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Author

López-Calvo, Ignacio

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“Coloniality is not over, it is all over:” Interview with Dr. Walter Mignolo (Nov. 2014. Part I)

IGNACIO LÓPEZ-CALVO
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, MERCED

Ignacio López-Calvo: Welcome to UC Merced and thank you for giving us your time for an interview. We are going to talk today about different topics related to your theories. You have mentioned that you are not entirely comfortable with the concept of “decolonial studies.” In your view, in the case of postcolonial theory, one can call it “postcolonial studies,” but you prefer to use other terms, such as “The decolonial project,” because it goes beyond the scholarly and academic: it is project within a realistic and practical component. Could you please elaborate on this? Also, the Decolonial turn is not a uniform or homogeneous thought. Could you please point out what you think are the most significant differences between your own approach and that of, for example, Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Ramón Grosfoguel, or other thinkers of this group?

Walter Mignolo: So, regarding the first question, think about the disciplines: sociology, economy, etc.; they don’t include the word “studies.” Therefore, when a field of investigation emerged after the Civil Rights movement, we have women’s studies, ethnic studies, and African American studies. Then, postcolonial studies and cultural studies, and that’s great. I think it is very important to keep in mind that this kind of movement and way of thinking emerged in academia, because they broke up the control of the disciplines. What is important about this emergence is that research was taken up by people fighting for their own liberation: women, African-Americans, gay and lesbian, etc., which made existing disciplines look conservative. Even when you find innovative research, innovation in traditional disciplines is always innovation to maintain the status quo by “developing” it and renewing it within the limited disciplinary universe. Post-colonial studies entered through that kind of configuration. But it doesn’t make sense to talk about decolonial studies, although you can find the expression used by people who obviously misunderstood what decoloniality is all about. Decolonial research is research, to advance advocacy for decolonization, which is a form of liberation among many others in process nowadays. “Studies” remains within the epistemology of modernity that is based on the distinction between the knower and the known, the subject and the object. This distinction was advanced by Max Horkheimer in 1937, but it is only half of the story. The other half of the story appears when the knowing subject is no longer a European modern subject, but a colonial one in the process of decolonizing knowledge and subjectivity. In that situation, you do research and base your argument on your research, but you do not “study” in the sense of Cultural Studies or Women Studies or Postcolonial studies. If you read Enrique Dussel, for example, you soon notice that he is a philosopher in *partibus infidelium*, as Ortega y Gasset liked to say; you don’t talk about philosophical studies, you talk about philosophy of liberation. Aníbal Quijano is a sociologist, you don’t talk about sociological studies; you talk about sociology also in *partibus infidelium* since Third World philosophical and sociological work are marginal in relation to the frame of First World philosophy and sociology. I remember that Renato Ortiz, who’s a Brazilian sociologist, said: “Because I am Brazilian, people think I am doing cultural studies.” That is, because you are not orthodox and don’t follow the rules, you are disobedient. This was precisely the issue prompted by Hamid Dabashi, in his polemical essays “Can non-Europeans Think?” in Al-Jazeera to which I responded, in the same journal, “Yes, we can.”

ILC: Ok, I see.

Mignolo: As for the second part of your question, “the most significant differences” I want to stress that “difference” here doesn’t mean antagonism but complementarity. People in the collective come from different disciplines and also from different countries, that is, with specific local histories. We all share some basic concept/ideas and premises: for example, that there is no modernity without coloniality, hence, we all write modernity/coloniality. It is assumed since Quijano’s groundbreaking article, decoloniality presupposes delinking (*desprenderse* is Quijano’s word) from the coloniality of power in all its spheres or dimensions, starting from decoloniality of knowledge and of being, since without this step, it is impossible to change the terms of the conversations. It is common today to hear and read decolonial arguments that operate only at the level of the content without touching the terms of the conversation. If you pay attention you would be able to identify a sort of decolonial Leninism telling you what to do to decolonize, calling their own location in the colonial matrix of power.

