

UC Merced

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World

Title

Enrique Dussel's Transmodernism

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/58k9k17t>

Journal

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 1(3)

ISSN

2154-1353

Author

Martín Alcoff, Linda

Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.5070/T413012882

Copyright Information

Copyright 2012 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Enrique Dussel's Transmodernism

LINDA MARTÍN ALCOFF
HUNTER COLLEGE & GRADUATE CENTER, CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

According to some of his critics, the work of Enrique Dussel fails to escape the illusions of modernism, despite his vigorous and revisionary critiques of it. For Horacio Cerutti Guldberg, Ofelia Schutte, and Santiago Castro-Gómez, Dussel's invocation of a we-subject among the poor, indeed, his very reference to macro-identities such as "the poor, women, blacks, and Indians," returns us to a modernist meta-narrative. And the problem with this meta-narrative is that it works to reify and fetishize the evident symptoms of disciplinary structures of representation, playing into the hands of such constituting structures, that is, rather than deconstructing them. As Castro-Gómez has put it, "With this, Dussel creates a second reduction: that of converting the poor in some kind of transcendent subject, through which Latin American history will find its meaning. This is the opposite side of postmodernity, because Dussel attempts not to de-centralize the Enlightened subject, but to replace it by another absolute subject" (*Crítica* 39-40; quoted in Dussel, "Philosophy" 338).

I want to suggest in this essay that what stymies the engagement with Dussel's work are these sorts of meta-philosophical issues. There are three in particular: (1) the question of the sorts of identity categories Dussel uses, which invoke group identities through impossibly large amalgamated terms familiar in modernist representations, without any nods to the fragmentation, intersectionality, or constructed character of group identities widely accepted today; (2) the question of the epistemological grounds for Dussel's claim to be able to think from the underside of history, to take the point of view of one of these amalgamated constructed categories as a privileged site for theory and philosophy, and (3) the very meta-narratives themselves that Dussel has advanced, contesting the Eurocentric and dominant (or metropolitan) post-colonial meta-narratives that offer explanations of the development of capitalism and its relationship to colonialism through offering, again, not a deconstruction, but a vigorous counter-narrative of a two-stage modernity process in which the New World plays a formative role, a narrative just as impossibly grandiose as any Hegel ever imagined. These three questions—the metaphysical question of identity, the epistemological question of standpoint, and the historiographical question of metanarrative—give rise to the critics' inability to position Dussel outside of the meta-positions of modernity, with its absolutism, universalism, and essentialism.

Although I believe Dussel's work can be defended in all three domains, in this essay I will only be able to address one: the question of meta-narratives and, in particular, the meta-narrative of transmodernity. As the critics I mentioned above should suggest, the debate here is not exclusive to

the European and North American discursive arena, but just as much in the Latin American domain, though with an important difference. In Latin America, to generalize, the critique of meta-narrative and totalizing theory has resulted from fatigue with a direct and prolonged experience with revolutionary absolutisms, such as the defense of excessive economic centralism in the name of “the Cuban people,” or of endless decades of brutal rural warfare justified with the claim of being an “Army of the People” (the FARC). Even invoking the macronarrative of U.S. imperialism incites skepticism today from a left base throughout Latin America that has begun to view such discourse as diversionary and exculpatory for a given party or leader’s impotence or self-justification. For example, numerous political candidates in my home country of Panama, who regularly espouse anti-U.S. rhetoric, continue to displace housing for the poor with luxury condos, and have taken the former U.S. military bases for privatized profit. The resultant political disenchantment with the era of national liberation discourses, widespread through the region, correlates to a philosophical disenchantment with the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that underlay those discourses, and in particular, with the reinvocation of identity categories, the idea of inevitable progress, the reference to large narratives, and absolutist truth claims. However embedded as these 60s era discourses were, as Dussel often reminds us, in liberatory on-the-ground praxis in Latin America rather than the academic, detached theory in the more privileged geo-centers of philosophy, they remain tributes of modernity by imagining progressivist teleologies, uncomplicated identity categories, and coherent national interests. And for the self-appointed vanguard party theorists of European communism, i.e. Žižek, Badiou, and their followers, (i.e., the party theorists without a party), Dussel’s defense of minoritized identities and cultural difference (see e.g., Dussel, *Twenty Theses* 87; Dussel, *Philosophy* 188-189; *Underside*, 21; “Philosophy of Liberation,” 341) hearkens back to a pre-Lacanian naïve noblesse oblige, or an un-self-conscious claim to re-present.

