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CHALLENGING BORDERS. THE LEGACY OF POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE IN THE PRESENT CONJUNCTURE[1]

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Abstract

This paper investigates the implications of the current global economic situation in the development and nature of capitalism through the contribution of postcolonial criticism. The assumption from which they move is that decolonisation is not over at all, although the sense that it takes on is profoundly different than in the past It is a question of saving this project and 'transposing' it into a completely different global context. It is not a question of thinking without Modernity or of building epistemological scaffolding, as scholars of the Coloniality/Modernity/Decolonialid group try to do, rather, working on the edges of Western concepts and categories that become open fields of struggle to the intervention of former colonized subjects.

Keywords

Decolonisation, capitalism postcolonial, globalization, modernity.

Resumen

Este documento investiga las implicaciones de la actual situación económica mundial en el desarrollo y la naturaleza del capitalismo a través de la contribución de la

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crítica poscolonial. La suposición de la que parte es que la descolonización no ha terminado en absoluto, aunque la sensación que adquiere es profundamente diferente que en el pasado. Se trata de salvar este proyecto y "transponerlo" a un contexto global completamente diferente. No se trata de pensar sin Modernidad, o de construir andamios epistemológicos, como los estudiosos del grupo Colonialidad/Modernidad/Decolonialid tratan de hacer, sino, más bien, trabajar en los bordes de los conceptos y categorías occidentales que se convierten en campos abiertos de lucha a la intervención de antiguos sujetos colonizados.

Palablas clave

Descolonización, capitalismo poscolonial, globalización, modernidad.

The circulation of Covid-19 has demonstrated once again the tricky nature of contemporary global processes. In one sense, that circulation has been fast and smooth, it has hit almost the whole globe prompting the sudden emergence of a "global crisis". At the same time, however, the spread of the virus has been profoundly uneven, shedding light on a panoply of borders, both between countries and regions and within them. Colonial legacies have shaped the circulation of the virus in many parts of the world, for instance in the US, where African Americans and Latinxs have been disproportionately affected, or in Brazil, where the same has happened with Indigenous people (as well as with blacks and the poor in general). More generally, the pandemic is spurring complex processes of reorganization of global spaces that were already underway, pointing to a further displacement of the US from the center of the global order and disorder and to the conflict-ridden emergence of a multiplicity of regional spaces. In the framework of such processes the mix of homogeneity and heterogeneity that characterizes globalization (see Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) is even more pronounced and invites critical reflection.

Which are the implications of the current global conjuncture for the development and nature of capitalism and in particular for the condition and struggles of exploited subjects across the planet? This is of course a crucial and complex question, which would require a much more expanded investigation and discussion than it is possible to provide in this essay. My aim here is far more restricted. I want to preliminarily test the potential contribution of postcolonial criticism to the general question I just asked. I speak of the "legacy" of postcolonial critique because my sense is that over the last ten years the field of postcolonial studies has somehow exploded. A postcolonial approach has deeply shaped the development of critical theory and the discussion of key topics in the present (say, from biopolitics to migration and climate change). But while the field continues to reproduce itself through journals and academic chairs, it seems to me that the most valuable contribution of postcolonial scholars today lays precisely in the operationalization (which also means "hybridization") of an approach and not in new systematic works of postcolonial theory and criticism. Moreover, many critiques of postcolonial studies, including the ones I will mention in this essay, have steadily led to a destabilization of its paradigms. Having modestly contributed to the postcolonial debate since the early 2000s —see for instance Mezzadra (2008) and Walker (2011)—, I basically tend to consider postcolonial criticism today as an important archive for the critical investigation of the present, which we can use combining it with other archives, perspectives, and conceptual languages. I will try to explain this in the following pages.

But let me start, consistently with the focus of this issue of *Soft Power*, with a short discussion of decolonization.

Struggles of Decolonization

Decolonization is far from over. This is a foundational statement for postcolonial criticism. In the last years we have been witnessing an amazing array of movements framing their struggles and claims in terms of decolonization; just to give a couple of examples, from the "Rhodes Must Fall" campaign in South African campuses to African American movements and struggles in the US, from Indigenous movements in many parts of the world to feminist struggles in Latin America and elsewhere. These are powerful although heterogeneous movements, which intertwine a claim for the decolonization of knowledge ("epistemic decolonization") with a struggle against the material reproduction of colonial logics and devices in contemporary regimes of domination and in the operations of capital. Decolonization takes on multiple meanings in the light of those movements and struggles and builds a fundamental stake in the present. Needless to say, there are profound discontinuities between the way in which decolonization is understood today and the historical process of decolonization, which builds however the necessary antecedent for any discussion of the topic.

