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Few readers of Radical Philosophy Review are likely to have read a 2003 essay by Amartya Sen because of the place it was published, namely The New Republic. Sen, winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economics and, along with Martha Nussbaum, the main articulator of the so-called capabilities approach, wrote “Democracy and its Global Roots: Why democratization is not the same as Westernization” (The New Republic, October 6, 2003), an essay, furthermore, that was not included in his recent collection entitled The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity (Harvard University Press, 2005). “Democracy and its Global Roots” is a wonderful exercise in deconstructive hermeneutics and global intellectual history; Sen argues that we should not fall into the trap set by the feigned modesty of the “West,” in which Westerners opt for a parsimonious and humble approach to democracy in non-Western parts of the world, arguing that they do not want to “impose” their values on other cultures. The trap here is that if we accept the gesture of feigned modesty, we also accept the inchoate, concealed assumption that democracy is of the West to give to others as a gift. Democracy, however, is neither a product of one civilization, the West alone, nor is it of the West to give. The West has enjoyed it, perhaps the longest, but only because it is the recipient of a gift bestowed by both internal and external
struggles. Democracy remains one of the most global of human endeavors, a project that transcends boundaries and cuts across cultures and civilizations.

Sen denounces the blackmail of ersatz Western modesty and the “gross neglect of the intellectual history of non-Western societies” which, along with the “conceptual defects of seeing democracy primarily in terms of balloting” leads to the misappropriation whereby the West claims paternity and intellectual property rights for democracy. In this issue of RPR we present three contributions, collected in a special section called “The Post-Colonial Atlantic,” that are correctives to this gross neglect, eloquently redirecting our attention away from sclerotic academic scholarship that keeps cycling the same old texts and problems, and towards new approaches and a broader archive than that of the insouciant West.

In our first essay, “Césaire’s Gift and the Decolonial Turn,” Nelson Maldonado-Torres offers a dual reading of Aimé Césaire, locating him in relationship to the classics of modern European philosophy, in particular Descartes, while at the same time re-contextualizing his work in the contemporary project of decoloniality and the re-mapping of reason, announced by Enrique Dussel and since taken up by thinkers including Paget Henry, Lewis Gordon, Walter Mignolo, and Ramon Grosfoguel. Maldonado-Torres urges us to think of Césaire as a Black Husserl, not because the latter is the paragon that all must emulate, but because the former was getting at the root of the modern existential malaise. His Discourse on Colonialism reconstitutes the Discourse on Method and holds up a mirror to Western reason; in Césaire, epistemic anxiety and hypothetical evil demons turn into existential dread and terrifying, murderous masters, but this time, it is the slave who perceives with “clarity” and “distinctness” the logic of possession enacted by the master. In return, we discover the decolonial gift, the reason of the slave, which opposes the false imperial gift described by Sen.

It is indeed a shame that we go through life thinking that there is a lineage that begins with Descartes, and weaves through Spinoza, Peirce, Heidegger, Husserl, Sartre, and Foucault, but which does not include either Césaire or Fanon (and of course also not Iris Young and Susan Bordo, each of whom have been post-Cartesian in most exemplary ways). George Ciccariello-Maher’s essay, “The Internal Limits of the European Gaze,” complements Maldonado-Torres’s by offering an immanent critique of the European criticisms of Eurocentrism. Here, one is to be reminded that hermeneutical suspicion is only earned after both humility and generosity have been exercised. said to have been transformed into one. Sartre’s usually unacknowledged debt to Fanon moved him from the position of a universal intellectual hiding behind the European gaze to a revolutionary stance focused on colonial subjectivity. Ciccariello-Maher argues that Foucault, though he learned form Sartre a certain skepticism regarding the European gaze, failed to see other possibilities for a new humanism, an “alter-humanism” that moves out from the periphery and learns from Césaire and Fanon.

John R. Martin, Jr.’s essay, “C.L.R. James’s Analysis of Race and Class,” also moves out from the Caribbean, that crucible of avant la lettre critiques of the impossible project of modernity. Martin retraces the ways in which C.L.R. James elaborated a Marxist-rooted analysis of racism and race consciousness that was neither reductivist nor dichotomizing. In Martin’s view, James is someone who has not lost any of his theoretical punch and incisiveness, and in fact has regained new vitality and contemporaneity due to enduring racism in the U.S., and the lost possibilities for a socialist democracy rooted in the critique of both race and class. Together, these three essays are stones from which to build a new edifice of cosmopolitan learning and philosophizing, an edifice that has no place within it for the kind of epistemic hubris and arrogance so long practiced by the West.

To round out the issue, reviews by David Ingram and Caroline Arruda bring together in print two old colleagues: Seyla Benhabib and Dick Howard, who both used to be contributors of Telos before the journal made its anti-Habermasian turn. Each looks to problems of democracy, whether in the paradox of its exclusions or the conceptual grounds for identifying it as a project. We are also pleased to recognize, in a review by Nic Veroli, the AK Press reprint of Anton Pannekoek’s influential Workers’ Councils. As Veroli argues, the practical reality of workers’ councils has always exceeded the occasionally numbing presentations of its logical coherence. Democracy, too, or so we think, needs to learn from these practical realities, since although it is far advanced in theory, its limitations in practice are more than obvious to you, our reader.

Césaire’s Gift and the Decolonial Turn

Nelson Maldonado-Torres

Abstract: Aimé Césaire’s Discourse on Colonialism is central to the project of decoloniality. It is a critical reflection on the European civilization project that gives expression to the disenchantment with European modernity that began to be felt in many places after the Second World War. This essay describes the overcoming of Cartesian reason through the “decolonial gift,” which makes possible an opening toward transmodernity, an alternate response or pathway in view of the declining geo-political and epistemological significance of Europe and the United States.

A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems that it creates is a decadent civilization.
A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization.
A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization.

— Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism.1

Aimé Césaire’s indictment of European civilization occurred at a point when Europe’s crisis reached its climax. It was only a decade after the end of the Second World War, when the impact of the first decolonization struggles on European discourse and on the minds of other colonized peoples throughout the world was already obvious. From then on Europe gradually became more marginal than ever in its not so recent history. Today, Europe is politically, economically, and intellectually important, but not as important as before the war and certainly not “defensible” in Césaire’s terms—even though post-Cold War admirers from Eastern Europe, Russia, and the former Soviet republics sometimes ignore or forget the lesson. Relative admiration of Europe in the post-Cold War, however, does not hide a present crisis in European identity. This new crisis can be understood, using Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s terms, as a standing in between the new imperial Prospero and the old Caliban. For Sousa Santos this term best describes the position of Portugal in relation to European countries such as France and Great Britain on the one hand, and the colonial world, on the other. But the term could be extended to refer to the ways in which many other Europeans feel today. As the United States has asserted its independence from Europe more openly than ever before since after the Second World War, Europeans begin to experience some degrees of subalternity. The responses to such a position have been predictable.