There is no one Chief or Executive Committee that determines and control what can be said in the name of modernity/coloniality/decoloniality. “Mandar obedeciendo” is a statement that unconsciously operates within us. If someone moves in a different direction, he or she is collectively ignored. There is no one Sacred Text endowed with One and Only interpretation. What makes the collective rich and powerful is precisely the different ways of dealing with issues emanating from the assumptions that there is no modernity without coloniality, that coloniality is not an issue of the Roman Empire, but it was formed since the sixteenth century, and hence coloniality is the darker side of Western modernity and it goes hand in hand with economic coloniality (which liberal and Marxists name “capitalism”). If you check the annotated bibliography, Oxford Bibliography on Line <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/obo/page/latin-american-studies>, you will understand what I mean.

Having made clear that differences are not antagonistic between myself and the people I work with within the collective, and that we all teach and collaborate with Catherine Walsh in the PhD she created and directs in Quito (although there is antagonism with people I do not work with), let me add that the decolonial project emerged after several of what today are “us”--in different places of the Americas and the Caribbean--were reading Quijano, but we were reading Quijano without knowing each other, until in, 1998, when Edgardo Lander organized two panels of the International Sociological Organization in Montreal.¹ And that was the beginning. Many of us began to work and talk and get together around the concept of coloniality. And then, we also introduced Enrique Dussel’s concept of “transmodernity.” There was an interesting difference there: Quijano was still talking at that point about socialism as an outcome delinking from the colonial matrix of power. But socialism was and is part of coloniality of power. Dussel displaced socialism toward transmodernity, and transmodernity had an analytic and prospective dimension.. We had some good discussions between Quijano and Dussel in the process of forming an intellectual and political community connected not only by ideas but also by affects. Ideas are necessary but not sufficient to form an intellectual and political community. Without the affective connection, there is no community, there cannot be. Between 1998 and 2005 or 2006, almost every year there was a meeting of the collective. Later on, new people came on board, such as María Lugones, Catherine Walsh, Zulma Palermo, Santiago Castro-Gómez, and Javier Sanjinés. And more recently, María Eugenia Borsani, Pablo Quintero, Adolfo Albán Achinte, and Rolando Vázquez. Other scholars, artists, and curators embraced coloniality/decoloniality, acting upon it through workshops and exhibitions. Alanna Lockward, a Dominican resident in Berlin, is a case in point. Be-Bop 2012, 2013, 2014 with its center in Berlin is a good example of what I am saying.² There is an emergence of new

people in Europe who are artists, curators, and activists from Berlin to Rumania and Russia and from Denmark to Holland. It is a quite a lot of work but the type of work I like, without much noise or grandiose pronouncements. Briefly, if you check OBO (Oxford Bibliography on Line), you will see in detail what I am here just outlining.

ILC: Now, let's return to post- and de-colonial. Do you think that one of the main differences between postcolonial studies and the decolonial project is that the latter has a component of activism that is not necessarily present in postcolonial studies, which are more scholarly, academic, taking place only within the academia?

Mignolo: Yes, I think so. In postcolonial studies or postcolonialism at large, and we can include subaltern studies, which was also born as an academic project. Ranajith Guha was in England, at Essex at the time, and then Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak in the United States. In the early 1990s, the concept of coloniality emerged not in the academia, but in the public sphere, in the field in which dependency theory, theology of liberation, and philosophy of liberation were coming, that is, social thought in Latin America. It took place within the university but also outside the university, other organizations are taking the concept. Also, sometimes, we are invited to workshops about social movements. For example, Catherine Walsh is doing a terrific job in Ecuador with Afro and Indigenous communities. Not that she is a vanguard intellectual who tells them what to do; no, they know who helps them in whatever they need and ask Cathy to contribute. There is a two way street—intellectual activists who are not in academia, but of course, they are thinkers for it is not necessary to be an academic to think; they need the collaboration of those of us who are in academia and have access to institutional circuits that you cannot access if you are not academic. And we need their collaboration, not of course to “study them” but to think with and from them as a philosopher, for example, think with and from Heidegger or Foucault. In our work, the colonial difference is always present and that is what distinguishes our thinking and doing from the disciplinary thinking and doing. This is another reason why the decolonial is not a “study” in the sense of cultural or postcolonial studies.