Dussel himself has of course answered these charges, and moved on (and I won’t have the space here to fully lay out his answers). There is something to be said for limiting the amount of time one spends answering one’s critics, especially one’s European and Eurocentric critics, and for spending time instead developing the liberatory philosophy’s new tasks. But I want to stay for a moment in this debate over what the meta-terms should be for a politically motivated or politically engaged philosophy, in order to consider the grounds for Dussel’s claim to have escaped the philosophical terms of modernity.

Dussel’s Transmodernity

In the concept of the transmodern, Dussel offers a counter to the metanarrative of modernity. If anything, the concept of the transmodern offers a meta-narrative that claims an even larger reach than the modern, with a more truly global and thus universal reference in place of the exclusivity of modernity to European-based and Eurocentric societies. The problem with metanarratives, as we know, is their totalizing character, and subsequent dismissal of any and all particulars that resist subsumption into the grand scheme. There is also a danger with metanarratives’ progressivist teleology, as Benjamin famously noted: nothing corrupted the German

working class more than its belief that it was on the side of history (Benjamin 258). To forestall such dangers, Jean-François Lyotard suggested the concept of paralogy: a refusal of totalizing metanarrative and embrace of contradictory language games, while Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze suggested we remain in the mode of localization: a strategic analysis and practice that stays in a local domain without seeking hegemony or a universally applied normative theory (Lyotard 60-61; Deleuze and Foucault 212). Dussel's *grand recit* seems to return us to an outdated philosophical tendency, which has been discredited both epistemologically and politically.

In his response to these sorts of charges, Dussel makes immanent critiques, clarifies the revisionary character of his formulations, and also raises practical realities. Dussel argues, against Richard Rorty, that localist, contextualist, neopragmatist and post-structuralist refusals of larger normative and historiographical claims are an inadequate defeatism and, as such, become “an accomplice to domination” (*Underside* 105). Dussel argues that, although Foucault rejects *a priori* historiographies, in reality he just replaces these with “genetic-epistemological history[ies],” such as the history of the changes in *episteme* and bio-politics, and thus does not himself follow his own *diktat* to stay at the level of the local (Dussel, “Philosophy” 339). He argues against Castro-Gómez that the repudiation of macro-narratives by post-structuralism is the result of being “seduced by the fetishism of formulaic thought” (Dussel, “Philosophy” 339), thus suggesting, I take it, that we cannot preempt political problems from occurring on the ground by ensuring that we theorize with the correct “form” or position on metaphysics.

Against “reason,” Dussel poses critical reason, against universality he puts forward concrete universality or *mundialidad*, and against modernity he poses transmodernity. As an explanation of his own meta-language he has said: “the philosophy of liberation seeks to analyze and define the philosophical metalanguage of all these [progressive] movements”(Dussel, “Philosophy” 347). This invokes the idea of philosophers as analytical transcribers or rear-guard theorists, not inventors or originators so much as those who give philosophical articulation to the ideas embedded in the praxis and lived experience of the activist oppressed. It is in this context that he claims that “metacategories such as totality and exteriority continue to be valid...” (347), meaning that they continue to be implied in the on-the-ground rhetorical praxis of today’s activists, those fighting corporate globalism, for example, or neo-liberalism.

So what is transmodernity? Dussel’s idea of the transmodern is very much related to his notion of the modern, over which there is an important disagreement between his account and standard notions, as I’ll discuss. For Dussel, the philosophy of the modern period is not characterized by a reflexive attitude toward one’s own conventional beliefs and practices, à la the standard normative (and Eurocentric) account, but by the development of a constituting, differentiated, masterful ego, the *I conquer* ego of Descartes’s individualist epistemic foundationalism (later revised but essentially retained in Kant and Hegel). This idea, nurtured by the experience of conquering the new world and the creation of a new global imaginary, gave rise to a philosophical articulation and an altered consciousness or transformed experience of subjectivity. Thus for Dussel, modernity is essentially bound up with an egotistical assumption of the right of mastery and domination, the vision of Adam conferred by God with the right of dominion over the animals of

the Garden of Eden and the right, in this virgin land given just to him, to decide upon the name of each one.