One response to the crisis of Europe today consists in reminding the United States of the Western origins of its roots and the need for partnership with Europe. This response is part of an imperial dialectic between Eurocentrism and a form of Americanism that is also facing a moment of crisis with distinct internal and external menaces. It fights the provincial imperialism of U.S. Americanism with another form of provincialism grounded in the European experience. A second response calls attention to the need of defining a European common foreign policy based on the political viability of the European Union. Also part of the imperial dialectics of recognition, this response by philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida involves recasting and reaffirming the value of European cultural and intellectual roots. It is almost as problematical as the first, not because it searches for common grounds among members of the European Union, but because it gestures toward the formerly colonized non-European world only very vaguely and thus fails to address the challenges that Europe still has to overcome in relation to its imperial and colonial legacy.

The third response is more promising. It consists in the idea of de-investing from U.S. interests. This response goes together with the realization of a certain commonality between Europe and its former colonies. It is the emergence of a certain European postcolonialism—not of Europeans who support decolonization, but of the perception of Europe itself as a colony. To be sure, this idea is not by any means widespread or without risks. For while the identification with the colonies opens unsuspected possibilities of mutual respect and collaboration, it can easily follow the path of an Eurocentric appropriation of the legacy and work of intellectuals from the periphery—that is, a re-centering of Europe and a new marginalization of the colonized and their perspectives. There is also the risk of erasing the significant differences between Europe’s subaltern status today and the legacies of its own forms of racial colonialism in the former European colonies. The effective evasion of these risks necessitates constant vigilance together with a process of self-decolonization, which in this case implies a necessary moment for Europeans of giving more priority to seeing themselves through the eyes of the colonized and deriving the consequence of such observation, than to the validation of their identity, their roots, and their geopolitical relevance. Europeans, just as the formerly colonized, cannot take any idea for granted in the production of their refashioned identity and political projects. They need to critically revise their history and their ideas in light of questions and concerns that appear prominently not only in the marginalized spaces within Europe, but also in the colonial context.

In a historical moment when Europeans and others look to the south for responses to the crisis of the age, it is important to clarify and elaborate on the contributions of intellectuals from the colonial world. If, as Immanuel Wallerstein has pointed out, we live in a kairos moment where choice is both necessary and important, then we need to investigate more the intellectual resources that might shed

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2. I thank the participants of the workshop on “Transcultural Humanities” at the University of Bremen for discussion of related ideas, particularly Sabine Broeck, one of the organizers, and Madina Tlostanova. Broeck explicitly brought out the Césairean theme of the indefensibility of Europe and Tlostanova provided ample reflections on the crisis of the Russian intellectual and political environment in relation to the enchantment with Europe.


7. Richard Sennett talked about this in a meeting of the Academy of Latinity (New York University, October 7, 2004).
light into our current predicament and that may provide guidelines for the future. There is the need of expanding on insights and projects that have remained marginal and have been silenced because their premises or proposals question the very bases of the European civilization project as well as our modern identities. Translation and transgression of different projects on critical theorizing are also needed if we want to widen and refine the alternatives that we have as we attempt to collectively respond to the future. Exercises in transgresstopic critique are today as important as ever. This essay is an exercise in such a kind of criticism and theory making. It joins other efforts in subverting the tables of what is considered legitimate theorizing and in augmenting the space for reflection about our collective present and future, engaging in the epistemic practice of what the Caribbean Philosophical Association refers to as shifting the geography of reason. The first section of this essay seeks to elucidate the significance of decolonization as a project and to elaborate a genealogy of what I refer to here as the “decolonial turn.” The decolonial turn (different from the linguistic or the pragmatic turns) refers to the decisive recognition and propagation of decolonization as an ethical, political, and epistemic project in the twentieth century. This project reflects changes in historical consciousness, agency, and knowledge, and it also involves a method or series of methods that facilitate the task of decolonization at the material and epistemic levels.

The second part focuses on method. I identify basic principles of decolonial methodology as they appear in Aimé Césaire’s Discourse on Colonialism. Césaire’s Discourse provides one of the most penetrating analyses of the crisis of Europe in and after the Second World War and the beginnings of decolonization movements around the world in the twentieth century. It seeks to show Europeans certain truths about themselves as well as provide an intellectual framework for conceiving of and advancing decolonization. In this sense, Césaire’s Discourse on Colonialism can be read as a discourse on decolonial methodology: it facilitates the decolonization of the European and the colonized. The Discourse appears to be in relation to the project of decolonization in a similar way to how other discourses on method stand in relation to the project of European civilization. I am thinking quite clearly of René Descartes.

I will take the relation of Césaire’s Discourse on Colonialism to Descartes’ Discourse on Method further by suggesting that the former can actually be read as a response to the latter. In this sense Césaire joins figures like Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, among others, who reflected deeply about the connection of the nature and crisis of Europe to Cartesian premises. It is widely known that while Husserl wished to radicalize Descartes and to strengthen the European rationalist vein and the French cosmopolitan impetus, Heidegger, a German nationalist who at one point served as a functionary of the Nazi administration, enlisted Descartes as one of the pivotal thinkers in the path that led and continued the forgetting of the question of Being. Heidegger also celebrated German language and customs and questioned the philosophical relevance of Romance languages. Appropriation or rejection of the Cartesian legacy stood behind philosophical formulations of cosmopolitanism and nationalism. Césaire, as well as his once student Fanon, had a different view, a different project, as well as a different geopolitical point of departure: not a Germany in crisis with varied reactions to French liberal cosmopolitanism and the Cartesian legacy in Europe, but the colonial world, and more particularly, the French Caribbean colonies. Césaire’s Discourse is the response of a black colonial subject to the Cartesian project. He mobilizes those aspects of his identity and geopolitical orientation towards a critical reflection on the basis of the European civilization project. It is such a critical theory that I wish to locate historically and then to explicate with the hope of providing more tools for the understanding of decolonization as a project and the self-decolonization of Europeans and others.

I. From the Idea to the Project of Decolonization in the Twentieth Century

Decolonization not only refers to the critique of and effort to dismantle neo-colonial relations that continued and renewed in different ways dependency and vertical relations of power between northern and southern countries, but also to radical transformation of the modern/colonial matrix of power which continues to define modern identities as well as the relations of power and epistemic forms that go along with them. We owe to Walter Mignolo the concept of the modern/colonial world, which is indebted to Aníbal Quijano’s theorizations of modernity and the coloniality of power. There are subtle but important differences in their accounts of the relation between modernity and coloniality that are necessary to have in mind


when the term is used. While for Mignolo coloniality is modernity’s constitutive
darker side, for Quijano modernity is an ambiguous formation that included
coloniality as a founding moment but that also gave expression to legitimate human
demands for individual freedom. Thus Quijano is hesitant, if not resistant, to the
idea of joining together modernity and coloniality in a single expression. Mignolo
does not necessarily oppose the idea that modernity contains positive elements that
cannot be reduced to coloniality, but he sees in the very concept of the “modern” an
idea that inevitably makes reference to the colonization of time. Thus, while it may
be true that there are aspects of modernity that escape the logic of coloniality, such
cognition does not do away with the inherent colonial aspect of the term. This
leads Mignolo to talk about alternatives to modernity, rather than simply alternative
modernities. Quijano would insist on his part that ideas such as individual freedom
and the socialization of power must be conceived as universal human achievements
or imperatives that are not to be diffused by appeals to the geopolitics of knowledge or
“diversality.” 13 It is an open question whether Mignolo’s concept of diversity
and the geopolitics of knowledge as well as his critique of abstract universals can
or cannot accommodate the universalistic grain of Quijano’s claims, or whether
Quijano’s appeal to universality collapses into the problematic dimensions of abstract
universals. To be sure, a systematic and more complete elucidation of these issues
requires a more ample space. 14