ILC: Since you've made the connection between the decolonial project, dependency theory and liberation theology, I would like to ask you a couple questions related to these movements. Since liberation theologians, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Clodovis Boff, are or were Catholic priests, and Catholicism, just like Islam, is, in my view, a universalist project, isn't there a potential contradiction there? I understand that the decolonial project tries to combat or avoid precisely that very universalism by which the European thought of five centuries was imposed on the rest of the world, homogenizing, along the way, the world's universities. Wouldn't that go against the idea of “pluriversality,” a world where several worlds can coexist? Isn't there a contradiction when we put together, for example, the decolonial project and Islam? Or a disconnection when we coalesce liberation theology and the decolonial turn?

Mignolo: Well, there is a complexity here. But first of all, let me address some of the assumptions in your question. The decolonial is not a universal project that pretends to put to rest in the past everything that is not decolonial, so we would emerge as the Savior Gods, who had the solution of the almost eight billion people in the planet. And so, a new planetary fascism will march like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Four of us turn to be the Four Horsemen). If you formulate the question with that very modern and universalistic presupposition, it is obvious that we have not made clear yet what we mean by pluriversality.

Number one, we have to distinguish theology from theology of liberation. Christian theology is, obviously, a universal project and so is Islam. But theology of liberation is not the same as Christian theology.

ILC: But it is part of it.

Mignolo: It is part of it. But we shall distinguish the institutions from the actors. Pope Francis (Jorge Bergoglio) is making a difference in an ossified institution where the Popes were European and therefore limited and blind to the colonial difference. Pope Francis feels the world from the Third World, and that makes a difference. Of course, there is no determinism, and it is not automatic that a Third World Pope will think and do and feel like Bergoglio. But what is undeniable is that Bergoglio is not feeling the world from Poland or from Italy. Neither does he “represent” the Third World, but his body responds to the lived experience of the trying years of the Cold War. Therefore, two distinctions shall be made here. Liberation theology is a Third World creation. While Christian theology, well, it was promoted by Constantine, but then it was institutionalized in the Papacy. That is why Gutiérrez has to renounce theology of liberation, because, I don’t remember which Pope said: either/or. You stay with the Church or...

ILC: John Paul II.

Mignolo: John Paul II, right. So in that sense, although I wouldn’t say it’s decolonial, the appearance of Third World liberation theology in Latin America was an important fracture with the Church. It had a lot of influence in Nicaragua...

ILC: With Ernesto Cardenal.

Mignolo: Right, and in El Salvador. Then, you see what Bishop Samuel Ruiz was doing in Chiapas with the Zapatistas. So I think Third World liberation theology is a very important ally of decolonial thought, decolonial doing, decolonial thinking, even though the genealogy of thoughts and sensing are not the same. For example, for decoloniality, racism and sexism are basic markers of domination, while in the case of Christian theology and theology of liberation in Latin America, it was not at its inception. However, Latin American theology of liberation is one manifestation. Native American theology of liberation, for example, does not itself with the Third World. George E. Tinker, for example, one of the prominent Native American theologians, made very clear the distinction between the theology of liberation in Latin America and in the Third World. Why? Because the question is that Latin American theologians of liberation were of European descent and oblivious of racism. The preferential option for the poor brought together Bartolomé de las Casas and Karl Marx, and in neither of them racism was an issue. For a Native American theologian, racism cannot be avoided. And the same could be said for Black theologians of liberation like James Cone. Then, we have Jewish theology of liberation, which theologians such as Marc H. Ellis. He had problems at the University of Texas, because Jewish theology of liberation is working with Palestinians. Thus, Jew theologians of liberation cannot be oblivious to racism, since Jews were, next to Moors, the initial racialized communities by Christian institutional theology in the Iberian Peninsula. Now, the question could be why is there no Indigenous and Afro-South American theology of liberation?

“Contradiction” is a very modern category in the sphere of modern epistemology; it is an Eurocentric category in that respect. I am not concerned with contradictions but with options, that is why the decolonial option is a fundamental concept in my thinking. Theologies of liberation are a diverse set of projects. They are not “studies.” It won’t make too much sense to talk about

“theology of liberation studies.” They are projects. Franz Hinkelammert knew it and so he called the Center he created in Costa Rica Departamento Ecu­mérico de Investigaciones. Notice that he could have named it Departamento de Investigaciones Ecu­méricas. But he did not and the word order makes all the difference. In a project, you do research for advocacy. In a discipline you study something to advance the discipline to bring some thing new, thus, the disciplinary modernity promoting “innovation,” assuming that innovation is in itself good and beneficial for every one.

