Learning to Unlearn

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In July 2001, we were teaching a summer seminar, sponsored by Open Society Institute at the European Humanities University, in Minsk, Belarus. During a lunch conversation in which we were talking about “postcoloniality,” one of the participants in the seminar asked: “What exactly is coloniality? When you talk about postmodernity,” she said, “I know what modernity is (at least I am familiar with the idea and the term), but when you talk about postcoloniality and decoloniality, I haven’t the slightest idea what coloniality is or may be.”11 This is a belated response to that question.12 Explaining to our student what coloniality means, we also lay out the difference between post- and de-coloniality, clarify why we opted for decoloniality over postcoloniality, and outline what are for us the contributions as well as the limits of postcoloniality.

By addressing the limits of postcoloniality, we are not placing ourselves “against” it; on the contrary, we are bringing forward another option—the decolonial option. The term “decolonization” became common currency during the Cold War and was connected to the Third World, particularly to the process of liberation in Asia and Africa. The decolonial option that rejects both capitalist and communist alternatives was introduced in the Bandung Conference, in 1955 (Ampiah 2007). However, decolonial thinking and decoloniality go back to the sixteenth century and cut across the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. A non-Spanish or, later on, non-British or
non-French ruling was one of the first responses given by activists and intellectuals in Tawantinsuyu and the Caribbean to global linear thinking supported by the invention of international law (Francisco de Vitoria and Hugo Grotius) and the *jus publicum Europaeum* described by Carl Schmitt in the early 1950s. Postcoloniality and decoloniality are two different responses to the five hundred years of Western consolidation and imperial expansion. These responses were built on different historical experiences, languages, memories, and genealogies of thought. Our take on decoloniality is built on the historical foundation of the modern/colonial world in the Atlantic (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries) and the history of the Russian Czardom and Empire; its translation into the Soviet Union and the changing roles of the Russian Federation and its ex-colonies in the past two decades.

In building on decolonial thinking and outlining decolonial options, our aim is to delink from the principles and structures supporting the existing system of knowledge in the humanities; we question the rhetoric justifying the role of the social sciences and the humanities as well as their methodology. Drawing on experiences and arguments such as the ones suggested by Maori anthropologist Linda Tuhiwai Smith, we call into question the disciplinary legitimacy of knowledge and the disqualification of knowledge that does not obey the existing disciplinary rules. That is one of the starting points of learning to unlearn in order to relearn—the disciplinary disobedience (Smith 1999). This is a qualitative not a quantitative shift, as is often the case with postcolonial studies.

Hopefully now the reader begins to see the different paths followed by decolonial thinking on the one hand, and postcolonial studies and theory on the other. What happens in the majority of postcolonial studies? They start from the version of history that places the British Empire (or, sometimes, the French Empire) at the center of modern/colonial history. It is too late for us. Modern/colonial history originated in the Atlantic, in the complexity of European imperial formations (Iberian Peninsula) and would-be empires (Holland, French, England), in the dismantling of Tawantinsuyu and Anahuac and the massive capture, transportation, and exploitation of enslaved Africans. This is one of the limits of postcoloniality seen from the historical perspective of decolonial thinking and struggling much before the advent of European postmodernity that makes possible the emergence of postcoloniality.

Sometime around the 1970s, due to the impact of decolonization struggles in Asia and Africa, the emergence of dictatorial regimes in South America, and the Civil Rights movement in the U.S., a radical transformation of intellectual and scholarly fields took place. In the “Third World,” the concern
was with the geopolitics of knowledge and, consequently, with decolonizing of the imperial knowledge. In the U.S., the concern was with the body politics of knowledge.\textsuperscript{14} It was the moment when a new organization of knowledge and understanding came into being: women’s studies, ethnic studies, Chicano/Latino/a studies, African-American Studies, Queer Studies, Asian-American Studies, and so forth. Postcolonial studies emerged mainly in the U.S. in this particular context. The novelty was that they put the geopolitics of knowledge on the table of an already subversive scenario centered on the body politics of knowledge. Postcolonial theories and postcolonial studies, instead, entered the U.S. carrying in their bags the last word by and about postmodern thinkers; the bags were \textit{le dernier gadgé-d’outre-mer}. Postcolonial contributions are obvious: they brought into U.S. humanities scholarship the relevance of the world beyond Europe and the U.S. The influence of postcoloniality was felt also in the social sciences, particularly through the influential work of Edward Said (1978). All in all, postcolonial studies and theories are connected to the splendors and miseries of French poststructuralism through which colonial experiences in British India were filtered. Parallel to that development, the Subaltern Studies, initiated by Ranahit Guha in London in the mid to late 1970s took Antonio Gramsci to India, i.e., an ex-British colony. It was Said who brought with him the British Maghreb and the Palestinian question and connected it to postcolonial debates. However, if in \textit{Orientalism} Said fits the discourse and goals of postcoloniality, his book \textit{The Question of Palestine} (1978), published in the same year, reads today as a decolonial critique parallel and complementary to Frantz Fanon’s \textit{The Wretched of the Earth} (1967 [1961]), Albert Memmi’s \textit{The Colonizer and the Colonized} (1957 [1991]), and the earlier José Carlos Mariátegui’s \textit{Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality} (1928[1971]).

In a nutshell, postcoloniality presupposes postmodernity, while decolonial thinking and decolonial option are always already delinked from modernity and post-modernity. It brings to the foreground a silenced and different genealogy of thought. The decolonial option originated not in Europe but in the Third World, as a consequence of struggles for political decolonization. And it emerged among “minorities” in the heart of the U.S. as a consequence of the Civil Rights movement and its impact on decolonizing knowledge and being through gender and ethnic studies. Furthermore, if we take into account the history of the Russian Empire, which was the first not-quite-European imperial formation following the European model and, in case of the Soviet Union, the first non-Christian European formation modeled on the European Marxist ideas and ideals, we would have to deal with the imperial difference (and imperial differentiation, since “differences” are never
static). Thus, decoloniality works on specific sets of issues built on particular historical legacies, languages, sensibilities, experiences, and senses affected through smells and food, bodies and sexualities, music and everyday life.

It is also through these routes that decolonial thinking enters the ex-Soviet world after 1991. We (Madina and Walter, as well as the collective modernity/coloniality/decoloniality) do not derive our ideas from European post-structuralism but from the colonial histories of South America and the Caribbean and of Central Asia and the Caucasus under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. In building our arguments, we may or may not use some of their concepts for convenience, but not the epistemic principles on which those concepts are grounded and the historical foundation of post-structural arguments. Our subjectivities, experiences, languages, histories, desires, frustrations, and angers are different from the ones expressed by Foucault, Lacan, or Derrida. Theirs is a different history; their problems are not our problems; and we surmise that our problems are not necessarily theirs. For this reason alone, geo- and body politics of knowledge is of the essence. This is what we meant when we made a distinction between focusing on objects and focusing on problems. Postcolonial theories and decolonial thinking are interrelated at the level of the enunciated (i.e., the content, the concern with colonial histories and their consequences for the present) but they do not intersect at the level of the enunciation (i.e., the terms of the conversation). Furthermore, imperial differences, encroached on colonial differences (e.g., racialization of China and Russia) and the way these encroachments engender and shape enunciations, are highly relevant in understanding the global coloniality (the darker side of global modernity). They are “next to” the encroachment on which postcolonial theorists and critics dwell.

