



Modernity Coloniality and Visibility: The Politics of Time

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Abstract

This paper presents the problem of the mediation between modernity and coloniality; and it explores the usefulness of the question of time to address this mediation. How can we think the simulation of modernity together with the oblivion of coloniality?

The text brings the critique of time to the centre of the modernity/ coloniality debate. It shows that chronology, chronological narratives are at the heart of the modern/ colonial systems of oppression; and that the movements of resistance against 'hegemonic globalization' are not only questioning the material structures of oppression, but also the universality of the modern idea of time. It is an invitation to think about the politics of time that are at play in modernity/ coloniality.

Here, the modernity/ coloniality tandem is seen as the institution of a politics of time that is geared towards the production of specific economic and political practices oriented to sever the oppressed from their past, their memory. The ensuing temporal discrimination makes invisible all that does not belong to modern temporality. Under this light, it is possible to see how the practices of resistance to the modernity/ coloniality project embody a different politics of time, one that rescues memory as a site of struggle, one that involves the possibility of inhabiting and rescuing the past. These practices of resistance are thus seen as fights against temporal discrimination: fights against invisibility.

By addressing the imposition of modern time we can better understand the widespread injustice and violence of modernity/ coloniality. Furthermore, the question of time can help us to bridge the gap between the simulacra of modernity and the oblivion of coloniality.

Keywords: Coloniality, Time, Resistance, Visibility

Introduction

*We are witnesses of the downfall of the future.
The demise of the idea of modernity*
Octavio Paz (1991)

We believe that it's the hour of the forgotten people
Subcomandante Marcos (2008)



Figure 1. Tlaxcala Codex, 1585

1.1 This paper responds to the need of bringing the critique of time to the centre of the modernity/ coloniality debate. It shows that chronology, chronological narratives are at the heart of the modern/ colonial systems of oppression; and that the movements of resistance against 'hegemonic globalization' are not only questioning the material structures of oppression, but also the universality of the modern idea of time. In other words, this paper is an invitation to think about the politics of time that are at play in the struggles against oppression.

1.2 Here, the modernity/ coloniality tandem is seen as the institution of a politics of time that is not only geared towards the control of historical narratives (Chakrabarty, Fanon, Mignolo), but also towards the production of specific economic and political practices oriented to sever the oppressed from their past, their memory. It is a politics that promotes modern temporality as a strategy of domination. It imposes the universal claim that the present is the only site of the real, while dismissing the past as archaic. The past is represented as a fixed entity with only documentary value. This analysis will show that the imposition of modern time is coeval to the widespread injustice and violence of modernity/ coloniality. The question of time is used to address the open question of the mediation between the illusion of modernity and the oblivion of coloniality. This text exemplifies how the practices of resistance to the modernity/ coloniality project embody a different politics of time, one that rescues memory as a site of struggle, one that involves the possibility of inhabiting and rescuing the past.

1.3 In an effort to break with the grammars of argumentation that reproduce the modern notion of time, the text moves in a fragmented way. It presents a series of quotations in order to illuminate rather than explain. This method aims to open images of thought instead of building up a single line of argumentation.

Oblivion, invisibility and the politics of time

2.1 'We are without face, without word, without voice'^[1]. A Zapatista said that this is the reason for wearing the balaclava. The Zapatista balaclava has turned oblivion into a sign of rebellion. Their fight can be seen as a fight for visibility. With these words we want to enquire how oblivion has been a constitutive part of

modernity's politics of time.

2.2 The forms of oppression that characterize modernity or more precisely, modernity/ coloniality cannot be sufficiently understood only through its material process without taking into account oblivion, invisibility. Modern systems of domination are not just about material exploitation; they are also about a politics of time that produces the other by rendering it invisible, relegating the other to oblivion. There is an intimate connection between oblivion and invisibility. The destruction of memory, as a result of the modern politics of time produces invisibility. In turn, invisibility is tantamount to de-politicization. In this context it is possible to say that the struggles for social justice are struggles for visibility. The oppressed can succeed in their fight against invisibility by bringing the claims for justice into the light of the public, and thus becoming political^[2].