There is a need to repeat that, independently of its multiple "failures" and truncations, decolonization was an epoch-making process, a key moment in the history of our present. Critiques of the shortcomings of decolonization are well known and well grounded. The emphasis on the nation state, in particular, has been often considered as a severe limit to the political imagination of movements and struggles of decolonization (see for instance Hardt and Negri, 2000, pp. 132-34). The inscription of postcolonial regimes within borders that more often than not had been drawn by colonial powers radically circumscribed the possibility of cooperation and experimentation in the search for new paths of political, economic, and social development after independence (see for instance Winichakul, 1994). Nevertheless, it is a useful exercise today to recall the high stakes and expectations surrounding decolonization in order to grasp the radical nature of the challenges it raised. Decolonization, Frantz Fanon famously wrote, "is quite simply the substitution of one 'species' of mankind by another. The substitution is unconditional, absolute, total, and seamless" (Fanon, 2005, p. 1). It would be wrong to read in these lines a kind of "naiveté" of Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth* is a political

manifesto and Fanon's statement is a wager, which nicely captures the turmoil, passion, and inventiveness that shaped the historical moment and struggles of decolonization. Political animals "in the most global sense of the term" (p. 40), the insurgent colonized have according to Fanon the unique opportunity to terminate the history of racism and to open up a new epoch in the history of the human.

We should take Fanon's (2005) words not that much as representative of the widely heterogeneous process of decolonization, but definitely as an effective reminder of the expectations and dreams, projects and efforts that spurred the movements and struggles of the colonized in that historical conjuncture (see also Samaddar, 2007, II, ch. 1). I am convinced that an attempt to rescue those dreams and projects —which also means to "translate" them onto a completely different conjuncture— is one of the main tasks of a postcolonial critique capable to contribute to the forging of a new language and politics of liberation in our present. Reading the classical texts of anticolonial thinkers of the 1950s and 1960s confronts us at the same time with an early and pronounced awareness of the pitfalls and risks haunting the process of decolonization. This is again the case with Fanon, who provides in the fourth chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* —"The Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness"— a detailed and sharp critique of African bourgeoisies, who aim at a mere "transfer into indigenous hands of privileges inherited from the colonial period" (p. 100). Writing an article significantly entitled "Decolonization and Independence" for *El Moudjahid* (April 1958), Fanon had already warned that "it is the colonial peoples who must liberate themselves from colonialist domination". And he had added that "true liberation is not that pseudo-independence in which ministers having a limited responsibility hobnob with an economy dominated by the colonial pact" (Fanon, 1988, p. 105). Fanon was anticipating here the formalization of the concept of "neo-colonialism" provided in 1966 by Kwame Nkrumah, to designate a situation in which formal sovereignty of a formerly colonized country is combined with a direction "from outside" of the economic system that ends swallowing up "its political policy" (Nkrumah, 1966, p. ix).

The notion of neocolonialism, alongside with other related categories forged by the panoply of dependency theory and Marxist analysis of underdevelopment, continues to be employed in critical literature and activist interventions across the world. It definitely grasps important economic factors and processes, as well as power relations that shaped the outcome of decolonization foreshadowing the current predicament of many postcolonial countries. Nevertheless, there is a need to emphasize that the focus on continuity constitutive of the notion of neocolonialism risks to erase the presence and mutations of

the dreams and projects of the colonized, their agency in history and present. A "stress on continuing neocolonial dominance", Robert J.C. Young (2001) aptly writes,

> […] has the disadvantage of suggesting a powerlessness and passivity which underestimates what has been achieved since independence, including the independence movements themselves, perpetuating stereotypes of helplessness even while it implies sympathy, and reinforcing assumptions of Western hegemony with the third world being portrayed as its homogeneous eternal victim. (p. 48)

This is precisely the wager of what I consider to be the best and most interesting postcolonial critique, which necessarily takes the historical break of decolonization as its point of departure and struggles to combine an analysis of the continuous reproduction of the legacy of colonialism with an emphasis on the agency of former colonized people, which also means with an effort to open up the archive of anticolonial struggles before and after the historical moment of decolonization.

Postcolonial Critique

Such an understanding of postcolonial critique is effectively instantiated by the work of Stuart Hall (2000). In several essays he insists that the postcolonial does not signal a linear chronological succession. It does *not* imply, above all, that the "problems of colonialism have been resolved" (p. 213). The term postcolonial rather "marks the passage from one historical power-configuration or conjuncture to another" (p. 213). Hall is keen to stress that the problems of dependency, underdevelopment, and marginalization (the problems usually emphasized by theories and usages of "neocolonialism") *persist* in the postcolonial situation. However, he repeats, "these relations are *resumed* in a new configuration" (Hall, 2000, p. 213). It is, simply put, this combination of continuity and discontinuity that characterizes the postcolonial. Colonialism is not over; its logics continue to haunt the present and nevertheless they are compelled to come to terms with a new configuration in which colonialism cannot reinstate itself as a consistent and stable system of power. This is because the historical threshold of decolonization continues to produce its effects and subaltern politics reproduces and amplifies those effects in multifarious ways (not necessarily consistent with the dreams and projects of struggles of decolonization but nonetheless effective).

It is worth shortly dwelling on Stuart Hall. His 1996 essay, "When Was the 'Post-Colonial.' Thinking at the Limit", provides an excellent overview of the main topics at stake in postcolonial critique and of key theoretical points. Written in the aftermath of the Iraq war in 1991, which built a kind of stress test for postcolonial theory, Hall's essay takes a critical distance from a unilateral "culturalist" understanding of the postcolonial. He explicitly acknowledges the constitutive relevance of a wide array of material factors, including violence and war, to make sense of the tricky combination of continuity and discontinuity that makes up the postcolonial. The proliferation of heterogeneous histories and temporalities, the inscription of difference onto Eurocentric grand narratives, the multiplicity of latitudinal cultural connections, movements of migration and the displacement and decentering of Europe and the West are analyzed in the essay against that background. Hall is quick to add, for instance, that "it is only too tempting to fall into the trap of assuming that, because essentialism has been deconstructed *theoretically*, therefore it has been displaced *politically*" (Hall, 1996, p. 249). This is an important warning, considering existing trends within postcolonial studies to disentangle the analysis of cultural processes from the materiality of politics and from an analysis of the working of capitalism (see Mezzadra, 2011a).