While anti-colonial struggles were shaking up the Third World, the Soviet Union and the U.S. (with the support of western European countries), were engaged in the Cold War. If, in the U.S., the Civil Rights movement opened up the waters for the decolonial body politics (e.g., for Chicanos and Native Americans as well as for African Americans in the 1970s, when the expressions such as “decolonization” and “internal colonialism” were already a common currency), the Soviet Union was successful in repressing the internal decolonial openings, particularly in racialized non-European colonies devoid of any agency, where the empire destroyed, bought up, or exiled most alternative voices in order to wipe off any traces of heterodoxy on cultural, ethnic, or religious basis. The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in an unwanted independence of most of its colonies, but the process was quickly strangled, while Russia together with the whole post-Socialist space
became a large arena for global coloniality (embracing the (neo)liberal version of the colonial matrix) and neocolonialism.

Decolonial thinking was also available (Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon; the journal *Presence Africaine*; etc.) but silenced in places where Marxism, structuralism, and poststructuralism occupied all the intellectual debates at the time. Decolonial thinking was going on in Maghreb, in sub-Saharan Africa, and in India but not in France or England. Decolonial thinking entered Europe with the massive immigration from South Asia, the Middle East, Maghreb. In today’s U.S., the massive migration is just joining decolonial thinking processes that can be traced back—in their conceptual awareness—to the 1970s, if not before. The field of “education” has changed radically. A diversity of “conceptual tools” became available, no longer controlled by canonical disciplines and transforming the instructional dimension of education, mainly in the humanities and the social sciences but already entering into other fields as well. Most important, however, it had and continues to have a strong influence on “nurturing,” shaping, and transforming subjectivities disputed in other realms by religious orders and market gurus.

It seems to us that postcolonial studies bring forward a change in the content but not in the terms of the conversation. The latter presupposes delinking and shifting the geography of reasoning, which is not obvious to us in various manifestations of postcolonial studies. One can reformulate Jacques Lacan’s ideas and create on their basis the new concepts in the vein of Homi Bhabha, but one can also start not from Lacan but from Gloria Anzaldúa, from the Zapatistas, from the Caucasus cosmology, or from Nakshbandi Sufism. These are options that already distinguish decolonial from postcolonial trajectories. It depends, in the last analysis, on how the world is inscribed in your skin rather than on how the novelty of post-structuralism affects your mind. Postcolonial studies seem to dwell in a skin different from ours and in need of the epistemic frame of Eurocentric modernity: the distinction between the knowing subject and known object is implied in both the notion of “study” and the notion of “theory.” For that reason, postcolonial studies do not alter the internal discourses inherent in and fundamental to modernity, such as progressivism and developmentalism: both are implied in the prefix “post.” Gandhi, Fanon, and Anzaldúa did not “study” or “theorize” British imperialism in India, Black experience in the Caribbean, Berber and Arabic existentia in North Africa, or Chicana trajectories in the U.S. Their political stance went together with a decolonial shift in knowledge production. Their thinking is “actional,” as Lewis Gordon describes Fanon’s work (Gordon 1995). What they all have in common, beyond their differ-
ences, is that they inhabit the colonial wound. All three of them “thought” and wrote from the “experience” of the colonial wound. And the knowledge produced from the colonial wound is not a knowledge that aims to change the “disciplines” but rather to “decolonize” knowledge, to undo imperial and colonial differences, ontologically and epistemically. Therefore, one of the vexing questions that emerged in the late 1980s about the relations between identities and epistemologies becomes a mute point: Fanon is not “studying the blacks” but instead, “thinking” ethically and politically from the colonial wound and shifting the ethics and politics of knowledge articulated in the distinction between the knowing subject and the known object. Learning to unlearn confronts us (scholars, intellectuals, students, professors, professionals of all sorts, officers of the state, and corporations officers) with the necessity of delinking from the naturalized vision of society (the idea of Humanity, of happiness and reward, of a vertical structure of power) that was created in the sixteenth century by monarchies and the Christian church, then mutated into the secular project (secularism) that brought the European bourgeoisie into the state and the Industrial Revolution and into reframing of the economy.

What about post-Socialist Russia? Who are the equivalents to Gandhi, Fanon, or Anzaldúa? The complication in Russian history is that the Soviet revolution turned Marxism into a model of imperial domination and Marxism became as oppressive as Christianity and liberalism. Post-Socialist Russia is facing the dilemma of having burned out one of the “hopes” still alive among Western Marxists and not having another way out of joining the new philosophy of Western empires—neoliberalism, which is only dusted today with the moth-eaten imperial nationalism and isolationism. Consequently, whereas decolonial projects and practices emerged in the colonies of Western empires as early as the sixteenth century, in Russian modern/colonial history, the anticolonial sentiment proper was less pronounced than the one linked to the imperial difference with the West. So, within the history of today’s Russian Federation, the decolonial attitude starts, paradoxically, with the imperial wound. Intellectuals and writers such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky in the nineteenth century and Victor Yerofeyev today describe this as follows: “In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, whereas in Asia we shall go as masters” (Dostoyevsky 1977 [1881]); and “From Moscow I can go to Asia, if I want, or to Europe. That is, it is clear where I am going to. It is not clear—where I am coming from . . .” (Yerofeyev 2000). It is not clear yet what will come from the ex-colonies of the Russian and Soviet Empires, as well as from some of the colonies that remain under the Russian Federation (such as Chechnya, Tatarstan, or, Buryatia). What is clear, however, is that
a shift in the ethics and politics of knowledge that would cast Russian history beyond the Hegelian dictum and beyond its double dependency with the West—liberal and Marxist—will emerge at some point at some place, because neither Christian Orthodoxy (very much like Christian Catholicism and Protestantism in the West) nor second-class liberalism offers a promising future. Marxism as a model for the organization of society has also run its course in Russia as well as in Western industrial countries (Europe and the U.S.) and their dependent states (Latin America and the Caribbean).

The Colonial Matrix of Power

The analysis and understanding of the logic of coloniality presupposes a reframing of the current view of history and of modernity. The very concept of post-coloniality (and its corollaries, postcolonial studies and theory) would also have to be reframed once the logic of coloniality is brought out of its invisibility and placed side by side with the rhetoric of modernity. The idea of modernity, to begin with, has been conceived from the perspective of European history and framed based on the historical process and subjective experience of Western European countries and people—more specifically, on the complicity between Western Christendom and the emergence of capitalism as we know it today. Europe and modernity have become synonymous and essential components of modern European identity. Coloniality, instead, has been swiped out and made invisible in the Eurocentric narratives as an encumbrance for the glorious march of modernity. Where coloniality is visible every day is in the colonies, semi-colonies, and ex-colonies of Western empires. For that reason, it is not surprising that the concept of “coloniality” has been brought out in Latin America, whereas the concept of “modernity” is a European invention. These are not, however, concepts that stand at the same level in power relations. We can talk about modernity ignoring coloniality, as it has always been obvious. But you cannot talk about coloniality without invoking modernity.

“Development” is a companion concept to modernity. “Underdevelopment,” however, is not the equivalent, in economic terms, to coloniality in historical and philosophical terms. Underdevelopment is what development proposes to overcome. In other words, underdevelopment is an invention of the discourse of development to justify economic and political interventions, with a good cause. Instead, modernity does not propose to overcome coloniality but rather tradition, barbarism, fanatic religious belief, and the like. Coloniality is what development needs to overcome under the guise
of underdevelopment. Coloniality is indeed the hidden weapon behind the rhetoric of modernity justifying all kinds of actions, including war, to eliminate barbarism and overcome tradition. Thus, coloniality is, like the unconscious, the hidden weapon of both the civilizing and developmental missions of modernity.