For Dussel, epistemic reflexivity in European modernity is less about putting one's own beliefs on firm grounds, as the story of Descartes is endlessly taught, than about deflating all possible reasons to listen to the other, or to accept the authority of others, or to consider alternative approaches different than those I myself have produced: the knowing I is imagined to be both universal arbiter and neutral or perspectiveless observer and as such need not give an account of its own prejudgments or accord presumptive authority to others. Such an epistemic solipsism is affected through subsuming "the Other under the Same" (Dussel, *Invention* 45), or refusing to entertain the possibility that there is a plurality of reasonable founding premises and conceptual categories. When my particular standards of judgment (or prejudgments, in Hans-Georg Gadamer's sense) become the universal, I can judge the Other under a cloak of neutral anonymity with no need for hermeneutic humility.

The historiographical meta-narrative of modernity is isomorphic with Descartes's own story of his quest for certainty through epistemic solipsism: modernity sees itself as the original uncaused cause or self-moved mover, whereby Europe provides its own foundation and the impetus to transcend the authoritarian barbarism of feudalism, to invent science, to renew philosophy, and to retrieve democracy from its buried European past. None of these developments have anything to do with anybody other than Europeans.

This modernity, then, cannot be superseded by postmodernity without remaining in the grip of the mythic history of modernity. In other words, post-modernism cannot critique only the meta-philosophical positions of modernism and take its stance as a philosophical advance or improvement over modernism without addressing the root causes of modernism's problems. Modernity must be transcended by a retelling of its history, which will reincorporate the other who it has abolished to the periphery and downgraded epistemologically and politically. The idea of transmodernity is meant to signify the global networks within which European modernity became possible, the larger frame of reference than the Eurocentric account includes. Transmodernity displaces the linear and geographically enclosed timeline of Europe's myth of autogenesis with a planetary spatialization that includes principal players from all parts of the globe.

The idea of the transmodern is thus designed in part to retell the story of Europe itself with an incorporation of the role of its Other in its formation, surely a more accurate and more comprehensively coherent account (Dussel, *Invention* 33). But it is also to retell the story of world history without a centered formation either in Europe or anywhere; no one becomes the permanent center or persistent periphery, which would result if European modernity were taken to be the uncaused cause. In this way, Dussel presents the idea of the transmodern as one that has both inclusivity and solidarity: it is more inclusive of multiple modernities without signifying these under the sign of the same, and it offers solidarity in place of hierarchy, a solidarity even extended to European modernity. He states,

Modernity will come into its fullness not by passing from its potency to its act, but by

surpassing itself through a corealization with its once negated alterity and through a process of mutual creative fecundation. The transmodern project achieves with modernity what it could not achieve by itself—a corealization of solidarity, which is analectic, analogic, syncretic, hybrid and mestizo, and which bonds center to periphery, woman to man, race to race, ethnic group to ethnic group, class to class, humanity to earth, and occidental to Third World cultures. This bonding occurs not via negation, but via a subsumption from the viewpoint of alterity... (Dussel, *Invention* 138)

Dussel invokes here a dialectic or plurilectic process in which European modernity is not left behind, but given a seat at the table as a part of the larger puzzle, one that has to re-understand itself to be sure as a particular which is part of the larger formation. Thus Dussel's transmodernity is inclusive more than it is denunciatory. It holds out its hand to Europe to rescale its self-understanding and come along in solidarity through egalitarian dialogue. It views the postmodern turn as a step in the direction of an immanent critique that might become part of a larger and more egalitarian dialogue.

Yet, despite this inclusive gesture, it remains clear that the sublation represented by the concept of transmodernity requires a negation of the Eurocentric modern. If the modern understands itself, as it so often does, as the unique moment of self-conscious reflexivity, with epistemic rigor and a capacity to escape conventions of doxa from pre-rational eras, it is not clear how to achieve a meaningful solidarity. Can this idea of the modern merely be revised without needing to start again from scratch? Dussel's "creative fecundation," which aims to incorporate and sublimate European modernity into a new transmodern paradigm, looks to some as wishful thinking. For this sort of reason, I suspect some of Dussel's critics cannot follow him to a new metanarrative but would prefer the piecemeal, local interventions that aim for a smaller scale.

