

## ***The Savage Decolonialist***

### *Notes on Critical Exoticism*<sup>1</sup>

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This brief intervention will address a point of convergence between vitalism<sup>2</sup> and decolonial thought, particularly as elaborated by the cultural theorist Walter Mignolo<sup>3</sup>. Originating in South America in the 1990s, decolonial studies has steadily moved away from the approaches to postcoloniality championed by authors such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha<sup>4</sup>, in order to reinterpret key anti-colonial texts by Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon<sup>5</sup> while building on a revised notion of modernity and coloniality that questions dominant Eurocentric principles of knowledge. Inspired by concepts articulated by Aníbal Quijano (“coloniality of power”) and Enrique Dussel (“transmodernity”<sup>6</sup>), Mignolo introduced two interrelated concepts – “border thinking” and “colonial difference” – in an effort to reshape the “geopolitics of knowledge” that Dussel had already introduced in his *Philosophy of Liberation* (1983).

In my commentary, I will approach Mignolo’s conception of “border thinking” by reflecting on a single, crucial colonial border at the center of the practice of “border thinking”: the separation between *humanitas* and *anthropos*. “Since *humanitas* is defined through the epistemic privilege of hegemonic knowledge,” Mignolo writes, “*anthropos* was stated as the difference – more specifically the epistemic colonial difference” that made it “as much the barbarian or the primitive as the communist, the terrorist” (Mignolo, 2003: 85). A careful consideration of this fundamental border, this line of separation dividing the specifically human/subjective/spiritual from the generally anthropological/bodily/naturalistic, will help us to see the convergences between the decolonial project and the discursive practices devised by radical vitalism.

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<sup>2</sup> For my understanding of vitalism, see Luisetti, 2008 and 2011.

<sup>3</sup> By Walter Mignolo see Mignolo, 1991, 2000, 2003, 2010, 2011. On decolonial studies see also Castro-Gómez, Grosfóguel (eds.), 2007 and Mignolo, Escobar (eds.), 2009.

<sup>4</sup> See Said 1978; Spivak 1987 and Bhabha 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Césaire, 1955; Fanon, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> See Quijano, 2008 and Dussel, 1995.

In the space that remains, I will focus on two aspects of the cleavage between *humanitas* and *anthropos* to show how decolonial thinking and subversive vitalism challenge the colonial distribution of differences, inventing conflictual modes of resistances and introducing alternative mappings of the human through different geographies of nature, cosmo-visions and epistemic apparatuses.

The first element of the epistemic and ontological border separating *humanitas* from *anthropos* is the Western concept of subjectivity. For this narrative, it is enough to follow Marcel Mauss' reconstruction of the genesis of the person, which traces the emergence of the Kantian and idealistic notion of the self out of a Christian anthropology based on the sacredness, freedom and structural emptiness of a ghostly subject position, wrapped in its transcendental cocoon by an immaterial and universalistic consciousness (Mauss, 1985). If the apparatus of *humanitas* manages to dominate any occurrence of the *anthropos*, or if the purity of a superior practical reason achieves absolute domination over the contingency of nature, this happens because the machinery of Western colonialism has produced what Mignolo (following Santiago Castro-Gómez's concept of "zero point epistemology": Castro-Gómez, 2005) defines as the "zero point of observation" of post-Cartesian rationality (Mignolo, 2003: 91). This ghostly Western subject, this formalistic black hole, is for Mignolo the "zero point of observation (the invisible knower, God, or the transcendental secular subject)" (2003: 89) that grounds the hierarchical distinction between *humanitas*, *anthropos* and "the imperial domain secured by global thinking" (2003: 91).

In other words, decolonial thought alters the configuration of *humanitas* and the *anthropos* by articulating a "discourse of the *anthropos*", a "body politics of the *anthropos*" which forces *humanitas* to think through its exteriority, to localize and contextualize itself in its historical and geopolitical determination. Western universalism is therefore "provincialized" (Chakrabarty, 2001) by a geo-historical and bio-graphical approach in which the disembodied macro-narratives of Euro-American modernity are unmasked as partisan tales, as local episodes of a diverse and conflictual pluriversal cosmos.

From Diderot to Nietzsche, from Rousseau to Leopardi, from Bergson to Lévi-Strauss radical Western vitalisms have followed a convergent path, dismantling the Christian skeleton of the Cartesian, Kantian and then transcendental subjectivisms and liberal reason with the tools of an unruly vitalistic mode of thought<sup>7</sup>.

Lévi-Strauss provides an important instance of this convergence in the most radical formulations of his anthropological method. In *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Founder of the Sciences of Man* (1962), Lévi-Strauss openly embraces the anti-philosophical and non-humanistic foundations of ethnological practices. Tracing Rousseau's thought in *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Lévi-Strauss imagines social anthropology as a therapy of de-westernization and de-subjectivation, rather than another positivistic and universalizing science, or another conception of human nature. According to Lévi-Strauss, Rousseau had discovered life before the opposition of nature and culture, before animality and humanity, and therefore had succeeded in dismantling the entire Western philosophical tradition insofar as it is based on the disarticulation of *humanitas* and the *anthropos*. In

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<sup>7</sup> For a critique of Western transcendental reason see Esposito, 2010.

doing so, Lévi-Strauss argued, Rousseau had also proclaimed the “end of the *cogito*” and announced the dissolution of the “compensative transcendence” of humanism.