The imbalance in power relations brings about—this time—the splendors and miseries of coloniality. The misery is its dependency on modernity. The splendor is that the concept reveals the colonial matrix of power, illuminates colonial and imperial differences, makes understandable the colonial wound, and delivers epistemic energy for a radical shift in the geo- and body politics of knowledge. The history and interpretation of the world can no longer be achieved from the universal perspective of the modern social sciences and humanities. Perspectives from modernity (from the left and from the right, from neoliberals or from neo-Marxists) provide only half of the story—hence the perplexity of the student in Minsk who was familiar only with this half. Telling the other half is our task then.

The logic of coloniality (the colonial matrix of power) is the “missing” half in current definitions of “modernity,” which passes for the totality. Take, for example, Anthony Giddens’s short description of modernity: “‘modernity’ refers to modes of social life or organization which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence” (Giddens 1992: 1). Giddens’s concept of modernity is very shortsighted, for he sees only one side of it—the European imperial side. From the perspective of coloniality, however, world history since the sixteenth century has had different colors and shades, different geohistorical locations for accumulations (of money as well as of meaning), enjoyments, and sufferings. We can therefore paraphrase Giddens’s description of modernity to render visible the logic of coloniality, as follows:

“Coloniality” refers to the modes of control of social life and economic and political organizations that emerged in the European management of the colonies in the Americas and the Caribbean from around the beginning of the sixteenth century onwards and that subsequently have become more or less worldwide in their influence. This associates coloniality with a time period and with an initial geographical location but for the moment leaves its major characteristics safely stowed away in a black box. Yet, they are being applied today in Iraq and the Middle East and North Korea, in Georgia (Transcaucasia) and Chechnya; in redefining the internal imperial difference between the U.S. and the European Union,
and the external imperial difference between the U.S. and the European Union on one side and Russia, China, and Japan on the other. Coloniality, indeed, has become since the sixteenth century more or less worldwide in its “influence.” (Mignolo and Tlostanova’s paraphrase of Giddens’s (1992) definition of modernity)

Let us now explore further coloniality as a concept, rather than the set of historical processes that the concept uncovers. It is a disturbing concept indeed. Coloniality invokes colonialism, which is the complement of imperialism. Thus, whereas “imperialism/colonialism” refers to specific sociohistorical configurations (i.e., the Spanish and British Empires’ colonies in the Americas and Asia), “modernity/coloniality” refers to the conceptual and ideological matrix of the Atlantic world that, since 1500, has expanded all over the globe. Third, coloniality or the colonial matrix of power, describes a specific kind of imperial/colonial relations that emerged in the Atlantic world in the sixteenth century and brought imperialism and capitalism together. The Roman Empire, for example, was not a capitalist empire, neither was the Ottoman Sultanate that coexisted in the sixteenth century with the Spanish Empire. The colonial matrix of power explains the specificity of the modern/colonial world and the imperial/colonial expansion of Christian, Western, and Capitalist empires: Spain, England, and the U.S.

Coloniality is disturbing because it forces you to move back the clock of “modern” history, because “modernity” has been self-fashioned on the French Revolution (politics), the Industrial Revolution (economy), and class struggle (the logic of history and the future of the world). Historically, coloniality is the hidden logic of control and management, underlining (invisibly) the European appropriation of land, the massive exploitation of labor, the slave trade, the extraction of gold and silver, and the plantation economy. It was not at that time a projected global design. Western Christians, after losing Jerusalem, where concerned about how to expand Christianity over the world—the oecumene that then did not include what would become “America.” Coloniality as a specific set of processes started with the Spaniards and the Portuguese. The world we live in today is, decolonially speaking, a consequence of the “colonial revolution” rather than the French or Industrial ones. The colonial revolution or revolution of coloniality started in the sixteenth century and does not consist in overruling something previous within the same history but in erasing to build something new: the New World, metaphorically, the modern/colonial world. This kind of revolution took place later on in Asia and in Africa, when European powers arrived with the tools of the empire; and when the U.S. and transnational corpora-
tions, today, arrive with their juggernaut to dismantle the environment in search for natural resources and the colonization of the last remaining subject of colonization: life itself.

In the seventeenth century, Dutch, French, and British merchants and entrepreneurs took advantage of the Caribbean lands and enslaved Africans to settle a plantation economy that contributed to increase the wealth and authority of Western European monarchies and created the conditions for the Industrial Revolution. The Dutch created the East India Company. The British soon initiated their own commercial relations with the Mughal Sultanate; after Napoleon, France started its commercial and colonial contacts with Maghreb. From the late eighteenth century on, the colonial matrix of power was expanded, transformed, and enacted by the emerging European imperial nations of the western and Atlantic coasts. This story is well known. Less attention has been paid to the commonality, the three centuries after the “discovery” of America, of the underlying structure that united the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, the French, and the English and also, with a few important provisions, the Russian.

Eastern Christianity housed among other spaces in Russia had its own historically unsuccessful global pretensions of the specific Orthodox Christian kind (based on aggressive Russian Orthodox universalizing the ideal of a particular spiritually, taking over the whole humanity) and also, its own New World—first Siberia, which was colonized by the Russian equivalents of the conquistadors (the Cossacks) and under the supervision of the proto-capitalist merchant families like the Stroganoff, from the late sixteenth century on—and in the second modernity—the Caucasus and Central Asia (the Russian Orient or the hot Siberia, as it used to be called in the nineteenth century). In spite of lacking classical capitalist model, in the first modernity, Russia had its own variant of coloniality, with Orthodox Christianity in its center (Moscow as the Third Rome) and all the commercial and geopolitical reverberations, except for the ingenious “discovery” of Western modernity—the firm link between racism and the shaping of the capitalist exploitation of labor in the colonies. Thus, already at that point in history, it became obvious that coloniality is wider and deeper than just “capital/modernity,” it cannot be taken exclusively to the economic sphere, and it allows us to conceptualize not just the West and its colonies but also the rest of the world, particularly Eurasia, which was later mentally colonized by the discourses of modernity. This deeper nature of coloniality, rather than capitalism, would keep coming forward again and again—in the Soviet modernity and in the late twentieth century, when capitalism would become polycentric and travel to non-European spaces.
It is disturbing, finally, because it forces you to a new beginning of modern/colonial history, to see the foundation of capitalism in the very “primitive accumulation” that Karl Marx, with his progressive view of history, saw as a precondition of real capitalism in the northern European Industrial Revolution. Globalization, as it is understood today, goes hand in hand with coloniality, with the foundation of the colonial matrix of power. Postcolonial studies and theories, as currently understood in the U.S. and certain European countries, start from a different historicity and genealogy of thought, which places the British Empire and, sometimes, French colonial expansion at the center of modern/colonial history. This is one of the limits of postcolonial studies seen from the perspective of global coloniality. Equally misleading and simplified are the attempts of certain scholars to apply postcolonial studies and theory to the analysis of the post-Soviet space, without paying attention to the differences both within their varied local histories and configurations and vis-à-vis the rest of the world.19

