

On Decoloniality: Concepts Analytics Praxis

Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh

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One of the conferences credited with the birth of institutional postcolonial studies took place in 1984 at the University of Essex. It was titled “Europe and Its Others” and present were Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha. Not surprisingly, over the next decades the terms of that title would be consistently challenged. The first in a series,¹ this book offers another such questioning: it is an introduction to the field of decoloniality through the work of Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh who, with many others, have labored to set up this concept over several decades. Decoloniality distinguishes itself sharply from decolonization (a concept prevalent in those early discussions) in that it attempts to undo (as well as to deconstruct, in the sense of showing the internal contradictions) the whole structure of epistemic and ontological Western thought. Clearly this is a very ambitious undertaking, but it is also obvious that it needs to be courageously advanced. Linked to hemispheric and border studies and generated by thinkers outside the “North Atlantic,” notably Aníbal Quijano (the influential Peruvian sociologist who died last year), the project examines the “colonial matrix of power” (CMP) in its many variations as an all-encompassing context which makes it difficult to formulate another place from which to create alternative epistemologies and ontologies. In the current climate of trying to rethink everything in order to find a way out of the contemporary morass of bankrupt and destructive epistemologies that are destroying the planet, the book is a timely intervention. It succinctly offers the reasons to find new concepts as well as providing incremental steps that do not simply reproduce what we “know” already.

Divided into two parts, between Walsh and Mignolo, the book performs a collaboration that demonstrates a shared direction but also insists on not blending separate views. At the same time, its methodology is to avoid setting up any paradigms or models (“new abstract universals”) and to intertwine theory and praxis as a way to undo the pervasive binarist Eurocentric philosophies that have dominated the world since the sixteenth century. “If by coloniality we mean the underlying logic common to all Western colonialisms and therefore the darker side of modernity, decoloniality means ... the analytic of such underlying logic rather than the historic-socioeconomic analysis of decolonization ... Reducing to size Western disciplinary apparatus and institutions (university, museums, theological institutions) that created and maintained

North Atlantic universal fictions, is unavoidable and necessary to open up the coexistence of epistemic and ontological pluriversality” (227).

Refusing to offer any “master plan” for decoloniality, Walsh and Mignolo bring into visibility various traditions and alternative epistemologies that might yield valuable new ways of thinking. Not surprisingly for those of us in postcolonial studies, these include many different Indigenous cosmopolitanisms (including the work of Leanne Simpson and Glen Coulthard in Canada) as well as Latinx (Gloria Anzaldúa is much cited) and kindred African epistemologies, such as the work of Sylvia Wynter and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, on the urgent need for more than one story to be told.

Key terms such as “modernity,” “representation,” “universal,” and “global” are interrogated in order to illustrate, for example, that all global or universal pronouncements are always highly local and specific, and that such moves actually function to foreclose on alternative perspectives. The recent emphasis on decolonization in postcolonial studies (of “independence” movements leading up to and during the Cold War period) is constructed in this account as generally neglecting to sufficiently interrogate the fact that colonial states were often created as a direct result of colonial boundary drawing: India/Pakistan are one such example, as is Nigeria. Initial attempts to question these arbitrary mappings were situated within border studies, something that has come into sharp relief more recently in contemporary surges in refugee and asylum seekers who are kept at bay with the reinforcement of borders and walls that are inevitably accompanied by virulent dehumanization. The notion of “representation” is queried because it is predicated on the logic of a pre-existing reality that is merely subject to differing translations, whereas Mignolo and Walsh argue that representation in any form in fact functions to bring this reality about.

Walsh and Mignolo instead stress terms and processes such as interrelationality, pluriversality and interspecificity, and “re-existence” rather than “resistance.” Tackling the dominant framework of modernity, they argue that coloniality “is constitutive, not derivative, of modernity” (4). In Walsh’s section, the emphasis is on “decolonial for” in the sense of a constant process of “becoming” that is linked, among others, to the work of Fernando Coronil and traces the shifts and movements of local and subaltern peoples: the Zapatistas in Mexico, Indigenous peoples in Ecuador and Bolivia. The limitations of terms such as “multiculturalism” are illustrated as linked to recognition by dominant and neoliberal groups (as in Coulthard’s work) and terms like “interculturalism” are substituted (57). Focus is on an “indigenization” of the academy, as in the work of Leanne Simpson, that ultimately seeks to situate decoloniality “as a disrupter in the academy” (106).

Mignolo’s section is predicated on the assumption that “Eurocentrism is not a geographical issue, but an epistemic and aesthetic one” (125). Citing the work of Sylvia Wynter on the narrow dominant conceptualization of what it means to be human, Mignolo argues that

“once we have reduced Man/Human to size and stripped him of his universality by showing that it is merely the universalization of a regional vocabulary and a regional concept of unilinear time to name a certain species of organism for which every existing language and civilization has its own time, concept and storytelling” (171), one way forward is to consider the “posthuman” in ways that go beyond Eurocentrism. “Cultural classifications and ranking is as strategies of the rhetoric of modernity enacting coloniality by disguising colonial differences (that we do not see) into cultural difference (that we are taught to see)” (179). Mignolo uses, amongst many others, the work of Humberto Maturana to show how supposedly pre-existing materiality (ontology) is in fact always shaped by epistemology. Maturana emphasized the biological basis of cognition (and thus epistemology) as well as endowing all living systems with the capacity for such cognition so that “humans” become one type among many within such systems.

This book promises to be an important series heralding a much-needed new direction in postcolonial studies. The second book in the series deals with the post-Soviet context and thus extends the usual postcolonial geopolitical terrain.

Notes

1. The following information on the series is on the Duke University Press website: “The series identifies and examines decolonial engagements in Eastern Europe, the Caribbean, the Americas, South Asia, South Africa, and beyond from standpoints of feminisms, erotic sovereignty, Fanonian thought, post-Soviet analyses, global indigeneity, and ongoing efforts to delink, relink, and rebuild a radically distinct praxis of living.”

Information available at: <<https://www.dukeupress.edu/books/browse/by-series/series-detail?IdNumber=4219645>>