My use of modernity/coloniality here refers mainly to the idea that it is necessary
to always historicize and theorize modernity with the concept of coloniality in mind.
This leaves open the question about the exact extent of modernity’s achievements or
failures. Seen in this light, decolonization refers to the task of building an alternative
world to modernity, without simply falling back into many of the ideas and practices
that are now regarded, even if problematically, as premodern. Decolonization also
makes reference to the construction of a new horizon of meaning which includes
new conceptions about the human being and material relations that do not conform
to the dictatorship of capital, and that are not limited by the empire of law in the
modern/colonial nation-state form. Decolonization, in short, is the comprehensive
process that seeks to dismantle the “coloniality of power.” It is best understood, as
Chela Sandoval and Catherine Walsh have suggested in different contexts, as “deco-
loniality.” By decoloniality it is meant here the dismantling of relations of power and
conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and
geo-political hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful
forms of expression in the modern/colonial world.

Césaire’s Discourse on Colonialism is central to the project of decoloniality. It
is a critical reflection on the European civilization project that gives expression to the
disenchantment with European modernity that began to be felt in many places
after the Second World War.16 The Discourse is an indictment of Europe and a
rejection of its racist and imperial ways. His critique is not without precedents.
Césaire questions Eurocentrism and the racism of the modern episteme as or more
strongly than René Descartes questioned the criteria of rationality sustained by the
Church throughout the Middle Ages and early modernity up until the seventeenth
century. Césaire also takes discourses on colonialism to a new level. Critiques of
coloniality have been as old as coloniality itself. They first showed themselves in
the cries of despair of subjects who lost their lives or observed the expansion of
the modern/colonial system in early modernity. From despair and cries, the skepticism
of the modern/colonial project turned into the idea of decolonization, which
presupposed the possibility of achieving some kind of independence. The idea of
decolonization was nurtured during the first moment of decolonization from the end
of the eighteenth to the first half of the nineteenth century. The first wave of

in The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America, ed. John Beverly, Michael Arona, and
Atlantic Quarterly 101, no. 1 (2002): 57-96; Walter Mignolo, Local Histories/Global
Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking (Princeton, NJ: Princeton
University Press, 2000); Walter Mignolo, “Os esplendores e as misérias da ciência: colonialidade,
geopolítica do conhecimento e pluri-versalidade epistémica,” in Conhecimento
Prudente para uma Vida Decente: Um Discurso sobre as Ciências’ revistado, ed. Boaventura
de Sousa Santos (Edições Afrontamento, 2003), 667-709.
14. For articulations of different aspects of this tension see Ramón Grosfoguel, “Subaltern
Epistemologies, Decolonial Imaginaries and the Redefinition of Global Capitalism,”
Review 28 (forthcoming 2005); Maldonado-Torres, “Post-imperial Reflections on Crisis,
Knowledge, and Utopia.” To be sure, these and related issues have emerged and been
discussed in the Modernity/Coloniality Research Group. The Modernity/Coloniality
Research Group is a network of scholars working primarily, but not only, in the United States
and Latin America whose work focuses on the redefinition and intersections between
critical theory and decolonization, world-systems analysis and ethnic studies, liberation
thought and subaltern knowledges. They include Manuela Boaçca (Rumania/Germany),
Santiago Castro-Gómez (Colombia), Enrique Dussel (Mexico), Arturo Escobar (Colombia/
U.S.A), Angela Figueiredo (Brazil), Oscar Guadriola (Colombia/England), Ramón Gros-
froguel (Puerto Rico/U.S.A.), Edición Leon (Ecuador), Madina Tlostanova (Russia), Nelson
Maldonado-Torres (Puerto Rico/U.S.A.), Walter Mignolo (Argentina/U.S.A.), Aníbal Quijano
(Peru), José David Saldívar (U.S.A.), Catherine Walsh (U.S.A/Ecuador), among others.
15. Chela Sandoval, Methodology of the Oppressed (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
Press, 2000); Catherine Walsh, “Interculturality and the Coloniality of Power: An ‘Other’
Thinking and Positioning from the Colonial Difference,” in Coloniality, Transmodernity,
and Border Thinking, ed. Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and José David
Saldívar (forthcoming), n.p.
16. I take the notion of “disenchantment” from Sylvia Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse:
‘Minority’ Literary Criticism and Beyond,” in The Nature and Context of Minority
decolonization was critical of imperialism but not so much of racism, and thus, of the coloniality of power. It was also still for the most part enchanted with Europe or with ideas of progress that had emanated from Europe. What I call here the project of decolonization emerges when the critique of racism intensifies, the absolute goodness of the nation-state form is put in question, the disenchantment with Europe becomes strong, and the question of postcolonial agency acquires global relevance.\(^\text{17}\) This occurs at the point where the end of the most devastating war in the twentieth century coincides with the beginning of liberation struggles in European colonies throughout many places in Asia and Africa.

The project of decolonization represents a third pathway among the intellectual and ideological options that became more prominent after the Second World War.\(^\text{18}\) The first two political and ideological pathways were defined by the new geopolitical powers that took a protagonist role during the war. On the one hand, there was the United States, which had already become an international force after the expansion of its territory beyond the original thirteen colonies, the war with Mexico, and the Hispanic-American war. The United States would come to assist as well as to displace northern Europe as a fundamental geo-political axis of world-systemic forces. With this displacement, Americanism is introduced into the world as a triumphalist and assimilationist ideology. Americanism had already entered the scene at the end of the nineteenth century with Roosevelt. It worked then as an ideology that dictated the terms of the assimilation of European immigrants, particularly Catholic and non-Christian, some of whom were regarded as people of dark skin.\(^\text{19}\) Americanism took new shapes with McCarthyism and today finds new forms of expression in reactions to foreign threats that include the “war on terror” and the hysteria about Mexican immigration, as manifested in writings such as those of Samuel P. Huntington.\(^\text{20}\) To be sure, Americanism has never entirely reconciled itself with other subjects, such as indigenous peoples and blacks in the United States, who in some way represent constitutively subaltern or racial components of the American nation.