2.3 The use of the term 'visibility' signals the close relation that there is between the material means of oppression and epistemic discrimination, violence. I propose to approach the modernity/ coloniality compound and its social production of oblivion^[3] through the question of time. Through the critique of modern time we see how modernity and hence coloniality means the imposition of a time that dismisses the past, turns the future into the teleology of progress and holds the present to be the only site of the real. Under the light of the critique of time, the modernity/coloniality compound shows its double face. On the one hand we have the hegemony over visibility in the spectacle of modernity, the phantasmagoria of modernity, and on the other, we have coloniality's strategies of invisibility, which impose oblivion and silence and erase the past as a site of experience. The condition of possibility of these strategies over the visible, the monopoly of the sense of the real, is grounded on the modern notion of time and constitutes under this perspective the politics of time of the modernity/ coloniality compound.

Modernity, coloniality and the question of their mediation

2.4 The growing literature around the modernity/ coloniality research agenda^[4] teaches us that we cannot speak of modernity without speaking of coloniality. We cannot see the ideas of progress, modernization, universality, and the like, without thinking of exploitation, violence, and segregation. The scholars of the modernity/ coloniality research program have made large efforts to re-write the history of modernity so that modernity is only seen in and through its relation with coloniality. 'The "discovery" of America and the genocide of Indians and African slaves are the very foundations of "modernity" more so than the French and Industrial Revolutions. Better yet, they constitute the darker and hidden face of modernity, 'coloniality' (Mignolo, 2005, p. xiii).

2.5 There is still a large effort that is needed to solve the theoretical problem that emerges from the hiatus that separates the narratives of modernity from those of the postcolonial perspective. In other words, there is a need to elucidate the mediation between the 'progress of modernity' and the 'violence of coloniality'.

2.6 Coloniality is not a derivative or an unintended side effect of modernity, it is coeval and thus constitutive of modernity. Coloniality is referred to as the dark-side, the under-side of modernity. We then can speak of the modernity/ coloniality tandem to address the current social problems. 'Imperial globality has its underside in what could be called ... global coloniality, meaning by this the heightened marginalisation and suppression of the knowledge and culture of subaltern groups' (Escobar, 2004, p. 207).

2.7 Let us stop for a moment and look at how the modernity/ coloniality tandem appears in two illustrations of Mexico City published in the 1930 edition of the National Geographic in an article called *North America's Oldest Metropolis*.

'A tattered old Indian came shuffling up to sell me a tiny terra-cota mask. ... "Who made it?" I asked. 'La Gente Olvidada' (The Forgotten People)" (Simpich, 1930, p. 81).

2.8 Further down the reporter presents us with another image:

'On billboards, in street cars, in news papers, and on theatre curtains the well-known illustrations for American made toothpaste, typewriters, motor cars, and toilet soaps give gaudy welcome to visiting Yankees, and bring that sense of security which comes from contact with familiar things in far places' (Simpich, 1930, p. 83).

2.9 For us the coupling of these images signals the same pressing question, namely that of the mediation between modernity and coloniality. How can we mediate between the 'forgotten people' and the 'billboards' full with 'American' brands? How can we make sense of the invisibility of the people and the visibility of the commodity? Is this not an essential question that arises in the midst of the modernity/ coloniality tandem?

2.10 Is it not that the phantasmagoria of modernity, unveiled by critical thinkers such as Walter Benjamin (1999), Guy Debord (1994), Jean Baudrillard (1983) among others, is part and parcel of the economy of oblivion that hides the 'colonial wound', that assures the continued silencing of oppression^[5]?

2.11 If from the perspective of the critique of time, modernity is seen as the age that is geared towards an unattainable future, we could venture to say that coloniality signals the movement of the rejection of the past as a site of experience.