But let me come to the point I find most important and challenging in Hall's (1996) essay. Colonialism, he writes, is usually defined "in terms of the binary between the colonizers and the colonized" (p. 242). What Hall has in mind is a constitutive aspect of modern regimes of colonialism, which was part and parcel of their working and of their "legitimization", independently of the fact that since the beginning it was challenged and transgressed on the ground. On the one hand, the colonial situation was characterized by such a binary, famously captured by Fanon in his description of the colonial world as a "Manichean world" (Fanon, 2005, p. 6). On the other hand, what we can term a qualitative "metaborder" run through the world circumscribing and separating the colonies from the metropolitan powers, which means from Europe and the West. Carl Schmitt's book, *The Nomos of the Earth* (2003), can be read as a brilliant chronicle, although from a reactionary point of view, of the legal, geographical, and political forms taken by that "metaborder" across modern history. It is precisely this standard view of colonialism that is radically challenged by postcolonial critique. Even more precisely one can say that postcolonial critique epistemically translates onto its paradigm the challenge to the "metaborder" between the colony and the metropolis successfully posited by the historical movement of decolonization. In this sense postcolonial critique, at least in

the strands that I find most consistent and thought provoking, can be considered as a continuation of anticolonial struggles in the field of theory under the new conditions established by decolonization.

Allow me to quote at length a passage from Hall's essay. The term "postcolonial", he writes:

> […] refers to a general process of decolonization which, like colonization itself, has marked the colonizing societies as powerfully as it has the colonized (of course, in different ways). Hence the subverting of the old colonizing/colonized binary in the new conjuncture. Indeed, one of the principal values of the term 'post-colonial' has been to direct our attention to the many ways in which colonization was never simply external to the societies of the imperial metropolis. It was always inscribed deeply within them – as it became indelibly inscribed in the cultures of the colonized. (Hall, 1996, p. 246)

The "subverting of the old colonizing/colonized binary" is a distinctive hallmark of postcolonial critique since its inception. This is the reason why it does not merely address the former colonial world, but it powerfully reconfigures also Europe and the West. It allows for instance to adopt the colonial lens to investigate mutations of citizenship and labor in the former metropolises, while it invites to discern anticipations of modernity and postmodernity in the colonial and postcolonial world. The contestation of the spatial "metaborder" implies in fact the contestation of its translation onto the domain of temporality, of the "'first in Europe, then elsewhere' structure of global historical time" whose historicist imprint has been effectively criticized by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000, p. 7). It is easy to see that the "subverting of the old colonizing/colonized binary", which also means the contestation of the borders traced by European colonial expansion, opens up new continents both for historical research and for a critical analysis of the present. Movements of migration become particularly important from this point of view precisely for the challenge they posit to borders, giving way to new geographies and spurring what Hall calls "the subaltern proliferation of difference" (Hall, 2000, p. 215). The study of the decentering effects of such movements on the West and of the related reactions toward closure in the latter, which imply the reworking of old and the emergence of new forms of racism, defines one of the major fields of tension and struggle investigated by postcolonial critique.

Unsettling, and not merely registering, the relations of Europe with its multiple "others" (Barker, 1984), carefully mapping the "responses" of the former colonized subjects through writing (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 1989) or antiracist struggles (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982), investigating the wide spectrum of subaltern agency in the colonial and postcolonial world, ranging from insurrection (Guha, 1983) to multiple forms of negotiation and "mimicry" beyond the rigidity of what Fanon called "Manicheism" (Bhabha, 1994), challenging the borders of Western feminism and opening up new spaces for feminist theory and practice (Mohanty, 2003): this is just a short and necessarily incomplete list of what I consider important foundational gestures of postcolonial critique (see for instance Quayson, 2000; Young, 2003; Mellino, 2005; Luce, 2018, part II). It should be clear that all of them, although in different ways, contribute to place under duress what I termed the "metaborder" between former colonies and former metropolises. This is not to say that postcolonial critique considers the world as a "smooth" space, where boundaries and differences (in the distribution of wealth and power) do not matter anymore. The opposite is the case. Boundaries and differences rather multiply in the postcolonial world, and there is a need to carefully analyze them both between different countries and regions and within them. The fact is that precisely this proliferation of boundaries and differences within countries and regions further displaces any "metaborder" and challenges its epistemic operations.