Defining Colonial and Imperial Differences

Colonial and imperial difference(s) are not fixed, stable walls. They change through time and space. What is maintained is the coloniality of both. If modern/colonial empires are one and the same with the foundation and history of capitalism and the idea of Europe, then the question is this: How does the colonial matrix of power, thus defined, relate and explain the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Sultanate, to take the examples of empires coexisting with the capitalist and Western Christian ones? To answer this question, we need to unfold the concepts of the “colonial and imperial differences” introduced previously. Both are implied in the very structure of the colonial matrix of power. Imperial discourses are built on the bases of the differences with people, languages, religions, economies, and political organizations of the colonies. To exploit, it is necessary to dominate, and to dominate, it is necessary to build discourses and belief systems that produce the imperial image as the locus of the right and unavoidable march of history and the colonies as the locus of the erroneous, the inferior, the weak, the barbarians, the primitives, and so on. To conflate differences with values in human beings’ hierarchical order is not just to identify “cultural” differences but to build “colonial” differences, justified in a “racial” configuration of human beings on the planet, their languages and religions, their economies, and their social organizations. That is, modern imperial discourses have been founded on the basis of “colonial differences” at all levels of the social. On the other hand,
to maintain the control vis-à-vis competing empires, it is also necessary to assert the superiority of imperial hegemony and to found the “imperial difference” with coexisting and imperial formations. Thus, the Russian Empire that took off with Ivan the Terrible toward 1555 and the Ottoman Sultanate, whose moment of splendor with Suleiman the Magnificent coincided with Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire and I of Castile, were soon located in the margins of the Western Christian imperial discourses. The Russians were Christian but not Catholic, their alphabet was Cyrillic, and their language was Slavic (linked with Greek literacy and not Latin), whereas the Ottoman Sultanate was Muslim and its language was Turkish and Arabic. The Russian and the Ottoman may have been empires, like the Spanish one, but certainly only second class. That is, the imperial difference recognizes the similar but immediately reduces it to a second-class empire by extending to it the features of the colonial difference. That is to say, both the Russian Empire and Ottoman Sultanate were inferior in terms of religion and language. Consequently, the imperial difference was constructed on the same principle of the colonial difference, except that it was applied to sociohistorical configurations that were not reduced to colonies.

Zero-Point Epistemology

The foundation of knowledge was and remains territorial and imperial. The world map drawn by Gerardus Mercator and Johannes Ortelius worked together with theology to create a zero point of observation and of knowledge—a perspective that denied all other perspectives. Modernity in this respect is not a historical process but an idea that describes certain historical processes. This idea needs a system of knowledge that legitimizes it. Simultaneously, once the idea was created, it legitimized the system of knowledge that created it (Mignolo 1992, 301–30). By the same token, the idea of modernity and the system of knowledge that legitimized it became a mechanism to disavow other systems of knowledge and to make other historical processes non-modern. The system, in which coloniality is embedded, also created a meta-language wherein its own affirmation went hand in hand with the justification to disavow systems of knowledge that the meta-language described as non-modern. Meta-languages have the peculiarity of detaching the known from the knower, the said from the act of saying, and create the effect of an ontology independent of the subject. Modernity then is the construction of a meta-language that originated the European Renaissance
(rebirth) coupled with European imperial expansion. Through the centuries, the meta-language was transformed and at the same time maintained during the Enlightenment and adjusted during the period of neoliberal globalization, to become globally hegemonic.

The hegemonic system of knowledge production, transformation, and transmission is grounded today in what Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez described as the hubris of the *zero point*. The coexistence of diverse ways of producing and transmitting knowledge is eliminated because now all forms of human knowledge are ordered on an epistemological scale from the traditional to the modern, from barbarism to civilization, from the community to the individual, from the orient to occident. By way of this strategy, scientific thought positions itself as the only valid form of producing knowledge, and Europe acquires an epistemological hegemony over all other cultures of the world (Castro-Gómez 2007: 433).

The hubris of the zero point is the place of the observer and the locus of enunciation that, in Christian theology, was taken by God and, in Secular Philosophy, by Reason. The zero point is the limit in which there is an observer than cannot be observed, the God of Transcendental Reason; that is, zero point epistemology is theologically Christian and egologically secular. Once a mortal human claims that he or she occupies that space, either in communication with God or in assuming the position of the observer at the top of the hill looking down the valley, a secure locus of enunciation is created that is hard to dispute. This happens because he or she observes not just with his or her eyes, but within certain languages and in certain linguistic tradition in the categories of thought; and consequently, whoever comes from knowledge systems incorporated in non-Western languages and relies on different principles of knowledge has a hard time entering the house where the hubris of the zero point dominates.

Epistemological frontiers were set in place as a result of this move. These were the frontiers that expelled to the outside the epistemic colonial differences (Arabic, Aymara, Hindi, Bengali, etc.). Epistemic frontiers were rearticulated in the eighteenth century with the displacement of theology and the theopolitics of knowledge by secular egology and the egopolitics of knowledge. Epistemic frontiers were traced by the creation of the imperial and colonial difference. Both epistemic differences were based on a racial classification of the population of the planet, where those who made the classification put themselves at the top of humanity. The Renaissance idea of Man was conceptualized based on the paradigmatic examples of Western Christianity, Europe, and white and male subjectivity (Las Casas [1552] 1967, Kant 1798).
Global Coloniality: The (Four) Spheres of the Colonial Matrix of Power Revisited

The colonial matrix of power emerged and was founded as a consequence of the Christian and Castilian colonization of the Americas. Radical changes took place during that period in the history of humankind. The changes in scale and orientation could be described in four interrelated spheres of social organization.

In each sphere, there is a struggle, conflict for control and domination in which the imposition of a particular lifestyle, morale, economy, structure of authority, and so on implies the overcoming, destruction, and marginalization of the existing one. The four interconnected spheres in which the colonial matrix of power was put together in the sixteenth century, and has operated since then, are the following:

1. The struggle for the economic control (i.e., the appropriation of land and natural resources and the exploitation of labor) oriented to produce commodities for the global market. As Anibal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein (1992: 134) suggest, the Americas were not incorporated into an already existing capitalist economy, but on the contrary, a capitalist economy as we know it today could not have existed without the discovery of America. The complementary movement of land appropriation and labor exploitation meant, simultaneously, the dismantling and overruling of other existing relations between human beings, society, land, and labor, such as the one already in place in the so-called Inca and Aztec Empires.

2. The struggle for the control of authority (setting up political organizations, different forms of government, financial, and legal systems or the installation of military bases, as it happens today). Thus, in the Americas, the Spanish and Christian institutions were established to dismantle and overrule the existing forms of control of authority between Incas and Aztecs.

3. The control of gender and sexuality—among other ways, through the nuclear family (Christian or bourgeois), and the enforcing of normative sexuality and the naturalization of gender roles in relation to the system of authority and principles regulating economic practices, the third sphere of the colonial matrix of power. It is based on sexual normativity and dual “natural” gender relations. Christian morality, the idea of the family, and patriarchal superiority were imposed at the same time that homosexuality was condemned and placed on the side
of the Devil. The control of gender and sexuality also overruled gender relations and sexual practices existing among Aztecs, Incas, and other communities reached by the spread of Christian itinerant missionaries. A decolonial gender theorist and activist, María Lugones, recently summarized this sphere in the concept of coloniality of gender (Lugones 2008), which we explore in more detail in Part II.