ILC: The second part of my question deals with the connection with dependency theory. Dependency theoreticians, as well as Franz Fanon, in *Les Damnés de la Terre*, argued that the wealth of Europe would have not been possible without the exploitation of its Third World colonies. That is, you don’t have an imperial, wealthy Europe without the exploitation of the colonies. Yet formerly colonized countries, like the so-called Asian Tigers, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, which were also colonized, overcame the coloniality they suffered after becoming independent in order to become strong, capitalist societies that compete with the West economically and now in other terms. How can this be explained? On the other hand, how can we explain dependency theory while taking into account the dependency that you have within Third World countries themselves? Because there is a center and a periphery within Mexico and Peru, for example. One does not have the same opportunities in life living in Mexico City or Lima than living in Chiapas, Oaxaca, Puno or Cuzco.

Mignolo: Well, there are a lot of things there. And we should start by distinguishing the “domestic” dimension (inside a give State) and the “inter-State” relations (wrongly called international relations; nations inter-relate in a different dimension than the States—migrations for example). But let me begin with a more provocative answer. I think that Latin American dependency theory was misunderstood. It was probably misunderstood or ambiguously understood, because of the conditions and what was going on in Latin America in the 1960s. The ambiguity was that dependency theory was interpreted as a Leftist proposal. That was the moment when dependency theory is saying, after Raúl Prebisch, of course, that Third World countries could not develop under existing global economic conditions, because as you said, political and economic dependency between core economies and political institutions and ex-colonies (as in the case of Latin America). That was the moment when Singapore was taking off. Singapore was doing what dependency theorists were saying that it was difficult to do. I think Latin American States had also ambiguous relations, and false expectations perhaps, with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. The ambiguity I am referring to was the hope that IMF and the WB (together with the Inter American Bank) would help States in Latin America to modernize and develop. But on the other hand, and for many people—including myself—dependency theory was a Leftist breakthrough. Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s advice to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, in Brazil, was very important. So Lula began to do the same thing as the Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who was a good adviser to Deng Xiaoping. Then Deng Xiaoping decided to change directions.

ILC: To capitalism.

Mignolo: To dispute the control of the economy by Western institutions. So, to economic coloniality. What liberals and Marxists call capitalism is a particular kind of economy that consists in exploitation of labor, appropriation and exploitation of land, together with a system of beliefs and ideas that organize economic production and exchange to the benefit of the group that controls both knowledge and economy. From the sixteenth to the end of the twentieth century, economic coloniality took the form of economic mercantilism, slave trade, extractivism in the New World

(gold and silver) and plantation economy in the Caribbean, both insular and continental. During two centuries, the historical foundation of what came to be described as capitalism was based in the Atlantic circuits. At that time, political economy did not exist as such yet, but there was a practical theory, that is, the formation of a system of ideas emerging from the new economic conditions that the Atlantic offered (that is, no longer the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean). The industrial revolution came together with the consolidation of the system of ideas and beliefs that were emerging in the previous centuries. Liberalism was the system of ideas and beliefs that went hand in hand with industrial economy. Shortly after, Saint-Simon introduced the term socialism. Liberalism and socialism, two secular ideologies, took over the justification and legitimization of industrial economy. Now, mercantile and industrial economies had in common the goal to accumulate at the expenses of human life and conditions. Mercantile and industrial economy are two faces of economic coloniality, a particular type of economy that emerged in the Atlantic in the sixteenth century. Economic coloniality was the economic dimension of coloniality of power or the colonial matrix of power. The colonial matrix of power was historically founded, transformed and managed by a few imperial States of the European Atlantic: the Iberian Peninsula, Holland, France, and England.

When Lee Kwan Lew and then Deng Xiaoping decided to appropriate the logic of accumulation, they did not become liberals. And, in the case of China, they changed the direction that socialism took in the Soviet Union. The point is that by appropriating economic coloniality but rejecting liberalism and neo-liberalism, they began the process of disputing the control of the colonial matrix of power that was the managerial privilege of the five imperial States just mentioned, plus the United States. If then capitalism (in the sense liberals and Marxists talk about it), was the economy of Westernization (Latouche), it became now with Singapore and China an instrument to secure dewesternization.