This is what makes Chakrabarty's project of "provincializing" Europe plausible and necessary, since the position of Europe at the very center of knowledge production and circulation was part and parcel of the architecture of colonial domination predicated on what Hall terms the "old colonizing/colonized binary." Displacing Europe from that position (the position of the "universal"), turning it onto a province among others, is a project that Chakrabarty (2008) places in a line of continuity with "twentieth-century anticolonial democratic demands for self-rule", which refused any historicist argument harping on "a 'now' as the temporal horizon of action" (p. 8). It is important to note that such a project does not lead Chakrabarty to dismiss the question of the universals or modernity as such. Universal notions and modernity rather become fields of struggle, open to the intervention of former colonized subjects capable to stage dialogues among themselves and even with the former metropolis, transforming old concepts and inventing new ones that may differentially work in different parts of the world, including Europe and the West. One is reminded once again of Fanon here, not only of his struggle to hold on to the idea of the human and humanism notwithstanding his devastating

critique of European humanism but also of his anatomo-political analysis of the emergence of a new Algeria in *A Dying Colonialism* (1965). Particularly in the chapters on the veil, on the radio, and on medicine Fanon combines a critical analysis of colonial modernity with a description of the many ways in which, through the insurrection, the colonized selectively appropriate modernity, laying the basis for a postcolonial modernity after independence. This is another truncated dream and project of the struggles of decolonization that postcolonial critique has taken up in many ways.

Civilizational Borders: the "Colonial Matrix of Power"

"Thinking *without* modernity", writes instead Walter Mignolo (2018), "delinking from its fictions, is one major decolonial challenge" (p. 109). Although it is possible to find similar rejections of modernity as such in postcolonial studies, scholars who employ the notions of "coloniality" and "decoloniality" take a much more radical stance on modernity in the framework of what has become an influent and widespread approach. Based upon the work of Anibal Quijano, who first introduced the notion of "coloniality of power" (see for instance Quijano, 2000), the "modernity/coloniality/decoloniality" project has steadily emerged since the late 1990s through the collaborations of scholars based in North and Latin America. What distinguishes the project is among other things the foundational reference to the conquest of America, which would be underestimated in postcolonial studies (hence a subtle polemic that often runs through the writings of scholars pertaining to the group). This is an important point, which definitely highlights a limit of postcolonial studies, and more generally there are many interesting aspects in Quijano's and even in Mignolo's work. However, my impression is that particularly in the last years the kind of orthodoxy crystallized around notions like "coloniality" and "decoloniality", as well as the "colonial matrix of power" (usually referred to through the acronym CMP, to signal the stabilization of its meaning), is closing rather than opening spaces of debate and research. Moreover, the absolute primacy of epistemology advocated by Mignolo leads to a sidelining of any material factor in his analysis of power and to a merely culturalist understanding of the stakes of decolonization. I will base my critical discussion of his approach on the chapter he wrote in a recent book co-authored with Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality. Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (2018), which opens a new Duke University Press series on the topic.

What characterizes Mignolo's take on the question of decolonization is on the one hand a critical discussion of the historical process of decolonization, on the other hand a distinction between "dewesternization" and "decoloniality." Regarding the first point, the "shortcomings of decolonization" (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 124) are identified in a focus on the state that replicates the blueprint of Western political theory. "The task of decoloniality after decolonization", Mignolo writes, "is redefined and focused on epistemology and knowledge rather than the state" (p. 121). The bias of decolonization continues to haunt contemporary processes of "dewesternization", which are reshaping the global space through the emergence of non-Western powers that aim at "delinking from westernization and confronting rewesternization by means of strong states" (p. 127). "Dewesternization" seems to be for Mignolo a welcome trend, since it lays new basis for decolonial options and practices. "In the current formation of a multipolar world order", Mignolo and Walsh write in their joint introduction to the book, "the rhetoric of modernity is no longer unidirectional and unipolar" (p. 6). Nevertheless, while there is a common ground, there is also a fundamental difference, and even an antagonism between "dewesternization" and "decoloniality." The former remains for Mignolo "an interstate-led project that disputes the control and management of the colonial matrix of power but doesn't question its very foundation" (p. 125). On the contrary, "decoloniality" radically challenges and disrupts the colonial matrix of power, as Mignolo often repeats, it "focuses on changing the terms of the conversation" (p. 130) and on opening up new territories for engaging in decolonial options and multifarious practices of "re-existence", which means in "the sustained effort to reorient our human communal praxis of living" (p. 106).

Mignolo's understanding of "decoloniality" is based upon a set of strictly integrated and nested concepts, starting with the strict link between modernity and "coloniality." "Decoloniality" is the perspective that allows making visible that link, shedding light on "coloniality as the darker side of modernity" (p. 109). We can begin to discern here some of the implications of Mignolo's use of the notion of the notion of "coloniality". I am sure that he would not agree with me, but coloniality seems to be a kind of metaphysical, or simply essentialist category that wipes out any difference within modernity and, even more importantly for the current discussion, erases the inscription within its conceptual fabric of a multiplicity of colonial and postcolonial encounters. The whole history of colonialism, in particular, is reduced to the uniform matrix of "coloniality" independently of the wide array of differences that characterized it since its "historical

foundation" in the early 16th century. "The changes are substantial if you focus on colonialism", Mignolo writes. "If instead you look for coloniality and you are aware of the history of the CMP they are circumstantial" (p. 237). Such an undifferentiated and compact understanding of the nexus between modernity and "coloniality" from the angle of "decoloniality" is characteristic, although with different nuances, of the "decolonial" project as a whole. And I am convinced that it is a serious limit both from a historical point of view and for a critical theory of the present.