4. The control of knowledge and subjectivity through education and colonizing the existing knowledges, which is the key and fundamental sphere of control that makes domination possible. The control of knowledge and subjectivity was part of the package of the colonial matrix of power on which the imperial control of the colonies was organized. Christian colleges were created all over the Spanish dominions. The Renaissance University, already at work in places such as Salamanca and Coimbra, were installed (like McDonalds today) in Santo Domingo, Mexico, Peru, and Argentina during the sixteenth century; and in the seventeenth century, Harvard (1636) was founded as the first university in the British colonies. The control of knowledge goes hand in hand with the control of subjectivity, from the Christian subject, modeled according to theological principles of knowledge to the secular subject, modeled according to the egological, emancipating, and sovereign principles. Obviously, the control of knowledge and subjectivities was accompanied by the dismantling and overruling of Aztec and Inca systems of knowledge and formation of subjectivity, which were framed neither on Christian theological principles nor on secular egological ones. From the late eighteenth century onward, the colonial matrix of power that was put in place during the sixteenth century under Christian and Iberian forms of governments and economy was translated and adapted to the needs of the new emerging imperial powers, mainly France and England. Myriads of examples illustrate the transformations of the colonial matrix of power at the level of economy, authority, sexuality and gender, and subjectivity and knowledge in both local and global histories in the last five hundred years. We refer to a number of such examples in the following chapters of the book. Here, we should also consider the imperial aesthetic in molding colonial subjectivities contested within Western civilization by always rebellious artists and, more recently, specifically by decolonial art and decolonial aesthetics (Tlostanova 2005, Mignolo 2007).

These four spheres describe a) the totality of the social where the struggle for power takes place and b) the interconnectedness among the four spheres.
But, what holds them together? The enunciation—categories, institutions, and actors in a position to manage and legitimize each of the spheres including knowledge itself—is precisely what “barbarians” and “primitives” and “Orientals,” underdevelopment, and the like mean: people, institutions, languages, religions, economies “behind” modernity.

The colonial matrix went through successive and cumulative periods, in which the rhetoric changed according to the needs and the leading forces shaping the spheres of economy, authority, public realm (gender and sexuality), and education (knowledge and subjectivity). And so, secularism displaced theology; development displaced the civilizing mission, and so forth. In the first period, knowledge was framed by theology and the *mission of conversion* to Christianity. That period dominated the scene during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and was in the hands of the Catholic Christian and southern European monarchies, although the Orthodox Christianity also had its limited success. It was marked by the compromises between the Roman Papacy and the Crown of Spain (from 1480 to 1555, from Ferdinand and Isabelle to Charles I of Spain and Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire). By the end of the seventeenth century, a secular and commercial language emerged in England, based on the profitable plantation economies. The combination of a growing economic discourse and an increasing secularization of life was a step toward the second stage, the *civilizing mission* led by England and France. When imperial leadership changed hands again after World War II, the U.S. *development and modernization mission* displaced the British Empire’s mission. It was in strong competition with another modernizing and developmental mission called *Socialism.* When development and modernization failed because it was not possible for a capitalist economy to develop underdeveloped countries, the mission changed again to market democracy as the supreme point of arrival of neoliberal philosophy. Approximately from 1970 to 2000 was the moment of consolidation of neoliberalism that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, translated the previous mission of *development and modernization* into the Washington consensus of the priority of market economy over social regulation. Through five hundred years of Western capitalist empires (Spain, England, the U.S., and their supporters), the rhetoric of modernity (i.e., the different types of “salvation” that the elites in power articulate in their discourses) has at once justified and hidden the logic of coloniality implanted during the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries.

Historically, the colonial matrix had a serpentine, not a vector, history. It unfolded not just in the Western empires, from Spain and Portugal, to Holland, France and England, to the U.S., but also—in a transmuted form—
in the Russian and, particularly, Soviet modernity. Starting from the sixteenth century and more intensively, from Peter the Great, Russia has been transforming gradually into a subaltern, second-rate empire that adapted the Western model of modernity, civilization, and later, progress, pushing the global expansionist Orthodox Christian project more and more aside or suppressing it in the collective unconscious. This only intensified Russia’s historical failure, as it could not possibly compete with the West in secular areas and was doomed to remain within the catching-up and resentful discourse that it is trying to overcome only today. Besides, adapting the rhetoric of modernity (as Russia did) went hand in hand with the logic of coloniality, but it certainly went unannounced and was not properly conceptualized. Efforts at revamping the aggressive Russian claims to world domination would take place in the nineteenth century as well, but only Soviet modernity would rebuild itself as an integral and seemingly secular system in which the rhetoric of modernity would change but the logic of coloniality would remain intact, altering only in its content. Thus, modernity in the twentieth century was implemented in two forms: the liberal/capitalist modernity and the Socialist/statist one. The Soviet modernity refashioned the rhetoric of modernity in the language of Socialism versus capitalism, but it reproduced the logic of coloniality in the control and management of its colonies, particularly the non-European racialized colonies of the Caucasus and Central Asia. As has been demonstrated by a number of scholars, the Bolsheviks wanted to build Socialism and have the colonial empire, too, and it would be sentimental and misleading to believe in their anticolonial rhetoric, particularly when it referred to the spaces that were historically claimed by Russians as their “own.”

Soviet modernity was an ultimately unsuccessful attempt at creating an alternative world, where nonetheless we can find the distorted reflections of all the elements of liberal capitalist modernity. Parallel to its rival, the socialist world had been building its own successive forms of coloniality, which in the end proved only the derivative and mimicking nature of Soviet modernity. Thus, the Soviet division of labor was also based on a racial hierarchy with a seemingly lacking idea of race (it was replaced with the specifically understood “nation”), but with a developed racial politics, the Bolsheviks inherited Eurocentrism, Orientalism, and racism from Western Socialism, albeit in distorted derivative forms. The Soviet modernity had its own developmental and progressive ideals, as well as a theatrical form of multiculturalism based on double standards similar to those of its liberal cousin and a caricature halfway decolonization (fashioned as the rehabilitation of the “enemy nations”) after Stalin’s death. In the realm of coloniality of knowledge
and being, based on the erasing of memory, history, literacies, and alphabetic traditions of the colonized and creating docile intellectual slaves, the Soviet modernity proved to be even more effective than that of the West. It is clear that the Soviet Union was a colossus with feet of clay and could easily collapse because of its own contradictory strategies and the time bomb of its ill-designed federalism, but it is also clear that the lack of immunity in the face of intellectual and cultural colonization by Western modernity, which the USSR inherited from Russia, was systematically used during the Cold War for the gradual disintegration of the Soviet Union from within. The collapse of the Socialist system coincided with the beginning of a new époque and became in itself one of the many manifestations of the new face of the global coloniality. In a way, Soviet modernity fulfilled its part and was dismantled.

The second crucial moment is taking place in front of our own eyes: the reproduction of the colonial matrix is being “diversified,” so to speak, in the struggle for the control of authority and economy. Diversification means that the colonial matrix is slipping out of control of Western imperial states that created it and made it work in the last five centuries. A common global economy goes hand in hand with global racism and the struggle for the control of authority. Diversified or polycentric capitalism means that, in contrast with the world order that existed thirty years ago, the emerging economic nodes no longer follow the instructions and recommendations of the World Bank and the IMF; they are already unfolding globally. This also means that the struggle for authority and control is no longer between the European imperial centers (World War I), or the European imperial center and a peripheral one (Japan), or the conflagration between liberal capitalism and Socialist economy that polarized the world during the Cold War and opened up the space for the nonaligned countries (basically the Third World).

