a chronological beginning and end to the colonial period, colonialism understood as a sociopolitical organization endures: "conquest is not an event, but a structure" (p. 8).

The theoretical consequence of this hypothesis is what Dussel calls the "myth of modernity." In his book *1492: El encubrimiento del Otro (The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of "the Other" and the Myth of Modernity)*, a text that launched decolonial studies, Dussel criticized a set of arguments claiming that modernity emerged in Europe due to cultural exceptionalism while ignoring the accumulation of wealth that colonialism made possible and which was a condition of possibility of modernity's emergence. Dussel, thus, challenges the diffusionist theory, which holds that modernity was born in Europe before spreading elsewhere, thanks to the Crusades and, more recently, development aid. Modernity no longer appears as a universal historical process but as an apologetic narrative justifying colonialism.

Quiroz and Colin point out, however, that the decolonial turn consists not only in formulating negative critiques, but also in conceptualizing alternative ways of

organizing knowledge. The desire to bring cultures and ontologies into conversation at the global level is notably articulated in Dussel's utopian concepts of "transmodernity" and "pluriversalism", Catherine Walsh's emphasis on the importance of validating the legitimacy of intercultural and "other" pedagogical practices, and Escobar's notion of an "anthropology of the multiple." The last part of the book is devoted to various theoretical and activist elaborations on contemporary topics, particularly the "two most promising" domains for decolonial studies: political ecology (notably the work of Fernando Coronil, Arturo Escobar, and Hector Alimonda) and gender theory, as seen in the Argentine philosopher Maria Lugones' critique of Quijano. Indeed, from the 2010s, a feminist critique is emerging, raising new questions for the decolonial turn.

Internal disagreement

While the book keeps its initial promise of introducing Latin American critical theories, greater consideration of internal disagreement within the decolonial movement would, in our view, have painted an even more accurate portrait.

It would have been interesting to bring to the readers' attention the critique advanced by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui in her 2010 book, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores* (Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization). According to the Bolivian sociologist, Quijano does not recognize the full value of the Latin American and Caribbean anticolonial tradition within which he situates himself. She also maintains that the authors of the decolonial turn are *themselves* the heirs of the modern/colonial system, as they constitute a cultural elite of European heritage that readily benefits from the symbolic and financial capital offered by positions at prestigious American universities.

For Rivera Cusicanqui, another critical intellectual framework relating to colonialism is needed, one anchored in *descolonial* practices. The added "s" seeks to restore the correct form of the privative prefix in Spanish, while also distancing itself from the first generation of decolonial thinkers, who are considered out of touch with social and political realities.

To the latter tradition Cusicanqui opposes a position that draws on Frantz Fanon's anticolonial legacy, grounded in activism and closely aligned with the struggles of indigenous peoples. Similarly, the implosion of the "Modernity/Coloniality" group following the Venezuelan political crisis was a major moment in the intellectual history of the decolonial turn. Some even see it as the end of the group, if not the paradigm. These critical voices, which can be heard throughout the continent, represent a non-negligible element of contemporary decolonial thought in Latin America.

Further reading :

- Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003.
- Stéphane Dufoix, *Décolonial*, Paris, Anamosa, series "Le mot est faible," 2023.
- Alain Policar, « [The Cultural Hegemony of Culturalism](#) », *Books and Ideas*, 6 January 2023.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, January 22, 2024. Translated by Michael Behrent, with the support of Cairn.info. Published in booksandideas.net, April 17, 2025.