Mignolo (2018) further develops his critique of modernity/"coloniality" in the field of knowledge, in ways in which one can see the lasting influence of his training as a semiotician. His main theoretical point could be described in terms of a primacy of epistemology over ontology. Ontologies, he writes, "are epistemic inventions" (p. 177). "Entities" and "de-notation" dominate the realm of Western ontology. One could legitimately ask what kind of notion of ontology Mignolo has in mind (Heidegger's work seems to be particularly relevant here) when he opposes "entities" to "relations", writing that "a world-sense [as the decolonial] that privileges relations cannot be understood ontologically because relations are not entities (they are relations among entities)" (p. 135). Suffice it to recall Étienne Balibar's (2007) engagement with the notion of an "ontology of relations" with respect to outstanding modern philosophers like Spinoza and Marx to show that the spectrum of alternatives within European philosophy is much wider than Mignolo seems to believe (pp. 32-33). The point is particularly important, since Mignolo uses the opposition between "entities" and "relations" to draw a kind of epistemic civilizational boundary between the West (where "we are taught to see entities, things"), and "most of cultures and civilizations on the planet", which take relations as the main focus of their worldviews. Repeating that "it is epistemology that institutes ontology", Mignolo (2018) maintains that "ontology" is an exclusively Western category, which should not be projected onto "non-Western thinking" (pp. 147-148), while for some mysterious reasons "epistemology" is not.

The drawing of such a firm epistemic (and civilizational) boundary "the West and the Rest", which in a way replicates in inverted form the "metaborder" between the metropolis and the colony, is for me another serious limit of Mignolo's work. Moreover, epistemology tends to become a totalizing principle, which disentangles the operations of knowledge from any material force, and from the "materiality of the world" as such, which for Mignolo (2018) is entirely "shaped by epistemology" (p. 196). The "colonial matrix of power" nicely encapsulates such a primacy of epistemology. The "domains, levels, and flows" that compose the matrix (p. 142) revolve around an act of *enunciation*,

which in particular institutes the "domains" (economics, politics, knowledge, subjectivity, etc.) to be managed and controlled (p. 169). The emphasis on such an act of enunciation is what allows Mignolo to widely employ the notion of "fictions" to characterize the narratives of modernity (p. 109) and to speak of the "rhetoric of modernity" (p. 121), eventually reducing the latter to a diabolic rhetorical machine that somehow managed to dominate the whole planet with its "colonial matrix of power." What we can call the materiality of modernity, which is also at root of its tensions and contradictions, is completely subordinated to the epistemological dimension, which also guides Mignolo's analysis of capitalism in terms of "economic coloniality" (p. 130).

Mignolo's (2018) frantic search for cultures and "epistemologies" existing outside modernity and its Eurocentric "colonial matrix of power" leads him to continuously reinforce the border circumscribing the West. And that border is necessarily a "civilizational" border, separating Europe and the West —"one of the results of knowledge making itself" (p. 196)— from other regions and continents where different epistemologies, ways of doing and thinking, forms of living are possible due a different history of civilizations and different cultural archives. "Delinking" from modernity and opting for decoloniality are the conditions for breaking free from the "colonial matrix of power", an option that Mignolo recommends also for racialized and sexualized minorities within the West (since racism and sexism are for him key outcomes of the working of the "colonial matrix of power"). "The decolonial", Mignolo (2011) writes elsewhere, "confronts all of Western civilization, which includes liberal capitalism and Marxism" (p. xviii). This civilizational opposition requires the reinforcement of the border circumscribing the West and forecloses therefore the theoretical space opened up by postcolonial critique through the "subverting of the old colonizing/colonized binary" (Hall, 1996, p. 246). Independently of the fact that "civilizational though" has a long history in Europe and the West, and it would be interesting to dwell on its pitfalls and shortcomings, its decolonial variant is doomed to nurture a merely moralistic critique of Eurocentrism and identity politics.

Resonances Across Borders

I dwelled quite at length on Walter Mignolo's work because it is definitely influential in many parts of the world, even beyond the Americas, often in dialogue with Indigenous studies (see for instance Byrd, 2011) and settler colonialism studies (see Wolfe, 1999, 2016; Veracini, 2010). In a way, one can say that the decolonial project

promises to provide an alternative to a postcolonial critique that for several years now seems uncapable to provide a convincing "grand narrative." I have explained the reasons why I do not consider that project a viable and interesting alternative (while a discussion of Indigenous and settler colonialism studies is beyond the scope of this essay). The essentialist nature of the main decolonial concepts, the primacy of epistemology over ontology, the sidelining of material factors and forces lead to a reinforcement of a "civilizational" border between the West and the rest that I find highly problematic. Challenging the border between former colonies and former metropolises in the wake of decolonization was the founding gesture of postcolonial critique. And independently of the way in which one evaluates the development of postcolonial studies in the last two decades, I continue to find that gesture a crucially important move in order to make sense of the world we live in. In the two remaining sections of the article, I will explore different ways to work according to that foundational gesture, whether or not they form part of postcolonial studies.