No matter if the diversification of capitalism takes sometimes more and sometimes less successful forms in various parts of the world (from China and Russia to Southeast Asia, from India to Brazil and the Middle East), it becomes clear that, in a polycentric world, the type of economy described by liberals and Marxists alike as “capitalist economy” is hegemonic. But that is not all, because economic transactions impinge upon and are modeled by the state competition in international arena, and state competition is not exempt from racial tensions, religious struggles, and rivalry for the control of knowledge. The colonial matrix of power is still at work but now outside its place of origin: the Atlantic economy from the sixteenth century on, and the European political theory, philosophy, and science since the eighteenth century. And no matter how great Western contributions were to the world history in the past half a millennia, the West is losing its global authority and,
therefore, the expectation that the rest of the world would follow the path of Western Europe and the U.S. is vanishing. It is clearly seen in the politics of the aforementioned locales that refuse to receive orders and recommendations from the IMF, the White House, or the European Union.

While the era of liberal and secular civilizing missions opened up the doors to its opposite, the Socialist civilizing mission, the Washington consensus, and the invasion of Iraq disguised as a war against terrorism (an example of rhetoric of modernity to justify the control of authority and natural resources), took the colonial matrix of power out of the Western hands, including its Socialist version. We do not know how polycentric capital/modernity will manifest itself in different locales in the future. But, what seems to be clear is the decline of the era of peaceful coexistence between theology, mercantilism, and free-trade capitalism in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Western nations; of the cohabitation of secular liberalism and industrial capitalism after the eighteenth century, when England became the dominant empire; and the emergence of the nation-states that replaced communities of faith (religions) by communities of birth (ethnicity), of coexistence of Western imperial nation-states under the leadership of the U.S., centered on global designs of modernization and development, translated into neoliberal projects of market democracy in the end of the twentieth century. Polycentric capital/modernity means, in short, that the five hundred years of Western domination is ending and the colonial matrix of power—created in the process of Western global domination—is now the terrain of global dispute.27

Yet the colonial matrix is not going away. Coloniality will remain as long as the final horizon of human life is guided by the desire to accumulate capital, as long as the economic gains and benefits continue to define “development” and the pursuit of happiness. The control of authority will continue, disguised by a rhetoric of progress, happiness, development, and the end of poverty and will justify the huge amounts of energy and money spent on the conflicts between the centers ruled by the capitalist economy.

Next to and beyond Hegel: Coexisting Imperial Formations, the Colonies, and the Mutations of Colonial and Imperial Differences

We have thus far argued around the constitutive complex modernity/coloniality and described the colonial/imperial differences, the production and reproduction of the colonial wound in the name of the achievements of
modernity. There are no nor can there be any modern achievements without inflicting colonial wounds. It is necessary now to displace Hegel's version of world history anchored in modernity, to shift the geo- and body politics and to anchor new world histories from the perspective of coloniality. We suggested how the implementation of the colonial matrix of power created the conditions for the emergence of spatial epistemic breaks that emerged around the world in the form of decolonial projects and orientations, silenced in the map of world history by the rhetoric of modernity. We move now to the complex imperialism/colonialism as far as the imperial and colonial differences have been defined by the rhetoric of modernity and implemented within Western, capitalist, Christian, and secular empires. The imperial and colonial differences are not, of course, “matter of fact” and ontological realities but imperial constructions on which the entire racial matrix of the modern world has been and continues to be built. Think, for instance, of the characterization of Islam in sixteenth-century Christian Spain and its counterpart, the interpretation of Islam in the twenty-first century U.S. Or think of the Circassian (Cherkess) people, who went from being treated by the Russian Empire as possible military allies and equals in humanity in the first modernity, through being racialized and dehumanized in the second modernity, during the conquest, then through their Soviet treatment as internal others and to their total othering and symbolic blackness today. Hence, the paradoxical metamorphosis of Circassians from the quintessence of the Caucasian race, in the German anthropologist Blumenbach’s ([1795] 1865) quasi-scientific interpretation, still around in some of the U.S. questionnaires, to their becoming subhuman in today’s Russian neo-imperial discourse.

In the unfolding of the linear history of Western empires that coincides with the history of capitalism (Arrighi 1995), the making and remaking of the imperial and the colonial differences became the empire’s companion, as Spanish philologist and grammarian Elio Antonio de Nebrija said when Queen Isabella asked him what would be the use of the grammar of the Spanish language.28 The foundation of imperial and colonial differences were articulated in the sixteenth century from the privileged perspective of Western Christendom and with the imperial foundation of Castile, with the “discovery of America” in 1492, and with the kingdom of Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire, which occupied almost the entire half of the sixteenth century. It was in Christian Castile and the historical role it attributed to itself in the simultaneous events of expelling Moors and Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, conquering two empires in what became the New World, and initiating a massive appropriation of land and exploitation of labor (followed
by Holland, France, and England) that created the conditions for a theological discourse in which the imperial differences with the Ottoman and the Russian Empires were established. Simultaneously, the colonial difference was articulated in the process of colonization of the Indians and the massive trade of African slaves.

A genealogy of the word “imperium” is of the essence here. Imperium has sovereignty and management of the colonies as one of its basic meanings. These legacies were handed down to Spain, particularly through Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor (1519–58), and later on were appropriated by the kings and queens of England and France. In a nutshell, the genealogy goes from the foundation of the idea of empire in Rome to its continuation in Spain, England, and France. That is, in the foundation of Western capitalist empires, there are legacies of the noncapitalist Roman Empire. This narrative is quite well known in the West, but it is particularly interesting that the Russian Empire has been left out as a silent and absent historical agent. The imperial difference begins, from the perspective of modernity, with this silence, which implies the inferiority of those who are, if not altogether out of history, then on its very margin, even if they are also imperial people. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, when Spain was not yet an empire but just a kingdom that happened to “discover” America, Russian imperial vision declared itself an heir of Rome and of Constantinople (the second Rome), self-defining and christening Moscow as “the Third Rome.” A British scholar of Russian descent, Dominic Lieven, wrote a book, *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (Lieven 2000),29 which begins with the analysis of the coetaneous existence, toward the first century of the Christian era, of the Roman Empire and the Chinese Huángdì, and of Latin and *Hanyu* (Han language) as the two languages and carriers of a complex system of knowledge. Second, Lieven moves to the three heirs of the Roman Empire: the Islamic Caliphate that arose toward the eighth century A.D.; the Russian Czardom, rising at the end of the fifteenth century; and the Western Christian empires (as Lieven puts it), which carried the torch for the rise and growth of Western empires (capitalist, Catholic, and Protestant).

The connections between these two genealogies (the Roman Emperor and the Chinese Huángdì, and their respective dominions) were forged in the eighteenth century. At this point, the imperial difference is not only crucial to understand the historical changes but also to reread Hegel’s imperial version of world history. The Russian Czardom was translated into Empire and began a process of affirmation of sovereignty and establishment of colonies that transformed “frontiers” into “borderlands” (i.e., the political divisions with adjacent empires, such as the Ottoman Sultanate and Persian domains
under the ruling of the Shahanshah in the south, Qing China in the east, and Europe in the southwest). The Caucasus developed into a borderland between Islam and Orthodox Christianity as well as, later on, into a colony of the Russian Empire. Thus, imperial and colonial differences were established in the very act of setting up the physical and geographical borderlands—the colonial difference with the Caucasus was simultaneously the locale of the imperial difference with the Ottoman Sultanate. The Russian Empire that, from the eighteenth century on, imitated and followed the imperial, sometimes capitalist, and often liberal patterns emerging in England, France, and Germany—at least on the surface—had a local history that prevented its governors, intellectuals, scholars, and civil society from feeling that they also inhabited the house of the “Absolute Spirit.” Thus, the imperial difference was established and Russia became a lesser empire in the ascending history of “European modernity.” Russia and the Soviet Union as empires had their own colonies subordinated through their own adaptation of the colonial difference that in this case can be called a secondary colonial difference. The colonial difference in Russia and the Soviet Union was subordinated to the imperial difference and subjected to the superiority of Western imperial rhetoric.