This difficulty gets at the key problem for the revisionary shift at the meta-level that Dussel wants to make: how do we move to a decentralized, pluriversal (rather than universal) approach that avoids relativism? How do we avoid losing the ability for critique, and especially for macro-level critiques that will be adequate to the macro-level epistemic structures of the coloniality of power? How do we construct a pluriversal epistemology in a politically meaningful way? Any overarching normative criterion for inclusion in the pluriversal is contradictory to the idea of pluriversality. Jürgen Habermas's attempts to produce overarching norms come under the understandable criticism that these work again to be exclusionary of those who cannot or don't want to be discursively engaged, who cannot or refuse to accept the terms of engagement, and this would include some indigenous groups, for example, who want disengagement and autonomy more than anything else.

Yet without an overarching criterion of inclusion or evaluation, Dussel is right that pluriversality has no clear relation to liberation. Dussel's worries with Foucault are based precisely in this concern: he suggests that if we stay only at the level of the local, we cannot develop a macro-account of hegemonic power. He asks: how can Foucault's local critiques work without challenging the meta-narratives, and macro-practices, that subordinate local knowledges? "One must recognize

... that power is mutually and relationally constituted between social subjects, but that, in any case, the power of the state or the power of the hegemonic nation (such as the United States) continues to exist” (Dussel, “Philosophy” 339). Local praxis does not make it possible to theorize the relations between local issues as relations between parts to a whole, and to understand local problems and challenges as often connected to larger, non-local processes. Dussel rightfully argues that we need a new paradigm, not simply a scattered guerrilla war.

The concept of the transmodern is meant, in part, to allow for a broad, even global relationality among elements, so none are irreducibly local. When we make cultures or knowledge systems *irreducibly* local, we truly risk ahistorical reifications. We risk losing sight of how our representations of local practices or knowledges may be constituted through imperial sign systems, or, in other words, mistaking the local as a solipsistic spontaneous emergence, rather than implicated---at least in its representations and how it is understood---within a larger colonial semiosis. Thus we must avoid *fetishizing* the local.

The potential relativism of pluriversality is avoided, then, not by imposing a uniform, universal standard or method or set of norms, but by developing provisional meta-narratives of global history that can illuminate local conditions and relations. What provides the normative criterion within pluriversality is just this meta-narrative of an interconnected history. This is not a transcendental criterion of rationality, a la Habermas, but a more dynamic and decentered notion of the developments of reason in relationality. Dussel’s macro-frame of the metanarrative, and in particular his metanarrative of the transmodern, operates to keep the colonial context ever-present in the analytical process, while decentralizing the idea of the modern and removing its vanguard global status. There is a coherent historical narrative that Dussel gives here to be sure—modernity phase one and modernity phase two—but there is no uniquely privileged site where the emergence of rationality occurs, or the development of a reflexive critical consciousness that begins to assess one’s conventions of belief and practice. Reflective consciousness is an equal opportunity phenomenon, as is blind dogmatism and willful ignorance.

Meta-narratives of history have explanatory value; they are offered as explanations for progression, development, or relations. The concept of the transmodern is a concept with much greater explanatory value than the myth of Eurocentric modernity, and, because of its pluri- and trans-versal character, it avoids the exclusionary, hierarchical effects of totalizing systems. Although it provides a check on the potential relativism that can occur when we reject centralized models, the concept of the transmodern is meant to provide an overarching criterion of evaluation for the philosophy of liberation, despite the fact that it is Dussel’s main alternative meta-narrative to the meta-narratives of Eurocentrism. It is motivated by its descriptive project, to produce a better ideational representation of history and social formations in the colonial era.

In more recent work, Dussel has suggested that it is out of this historical re-description that we can map the productive sites for the most critical, irruptive work. The transmodern meta-narrative suggests a recipe for moving forward not through universalist procedures justified via a transcendental arguments outside of cultural or historical specificity, but via an analysis of how and where cultural dialogues can occur most productively given the way in which the current global

discursive regimes have been affected by colonialism. Radical critiques respond, he argues, from another place or location, positioned as the exterior to those designated universal cultures of European Modernity. These other places have been characterized as dead, or epistemically barren, yet they are alive with a distinct difference barely legible to the center. It is from here that new paths for future development and dialogue will emerge toward “pluriversality as a universal project.” (Mignolo 243).