Lee Kwan Yew advised Deng Xiaoping (apparently Deng Xiaoping traveled to Singapore to consult with Lee Kwan Yew) and as a result, China took off. I think that that was what dependency theory was proposing at the end, but it was not clear: that you have to appropriate capitalism in order to get independence from capitalism. That is what the Asian Tigers did, and what Lee Kuan Yew did, and this was dewesternization. That's why I say that Brazil and Bolivia are dewesternizing countries, because they are appropriating capitalism, while developing an indigenous middle class.

Of course, the second point is that there is the tension not just between Lima or Mexico City and their peripheries, but at this moment, between the bourgeois, indigenous middle class and the indigenous people who are fighting against them. The same is taking place in Brazil, where forty million people have been lifted out of poverty; that's fine. But then you have the growing gap between the elite and the poor. So that is when I started thinking about dewesternization and this is what dewesternization means. I think that's what Singapore did first, then China, and finally the other Asian Tigers, which are appropriating capitalism, while keeping control of it. Latin American modernization and development failed, because they were waiting to solve problem with the IMF and the World Bank. It was Lula who redirected the economy, and now we have Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and other countries following that path.

PS: At the time I (Mignolo) am editing the oral version of the interview, April 2015, Lee Kwan Yew passed away. Western media eulogized him for having transformed a small island of fishermen into a global financial center. That is, the eulogy is how Western Lee Kwan Yew was. No one touches the other half of the story—Lee Kwan Yew and Deng Xiaoping, both engineering of Dewesternization. The view in the East is different, they are closer to Western blindspots, <http://www.indiatvnews.com/news/world/lee-kuan-yew-helped-in-financial-development-of-indian-community-23663.html>

ILC: And Dilma Rousseff has continued that dewesternization path in Brazil, right?

Mignolo: Right, and I don't see other possibilities now. And she is paying the consequences after being re-elected for the second term. A State cannot do better at this point than dewesternization. See what happened with Cuba, where it's going, to join the dewesternization. Iran is now being praised in the United States by right-wing economists for going neoliberal. Iran has no choice but to embrace economic coloniality (that is capitalism), but that is not embracing neo-liberalism. To imagine a neo-liberal Iran is to see only half of the story. Like imagining that after dethroning Saddam Hussein, Iraq will be neo-liberal the following week. Iran is not going neoliberal; they are appropriating capitalism in the same way as Singapore, China, the Tigers did before them. That doesn't mean that they are becoming ideologically neoliberal.

There is a pending question from before. Islam, institutional Islam, claims universality like universal Christianity, but they also have a theology of liberation. As it is often been said, neither Islam nor Christianity are homogeneous, but there is a point in which no one mistakes Islam with Christianity. In that diversity, there is room for liberation theologies in Christianity and Iran. That is where you start building alliances for projects. There are feminists, for example, who are taking over interpretation of Qur'an, meeting in the mosque, etc. You don't have to stop being Muslim, or Christian or liberal or Marxist; what you need to stop doing is pretending that Islam is good for everybody or Christianity is good for everybody or Marxism is good for everybody. Now, neo-liberalism entered a different logic in which there is no return and in this sense, it cannot be compared with liberals, Christians or Muslims. A neo-liberal subjectivity has no room for something like "neo-liberalism of liberation." Pluriversity comes into the picture when your fight for truth in parenthesis, for conviviality rather than competence, for regeneration of life rather than production of objects, for working to live rather than living to work, to find happiness in communal love rather than in possessions of objects, credit cards or aspiring to the CEO of one of the top five banks in the world.

ILC: Please correct me if I misinterpret your writing and interviews. Sometimes I feel that you, in your last answer, for example, tend to celebrate dewesternization. My question is the following: do you see the possibility of negative consequences coming out of this, besides this economic liberation? I'm thinking of dewesternizing countries such as Russia today, for example, where homophobia is rampant and homosexuality is virtually illegal. One of the things that Western culture has tried to impose, perhaps in their wrong way, is this sort of liberation through feminism, gay and lesbian rights, etc. In this regard, do you see potential negative consequences of dewesternization?