Modernity/Coloniality and the World of Imperial Differences

The imperial difference brings its own configurations into modernity/coloniality picture. For instance, in those locales where the projection of modernity was not direct but mediated by the presence of a secondary empire that created its own distorted, mimicking, and ineffective variant of modernity, the history, the genealogy of humanities, and the ways of their regeneration would be quite specific. The humanities as we know them are indeed responsible for the shaping of the Western imperial reason, but in certain locales, this formula has to be complicated. For example, in Russia, this knowledge is not quite Western but imperial and its non-Western nature does not save it from a discriminatory stance toward its own internal and external others.

All the Atlantic empires that came into power through the exploitation of labor and extraction of natural resources from America were Catholic or Protestant, whereas the Ottoman Sultanate was Muslim and the Russian Empire was Orthodox Christian. Historically, then, capitalism was complicit with the materialization of the Atlantic economy, with Catholicism and Protestantism. If the very idea of “modernity” thus became part of the vocabulary
and the rhetoric that went together with the coming into sight of the Western empires of the Atlantic and their colonies in the Americas, the colonial control of labor that materialized in the Atlantic was based on two systems of exploitation of labor to produce commodities for the world market. Western exploitation of labor was organized around encomienda and slavery, of which the Spanish, Portuguese, French, and British took ample advantage. The implantation of labor systems that founded colonial capitalism displaced and destroyed the labor system in the Aztecs and Incas, which, whatever it was, was not capitalist. In contrast, Russia was not largely involved in the type of exploitation of labor that the encomienda and the transformation of the slave system implanted in the Atlantic (i.e., the triangle trade) during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In contrast with the Spanish colonization of America, Russian colonization did not take the shape of massive exploitation of labor to produce commodities for the global market. Geopolitical, military, and religious goals prevailed, as Russia did not find itself in the situation of having to deal with a “new” continent and its natural resources, and the only massive labor force it could exploit was that of its own serfs. Thus, if Spain and Russia had a similar beginning in their road to empire (e.g., “liberating” themselves from the Moors and the Mongolians), soon the differences became apparent: Russia was not part of the Atlantic monopolistic capitalism, and therefore, it found itself on the margins of European modernity and the emerging logic of coloniality.

Through modern/colonial (that is, decolonial) analysis, the world of imperial difference is dominated by two recurrent motifs: the problematic of subaltern empires (Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Sultanate, Russia), which act as intellectual and mental colonies of the first-rate capitalist Western empires in modernity, and, consequently, create their own type of secondary colonial difference; and a forceful Socialist modernity, which is a mutant, marginal, yet decidedly Western kind of thinking and acting, an emancipatory global utopia, gone conservative and reactionary.

In works touching upon the typology of empire(s) (Hardt and Negri 2000, Ferguson 2004a, 2004b, Smith 2003, Spivak 1999), Russia/Soviet Union remains nonexistent or at the border, which, however, does not mean that its experience is not relevant for other locales. In fact, because of their uniqueness, the discourses and practices of the Russian and Soviet Empires, the “dark other” of Western Europe, can be used to illustrate and partly reformulate the problematic of modern colonial and imperial differences throughout the world. To understand from a border epistemic perspective how the European colonial model was replicated and transformed in subaltern empires such as Russia is one of the goals of this argument. To do so, it
may be interesting to briefly trace the main aspects of modernity/modernization in Russia/Soviet Union interpreted both internally and externally. By “internally” and “externally” we do not mean ontologically existing entities but imperial inventions and creations. These terms mean indeed the self-making of the interior space and, by the same token, the invention of the exteriority that makes possible the construction of the interiority. So by “internally” and “externally” we mean both the frame of Russia’s complicated relations with the capitalist empires of the West and the frame of its no-less-complicated and varied imperial discourses with respect to its own quite different colonies. Khazhismel Tkhagapsoev, an intellectual from the northern Caucasus, mapped the making of the imperial difference in the relationship between Russia and the West, starting from the “beginning,” that is, the adoption of Christianity, to Vladimir Putin’s presidency:

In general the Russian reality appears as an existence of “transmuted forms” on all crucial and turning points in its history. For example, in the ninth century, Russia adopted Christianity, but it got so transformed within the Russian social-cultural context that it became very much imbued with the spirit and forms of pagan culture and it acquired a “transmuted nature (form)” in relation to Western European Christianity, based on the systemic-rational philosophy of Aristotle and Aquinas. In the eighteenth century, Russia began to assimilate European economic, political, and cultural ideas and forms of modernity—the ideas and forms of capitalism, market economy, and technological culture. However for another two hundred years (up to the beginning of the twentieth century), Russia preserved the dominance of the political class of landowners (latifundium), while the capitalist (bourgeois) class was denied access to the political decision making. So capitalism also acquired in Russia a transmuted nature (form) as it was driven not so much by the rules of the market as by the subjective will of the main landowner of the country, the “tsar-autocrat.” In 1917 a new turn took place in the history of Russia—the Bolsheviks pushed it into the new historical trajectory, that of Socialism. But, as is well known, Stalin’s model of Socialism, which had never undergone any principal changes under other Communist party general secretaries from Khrushchev to Gorbachev, had little to do with the Swedish social political system. (Tkhagapsoev 2006: 519–20)

The exemplary case of Russia shows how the canonical concept of “universal history,” a Christian invention and a fundamental tool of modernity/coloniality later secularized by Kant and Hegel, could be reframed in terms
of borders and differences—imperial and colonial. Universal history in this sense is none other than the history of the world from the epistemic perspective of European modernity (Christian and secular), fashioning itself as such and building on the imperial difference with other rival empires and on the colonial difference with subjugated people.

Within the world of imperial difference(s), modernity discourses acquire secondary and mutant forms. This refers to secondary Eurocentrism practiced by people who have often no claim to it (like the Russians), to secondary Orientalism and racism that flourish particularly in relation to the non-European colonies of subaltern empires, such as the Caucasus and Central Asia, giving them a multiply colonized status and a specific subjectivity often marked with self-racialization and self-Orientalizing (Tlostanova 2008). Without these additional categories, we cannot rethink humanities, social movements, or subjectivities in these spaces. At the same time, the Central Asian and Caucasus people would be unable to decolonize themselves without a robust reconceptualization of their location in the world history of the past five hundred years and the history of their relatively recent colonization by Russians and Soviets. This unstable and blurred world of distorted reflections and Janus-faced subjectivities produces a specific kind of scholar and humanities marked by only virtual, imagined belonging to modernity, based primarily on intellectual colonization, which is the most serious impediment for any decolonization of thinking, of knowledge, and of being in the world of imperial difference.

