Learning to Unlearn

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IT IS TIME to return to our main line of argument: learning to unlearn in order to relearn, the decoloniality of knowledge and of being, and the decolonial option. How are these three concepts related and how do we relate to them?

First of all, the principle of learning to unlearn in order to relearn is, as explained in the Introduction, the starting point of Amawtay Wasi. Therefore, it is a proposition of Indigenous philosophical and decolonial thinking. As neither of us is an Indian in blood or in the way of life, philosophy, or education, what would the consequences be of taking this principle as the first step? We are not trying to appropriate and expropriate the proposition of learning to unlearn and by so doing contribute to reactionary forces that would be happier if such an institution (Amawtay Wasi) did not exist and the traditional imperial/colonial universities (e.g., state universities) or private and corporate ones were the only options. On the contrary, rather than appropriating the breakthrough, advanced by Amawtay Wasi, we submit to it, in the same way as other intellectuals prefer to submit to the Hegelian or Marxist options instead of submitting to Indian epistemology and wisdom. By so doing, we shift our own epistemic geography and contribute to shifting the geography of reasoning and the geopolitics of knowledge. As stated previously, by geopolitics of knowledge, we are spatializing epistemology and delinking from the idea that there is only one house of knowledge, that being
the one built on two classical and six modern Western European imperial languages.

Second, in which way does the argument advanced in this book contribute to learning to unlearn and to the decoloniality of knowledge and being? The first chapter introduced border thinking and border epistemology ingrained and embodied in colonial and imperial differences. It then framed the entire argument that was developed in two types of local histories responding to imperial local histories and Western locally based global designs. Central Asia and the Caucasus, on the one hand, and South America and the Caribbean, on the other, are not objects we studied, “applying” border epistemology, but are precisely the local histories from where border epistemologies emerge, very much like the local histories of Western Christendom transmuted into secular European philosophy and science. The difference is that border epistemologies around the world advance decolonizing projects while Western Christian and secular epistemologies advance national European formations and their imperial expansion. The concept of “humanity” was crucial in that endeavor, since it was a key concept to classify and rank the world according to races, gender, and sexuality. Chapters 3 and 4 describe, through the imperial and colonial differences, what needs to be unlearned and what the horizons are for relearning and, therefore, for decolonial education and agency. Chapters 5 to 7 focus on the concept of humanity within Western imperial histories and its complicity with the idea and practice of citizenship. Thus, our argument closes with a history of the Western modern and colonial university, on the one hand, and the breakthrough, the discontinuity introduced by Amawtay Wasi.

Border epistemologies, very much like Western hegemonic and territorial ones, emerge from political, epistemic, and ethical needs. Territorial epistemology directly and indirectly contributed to found and consolidate the modern/imperial world order, the diversity of local histories that had to deal with the encroachment of Western political, economic, epistemic, and subject (trans)formation, where the need to emancipate, liberate, and decolonize becomes a question of fighting for human dignity that Western imperial ambitions needed to negate to advance the project of one world united by one global design. Border epistemology should be distinguished from anti-Western and anticapitalist doing and thinking. Anti-Western options are forms of resistance, while border epistemologies, in and from different local histories confronting imperial Western designs, not only oppose but mainly think forward, imagining and building a pluriversal and nonimperial world order(s). Thus, learning to unlearn becomes the starting point of border epistemologies and border epistemologies are the origination for delink-
ing from what hegemonic education tells us (all of us) to learn and for what, instead of claiming for recognition and inclusion.

We have been working on the final version of this book during the financial and economic crisis that shook the world. We are not economists. But the crisis is not just an economic and financial problem to be solved by economists, bankers, and presidents of the G8 or the G20, or the G8 and the “emerging countries.” It is a civilizational crisis that affects all levels of life, and crisis is also a good time for initiating the rethinking and delinking from the neoliberal model that has demonstrated its complete failure. As the economy has become increasingly the guiding horizon of Western civilization, subjectivities were formed and transformed according to economic and financial values based on the belief that development (that is, increasing production) is the road to freedom because it offers more options to people, but these options are of the same kind and in the same sphere of belief and values: Happiness has been tied to consumption and accumulation. Development is supposed to put more money in the pockets of people, from the multimillion-dollar salary of the CEO to the working class and the middle class—the entire spectrum of society dancing in the happiness of an infinite growth.

Instead we have been arguing for decolonial options. While development argues for increasing economic options, decoloniality argues that development is the latest rhetoric of modernity and the new modulation of coloniality. The question then is not how to make development work for all, to defend globalization or save capitalism. The argument of the book focuses on particular cases in which the civilization model has been analyzed from the margin of developed countries before the crisis, to be sure but in retrospect, in instances that were already signs of a nonsustainable world order structured, over the past five hundred years, on the making and remaking of imperial and colonial differences. If the management and control of economy within the colonial matrix of power established hierarchies on the bases of material wealth manifested in buildings, banks, corporations, institutions, monuments, museums, universities, and above all, national reserves, the discourses naturalizing such a world order and forming subjectivities permeated all other spheres of the colonial matrix: management and control of knowledge, subjectivities (citizens and consumers), and gender/sexuality. The financial crisis that started in 2008, and in 2011 affected the core of the system (The European Union and the U.S.), is another indication that the West (meaning the core of the EU and the U.S.) can no longer control the colonial matrix of power. The international dispute of our time is, indeed, for liberation, be it at the level of the States (cf. the BRIC countries) who are disputing who controls the matrix; or be it at the level of the political soci-
ety (e.g., decolonial social movements and projects, like The Zapatistas and La Vía Campesina), which is aiming to delink from the colonial matrix of power.