2.12 A useful mediation between modernity and coloniality can be found in the notion of a modern politics of times that expresses itself in a threefold hegemony: a) the rejection of the past, b) the future-oriented mentality and c) the objectivity of the present. a) Coloniality comes to view as a set of practices and technologies of oblivion, of temporal discrimination that have contributed to making 'the other' invisible. b) Modernity is seen as a race towards an unattainable future, the race of the 'phantasmagoria of modernity'.

c) The objectivity of modernity affirms the history of western metaphysics, the ontology of presence, it affirms the present as the only site of the real.

The critique of time

2.13 The critique of modern time shows that modernity is the time that rejects the past, affirms the present as the site of the real, and construes the future in the semblance of a teleology. Core ideas of modernity, such as progress, history, universality, individuality they all correspond to this conception of time.

2.14 In modernity, the present is affirmed as the site of the real, it is the site of objectivity, it designates the space of power. Michel de Certeau (1988) shows how modern domination is exercised through appropriating and defining its 'proper place', thus the enterprises of discovery, of map making, the scriptural economy of science, the modern city can all be read as strategies to define and appropriate space. Modernity can hence be characterized as the age that designates space as reality, and space is the site of power. What is important for our analysis is to realize that in modernity space coincides with presence, it is the expression of the present. The present and presence come together in the modern notion of time to constitute the site of the real^[6].

2.15 Benjamin's thinking of the 'empty present' of modernity helps us bring further this reflection as it shows that the affirmation of the present as the site of the real cannot be separated from the cult of the new and the illusion of the commodity. Modernity, Benjamin says, is the time haunted by its phantasmagorias. The modern objectivity of the present is wedded with the simulation of the future. The modern hegemony over visibility is a hegemony over the illusions of an objective present and a utopian future.

2.16 On the other hand, coloniality comes to light, as the movement of oblivion, of the rejection of the past. It is the expression of a time that praises the present as the site of the real and the future as the horizon of expectation and the ultimate source of meaning. This notion of the future corresponds to the one-dimensional mind and its rational utopias. The violence of modernity and coloniality has constantly been justified in the name of these rational utopias. The chronology of historical necessity underlies the ideologies from right and left that flourished in the twentieth century and that systematically suppress the other, fostering the devaluation of political alternatives, and of alternative narratives. 'Historical determinism has been a costly and bloodstained fantasy'^[7](Paz, 1991, p. 28).

Practices of oblivion and temporal discrimination

2.17 It is precisely because the suffering belongs to the past that it is rejected as non-objective, non-valuable. The suffering of the oppressed is erased. Memory is historicized, the age of museums is the age of institutions that have reduced the past into a proper place, the past has been confined / objectified within the grips of history as institution, as a discipline. The past is confined to the *objectivity of the present*. History ceases to be a relation to the past, to acquire the semblance of a museum. 'From the beginning of the sixteenth century onward, the histories and languages of Indian communities "become historical" at the point where they lost their own history' (Mignolo, 2005, p. 26). The making of the past into an object of knowledge, 'the proper place' of history as a discipline, means negation of the past as an open realm of experience. This corresponds to the temporal hierarchy imposed by the modern notion of time and the hegemonic notion of history. '[F]or nineteenth-century intellectuals, statesmen, and politicians, "modernity" was cast in terms of civilization and progress' (Mignolo, 2005, p. 70). And '[t]he present was described as modern and civilized; the past as traditional and barbarian' (Mignolo, 2005). The terms barbarian and then primitive, traditional, backward become key words in the vocabulary of discrimination and the production of otherness. Societies were placed 'in an imaginary chronological line going from nature to culture, from barbarism to civilization following a progressive destination toward some point of arrival' (Mignolo, 2005). Modern Europe was established as the present, the past was the other (Mignolo, 2005). This type of temporal discrimination is clearly shown in the Zapatistas' claims. 'We are not your past, but your contemporaries' this is what a group of Zapatista women said to a group of European feminists that came to help them 'liberate'^[8] themselves. The analysis of Walter Mignolo shows how modernity/ coloniality came with the instauration of temporal discrimination. 'By the eighteenth century, when "time" came into the picture and the colonial difference was redefined, "barbarians" were translated into "primitives" and located in time rather than in space. "Primitives" were in the lower scale of a chronological order driving toward "civilization"' (Mignolo, 2005, pXX).