What I am interested in is precisely the production of resonances across borders, the forging of a theoretical framework that acknowledges differences between countries and regions while at the same time allows taking experiences and processes from one region to explain what is happening in another region. A good example in this respect is provided by Jean and John Comaroff's (2012) celebrated essay "Theory from the South". On the one hand they write that "in many respects, Africa, South Asia, and Latin America seem to be running ahead of the Euromodern world, harbingers of *its* history-in-the-making" (p. 121). It is easy to see that the boundary between the "Global North" and the "Global South" is blurred here, and it becomes possible, say for a European scholar, to study the development of Africa, South Asia not only from the angle of "area studies", but also to let that development "resonate" in Europe. On the other hand, Comaroff and Comaroff focus on the politics of the poor in South Africa, a "living politics", stressing its peculiarity in the South African context. And nevertheless, they add that "the wave of popular protests against austerity measures in Europe has brought something akin to a living politics to the streets of Athens and London" (p. 122). We are confronted here again with "resonances", although of a quite different way. Expanding and elaborating on such resonances as the ones highlighted by Comaroff and Comaroff it becomes possible to forge an approach to the study of global processes that seems to me consistent with the foundational gesture of postcolonial critique, and that allows grasping crucial aspects of both global capitalism and of the struggles crisscrossing and contesting its development.

Resonances across borders are haunted by what Ann Laura Stoler calls in her *Duress. Imperial Durabilities in Our Time* (2016) "colonial *presence*", a notion that is not necessarily coincident with a "colonial present", since it marks "the interstices of what once was and what is, reworking both" (p. 33). Among recent scholarship, Stoler's book provides us with particularly effective conceptual tools to grasp colonial continuities in the present. While she definitely stresses moments of straightforward continuity (she mentions for instance Palestine and Iraq), she invites us to carefully analyze "strange continuity" (p. 28), following the mathematical model of "recursion." Recursion, she writes, "is precisely *not* to imagine that social and political processes ever play out in a repetitive and mimetic fashion" (p. 27). The recursive replication of fragments of colonial legacy shapes our present, and Stoler adds that the effects of such "fragments" are no less "tragic" than the ones of earlier systems of full-fledged colonial domination (p. 31). It seems to me that such an approach allows discerning different levels of colonial continuity, focusing on such different instances as, say, the operations of transnational corporations in Indigenous territories in Latin America, police violence and mass incarceration of African Americans in the US, Hindu fundamentalism in India, or European border regimes in the Mediterranean. These are just four instances among many others of key structures of power whose working displays colonial continuity and "presence", although to different degrees and in diverse ways, and cannot therefore be critically grasped without employing the colonial/postcolonial lens.

The approach I outlined speaking of "resonances across borders" and the concern with mapping "colonial *presence*" in our current predicament compose a theoretical framework that I find particularly effective to grasp the transitions and mutations of capitalism at the global level. It is from this point of view that I have employed both in individual essays (see for instance Mezzadra, 2011b) and above all in my collaborative work with Brett Neilson (see Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013, 2019) the notion of "postcolonial capitalism". This is a notion that has been circulating in postcolonial debates particularly since the publication of an important book by Kalyan Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development* (2007). This is not the place to provide a full-fledged discussion of Sanyal's work (see Chatterjee and Sanyal, 2016). Suffice it to say that in his opinion "postcolonial capitalism is a world of difference" (Sanyal, 2007, p. 218). Far from being able to accomplish its universalizing tendencies, capitalism in the postcolonial world is compelled to negotiate its relations with multiple "outsides", which means in particular with the steady expansion of that informal "need economy" that according to theories of development and modernization was only a remnant of "traditional", pre-capitalist

social formations. This is above all because postcolonial capitalism is characterized by the continuity of processes of so called "primitive accumulation" that do not end up in processes of full proletarianization of the dispossessed (in their transformation into industrial workers). A new meaning of poverty and a new politics of the poor, both in terms of capitalist governmentality and in terms of struggles, are according to Sanyal distinctive features of postcolonial capitalism.

There would be much to discuss in this pioneering book, focusing for instance on the ways in which Sanyal frames his notions of capital's outsides and "non-capital" (see Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019, ch. 2). My main critical point here is that Sanyal limits his use of postcolonial capitalism to the analysis of capitalist formations in the former Third World. The continuity of "primitive accumulation" however, has been stressed by many scholars over the last years as a hallmark of global capitalism writ large —see Mezzadra (2011c) and the literature discussed here—. Such a theoretical move challenges the "historicist" temporality of modern capitalism (since it points at the reemergence of the "origin" at the "highest point" of capitalist development) and should therefore invite to reshuffle its spatial coordinates. Recent analyses of "accumulation by dispossession" (since Harvey, 2003) and of "extraction" as a key aspect of contemporary capitalism (see Mezzadra and Neilson, 2017) are attempts to flesh out logics and operations of capital that make up a regime of *differential* accumulation whose effects expand across borders between countries and regions. This is for me a very important point, as I wrote at the beginning of this essay. To be aware of the "homogeneity" of such regime is so important as it is to carefully investigate the profound "heterogeneity" that builds the basis of its working and that such working further stimulates and multiplies. It is to conceptually grasp this complex interplay of homogeneity and heterogeneity that the concept of postcolonial capitalism is particularly helpful for me.