The second historical door or pathway that opened after the fall of Europe in the Second World War is that of communism. Communism represented for many a viable option for a different future from those offered by fascism, European liberalism, or U.S. Americanism. The Cold War put Soviet communism and Americanism at the center, with some other related projects as satellites. Europe itself became physically and ideologically divided between these two spheres of influence, while former European colonies attempted to negotiate or steal spaces of freedom to forge alternative projects or at least political formations that allow them to enjoy some autonomy. Some of these projects were defined by neocolonial elites in the former colonies and others by ultra-conservative anti-Western sectors. But there also emerged a sophisticated anti-colonial discourse that raised itself beyond resentment while it also offered new grammars to do critique and new ideas to forge a post-Eurocentric future that also overcomes the limits of modernity/colonialism. This is what I am referring to as the third historical pathway that opens up in the twentieth century. Césaire’s Discourse on Colonialism is one of the key texts that put forward this type of discourse. To be sure, we also find many figures and texts who might be located in two or more projects simultaneously.

In sum, if, as Wallerstein argues, the distinctive ideologies of modernity after the French Revolution were conservatism, liberalism, and Marxism, the Second World War would bring to visibility particular expressions of these ideologies, now forged primarily outside of the European continent. European liberalism’s sphere of influence subsides and U.S. American liberalism dominates. Different from European liberalism—particularly French liberalism—U.S. American liberalism tends to reconcile itself with religion, and particularly with Christian Protestantism, more easily. Marxism gives way primarily to Soviet communism, which was deeply anti-religious, with aspirations of empire building. Conservatism in this context became primarily the view of those who wanted to hold on to a picture of the world as dominated by Europe or by an European nation, as was the case with intellectuals such as Martin Heidegger who adopted strong forms of Germancentrism after his complicity with fascism.\(^\text{21}\) In more general terms, Eurocentrism itself became the new conservatism, since it continued to affirm European centrality in a world that no longer had faith in Europe and that was gradually moving beyond the European Age. Indeed, Eurocentrism represents today a similar option to that taken by those who defended a Christian-centered view of the world after Copernicus had defied Christian cosmology, after Columbus had broken with classical and Christian geography, and after Descartes offered a


\(^{18}\) See Maldonado-Torres, “Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Decolonization.”

\(^{19}\) I owe Shimberlee Jirón-King references on this point.

\(^{20}\) Samuel P. Huntington, Who are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

new epistemology. At least this is how it appears after reading Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* and the influential book of his once student, Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. The same can be said, if we follow Sylvia Wynter, of much of what often passes as “minority” literature. But from the perspective introduced by these texts conservatism can hardly be said to appear only in Eurocentric ventures. Conservatism also transpires in U.S. American liberalism, which tends to valorize the world through religious themes (such as Manifest Destiny), the perversion of which has already been more than historically tested. As problematic as European liberalism may be, U.S. American liberalism undoes some of its victories. The same occurred with Soviet Communism. But all of them appear to be in some measure conservative when compared with the project of decolonization. In short, while liberalism, Marxism, and decolonization projects left conservatism to some extent by the wayside in the Cold War, conservatism gradually came back strongly not only as a separate or distinct ideology, but in the form of the Eurocentrism of liberals and Marxists who resist decolonization. Conservative republicanisms and a liberal form of conservatism have become the strongest ideologies after the Cold War.

The fall of Europe in and after the Second World War makes possible the opening of a new historical horizon, that of decoloniality, which, as Fanon put it, is the path of the condemned of the earth. If modern philosophy began in the Caribbean, as Enrique Dussel suggests, it is possible to say that transmodern decolonial philosophy also finds a strong anchor in the Caribbean. Césaire’s *Discourse* and Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, along with Black Skin, White Masks are the primary representatives. The pathway of decoloniality that I wish to highlight here is opened in a definitive form with the combination of the internal and the external devastation of Europe, that is, not only by the racist and genocidal force of Nazism within but also by the hopeful force of decolonization in many of the colonial territories. Consequently, the newly (dependent) nations as Weber would accentuate in regards to what he perceived as the progressive historical development of Europe, but with Eurocentrism or the “myth of modernity” itself, became a central component of the second wave of decolonization. The fall of Europe was a symptom of a larger crisis of the world-system as a whole, which made visible the ways in which colonial structures still defined geo-political relations, even in places that had obtained independence. From here the suspicion or disenchantment with Eurocentrism began to propagate rapidly in different spaces in the Americas.

The disenchantment, not simply with “tradition” largely defined or with religion, as Weber would accentuate in regards to what he perceived as the progressive historical development of Europe, but with Eurocentrism or the “myth of modernity” itself, became a central component of the second wave of decolonization. The fall of Europe was a symptom of a larger crisis of the world-system as a whole, which made visible the ways in which colonial structures still defined geo-political relations, even in places that had obtained independence. From here the suspicion or disenchantment with Eurocentrism began to propagate rapidly in different spaces in

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27. Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985); Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books, 1999). Even though Fanon has been much more influential than Césaire, the influence of Césaire cannot be overestimated. Chela Sandoval has told me in conversation, for instance, that the first decolonial book that she read was Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism*.

II. Discourse on Colonialism, the “Crisis” of Europe, and the Third Path of Decolonization or Decolonial Turn

What I call the third way, that of decolonization, transmodernity, and pluriversality, is not parallel or equivalent to the other two pathways that opened up after the Second World War. Americanism and communism are more recent historical projects and are less ambitious than the project of decolonization. Americanism has its founding moment in 1776, and communism is grounded on modern ideologies that were born out of the European Enlightenment. The project of decolonization, on the other hand, has been articulated in different ways since the very beginning of the European expansion in the Americas. Americanism and communism are also more limited than the project of decolonization because they are delimited by modernity. That is, they are expressions of modernity’s ideologies: conservatism, liberalism, and Marxism. The project of decolonization represents a “spatial rupture” with modernity. This does not mean that the project of decolonization is necessarily anti-liberal or anti-Marxist, or that it could dispense of elements from them. What it means is, first, that the bases for the project of decolonization precede the European Enlightenment, and, second, that it subsumes modern ideas in the effort to produce alternatives to Western modernity, which Enrique Dussel refers to as trans-modern. The project of decolonization also implies that Europe has been called from the very beginning of the modern/colonial project to abandon its imperialist posture and to adopt a different historical project. That is to say, the project of decolonization is not only different from that of European modernity, but it also confronts modernity with a series of ethical, political, and intellectual imperatives. Decolonization has the character of denunciation and demand. Its viability, however, does not rest on their recognition. These different dimensions of the project of decolonization appear in Discourse on Colonialism.

As suggested previously, Césaire’s Discourse on Colonialism and Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth are perhaps the texts which most clearly and strongly articulated the third path that opened up after the war. They were written with full awareness of the new world dynamics that began to unfold after the Second World War. Both aim to understand the world that began to emerge from the perspective of groups that suffered constant and consistent exclusion throughout modernity. They referred to them as the wretched or condemned. Césaire’s Discourse focuses on the understanding of the crisis of Europe and the possibilities that began to open after its fall. Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth focused more on the struggles and possibilities of colonized peoples as they began to claim independence from Europe.