2.18 Next to the reduction of the past by the 'scriptural machine' (de Certeau 1988) of the historian and the social scientist, and the forms of temporal discrimination prevailing in modern narratives, there have been other practices, politics of time, oriented to sever the past from the realm of experience, strategies of erasure. Enormous resources and political capital have been invested in the destruction of the links with the past. In the Mexican Codex of Tlaxcala there is an image of Franciscan monks burning the cloths, the manuscripts, burning the gods (Figure 1). This pictorial example is just a token of the endless history of a politics of time oriented towards the destruction of memory.

2.19 In 1894 during the attack of the Dutch in Indonesia, 'When the colonial soldiers conquered the Lombok kingdom a lot of cultural artefacts were ransacked when soldiers need[ed] something to warm-up their bodies a shelf of "old" books from [the] king's library [were] burnt' (Subangun, 2008, p. 2) During the British colony in India the colonial rulers organized bonfires to burn the traditional cloths^[9]. In 1614 The Archbishop of Lima ordered the burning of the *queñas* and all other musical instrument from the indigenous people. ... In 1562 Fray Diego de Landa burnt all the Maya books, burning eight centuries of knowledge. In 1888 in Rio de Janeiro, the emperor Pedro II burnt the documents narrating three hundred Years of slavery in Brazil (Galeano, 2009, pp. 76-77)^[10].

2.20 "Colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. ... By a kind of *perverse logic*, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (Fanon in Mignolo, 2005, p. 84)^[11]. These practices distinguish coloniality by a politics of time, driven to erasure. The objects, the instruments, the written knowledge were systematically turned into ashes. This shows an economy of destruction that is not reducible to be a side effect or a necessity of economic exploitation. What distinguishes these acts of destruction of the past from pre-modern acts of cultural destruction is that these acts came together with the imposition of modern temporality.

Memory as resistance

2.21 However the memory of suffering cannot be burnt down, it cannot be totally erased by these practices. This highlights the value of the oral tradition as a strategy of resistance in many rebellious movements. The suffering of the past remains. '[N]othing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history' (Benjamin, 2003, p. 390).

2.22 The consciousness of the suffering of the previous generations is the source of strength for a politics of time of liberation. The liberation from the modern politics of time is a fight for 'a memory that looks for the future against western oblivion'^[12]. The rescue of memory is not a conservative move, the possibility to experience the past is not essentialist, but rebellious. 'I am sorry, I object the term "nostalgia". Nostalgia is the *waltdisneyization* of the past. It is very different from the memory that doesn't idealize nor disguise' (Pacheco, 2009)^[13]. The Mexican poet's warning shows that we should not turn memory into a utopia; if we turn memory into utopia it is not memory anymore. Memory is the past as a site of experience it is a rebellion against the future oriented reason of modernity, against the reason that idealizes and disguises. Memory stands up against the rational utopias that have brought oblivion and violence.

2.23 As Walter Benjamin says the strength of rebellion, the spirit of sacrifice is nourished 'by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren' (Benjamin, 2003, p. 394).

2.24 The coming into visibility of the movements of resistance speaks of their capacity to break with the continuity of the processes of oppression, a continuity where chronology is synonymous of oblivion. They break away from the modern 'empty time' that has been imposed upon them. 'The Mexican revolution of 1910, says Octavio Paz, was a popular upheaval that brought to light what was hidden. That is why it is not just a revolution but a revelation' (Paz, 1991, p. 54)^[14]. The event clashes with the linear history of modernity and brings to visibility what was up until then marginalized out of the light of the public. Orfeo 'goes to rescue, not to conquer: he has to receive, not to possess' (Mujica, 2004, p. 25)^[15].