Thinking about Sanyal's definition of postcolonial capitalism as a "world of difference", one is again reminded of Fanon's (2005) definition of colonial capitalism as a "protean, unbalanced reality, where slavery, bondage, barter, cottage industries and stock transactions exist side by side" (p. 64). Needless to say, there are huge differences between colonial and postcolonial capitalism, but I agree with Miguel Mellino (2016) when he writes that the protean and uneven space described by Fanon, the "combination of different and hierarchized forms of labor, extends even through the so-called advanced capitalist countries" and that therefore "contemporary global capitalism can be conceived of as postcolonial capitalism" (p. 73). There should be no need at this point to stress once again that this does not imply erasing differences and inequalities among

countries and world regions. The opposite is true. As I understand it, the notion of postcolonial capitalism allows grasping the proliferation of differences and inequalities while it helps forging a unitary framework for their analysis. It enables the production of "resonances" across borders in the sense I was speaking about with respect to "Theory from the South" by Comaroff and Comaroff, which means both regarding structural processes and regarding social movements and struggles. Moreover, an important aspect of the notion of postcolonial capitalism is that it opens up an effective angle on the transformations of what we can call with Marx "living labor" after the explosion of "free" wage labor as a standard employment relation both in the West and elsewhere in the world (see Mezzadra, 2011b). Also from this point of view "resonances across borders" can help us to better understand what is at stake in such explosion and to prompt dialogues among scholars and activists based in different parts of the world.

Postcolonial Spaces

Speaking of "resonances across borders" raises the question of the ways in which we make sense of the global space in its current constitution. Geographical and "metageographical" (Lewis and Wigen, 1997) notions are particularly important in front of the spatial disruption that we are currently witnessing in a conjuncture characterized by the steady displacement of the US from the center of the global order and disorder and by the conflict-ridden processes of regionalization that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. An entire geographical nomenclature, including the "three worlds" model, the notion of an "international division of labor", or stable configurations as the ones elaborated around binaries such as center/periphery or North/South, is tested in such a conjuncture. Civilizational thought, in a way anticipated by Samuel Huntington in his *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996), circulates in contemporary debates even beyond the "decolonial" variant I critically discussed before, for instance when it comes to the analysis of the position of continental states like China and India in the planet. There is a need to repeat that the use of the notion of civilization to make sense of the global geography is a foundational aspect of European colonialism. As Naoki Sakai (2000) explains in an important essay on the historical role of the "West and Asia binary", the "cartographic imaginary of the globe upon which modernization theory is invariably dependent" emerged out of a series of violent colonial encounters in which the "West" interpellated its "others", establishing civilizational partitions and

at the same time reinforcing its undisputed centrality. This is the reason why Sakai writes:

> […] the insistence of the propriety and native authenticity of us Asians would only reinforce the discriminatory and distinctive uniqueness of the West and prevent us from dismantling the colonial relationship that underlies the identities of both the West and Asia. (p. 801)

A critique of civilizational thought should therefore figure prominently in a research agenda on postcolonial spaces, which does not mean that we should not take into consideration the role of religious and cultural factors in the making and remaking of the world we live in. The point is rather to maintain and nurture a critical attitude toward the crystallization of those factors in the shape of unitary civilizations. Deploying and updating a postcolonial critique of cultural "essentialism" there is a need to shed light on the material forces and relations of power that drive such crystallization as well as on the underlying conflicts and struggles. The same is true for the notion of "region", whose processes of constitution and bordering require a critical scrutiny, for instance through the lens of the "critical regionalism" advocated by Gayatri Spivak (2008) within the framework of a reflection on the notions of "planet" and "planetary" that also inspire the work of postcolonial geographers (see Sidaway et al., 2014).

Alternative images of the global spaces are urgently needed in this regard. And luckily there is no shortage of such images in contemporary scholarship. Take for instance Lisa Lowe's amazing book, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015). Starting from the analysis of a secret memorandum from the British colonial office to the "Court of Directors of the East India Company", written in 1803 and dedicated to a discussion of the implications of the Haitian revolution across the British Empire, Lowe interweaves a narrative that displaces colonial and imperial geographies and focuses on the entanglement of "four continents". Crucial to her work are the movements and struggles of Chinese indentured workers, whose import within the British Empire in the wake of the abolition of slavery was foreshadowed in the secret memorandum of 1803 (p. 23). Far from pursuing "a single, particularist cultural identity", Lowe's interest in Chinese emigration is "to explain the politics of our lack of knowledge" and to provide a key to the exploration of alternative geographies, to unearth that "spatial dynamics" that crisscrosses and enables her counterhistory of "liberal freedom" and its colonial imprint (p. 16).