Mignolo: Oh, sure! Dewesternization is not a happy paradise; I am not celebrating it but just saying that...

ILC: It's happening.

Mignolo: That it's happening, like it or not. So, think about that. You can critique de-westernization but you cannot deny that is going on. Showing that it is as bad that Westernization and Re-westernization won't make it vanish. I do not believe, like Marxist do, that we are living in a neo-liberal world, which is, a world led by Westernization and Dewesternization. Neoliberalism was the last chapter of Westernization (e.g., Serge Latouche, *L'occidentalization du monde*, 1989). If you think that way, you will miss many to understand the changing world order and the multiple "crisis" we are all witnessing. Dewesternization, on the one hand, is capitalist, so their capitalism has the same

negative aspects as Western capitalism: the deterioration of the environment, the exploitation of labor...

ILC: Social injustice.

Mignolo: Social injustice. But what I'm saying, and this is why people think I'm celebrating dewesternization, is that I cannot admit a critique of China without a critique of the US and Europe. You can say also that any critique of UF international relations shall then go hand in hand with a critique of China and the BRICS. Yes, but always underlining the power differential. Re- and dewesternization are not on equal footing, but entangled on a power differential. US can put sanctions on Russia or Iran. Russia and Iran cannot put sanctions on the US. To see the world as just neoliberal and understand it in terms of neoliberalist Singapore or Chinese way is missing the point. Economic coloniality formed itself in the European/colonial Atlantic in the sixteenth century, coincided with the expulsions of the moors from Europe and the confrontation with the Ottoman Sultanate (causing Cervantes to loose his hand in Lepanto). China was not a problem at that time for Western Christians, because on the one hand China was not trying to encroach over Europe and there was no confrontation between Confucianism and Christianity, as there was between Christianity and Islam. China didn't care about Europe, which was the land of the barbarians for them. So what you have to understand is that dewesternization is still under certain control of the West and re-westernization is precisely what the US is doing in international politics not to loose that control. De-westernization is the word that points toward State politics, in international affairs, from governments that are no longer ready to receive orders. This, of course, is a particular type of conflict precisely because global economy is one, capitalism (diverse of course, as are diverse Christianity and Islam), but global politics is not. Dewesternization is the name of State politics delinking from Western domination. So, there is a liberation of the State, but not necessarily liberation of the nation. Liberation of the State does not mean liberation of the people, the nation. That is crucial. What we see now is that in the struggle for dewesternization, people don't count. But this is not different from the project of re-westernization. In US the middle class is loosing privileges by the minute, the unemployment continues, and the lower strata of society find their situation worsening

ILC: Not between the people themselves?

Mignolo: Indeed, I am referring to inter-State relations. International-relation is a misnomer for nations, that is, people who can travel have constant "inter-national" relations and in general, not conflictive relations. But the relations that govern the world are "inter-state" relations; thus the imperative to uncouple nation from State. Today it is obvious, particularly in the South American Andes, that one State is formed by several nations, and that there is one nation that is identified with the State. But coming back to dewesternization, I am not celebrating it. There is, however, a widely held assumption that if you do not like something that is there and your interlocutor only recognizes it but does not critique its negative aspects, your interlocutor is celebrating what he or she is not rejecting. I don't celebrate dewesternization, but on the one hand it exists and, on the other, without dewesternization, we would be in a down-hill trajectory that Anthony Giddens celebrated after the collapse of the Soviet Union: from now on, said Giddens, it is modernity all the way down. In a certain sense, he was right, but he was thinking that modernity all the way down was Westernization all the way down. In which case we would be in the trajectory to a global fascism. Dewesternization continues the trajectory of the dream of modernity, but not in the way I imagine Giddens was

hoping: it is modernity out of hands, that is, dewesternization is disputing the management of the Western idea of modernity.

Notes

¹ Lander edited some of the presentations in those panels and you will find in the book the ones (Coronial, Escobar, Lander, Mignolo and Quijano) who then became participants in the project modernity/coloniality Cfr, *La colonialidad del saber. Eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales en América Latina*, CLACSO, 2000, <http://bibliotecavirtual.clacso.org.ar/ar/libros/lander/lander.html>.

² <https://spiritualrevolutionsandthescrambleforafrica.wordpress.com/>