

Embers of the Past: Essays in Times of Decolonization

Javier Sanjinés C.

Trans. David Frye, Fwd. Walter Mignolo

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Javier Sanjinés C.'s *Embers of the Past: Essays in Times of Decolonization* was originally published in Spanish in 2009 as *Rescaldos del pasado: Conflictos en sociedades poscoloniales*. This excellent translation by David Frye was published in 2013 as part of Duke University Press's series Latin America Otherwise, edited by Walter Mignolo, Irene Silverblatt, and Sonia Saldívar-Hull. The book series has been groundbreaking in publishing studies that are aligned with innovative critical perspectives on the region, and that challenge stale approaches. The impact of the series cannot be overstressed, and the book in question fits the series' proposal. Even after almost a decade, Sanjinés' book demonstrates a deep concern for issues that resonate with a contemporary reader. The original title in Spanish "Conflicts in Postcolonial Societies" indicate the shift that has occurred in scholarship in the field, transforming conflicts into an active form of decolonization. In evoking the past, the book directly addresses history and how it impacts the decolonial present.

Mignolo, one of the main contemporary scholars of Latin American Postcolonial Studies, wrote an elucidative foreword to Sanjinés' book. Mignolo's recent engagement with the decolonial turn is evident in his contribution to this book. Mignolo points out how the book "confronts the blind spot of modernity," and how the "affirmation of the European past as universal allows for the sustained rhetoric of modernity that disavow any other tradition and any other past as sustainable" (viii). Sanjinés' reflections investigate the "fissures," as Mignolo puts it, within stagnant notions of modernity and progress relying on colonial history. Bolivian critic Sanjinés was a member of the Latin American Subaltern Studies group with Ileana Rodríguez, John Beverley, and José Rabasa, and later joined the Modernity / Coloniality / Decoloniality project with Walter Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, and Arturo Escobar, among others.

The main goal of the book is to rescue the essay form as a transgressive vehicle for questioning the notion of modernity and historicity in light of coloniality and decolonial thought in Latin America. By proposing that the essay sits at the "margins of historical temporality" (24), Sanjinés seeks to question "philosophical assumptions of Western temporality, particularly those that govern the modern philosophy of history" (2). The author opens with a question posed to interrogate the notion of progress given the "crisis in the historical project of modernity" (1). The construction of modernity has

been at the forefront of Latin American Postcolonial Studies' reappraisal of the precarious but persistent polarity—modern versus primitive—colonial relations imposed. Along those lines, Sanjinés discusses the colonial exploitation that came in the name of modernization. His working definition of decolonization is “a local effort that has emerged from the struggle against colonial domination but cannot and should not disregard the tremendous critical contribution from Europe that questions Eurocentrism and the historical time that constitutes it” (12). As such, Sanjinés' book operates within analyses of specific case-studies from Bolivia, but also from Peru and Brazil, at the same time that he engages with Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukàcs, Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Reinhart Koselleck, to name just a few among many other European thinkers who question modernity. The book thus works towards what Mignolo calls “a global process of decoloniality” (xvii).

The book is divided in five sections. The introduction, “Modernity in the Balance, the ‘Transgressive’ Essay, and Decolonization,” contextualizes Western notions of time, history, and modernity grounded in Descartes and Hegel, moving on to contemporary consolidations of neo-liberalism in Latin America. While pointing out the crucial crossroads which the region finds itself at, the author discusses socio-economic fragmentation as a direct consequence of interventions in the name of modernization. Evoking examples in the “communal decolonial practices” to be found in indigenous communities in Bolivia, the author ponders on societal alternatives (10) to neo-liberal modernity. Mentioning the case of Bolivia, and claiming the country has actually operated under a Plurinational state “between the national *criollo-mestizo* culture and interculturality,” the author notes there is an affinity with a more radical decolonial turn that goes beyond the impasse of a doomed left turn (11). Chapter one “The Changing Faces of Historical Time,” offers an examination of “fragmentary multicultures” given the historical processes of *mestizaje* and recent migrations (29). The chapter discusses Peruvians Antonio Cornejo Polar and José María Arguedas as examples of authors who addressed *mestizaje* and transculturation. Focusing on Bolivian historian Jorge Siles Salinas, it examines the fissures in history, and breaks from a prescribed modernity.

Chapter two, “Is the Nation an Imagined Community?” directly engages with Benedict Anderson's proposition on the construction of the nation, which became crucial to Latin American Studies. Sanjinés examines the discourse around the nation in relation to nationalism and ethnicity. The two main case studies of this chapter are Brazilian Euclides da Cunha and Peruvian José Mariátegui, both presented as alternatives to a prescribed colonial modernity. This chapter also engages with Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's theories of multitude in relation to ethnicity.

Chapter three “Now Time: Subaltern Past and Contested Historicism,” questions the possibility of inclusion, or of the reconstruction of a subaltern past (97). The author engages with

Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of a political modernity in relation to categories of Western intellectual traditions, and with Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Sanjinès debates in particular with Michael Taussig's studies on the supernatural in the region and offers a critical perspective on Latin American alternative cosmologies such as the notion of Pachamama, or Mother Earth.

Chapter four, "The Dimensions of the Nation and the Displacements of Social Metaphor in Bolivia," examines contemporary ethnic movements in Bolivia. Applying a variety of critical perspectives (ranging from Chakrabarty to Hernán Vidal), the author looks at a national pedagogy. Culminating in a further investigation of the Plurinational state in Bolivia, the author arrives at the concept of *Buen Vivir*, or living well, a philosophical cosmology that advocates a harmonious co-existence with nature, and that has inspired social movements and even constitutional rights of nature in several countries in Latin America. This is a familiar concept in present academic debates. To the author, a "basic aspect of decolonial logic is that knowing is interwoven with living" (181).

The intellectual scope of this book is vast. Having engaged with many critics, too many to mention here, the book demonstrates mastery of Western philosophy and criticism, Postcolonial theory, and Latin American cultural production and indigenous movements. The book is still relevant to the contemporary reader interested in the decolonial turn, and its relevance is not exclusive to Latin American Studies.