Lowe's analysis of the "intimacies of four continents" from the angle of the interplay between colonial regimes of domination, mutations of labor, and migratory movements is definitely thought provoking and it outlines methodic principles that it would be worth testing in the present. Needless to say, postcolonial critique has tackled the question of space since its inception, and there is a need to carefully search the postcolonial archive in our attempt to forge a conceptual language capable to grasp the geographical turmoil and spatial disruptions we are currently confronted with. Just think, to give an example, of Paul Gilroy's (1993) careful intertwining of spatial and temporal dimensions in his analysis of the diasporic "counterculture" of the "Black Atlantic". His focus on the sea as a geographical space and a methodic perspective for the analysis of modernity, colonialism, and postcolonialism has nurtured a proliferation of Oceanic histories and studies, including for instance an "Indian Ocean critique" (Chari, 2015). To give a second example, a recent volume edited by Tariq Jazeel and Stephen Legg (2019) explores the legacy of "subaltern studies" from the angle of their implicit and explicit contribution to critical geography. Following the lead of Gayatri Spivak, Jazeel and Legg (2019) pursue "a critical engagement with the politics of representation" (p. 14) in the field of geography, further displacing Europe from the center of the map, provincializing the spatial autonomy of the nation form, and focusing on "interstitial" geographies across borders. The chapters of the book provide readers with multifarious and challenging instances of a postcolonial "geographic imagination" that have immediate resonances in our present, from fascinating tales of subaltern maritime networks across the Indian Ocean (Sharad Chari) to the analysis of the University of Dar es Salaam as a postcolonial site of learning and pan-African elaboration in Nyerere's Tanzania (Jo Sharp). Such "subaltern geographies" do not fit any national or civilizational norm, and they continue to spur social and even spatial practices in many parts of the world.

The struggles against colonialism have also been characterized by peculiar forms of geographical imagination, powerfully instantiating what David Featherstone (2012) calls "the generative world-making possibilities of subaltern political activity" (p. 9). Those struggles have produced their own geographies, which remain hidden but nonetheless present in the constitution of the current global space, as a peculiar anticolonial "presence" to hark back to the discussion of Stoler's notion. Transcontinental networks have nurtured anticolonial activism, while exchanges across languages and continents have led to the emergence of politically charged visions of regionalism (think of Pan-Africanism, to give one example) and solidarity. Writing of his link with Africa, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote for instance in 1940 his *Dusk of Dawn* (2002) that its real essence had

to do with the "social heritage of slavery". And he immediately added that "this heritage binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South Seas" (p. 117). Du Bois was foreshadowing here the emergence of a political notion of "Third World" in the framework of decolonization, which was at the same time registered and prompted by such an important event as the Afro-Asian conference of Bandung in 1955. In a recent book, *From the Tricontinental to the Global South* (2018), Anne Garland Mahler carefully investigates the contribution of black radicalism in the Americas and in the Caribbean to the formation of the spirit of anticolonial and antiimperialist solidarity that anticipated Afro-Asian encounters and laid the basis for "the extension into the Americas" of the Bandung movement with the formation of the Tricontinental in January 1966 (p. 3).

What makes Mahler's reconstruction of Tricontinentalism so interesting and inspiring is that she continually works the boundary between the insurgent peripheries and the imperialist center. In fact, an important part of her book is dedicated to the history of Tricontinentalism in the US, particularly focusing on African American and Puerto Rican movements and cultural practices. In Mahler's (2018) analysis Tricontinentalism anticipates "key concepts within recent theories of network power and resistance" since it conceptualized power "as transcendent of individual nation states", theorized resistance "as occurring through global, lateral networks" beyond boundaries, and emphasized that there is "no outside" to power (p. 26). Interestingly, she distinguishes Tricontinentalism from Third Worldism, maintaining that the latter "clearly fails to capture [the former's] highly fluid geography and privileging of struggles located precisely within the First World" (p. 208). It is from this point of view that Mahler finds the notion of Global South "to have striking resonances with Tricontinentalism in that it uses the South to refer to a global system of inequality that affect diverse peoples across a fluid geography, and it theorizes transnational resistance to a decentralized power structure through ideological rather than trait-base terms" (p. 219).

Fair enough. I welcome the return of Tricontinentalism in Mahler's (2018) understanding of that historical experience, including what she calls its "metonymic color politics", which means a use of color and race detached from skin color and inscribed onto shifting geographies of power and resistance (p. 65). Nevertheless, my sense is that the widespread use of the notion of Global South today (by activists and scholars, sure, but also by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) does not contribute to grasping what Mahler calls a "fluid geography". It rather tends to reinforce the border between the Global South and the Global North. I repeat that I am happy

to register different usages of the notion, but I remain concerned with the rigidity of a binary distinction that does not allow grasping crucial aspects of the contemporary planetary turmoil (for instance, is China part of the Global South or of the Global North? Definitely of none of them) while it obscures the proliferating transits and entanglements among different areas at the global level. Mahler explains the erasure of the memory of Tricontinentalism with the direction taken by mainstream postcolonial studies, which "focus on the national contexts represented at Bandung" and elide "both Latin America as well as oppressed populations within wealthy countries like the United States" (p. 243). This may be true regarding the academic development of postcolonial studies in the US. Nevertheless, I am convinced that what I called the foundational gesture of postcolonial critique, the subverting of the "old colonizing/colonized binary" (Stuart Hall) and the challenge to the "metaborder" between colony and metropolis, continues to be an inspiring methodic principle for the critical investigation of the current global space, of its fault lines, of its connections and disconnections, of the movements and flows that traverse it, of the boundaries, channels, bottlenecks, and deadlocks that striate it. Whether or not one decides to adopt a postcolonial language in that investigation is at the end of the day not particularly important for me. But I continue to work in the spirit of the foundational gesture I just recalled, which seems to me to open up a conceptual space in which a wide array of struggles for liberation continue to nurture practices of research and political interventions, across borders and beyond the limits of postcolonial studies.

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