My main thesis here is that Discourse on Colonialism should be read as a response from the colonized world, and particularly from the perspective of the African diaspora, to the European modern civilization project, which finds one of its strongest roots in the philosophy of René Descartes. In his Discourse, Césaire takes a variety of postures that go from internal critique and “subversive complicity” to the introduction of new critical perspectives beyond the European interpretive and epistemological framework. Césaire deploys a complex rhetorical arsenal in his diagnosis and indictment of European Man.


30. For an elaboration of transmodernity, see Dussel, “World System and ‘Trans’-Modernity,” 221-44. For pluriversality, see Mignolo, Local Histories/Global Designs.


34. Enrique Dussel, Ética de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y de la exclusión (Madrid: Editorial Trotta; México, D.F.: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana—Iztapalapa, and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1998); Mignolo, Local Histories/Global Designs.


36. With European Man I refer to an ideal of European humanity, which is closely tied to its difference with colonized sub-humanity. It also denotes a strong masculinist bias in favor of conceptions of self and civilization that fit ideals of manliness. I distinguish European Man from Europeans in that while the former refers to an idea, the latter refers to European people as such, whose self-conception has been informed by the ideal but who can identify or not identify with it in different respects.
With his reflections on the crisis of Europe, Césaire joined a wide and diverse group of thinkers who diagnose Europe and who aim to articulate responses to it. Many of these European theorists took Descartes’ philosophy as a point of reference. I have referred to Husserl and Heidegger already, but one can add Sartre, Freud or Lacan as well, among many others. They interpreted the crisis of Europe as the result of a departure fromCartesianism, or else as the contrary, that is, as the expression of an inability to break away from Descartes. They thus attempted to provide a new view of the subject and of knowledge, and a new methodology, philosophical perspective, or science, beyond the Cartesian or Newtonian sciences. Of the different European voices trying to provide a new orientation for thought it was undoubtedly Jean-Paul Sartre who took most seriously questions and ideas that emerged in the colonial world. But even Sartre failed to note the extent of radicality in the proposals of such figures. From here we see the need of attention to Césaire and others as philosophers or theorists in their own right, which includes analyzing the extent to which intellectuals from the periphery, and not only those from Europe, were critically and originally engaging the Cartesian legacy and other foundations of modern Western thought.

Césaire writes at a point when the disenchantment with Europe accelerates. He offers the first sustained diagnosis and critique of Europe at a point where the crisis of Europe looked more like its very end. And this becomes for him and others a new point of departure for critique. While in the nineteenth century it was believed that critique finds its starting point in the critical assessment of religion—indeed for Marx, with its very end—Césaire’s text makes the point that critique in the second half of the twentieth century can only begin with the critique of Europe. It also seems to follow from his text that just as Europe had to pass through the disenchantment with religion in order to access modernity, the world (including Europe) has to pass through the disenchantment with Europe in order to aspire to what Enrique Dussel calls transmodernity. This remains a goal fifty years after Césaire wrote his Discourse. But this should cause no surprise. Just as many religions have the capacity to survive even after they have shown to be decrepit, Eurocentrism will keep its priests and mausoleums for some time. The realization of its bankruptcy will be gradual and not by any means immediate. At the end of it all Césaire’s Discourse will still be waiting for us.

III. Discourse on Colonialism and the Crisis of Europe

Césaire opens up the Discourse on Colonialism describing Europe as a “decadent civilization.” In this statement, Césaire not only has in mind the proliferation of fascism in Europe, but rather the more general issue that European civilization has been unable to solve the problems that it creates. The main problems that he has in mind are the proletariat and the colonial problem. The problem of the proletariat is very present in Europe, and is thus taken seriously by many as a problem. But the problem of colonialism hardly emerges as a problem, at least in the sense of being itself a problem rather than the problem being the colonized peoples themselves. In this, Césaire demonstrates one of the central features of the decolonial attitude: the problem is located in the structures, not the people. This move is characteristic of a critical attitude in general. What makes it decolonial is that the “people” in question are not even considered to be “people” under the racial/colonial lenses. That is, they are racialized subjects who inhabit the world of superfluous visibility. In regard to these “subjects” the shift of perspective that leads to critique requires a more radical turn. Here the European tradition of critical theory usually finds limits.

A clear expression of the “decolonial attitude” is Césaire’s resistance to subordinate the question of the proletariat to the colonial problem. The colonial problem raises for him specific questions and requires an exploration of its own which includes reference to capitalism, but which is not reducible to economics, class struggle, or exploitation. He rather points to the specificity of colonial and racial domination. Césaire, however, does not proceed in this text to show the connections between world capitalism and race or colonialism. He focuses on the connections between fascism and the colonial experience. Césaire uses drastic but legitimate means to bring to consciousness to the European the harsh gravity of the colonial problem. This is a decolonial strategy. Once the “master” recognizes as a principle the gravity of something that has affected him, the colonized uses those principles or those “evidences” in order to bring the master to the awareness of gravities that he did not even want to see. This is not always a mere strategy. In some cases, as in Césaire’s, the colonized has more complex and convincing articulations of those principles than the master himself has. Gaining the master’s recognition about some evil not only serves the practical goals of gaining degrees of freedom. It also serves the theoretical task of educating him about ethics and reason. Here the practical and the theoretical are entangled without being entirely reducible to each other.

Discourse on Colonialism is written in poetic prose, but the style is very different from Césaire’s poems, which follow the surrealist trend of the time. Surrealism was

38. See Maldonado-Torres, “Decolonization and the New Identitarian Logics after September 11.”
characterized by employing unconscious forces and pre-rational elements in order to
debunk the attempt to reduce the psyche and our experience of the world in rationalist
formulas. As Robin Kelley points out, surrealism was “an extension of [Césaire’s]
search for a new black subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{41} Césaire makes very illuminating comments in
this regard:

Well then, if I apply the surrealist approach to my particular situation,
I can summon up these unconscious forces. This, for me, was a call to
Africa. I said to myself: it’s true that superficially we are French, we
bear the marks of French customs; we have been branded by Cartesian
philosophy, by French rhetoric; but if we break with all that, if we
plumb the depths, then what we will find is fundamentally black.\textsuperscript{42}

Césaire’s poems are written in the surrealist vein, which he infuses with \textit{négritude}. \textit{Discourse on Colonialism}, written only a few years after the Second World War, uses
different rhetorical devices. His narrative takes more sober, argumentative, and rational
tones. Moreover, Césaire focuses on Europe, not black subjectivity. By no means
does this represent an inconsistency or betrayal to his surrealist intuitions. Surrealism
allowed Césaire, among other things, to undermine the bases of Cartesianism. In this,
Césaire somewhat approached Heidegger and others who found in poetry important
ingredients to overcome the limits of Cartesianism. But while Heidegger searched
for European roots in Greece and Germany, Césaire was trying to establish an in-
timate connection with Africa. Césaire, however, was not tied to African roots. While
\textit{négritude} took him away from Europe, his Marxist commitments and his view of
the structural conditions of colonization led him far from relying solely on cultural
politics. It would be a mistake, though, to reduce Césaire’s political commitments to
Marxism. It was not only the problem of the proletariat that he addressed, but
also the colonial and racial problem. And he did not think that one could be reduced
to the other. As I pointed out before, Césaire does not spell out the relationship
between these two. This work will be done later on by figures such as Peruvian
sociologist Aníbal Quijano.\textsuperscript{43} Quijano’s theorization of capitalist exploitation and racial
domination, along with their impact on spheres of power in society such as control
of sex, knowledge, labor, and authority marks a higher level in the understanding of
modernity and capitalism. Césaire did not articulate these ideas, but he, along with
others, made their articulation possible. This reveals important levels of continuity
and collaboration in the larger and collective project of decolonization.