What options are available to imagining a world beyond the colonial matrix of power? The world is linked today by a common conception of what the economy is and should be, let us call it “capitalism.” The struggle takes place at the interstate level and centers on the control of authority. Iran and Venezuela base their strength on oil and dispute the control of authority in the name of Islam and Socialism of the twenty-first century, respectively. Bolivia joins forces but with a different claim: indigenous concepts of life, and therefore of politics and economy to move toward nonindividualistic, non-self-serving model, not governed by success through competition and killing, which is ingrained in Western conceptions under the name of democracy. China and India, two countries that account for half the population of the world, have been moving toward political disobedience in relation to Washington, the European Union in the Doha Round, and joining other emerging countries (Brazil, Australia, Mexico, South Africa) in rejection of the G8 plan for emission control. However, beyond the interstate system and the transstate network of the corporations, the novelty in the past thirty or so years is the growing forces of the global political society (i.e., the social movements). While the civil society has remained dependent and obedient to the dictates of the states, the corporations, and the supporting international institutions (UN, IMF, World Bank), the political society began to delink, to disobey the uniform conception of life based on individual success, accumulation, gains, growth of the GNP (Gross National Product), securing consumers to buy commodities with the single function to increase gains for the makers of these commodities, who, to do so, need to exploit labor, destroy the natural balance of Pachamama/Gaia as a living organism, and invent, in a very creative manner, the financial structures based on subprime mortgages that generated the most dramatic expanded moment for the majority of about 30 percent of the global population who “benefit” from a philosophical conception of life based on overproduction and overconsumption. For the rest of the world population, about 70 percent, the changes are not significant: They have been living under the level of poverty, increasingly, since 1820, the symbolic date of the Industrial Revolution and the splendid takeoff of Western civilization and industrial production.

All of this is what needs to be unlearned in order to relearn and to imagine a world not driven by the survival of the fittest in a society created by a handful of people, who constructed a world for the fittest and defined fitness according to their own will to power. The fact is that the majority of the
population, who are not interested in the will to power, suffered the consequences of a world in which the will to power was naturalized. The time has come to build a world according to the needs and visions of those who are not driven by the will to power and the survival of the fittest.

The decolonial option proposes and promotes social organizations globally interconnected but not globally dominant or hegemonic, based on cooperation rather than competition, and on a horizon in which institutions are at the service of life rather than life at the service of institutions. Today, for example, the restructuring of the state and “saving” the capitalist economy are the two main concerns, at the expense of life in general, not only of human beings but of life of which human beings share in minimal proportion because life is much and very much larger than just human life.

It has been reported that, in industrialized countries, the crisis motivated people to go to church and find comfort in religion. Religious movements have been also instrumental in supporting people in stressful situations. However, religious options created by the need of the people do not necessarily match and correspond to the religious options promoted by the theologians (the Pope or theologians of liberation) in their will to help. If the papacy shares some features with liberal and democratic government and institutions concerned with “the end of poverty,” theologians of liberation share some features with NGOs: NGOs present themselves as saviors, but the vision of NGOs seldom coincides with the vision of the people and communities they want to help. NGOs are embedded in the rhetoric of modernity, while the communities they are helping are victims of the logic of coloniality.

Another option is Marxism. As we stated previously, in Russian and Soviet ex-colonies, Marxism has become a difficult and complex option—contrary to the West, where it still has some purchase. Because of lack of information and the continuing zombification by the rhetoric of modernity and its binary division into right and left, these people have not yet perceived the decolonial option as a viable alternative, as it is, for example, for the countries of South America, where colonial Marxism (i.e., Marxism transplanted into the history of countries in which Amerindians and peasants live at the margins of industrialization and the formation of an industrial working class) has been in crisis for at least three decades.

Learning to unlearn, delinking from the naturalized conception of life that has been increasingly dominant in the past five hundred years, is the starting point of decolonial agency and thinking. The decolonial option emerges from that horizon. But, contrary to existing options based on universal assumptions and the drive to collect adepts as members of the insti-
vention (Christianity in its various forms, liberalism in its many variants, Marxism in all its modulations, Islamism in its different manifestations), the decolonial option does not offer a readymade horizon, like the options just mentioned: The decolonial option starts from delinking, learning to unlearn that the objectivity and truth without parentheses in which universal options are grounded, have been exhausted. The decolonial option is not a new universal, a convenient project for the future but, on the contrary, a starting point where the future has to be made in the process of learning to unlearn. This is precisely what the Zapatistas meant in their dictum: a world in which many worlds will coexist.