Following Rousseau in this project of de-westernization, Lévi-Strauss characterized social anthropology as a practice of refusing “everything that makes the ‘self’ tolerable” and Western societies acceptable. Instead, assimilating a Bergsonian vocabulary of anti-Kantian vitalism, he maintained that life is a conjectural force of exteriority that destroys the myth of human nature and the security of Western social life, pushing thought “beyond humanity” and beyond the social. In this model, anthropology is therefore a method of primordial identification with nature and animality, a savage discourse of the *anthropos* enunciated against the *hybris* of *humanitas*.

Any reader of *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* is immediately struck by these resonances with Bergson’s anti-transcendentalist, vitalist and post-humanistic naturalism, which is so incommensurably divergent from the Eurocentric, theological mainstream of Western Kantianisms, phenomenologies and Heideggerianisms.

The second element border-gear driving the machine of *humanitas* is primitivism. As the savage, natural side of *humanitas*, the *anthropos* is assimilated, educated and reformed by the invisible, superior ruler of Man. Western modernity is a *Bildungsroman* of humanity, the *grand récit* of the taming of savagery, the imaginative construction and political overcoming of the state of nature.

We are well aware of the regressive and colonial connotations attached to the countless descriptions of the barbarians and primitives of Europe, Africa, and the New World. And yet, we must learn to look beyond this semantic debasement, and learn how to deconstruct and politicize *humanitas* from the only subversive standpoint available to Western conceptual vocabulary: the primitivism of the *anthropos*. Mignolo embraces this strategy instead of surrendering to, or being assimilated into *humanitas*: “the task of the *anthropos* is [...] to engage in barbarian theorizing in order to decolonize *humanitas* [...] my purpose here is to articulate a discourse, the discourse of the *anthropos* in the process of appropriating *humanitas* in order to become something else than *humanitas*” (Mignolo, 2003: 90-91). As a “barbarian theorizing,” a “discourse of the *anthropos*,” this decolonial primitivism has the task of neutralizing the hegemony of *humanitas* and thinking beyond the binary cages of nature/culture, primitive/civilized, or archaic/modern. This wide-ranging discursive strategy, which I call “critical exoticism,” provokes further enquiry and invites us to ask how it can contribute, from a vitalist perspective, to the decolonial project.

Critical exoticism, as practiced for example by Vico and Diderot, Rousseau and Nietzsche, Leopardi and Lévi-Strauss, Clastres and Deleuze, is a technique of estrangement and defamiliarization from Western hegemonic meta-narratives, including colonial epistemic borders and hierarchies. The wide-ranging practices of critical exoticism are at once a self-conscious attempt to think within one’s context, a refusal to universalize any system of beliefs, and a commitment to conceptual, imaginative, and political perspectives of what is subaltern, exterior or virtual. Critical exoticism is “critical” because of its self-imposed localization within Western local history and semantics, while at the same time this criticism is “exotic” because of its defamiliarizing politics of the Outside.

Here I would like to briefly illustrate the functioning of critical exoticism by recalling another instance of this tactic which, together with primitivism, has shaped radical thought from the Baroque period to today's *indigenismo*. I mean modern Orientalism, whose critical and exoticist varieties reach back before nineteenth century colonialism and the political and cultural hegemony of the British colonial empire.

In *The Birth of Orientalism* (2010), Urs App provides an alternative genealogy of Orientalism, deploying a comparative perspective on religion to highlight its anti-Christian, anti-theological and anti-Eurocentric matrix, which had been championed alternately by Enlightenment philosophers and Romantic philologists. Arguing against Said's selective framing of Orientalism within the *pouvoir-savoir* of nineteenth century British imperialism and its confrontation with the Muslim world, App shows how the cultural trauma of Europe's colonization of the Americas and expansion eastward is magnified in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the massive penetration of texts and ideas from Japan, China and India. These texts were mobilized by radical intellectuals such as Pierre Bayle and Voltaire as powerful sources for the displacement of European Christian civilization. In this reconfiguration of the Orientalist genealogy, New World primitivism and Asian Orientalism joined forces to challenge the universalistic latitude and socio-political supremacy of European civilization. As App explains, "The birth of modern Orientalism was not a Caesarean section performed by colonialist doctors at the beginning of the nineteenth century when Europe's imperialist powers began to dominate large swaths of Asia. Rather, it was the result of a long process that around the turn of the eighteenth century produced a paradigm change" (App, 2010: XIII).

App sees the emergent paradigm as a product of the exhaustion of European theological-political universalism. Describing this event as what we might call "the bright side" of the Enlightenment, App sees this shift as an antidote to the hegemony of Western modernity and its epistemic *dispositif*: "Judaism and Christianity themselves began to be increasingly viewed as local phenomena on a dramatically expanded, worldwide canvas of religions and mythologies. At the end of the Eighteenth century, Volney portrayed Christianity as a relatively insignificant and young local religion based on local varieties of solar myth" (App, 2010: XIV).

In my read from within a Western context, I would argue that the vital energy of primitivism and Orientalism can still be mobilized in order to detach and disentangle ourselves from our current forms of life by allying with decolonial and indigenous practices in order to envision life beyond the anthropological borders of capitalistic modernity. Perhaps at the end of this process, critical exoticism will also be required to confront its anthropological foundation, and exoticize politically the non-humanity of nature: "Rousseau thought he could confront Hobbes 'on how the state of war springs from the social.' In so doing he proposed the Noble Savage in place of the Englishman's ignoble savage, one anthropology to replace another, only this time an optimistic one. But the mistake here was not the pessimism, it was the anthropology, and the desire to found a social order on it" (Tiqun, 2010: 89).

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