Dussel clarifies this proposal as a positive alternative to the rational reconstructive projects of European modernity, but without sacrificing or conceding the terrain of the rational. Critical thought is sparked by intercultural dialogue through an immanent process that ignites local participants to rethink the terms of local cultures, not through recourse to mandated universals but as a response to the stimulation of a dialogue that is what Dussel calls *transversal*, meaning that it does not presuppose a formal symmetry between cultures, nor does it operate only between elites. It thus occurs outside of the domain of legitimated epistemic interaction by the standards of European rationalist modernity, and it does this in several ways. First, the *location* of participants is key in assessing the legitimacy and efficacy of their critique, rather than ideas separated from context. Second, we must begin to recognize, and incorporate within utopian revisions, the simple fact that non-elites contribute to the production, development, and dissemination of critical thought, and that, in many cases, the best radical ideas of authoritative discourses are expressions of the intellectual ferment sowed from “below,” in the subjugated spaces of the culture. And third, that the ongoing effect of colonial legacies on cultural interactions must cause us to recognize that the necessity of defending cultural autonomy must still be recognized as a powerful force even when we acknowledge the unstoppable flows of ideas and influence. In Dussel’s account, critical rationality occurs within localized spaces but is instigated at times by larger intercultural dialogues. This is truly a new map, a map of a transmodern world. If we recall the three meta-theoretical hurdles for Dussel’s work that I enumerated at the beginning of this essay, we can see how his notion of the transmodern addresses each one: through the re-articulation of certain identities as privileged epistemic locations, and through a re-grounding of knowledge via the transmodern cosmology.

The postmodernist critics of Dussel as well as of Walter Mignolo are making the mistake of incorporating their ideas “under the domain of the Same,” as if their revisions of meta-language replicate the formal characteristics of Eurocentric, decontextualized, de-culturated universalisms (see e.g. Michaelson and Cutler Shershow). But here are the differences: Dussel places his foundation in a politically conscious perspectivalism, rejecting neutrality or objectivity; he and Mignolo geographically and historically locate their ideas, thus forestalling claims of absoluteness or infallibility and inviting future transformation; gnoseology and transmodernity are both approaches that exemplify pluriversality—that is, a decentered epistemology that emphasizes dialogue as the route to adjudicate difference rather than an individual procedure of judgment. To be sure, both offer meta-languages and in some senses, intellectual and political maps with aspirations to cover a wide territory, geographically and historically. But postmodernists do the same— Jean-François Lyotard’s paralogies, proposed in place of paradigms, and Gilles Deleuze’s thousand plateaus are

similarly broad in scope and ambitious in coverage, even setting out normative criterion for determining what kind of moves can be supported (inventiveness, productiveness, difference). (So one could argue that Dussel and Mignolo are postmodern in this sense if Lyotard and Deleuze are, and yet there is a difference. Lyotard and Deleuze are not as upfront about the normative aims of their meta-ambitions.) But the main point here is that Dussel is right to charge his critics with formalism: as if all meta-narrative forms are the same. They are not.

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
- Castro-Gómez, Santiago. *Crítica de la razón latinoamericana*. Barcelona: Puvill Libros, 1996.
- _____. "(Post)Coloniality for Dummies: Latin American Perspectives on Modernity, Coloniality, and the Geo-Politics of Knowledge." *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*. Edited by Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008. 259-85.
- Cerutti-Guldberg, Horacio. "Actual Situation and Perspectives of Latin American Philosophy of Liberation." Trans. Ofelia Schutte. *Philosophical Forum* 20. 1-2 (Fall-Winter 1988-1989): 43-61.
- Dussel, Enrique. *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of "the Other" and the Myth of Modernity*. Trans. Michael D. Barber. New York: Continuum, 1995.
- _____. *Philosophy of Liberation*. Trans. Aquilina Martinez, and Christine Morkovsky. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985.
- _____. "Philosophy of Liberation, the Postmodern Debate, and Latin American Studies." Trans. by Rosalia Bermúdez. *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*. Eds. Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008. 335-49.
- _____. *Twenty Theses on Politics*. Trans. George Ciccariello-Maher. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008.
- _____. *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*. Trans. and ed. Eduardo Mendieta. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996.
- _____. "World-system and Trans-modernity." *Nepantla: Views from South* 3 2 (2002): 221-44.
- Foucault, Michel and Gilles Deleuze. "Intellectuals and Power." *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. By Michel Foucault. Ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977. 205-17.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. Vol. 1 Reason and the Rationalization of Society. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Michaelson, Scott and Scott Cutler Shershow. "Rethinking Border Thinking." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.1 (Winter 2007): 39-60.
- Mignolo, Walter. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Schutte, Ofelia. *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.