While Césaire’s poetic and surrealistic vein put him closer to Heidegger than to
Husserl’s project, the \textit{Discourse on Colonialism} is definitely closer to Husserl. In
his \textit{Cartesian Meditations}, Husserl attempted to provide a response to the crisis
of modernity through the transformation of Cartesian thought.\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Discourse on
Colonialism} can be seen as an effort in the same direction, but it decisively breaks
from Cartesianism as well. While Descartes and Husserl attempt to establish or
reformulate the basis of the European historical project through the centrality of the
subject and the epistemic value of “clarity” and “distinction” (or phenomenological
intuition in Husserl’s case), Césaire aims to introduce a new type of critical reason
which rests on the “clarity” that colonized subjects have of the perversity of the
European civilization project. Let’s see this carefully.

There are clear parallels between Césaire’s \textit{Discourse on Colonialism} and
Descartes’ \textit{Discourse on Method}. Both are brief texts divided in six sections. It is
almost as if Césaire was emulating Descartes, responding to him, or trying to write
a new \textit{Discourse} for a new historical project. The brevity of both texts is explained
by their focus on the most basic aspects of the scientific attitude. That is, they aim
to provide new perspectives about basic philosophical principles. Both focus on
impediments to the search for truth. But they highlight different forms of deception.
Descartes focuses on the deception of the senses, tradition, and assumed certainties,
while Césaire focuses on the deception of those who, after apparently following
Descartes’ method, believe not to be deceived but deceive themselves nonetheless
in regard to what is most fundamental: themselves and their relations with others.
Otherwise put, in \textit{Discourse on Colonialism}, Césaire aims to elucidate the dark side
of the “deception” and “self-deception” that Descartes attempted to exorcize in
his \textit{Discourse on Method}. He also provides ideas about correcting these evils and
falsehoods through decolonization. Césaire’s \textit{Discourse}, thus, like Descartes’, is a
discourse on method. It is a discourse on decolonial methodology, on how to achieve
and maintain a decolonial consciousness and a decolonial attitude.

\textit{Discourse on Colonialism} is premised on the \textit{fact} that “Europe is unable to
justify itself either before the bar of ‘reason’ or before the bar of ‘conscience’; and
that, increasingly, it takes refuge in a hypocrisy which is all the more odious because
it is \textit{less and less likely to deceive.”}\textsuperscript{45} It is clear here that for Césaire Europe took the
role in modernity of a failed evil demon of sorts who could no longer, after the war,
deceive others about the grandiosity of its civilization or about the alleged obviousness


\textsuperscript{42} Césaire, \textit{Discourse on Colonialism}, 68.


\textsuperscript{45} Césaire, \textit{Discourse on Colonialism}, 9, italics mine.
of the racial, sexual, religious, and geo-political categories that were so instrumental for its hegemony. This bar of reason, on the other hand, is not a privileged epistemic subject, but an intersubjective community: the whole world. The devastation of the Second World War and the Holocaust showed very clearly the bankruptcy of Europe to the world. On the one hand, there was the United States. Césaire comments that the United States’ opinion of Europe was not necessarily wrong but that it clearly reflected its own interests for supremacy. That is, the critique by the United States served its own interests for hegemony. Césaire knew, as did so many others in the U.S. southwest and Latin America, and some in Europe, that the United States were a menace to Europe and the world. Césaire also knew that Europeans might be tempted to respond to the situation by holding on to their roots with more determination. From Husserl and Heidegger at the beginning of the twentieth century, to Habermas and Derrida more recently, we find the repeated gesture of searching for European roots as a response to its “crisis.” Some Europeans continue to believe that the door of Eurocentrism is still open, or is a lived possibility. To be fair to these efforts, it must be said that Eurocentric epistemologies still dictate to a great extent recognized ways of thinking and critique. But conscious adherence to Eurocentric projects is quite different from opposing Eurocentrism while nonetheless collapsing into it. Césaire’s judgment of the former is unforgiving. He considers them to be hypocrites who lie to themselves and who aim to hide what has appeared with “clarity” and “distinctness” to everyone: Europe’s perversity.

Césaire accuses Europeans for attempting to hide from themselves by different means knowledge about the reality and character of European civilization. That is, Europe has not only deceived the world but also itself. Césaire’s Discourse aims to elucidate the nature of the deception and self-deception in question. Yes, it would be worthwhile to study clinically, in detail, the steps taken by Hitler and Hitlerism and to reveal to the very distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century that without his being aware of it, he has a Hitler inside him, that Hitler inhabits him, that Hitler is his demon, that if he rails against he is being inconsistent and that, at bottom, what he cannot forgive Hitler for is not crime in itself, the crime against man, it is not the humiliation of man as such, it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa.48

Like Descartes, Césaire knows that deception leads humans away from the “truth” and the achievement of “true science”, but he adds to this that the European form of self-deception is also homicidal.49 While Europe, through the Eurocentrism endemic to European modernity, took the role of deceiving others, and thus of becoming an evil demon of sorts, Europe itself, Césaire notes, has its own demon or agent of deception. This is Hitler himself. And Hitler showed himself as an effective agent of European thought and action long before fascism existed. Hitler was already present in Europe’s mind since the times of colonization and systematic racism in modernity. Like many of Hitler’s victims, colonized and racialized subjects have suffered extermination, genocide, enslavement, and violence for centuries. Hitler is, in short, the name that Césaire uses to refer in retrospect to the European evil demon that has deceived Europe and led it to create and sustain the color-line which is a most fundamental source of its own identity and historical agency.50 Hitler precedes fascism but also survives it. European humanists and the Christian bourgeoisie itself, according to Césaire, continue to be duped by Hitler. Their critiques of the historical Hitler rely on their unshakable commitment with Hitler, the internal demon of European consciousness. Thus, their critique is “inconsistent” as it presupposes a commitment with that which they allegedly criticize. Critiques of “the crime and humiliation of man” are critiques of the use of colonial violence toward the typical colonizers, the Europeans. That is why Hitler’s crime is unforgivable. And that is also why he must be denounced, but only partially, as Hitler the demon continues to define the terms of such critique, and thus, of its outcome. Following this very logic, it could be said that while fascism was preceded by colonialism it continues to persist through the coloniality of power and the continued production of what W.E.B. DuBois referred to as the color-line. But European Man in many ways continues to be deceived about itself and those realities.