We are not offering a blueprint of how to learn to unlearn, because learning to unlearn is the constant process of delinking rather than a revolutionary act. The modern concept of revolution is being displaced by the transmodern and decolonial process of delinking and rebuilding (to relearn). We are ourselves in the process of unlearning, conceptualizing new categories of analysis that would not be infected by the rhetoric of modernity, but it is a difficult task and an open field that we invite everyone to join. Our book was one of the first attempts at learning to unlearn.

Since our anchor has been Amawtay Wasi, we do not imply that learning to unlearn is a process limited to the academy and higher education. To start with, Amawtay Wasi, as we explained, is a different type of academy, an other university, which is not competing on the same level as the modern and corporate universities are competing with each other (to get more grants, to have more students, national and international, to promote development, etc). Rather it is moving in a different direction, shifting the history of the university toward the needs of people who do not partake of the idea that rewards and recognition should be based on money and political position. If the bourgeoisie was the ethno-class that emancipated itself from the monarchs (European monarchs) and the Christian European church, we are living at the time in which the global political society is no longer contained in one ethno-class governed predominantly by males, but in a world in which the human dignity of the damné is at stake. The main social actors in the present and pointed toward the future are the many decolonial projects designed and enacted by the global political society, whose members share more than gender or ethnicity—the commonality of the colonial wound that makes them/us less human or less able to take their/our destiny in their/our own hands.

Learning to unlearn is an activity and thinking processes taking place not merely in the sphere of higher learning but in all spheres of life. The Zapatistas have a lot to offer, in a different domain of the social, the same
way as Amawtay Wasi has in the sphere of higher education (Universidad de la Tierra). We made several passing references to the Zapatistas throughout the book. We would like to close by invoking the four domains in which the Zapatistas initiated, in their own movement, the process of learning to unlearn in order to relearn.

The first one, in random order, was initiated by the “urban intellectuals,” such as Rafael Guillen, a group of Mexican activists who went to the Lacandon Jungle in the mid-1980s. In that process, Rafael Guillen became subcomandante Marcos and understood (learning to unlearn) that the Marxist ideals of the urban intellectuals were of little significance to communities who have been in the struggle for five hundred years, much before, and in a different context from, the Industrial Revolution in Europe and the emergence of the ethno-class of proletarians. Learning to unlearn was followed by a long and creative process—for and by the urban intellectuals—of learning to relearn. The teachers or better yet the people of wisdom were Indians from the south of Mexico, of the Maya region and Mayan languages. In other words, the people who have been classified from the initial days of the conquest as humanly deficient and in need of “learning” what Christians had to teach them, became the teachers. ‘Governing by obeying at the same time” is simply a political treatise that is being unfolded in the very deeds of the Zapatistas.

From this political treatise, “Juntas de Buen Gobierno” or “Los Caracoles” emerged (González Casanova 2006). The name of this decolonial organization invokes the initial step taken by Guaman Poma de Ayala, in the Viceroyalty of Peru/Tawantinsuyu in his by now well-known historiographical and political treatise, Nueva Coronica y Buen Gobierno. “Los Caracoles” is just the enactment of the radical and decolonial political treatise in one sentence. Indians/Mexicans now have the option of managing their own life and destiny rather than casting votes for Mexican presidents who will ignore them and prevent them from taking their life into their own hands. That is they are learning to unlearn, delinking, in order to relearn, re-exist.

Correlative and complementary to the political principle and its enactment, is another well-known and powerful Zapatista’s statement: “Because we are all equal, we have the right to be different.” The dictum shifts the naturalized Western modern (Christian and secular) hegemonic idea that, since we are all equal and humans, we should forget the differences. Such principles go badly with the very practice of Christian and liberal deeds, where differences are always repressed, suppressed, disavowed in their support for a homogeneous world that guards the interest of the global bourgeois ethno-class.
Last but not least (and introduced in “La segunda campaña”) is the Zapatistas’ reversal of any missionary will of conversion into existing ideologies (Christianity, liberalism, Marxism, Islamism) and their emphasis on the open orientations of decolonial options. This principle was expressed as “Andar preguntando” rather than “andar predicando” (“walking while asking rather than walking and conversing”). It should be understood as bi- or pluridirectionally. In other words, it is not a privilege of the Zapatistas to ask questions while walking, focusing on what the Zapatistas are interested in and preventing other “walkers” (i.e., the actors of converging but different decolonial projects) to do the same. If the process of asking while walking was unidirectional, it would not be a contribution to learning to unlearn but, rather, an enactment of missionary principles, only giving a false impression of contesting them. Learning to unlearn in order to relearn is a difficult process due to the fact that Western modernity is inscribed in all of us (Westerners or non-Westerners). But it is already an ongoing process enacted by many of us, because while recognizing that modernity is in all of us, we also recognize that coloniality is constitutive of modernity. Western contributions to world history must be celebrated, but the self-appointed role of modern actors and institutions to demand that the rest of the world follow their example has been and will always be totally illegitimate. The emerging global political society is responding to this false demand in a variegated process of delinking, learning to unlearn, and engaging in relearning.