

Reviews

Learning to unlearn: decolonial reflections from Eurasia and the Americas

By *Madina Vladimirovna Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo*.
Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2012.
Pp. vii+283. Hardback US\$59.95, ISBN 978-0-8142-1188-5.

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doi:10.1017/S1740022813000557

The issue of the nature of the relationship between modernity and colonialism – whether it is incidental, temporary, or necessary – remains a key area of debate in contemporary historical research. Outright repudiation of modernity on the grounds that it is intrinsically colonialist is not often regarded as a viable position, even by those who argue for such an understanding of modernity. Walter Mignolo, a professor of humanities at Duke University, and more recently Madina Tlostanova of the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, have participated in developing a perspective known as 'decolonialism', which calls for 'delinking' with modernity and 'Western epistemology'. While this position does not advocate an outright repudiation of modernity, it demands an escape from modernity and what is regarded as Western epistemic domination.

Learning to unlearn presents the decolonialist historical framework in what is perhaps a more thorough manner than Mignolo has previously put forward. The book also aims to incorporate central Asia (the former Soviet republics and parts of Russia) into this originally Latin American perspective. Another objective is to present a critique of the humanities in terms of the European formation and constitution of this field of inquiry and to set forth a path for the decolonial rehabilitation of those subjects. This path is connected with an overriding

concern of the book, the approbation of what the book characterizes as indigenous initiatives for moving beyond modernity and Western epistemology, particularly the Universidad Intercultural de los Pueblos y Naciones del Ecuador. Part 1 presents the decolonial framework, Part 2 focuses on central Asia and gender, and Part 3 provides a critique of the liberal concepts of the human, human rights, global citizenship, and the humanities. An appendix discusses the Universidad Intercultural.

On the whole, decolonialism can be seen as an extension of dependency theory to the realm of knowledge and values, for which the non-West continues to be dependent on the West. The book defines modernity as the 'zero-point' epistemology of the West, that is, the notion that truth is singular, universal, and scientifically accessible (p. 42). The 'rhetoric of modernity' consists of the narrative of human historical progress towards truth and emancipation. A chief tenet of decolonialism is that 'coloniality' is the constitutive dark side of modernity. The modern notions of universality and progress require the exclusion and domination of those who do not conform fully to the modern notion of humanity, the 'wretched of the earth'. The 'colonial matrix' (p. 2) therefore defines the present world, so long as Western epistemic discourses are dominant. Capitalism is apparently a key element of the colonial matrix, but not a defining one. This is because modernity and coloniality originate not in the rise of capitalism but in the Spanish and Portuguese conquest of the Americas. Catholic Christianity was the first iteration of modern epistemology, and liberal secular humanism the second. Capitalism (or 'capital accumulation') fits in as the motive of greed underlying universalist epistemology, in which 'accumulation of money' goes 'hand in hand with the accumulation of meaning' (p. 199).

There is no epistemic point inherently outside modern Western thinking, but there is 'the outside created by the inside' (p. 19), which is the perspective inhabited by non-Western peoples,

who, as the excluded and dominated, are both necessary to and exterior to Western supremacy and universality. This liminal zone is designated 'the border' and gives rise to 'border thinking' (p. 7). Thinking from this perspective is 'pluriversal' and 'trans-modern', and constitutes 'epistemic disobedience' (p. 160), unlike trends of thought such as postmodernism and postcolonialism, which, despite their critical stance, originate from modernity and remain circumscribed within it and thus 'obedient'. It is not clear, however, what the nature and content of 'border thinking' actually is. It seems that some type of pre-modern non-Western thought must lie at its basis, such as Mayan thought for the Zapatistas, or Sufism in other instances. Yet the main decolonial thinkers who are mentioned – Gandhi, Fanon, and Gloria Anzaldúa – derive their ideas in many ways from European critiques of modernity. It seems that their anti-colonial perspective is responsible for their epistemic liberation. It is difficult to see, however, how the thinking at least of the first two is pluriversal rather than universal and free of notions such as humanity, human rights, and citizenship.

The sweeping historical and philosophical assertions made in *Learning to unlearn* are not provided with argumentation or evidence. This is seen vividly in the book's more localized discussion of the Soviet and imperial Russian legacy of central Asia. The argument here is that Russian and later Soviet modernity and conquest were an inept imitation of Europe, resulting in a 'deviant modernity' (p. 123). Orientalist thinking condemned central Asian gender relations on the basis of the modern/traditional binary and imposed Western feminist norms, whereas the reality is that 'the patriarchal nature of traditionalist society is a Western myth' (p. 129). Indigenous, non-Western forms of thought were comprehensively wiped out and replaced with universalizing Western categories, resulting in the 'zombification' of all who think in these categories, with the exception of certain figures who draw on mystical and 'non-rational' traditions, and some progressive artists.

The problem with Western emancipatory concepts, according to Mignolo and Tlostanova, is that they are based on a universalizing definition of humanity that is actually exclusive and particular to the West. Yet the utopian decolonial recipe for 'a peaceful world' consists of delinking from global capitalism, and recognizing that all human beings are human. In this scenario, the concept of human rights will no longer be necessary because violations thereof will not exist. It is difficult to see these claims as amounting to an epistemic liberation from the Western

concept of humanity. Nor is any account of the nature of the desired 'pluriversal' epistemology offered.

Although *Learning to unlearn* takes as its point of departure a number of cogent, pre-existing criticisms of humanist thought, it does not appear to advance these critiques or to offer solutions to the difficult problems that they raise for political thinking. Nor does the work succeed in defying the modernity it 'disobeys', as can be seen in its restatement of the nineteenth-century ideal of the humanities as its proposed decolonial rehabilitation of those subjects. Aside from the lack of systematic argument and evidence for its interpretation of history, and the failure to define its concepts clearly, the work succumbs to problems widely encountered in this field. The misguided identification of modernity with rationalist universalism and liberal moral and political norms fails to account for the centrality of emotion, sentiment, moral conscience, and desire to modern normative discourses. The identification of modernity with the West results in mischaracterizing the growth of new social forms and the development of norms that fit with them as mere imitation of the West. The spread of agriculture and urbanization has not been understood in this manner and neither should modern social transformations. This identification leads to the particularly pernicious idea that modern historical reality consists of nothing but the West and the conceptually necessary exterior of the West – that is, a concept and its logical 'supplement'. This may be the outcome of certain modern discourses about the nature of historical reality, but there is no reason to accept it as our own frame of analysis. Even if it is determined that domination is a necessary correlate of modern normativity, it is a continuation of orientalist thinking to see this as inherently Western domination.

Racism in the modern world: historical perspectives on cultural transfer and adaptation

Edited by Manfred Berg and Simon Wendt. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011. Pp. 378. Hardback £75.00, ISBN 978-0-85745-076-0; paperback £22.00, ISBN 978-1-78238-085-6.

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doi:10.1017/S1740022813000569

This edited volume complicates both the history and historiography of race and racism in the field of