Racism: A Criterion for Deciding Who Belongs to Humanity

The struggle for the economic control, the control of authority, of gender and sexuality, and finally of knowledge and subjectivity that the colonial matrix of power rests upon are interrelated and interdependent. Each of them impinges on the other. But, what glues them together? The answer is racism. By “racism,” we do not mean a classification of human beings according to the color of their skin but rather a classification according to a certain standard of “humanity.” Skin color was the secular device used since the eighteenth century when the religious racism based on blood purity was no longer sufficient to accommodate, in the classification, peoples around the world that were not Muslims or Jews. In the sixteenth century then, while Christians in Europe were building a discourse that disqualified, in religious terms, Moors and Jews, the same Christians were building in the Americas
a discourse that disqualified not only Indians and Blacks, but also mestizos and mulattos, that is, the mix between Spanish and Indians and Spanish and Black. Although this classification was necessary for Spanish and Creoles of Spanish descent in the Americas, Spaniards from Spain introduced a new distinction to cast Creoles of Spanish descent in America inferior to those Spanish born and raised in Spain. Thus, racism is an instrumental term in which the colonial difference is built and the colonial wound infringed: Racism is a device to deprive human beings of their dignity. The logic of coloniality is implied in the racialization of people, languages, knowledges, religions, political regimes, systems of law, and economies. Racialization of the sociohistorical spheres on a world scale means to degrade whatever does not correspond to the imperial ideals of modernity and to persecute and destroy whoever disagrees with the racial classification of the world. That hidden logic, justifying killing in the name of modernity, is precisely the constitutive logic of coloniality.

Racism, in the final analysis, rests on the control of knowledge/understanding and subjectivity. The modern imperial missions were as much about the control of economy and authority as about producing new subjects, modeled according to Christian, liberal, and Marxist concepts of society and the individual. Knowledge has been, together with language, the companion of empires and, in the case of Western empires founded in capitalist economy (from mercantilism to free trade, from monarchy to nation-states), knowledge has been under control of theology and egology. By “Egology,” we refer to the new principles of knowledge (“I think”) and subjectivity (“I am”), which were both twisted by René Descartes (1596–1650) in his well-known “I think, therefore I am.” One cannot exist without the other, although Knowledge was placed before and above Being. And both contributed to a new direction in European thought and subjectivity that was already in place, for instance, in Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra’s Don Quixote (1605, explicitly stated in the Preface). The Cartesian thinking subject and constitutive being was not supposed to be a black African or a brown Indian from the Americas, a brown Indian from Asia, or a brown Arab from North Africa and what is today the Middle East. The Cartesian subject was immaterial and disembodied, without color and odor—an empty signifier of a sort (controlled by the principles of the theo- and egopolitics of knowledge) that embraced all, every skin color and religious belief under the control of the experience of white European man and Christian religion. Immanuel Kant was clear, following Descartes’ route, that “these” people were not yet ready to reach the highs of the Beautiful and the Sublime and, even less, of Reason (Eze 1997: Part 4).
Nelson Maldonado-Torres conceptualized this ontological dimension of coloniality through the idea of misanthropic skepticism, that is, a doubt in the humanity of the other, who is marked by constant violence and death. Therefore, he questions the Cartesian logic of the “ego cogito” that hides its darker side—the ego conquiro—as a crucial element of European consciousness that led to global naturalization of the subhuman status of the colonized and racialized peoples. “If the ego cogito was built upon the foundation of the ego conquiro the “I think, therefore I am” presupposes two unacknowledged dimensions. Beneath the ‘I think’ we can read ‘others do not think,’ and behind the ‘I am’ it is possible to locate the philosophical justification for the idea that ‘others are not’ or do not have being . . . should not exist or are dispensable” (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 252).

Shifting the Ethics and Politics of Knowledge

The control of knowledge in the colonies implied, simultaneously, the denial of knowledges and subjectivities in Nahuatl, Aymara, or Quechua languages. In the sixteenth century, Arabic had been already cast out, and in the nineteenth century, Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali would follow the same path. The denial of knowledge and subjectivity created a spatial epistemic break that cannot be captured by Tomas Kuhn’s (1962) paradigm changes or Michel Foucault (1968) epistemic breaks. The panorama we face as scholars and intellectuals concerned and critical of the formation, transformations, and current persistence of the colonial matrix of power is not so much the “study of colonialism” or “postcolonial studies” around the world but the need to “decolonize knowledge.” And decolonization of knowledge can be hardly attained from within Western categories of thought—neither Spinoza nor Nietzsche will do. We need to move in different directions.

Today, the spatial epistemic break is turning into geo- and body political epistemic shifts: those managed by the body politics of the state (unveiled by Foucault) are turning miseries into celebration and claiming the geo- and corpopolitical epistemic rights of enunciation. Both “breaks” are chronological and remain within the regional history of Europe. The spatial break emerged in the decolonial attitude which can be traced back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Waman Puma de Ayala in the Viceroyalty of Peru) but became more visible in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Gandhi, Mariátegui, Césaire, Cabral, Fanon, Menchu, Anzaldúa). Mariátegui, Césaire, Fanon, or Anzaldúa become the equivalents of Descartes for the decolonial epistemology that is already well underway, although not visible
in the publications of university presses, which are more and more attentive to the market. The concept of coloniality is not only a concept that describes a reality but also a concept that affirms its own locus of enunciation; a concept that anchors the shift in the geo- and body politics of knowledge. This argument not only describes a phenomenon but also argues mainly from the new perspective that the phenomenon described allows us to create.

Decoloniality (as synonymous with decolonization of knowledge and being) cannot be a knowledge at the service of the monarch, the church, the state, or the corporations, but knowledge that comes from the perspective of and empowering of the “the colonial subalterns”—that is, those whose languages, religions, social organization, and economic production have been denied and suppressed by structures based on the theo- and the egopolitics of knowledge. The first took away the geographical and biographical locations of knowledge and the knower in the name of God; the second—in the name of Transcendental Reason. The epistemic imperial and colonial differences were the instruments through which theo- and egopolitics of knowledge were established. The decolonial shift relocates the geo- and body politics of knowledge and reveals that both the theology and egology implemented a philosophy of knowledge that denied its own geographical and biographical location while projecting, as universal, what was indeed anchored and located at the geographical and biographical location of imperial agencies. Decolonial projects and actions cannot be subsumed under paradigmatic or epistemic **breaks** within the universal time of Western modernity but should be considered as a geo- and body political epistemic shift fracturing a cosmology with no alternatives other than Christian, liberal, and Marxist.

The spatial epistemic shift generated by the repressive logic of coloniality engendered, as we suggest, decolonial projects and practices, including knowledge and subjectivity, and prompted the question of the ethics and politics of knowledge: Where do intellectuals stand in this enterprise? How do their subjectivities formed by ethnic belonging and discrimination based on race, gender, languages, regional histories, and so forth impinge on how they think, how they are seen, and how they want to imagine and create a future beyond discrimination? Imperial and colonial differences inflicted wounds and created borders—physical and mental lines that can be policed between one country and the other, between one neighbor and another, between an employer and an employee, between the population of ex-imperial countries (such as Russia) and the immigrants in imperial ones (such as the core countries of the European Union and the U.S.), between the police and the civil society. Borders are lines that divide people in the street and allow the police and the embassies of dominant countries to control entire populations.
in other parts of the world. And borders are also conceptual and mental lines that divide different types of knowledge. What we need is the epistemic geopolitical and body political potential emerging from the borders (in the ex- and neocolonies as well as in the ex- and neoempires) to displace the epistemic privilege of modern epistemology (theo- and egological; Eurocentrically oriented). The line of the colonial difference is common through time and space to all those who have been wounded by the coloniality of knowledge and being, one domain of the colonial matrix of power. Silenced through the history of modernity told from the perspective of modernity, those who have been wounded are taking the lead, not in the academicism of postcolonial studies but in the ethical and political arena of the epistemic decoloniality. Decoloniality (the undoing of the colonial matrix of power) implies two simultaneous moves: to unveil the hidden logic of modernity (i.e., coloniality) and to work toward another globalization, as the World Social Forum has it.