2.25 The postcolonial critique of modern time, seeks to transform our relation to time. The critical thinker of time does not want to conquer time, but rather she seeks to rescue, to salvage our relation to time, to the past, to memory, to history; she must receive, not possess. The manner of appropriation of the historian is replaced by a more humble reception, by listening, by experiencing time. We can then realize that the linear history of modernity, its universal chronology is continually being called into question by a history based on difference, where the present is constantly interspersed by the past. 'The silences and absences of history are speaking their presence' (Mignolo, 2005, p. 157).

Conclusion

3.1 Let us note that the critique of time, by recognizing the violence of the simulation of modernity next to the violence of oblivion, is able to thematize the problem of those that are in the abyss, in-between the paradigms of the subaltern subject and the modern subject. By revealing the connection between modernity and coloniality, the critique of time brings to light all those who live in modernity's spaces of exclusion, no longer with an indigenous language, name or identity, those who live in the lost 'cities of modernity' and which remain largely unseen by the literature that presents modernity/coloniality as an unmediated dichotomy.

3.2 So far we know that modernity cannot be thought without coloniality, that the spread of the ideas of progress and universality cannot be sundered from the spread of marginality and violence. Let this text serve as an initial provocation to explore the hiatus that divides modernity and coloniality by raising the question of their mediation. How can we think a modernity of simulacra that holds hegemony over the visible next to a coloniality of violence, oblivion and invisibility? How can we think together simulation and oblivion? Our proposal is to explore this mediation through the question of time, by taking seriously the politics of time that are at play next to the economic and political systems of exploitation. We suggest, for instance, looking at the illusion of the future in the practices of commodity consumption, at the notion of the present as being the site of the real in the institutional practices of power over places and knowledges and at the oblivion of the past in the practices of destruction of memory. Simulation and oblivion can be thought together when we see the politics of time that is at play in modernity/ coloniality.

Notes

¹ Conversation with the members of 'La Junta de Buen Gobierno de Oventic' Chiapas in the Summer 2008. This and other conversations that are quoted throughout the text are part of an ongoing dialogue and exchange of ideas with participants in and around the Zapatista movement in Chiapas Mexico and in particular with members of La Universidad de la Tierra in San Cristobal de las Casas. The 2008 conversations were financed by the Knowledge Program of Hivos (The Netherlands).

² Here the notion of the political is not referring to the State, to institutional politics, it is the notion of politics as understood by Hannah Arendt (1990) as the coming together to constitute a public space see Vázquez (2006).

³ For a very interesting perspective on this issue see Boaventura de Sousa Santos's various writings on the Sociology of Absences and the Social production of absence, especially Santos (2006).

⁴ See for instance: Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar editors, 'Globalization and the De-Colonial Option', *Cultural Studies* 21:1/2 (March, 2007); Morana, Mabel; Dussel, Enrique; et. al. (eds) 2008, *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate (Latin America Otherwise)*, Duke: Duke University Press.

⁵ This question shows the importance of building up a serious dialogue between the internal critique of modernity and the external critique of modernity/coloniality, that is between, the schools of critical thought and the traditions of 'border thinking' that have been denouncing coloniality.

⁶ To read more on the 'spacialization of time' see Deleuze (1998).

⁷ Modified translation: El determinismo histórico ha sido una costosa y sangrienta fantasía (Paz, 1991, p 62).

⁸ Conversation with members of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, summer 2008.

⁹ Conversation with Smitu Kothari in March 2007, during a visit to the modernity/coloniality research seminar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁰ My own translation

¹¹ My own italics.

¹² Conversation with the members of Las Abejas, Acteal Chiapas, Summer 2008.

¹³ My own translation

¹⁴ My own translation.

¹⁵ My own translation: Orfeo va a rescatar, no a conquistar: debe recibir, no poseer.

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