The emergence and spread of fascism in Europe along with its tragic consequences made it impossible for the European to hide some truths about his civilization. Yet European Man has for the most part remained blind in the face of the reality of the colonized, and has thus failed to know more about himself. The “slave,” however, has known about the perversity and the inconsistency of the “master” for centuries. Césaire points out in the Discourse that the slaves know that their masters “lie” (to themselves and the slaves) and that, inasmuch as they hide from themselves a truth about themselves, they are “weak.” This is particularly true after the collapse of Europe in the Second World War. The slaves and the colonized people appear in

46. Habermas and Derrida, “February 15, or, What Binds Europeans Together.”
47. Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America.”
48. Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 14.
the Discourse on Colonialism as a necessary epistemic source for Europe to achieve “clear” and “distinct” ideas about its identity and the character of its historical project. Their failure to take the colonized seriously as a subject of knowledge meant at the same time a betrayal of the Cartesianism to which they were allegedly committed. “Lies,” more than “clarity” and “distinctness,” were central aspects of the European project.

To be sure, the knowledge that enslaved and colonized subjects have, while “clear” and “distinct,” was not necessarily achieved by a rigorous Cartesian method. Descartes’ method rested on hyperbolic doubt. He imagined an evil demon who played with the epistemological powers and the sensual capabilities and who “deceived” people about their most fundamental convictions. The condemned did not need to imagine an evil demon in order to know the truth about European Man. The violence of the master was enough for that. Or else, as I indicated previously, Europe itself appears as an evil demon of sorts in Césaire’s text. Now, its evil character not only shows in deceit, but also in the propagation of violence and death as well as in the naturalization of the institutions, ideas, and practices that perpetuate social death and colonial violence. Instead of a process of methodic doubt, the condemned went through a process of methodic suffering based on their alleged lack of humanity. But the “slaves” knew themselves human. They also knew that the “master” could only legitimate his conceptions and the violence that he perpetrated through a process of methodical and brutal self-imposed blindness, facilitated by the dominant symbolic structure. The “masters” hide from themselves knowledge about the humanity of those whom they considered non-humans. The forgetfulness of the humanity of the racialized and the colonized, rather than the forgetfulness of Being, as Heidegger would have it, appeared to Césaire as the true crime and inconsistency of Europe. This is bad faith in its most destructive expression.52

51. For an elucidation of social death, see Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982). For the links between death and colonialism, see Maldonado-Torres, Against War.


53. It is no accident that Césaire’s Discourse was the first and one of the most powerful texts on decolonization that the Chicana theorist Chela Sandoval, who offers an account of love as a decolonial force in her Methodology of the Oppressed (2000), encountered (conversation April 22, 2005). Sandoval’s Methodology of the Oppressed is directly inspired by the writings of third world women of color in the United States and by theorists such as Frantz Fanon, who, as I have mentioned already, studied Césaire carefully and who insisted on the primacy of the self-other relation. Sandoval’s Methodology is a self-conscious effort to elevate some of the insights on the decolonization of self, society, and knowledge to the level of method, just as Césaire himself began to do in the Discourse. The Discourse, written in the early years of the wave of decolonization in the twentieth century, focuses on the fundamentals of decolonization, as they were perceived by many in the periphery upon Europe’s demise. It stands today, as before, as a propaedeutics to decolonial methodology as it also continues to inspire new approaches. Césaire and Sandoval’s reflections on method and the sciences, among those of Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Lewis Gordon and others, form part of the rich and complex genealogy of the decolonial turn.
basic ideas that appear in the third way of decolonization. They are also the most fundamental elements of the decolonial turn. His dismissal or ignorance about this type of reflection led Descartes not so much to conceal Being, but to make invisible racialized and colonized subjects as well as to severely hinder the power of the decolonial gift.

The decolonial gift refers in this case to the reason of the enslaved or the condemned. Césaire finds in the general character of this form of reason a fundamental contribution to responses to the European crisis. The very existence of the slave may be interpreted as a claim or exigency, or else, as a radical questioning of the decision to maintain slavery. The blindness or lack of hospitality to the free gift of the slave is not accidental. It is inherent to the colonial situation and to racial slavery. The notion of damnation, that both Césaire and Fanon use to refer to the colonized, makes reference to a situation where “gifts” are not received but taken before they are even offered. Dispossession and possession take precedence over the logic of the gift. I base this insight on the etymology of donner or condemned, which makes reference to the French donner, which means “to give.” Damné refers to someone who cannot give because her offerings have been taken from her. Both Césaire and Fanon understand colonization as a “despojo” or dispossession of the resources that subjects and people count on to offer to others. The offering (“la ofrenda”) enacts (does not represent) the humanity of such subjects. This moment of humanization cannot be spelled out with reference to the Hegelian conception of the struggle for recognition. The gift, not struggle, is the means of obtaining recognition—particularly by one slave from another, not from the master. But even the master searches for recognition in this way. Lordship itself can be understood as a peculiar form of the logics of giving, a skewed form in which giving and receiving turn into selective giving and possession. Césaire favourably cites Malinowski on this point, who describes the nature of the European “gift.” According to Malinowski:

> Every conception according to which Europe is a cornucopia or a place where everything is freely given is mistaken. One does not need to be

56. Fanon highlights the relevance of the concept of damnation in his Wretched of the Earth (Les damnés de la terre), trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004). Césaire also uses the term. He writes that the culture of the colonized is “condemned to remain marginal in relation to European culture.” See Aimé Césaire, “Culture et colonisation,” in “Lire...le Discours sur le colonialisme de Aimé Césaire,” by Georges Ngal (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1994), 119.

Europe pretends to “give” generously to the colonized, but that which it gives is inessential. The irony of the colonizing endeavor is that the European imperial gift presents itself as donation, but, on the one hand, as Malinowski points out, it is very selective and, on the other, it establishes a logic of possession. Thus, colonization can be seen as a perversion of the paradox of the gift. Giving is paradoxical because the subject or its interests cannot fully account for its condition of possibility. Its paradoxical character is most evinced at the point when a subject gives his or her own life for a subject who is not even considered to be a subject and from whom one cannot therefore expect anything in return. Colonialism fundamentally distorts this paradox. The paradox of giving turns into the perverse paradox of possession whereby the European takes away the possibilities of giving from the colonized, while paradoxically also expecting gratitude. The imperial gift takes away from the colonized the very possibilities of giving: that which the colonized could give has been “taken” away from them. This is precisely the condition of damnation. The colonizer-colonized relation fundamentally distorts and makes impossible reciprocal relations of generosity between colonizer and colonized. The colonized are banned from affirming their humanity through donation, while the colonizer lie to themselves by thinking that they “give” to the colonized when what they do is rather to steal and take away things from them, including the very possibility of giving. In colonialism, what takes the place of reciprocity and generosity is permanent debt, which allows colonization to take the form of recurrent dependence. Thus, colonialism, which begins through conquest, gradually turns into a process that demands

permanent gratitude and permanent dependence. In this process, both colonizer and colonized fail to achieve affirmation of their humanity in a way that is consonant with the paradox of the gift, which is necessary for reciprocal recognition to take place.

For Césaire, the slave perceives with “clarity” and “distinctness” that the master enacts a logic of possession when they want to make colonization appear as if it were an expression of generosity, the “white man’s burden.” And, since generosity is basic to the affirmation of humanity, this insight is relevant for knowledge about Europe and its crisis. Colonialism alters the coordinates of relations that allow subjects to affirm themselves as humans. In this sense it could be said that colonialism has metaphysical implications, which requires philosophical anthropology to spell them out. Fanon made clear, for instance, how black subjects were led to affirm their humanity by adopting white masks. But colonialism dehumanizes the colonizer and not only the colonized, as we will see below.

Césaire and Fanon’s analyses introduce peculiar visions of subjectivity and sociality that defy Cartesian tenets, but they nonetheless remain committed to universalism. This combination serves as the basis to new decolonial sciences. Césaire proposes the decolonial sciences as an alternative and antidote to the European sciences. The relation between European humanity and its sciences, as Husserl formulated them, make clear that the decolonial sciences must be included in the preparation of any diagnosis of and cure to the crisis of European Man. At least it appears that way with “clarity” and “distinctness” from the perspective of the slave and the colonized. It is from this perspective that Césaire contributes to the discourse about the crisis of the European sciences. Concerning European scientists Césaire proclaims that “their highly problematical subjective good faith is entirely irrelevant to the objective social implications of the evil work they perform as watchdogs of colonialism.” Césaire offers several illuminating examples in which he makes reference to Descartes’ Discourse on Method.

Due to their racism, the European sciences go as far as betraying part of their fundamental elements, such as Cartesian universalism. We have already seen that Césaire’s surrealism, as well as some aspects of Post-continental Philosophy, partly stems from Cartesian premises. Césaire, however, continues to hold on to a universalist vision. To be sure, by no means must one be led to believe that universalism is only a Cartesian legacy or that it belongs only to a European tradition of thought. Césaire’s own formulation of universalism is nonetheless very original as it is founded on dialogue and the imperative of decolonization, rather than on a monological and monopoloty Cartesinan vision. It is from this perspective that the “gift” of the colonized appears so important for him. The colonized has been stripped of the character of the non-whites, and—although each of these gentlemen, in order to impugn on higher authority the weakness of primitive thought, claims that his own is based on the firmest rationalism—their barbaric repudiation, for the sake of the cause, of Descartes’ statement, the charter of universalism, that “reason ... is found whole and entire in each man,” and that “where individuals of the same species are concerned, there may be degrees in respect of their accidental qualities, but not in respect of their forms, or natures.”

60. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks.
61. In “Débat (extraits),” Césaire notes “Je trouve que Malinowski a eu le mérite, par sa théorie du don sélectif, de fournir une contribution très intéressante à la science, une contribution positive à ce que j’appelle l’anticolonialisme”; in Georges Ngal, “Lire... le Discours sur le colonialisme de Aimé Césaire, 132. The most systematic continuations of this project appear in the work of Sylvia Wynter and Lewis Gordon; see, Lewis R. Gordon, Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Tiring Times (Boulder, Co.: Paradigm Press, 2006); Gordon, Fanon and the Crisis of European Man; Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony: A Discussion of the Works of Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon,” The New Century Review 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337. See also Kenneth Knies formulations of post-European sciences in the Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise dossier in Post-continental Philosophy (see n. 52).
62. Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 34.
63. Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 34.
Césaire's Gift and the Decolonial Turn

IV. Conclusions

Discourse on Colonialism is the contribution of a colonized and racialized black subject to European discourses about the crisis of Europe and its Cartesian legacy. It is a direct response to Descartes' Discourse on Method. Césaire confesses that “we have been branded by Cartesian philosophy, by French rhetoric,” but beyond such brands one finds the ideas and experiences that survived colonial violence and others that emerged in response to such violence. They are the sources for a “clear” and “distinct” understanding of problems that the European refuses to confront. They are also at the base of new ideas and proposals for human conviviality. Césaire highlights the promise of universalism under the rubrics of decolonization, as well as its problematic expression in the European project. Césaire leads us to ask ourselves what would have happened if Descartes had been attentive to the reason of the slave. What kind of method would he have proposed to address the perversity of colonization and the relation of the emerging sciences with it? What does it mean for the European humanity of the twentieth and the twenty-first century that the “slaves” have spoken and continue to speak, or else, that his perspective has been at least partly articulated and voiced?

Discourse on Colonialism offers itself as a mirror to, or a look at, Europe from a position which is not entirely European, and which indeed, Europe continues to subalternize. The Discourse articulates the point of view of the slave using discursive forms that are characteristic of European reason, but it also points to its limits, its silences, and its racism. For a very long time Europe has evaded this look, but for this very reason it has not been able to gain a full understanding of its own condition. Perhaps now, fifty years after Césaire published his Discourse, at a moment when responses to Europe’s geo-political significance only seem to awaken new forms of traditionalism, it begins to find more attention from dissatisfied European intellectuals and scholars. The fascination with European roots is still strong, however. A serious engagement with Césaire thus still remains a challenge. Césaire's Discourse, like the decolonial gift, has the form of the classic pharmakon which is both medicine and venom. It is an offering which promises to initiate a process that leads to the decolonization of Europeanity. It is also at the very basis

64. Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 13.

65. This project continues today in the work of the Modernity/Coloniality Research Group (see n. 14), the Caribbean Philosophical Association, Latin@ philosophers and critical thinkers, and in the work of Latin American liberation philosophers, among others. Figures who belong to these different groups met recently in the conference Mapping the Decolonial Turn: Post/Trans-Continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique at the University of California, Berkeley (April, 2005) to discuss their commonalities and differences. Some of the figures present included Linda Alcoff, Enrique Dussel, Lewis R. Gordon, Paget Henry, José David Saldivar, Chela Sandova, and Sylvia Wynter, among others.


of a post-Eurocentric and post-continental discourse. Discourse on Colonialism is perhaps as important for the Europe of the twenty-first century, as Discourse on Method was in the seventeenth. While modern Europe found its basis in Descartes’ Discourse, global transmodernity has to come to terms with Césaire. Discourse on Colonialism aims to take us beyond modernity/coloniality to transmodernity. This is the task that it poses for twenty-first-century humanity.

68. Enrique Dussel, “The ‘World-System’: Europe as ‘Center’ and its ‘Periphery’ beyond Eurocentrism,” in Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism, and Liberation Theology, ed. and trans. Eduardo Mendieta (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 53-84; Maldonado-Torres, Against War. See also the dossier in Post-continental Philosophy (see n. 52).

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