



## Twelve Theses on Decolonizing History

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### ABSTRACT

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In a novel historical context, as in the case of a revolution, the weight of history tends to be light on the generations that are there at the onset; they may be called “the inaugural generations”. On the other hand, it tends to be heavy on the generations that follow; let us call them “the after generations”. These two types of generations correspond to two different conceptions of the past, respectively: the past as a mission or a task, and the past as a treasure or a trophy. For the inaugural generations, the past is open and unfinished; for the after generations, it is closed and accomplished. The relative prevalence of these two types of generations determines the relative weight of history. History is as much about the past as it is about the present. The present is nothing more than the past in the process of presenting itself to us. Modern Eurocentric view of the world led to a global separation between two bodies of people: those who do not want to remember and those who cannot afford to forget. The latter are the people whose past and present was violently interrupted by Western domination. In consonance with the epistemologies of the South, this paper is written from the perspective of the people who cannot afford to forget.

**Keywords:** decolonizing history, decoloniality, inaugural generation, Eurocentric, global south,

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*The inner meaning of history [...] involves speculation and an attempt to get at the truth, subtle explanation of the causes and origins of existing things, and deep knowledge of the how and why of events. History, therefore, is firmly rooted in philosophy.*

(Ibn Khaldun, 1958, vol. 1, p. 5)

*Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.*

(Fanon, 1968, p. 206)

## I

The basic assumption of decolonizing history is that there is no single entity called history, as no single narrative can account for the past. There is no single past either, but rather an entangled past with interconnected histories (Subrahmanyam, 1999, pp. 289-316).<sup>2</sup>

What we call the past is, in fact, an optical illusion, since it is always in the present that we write about the past, and the writing “we” may be us or them. The past is the current settling of accounts between conflicting social forces struggling for power, for access to scarce material and spiritual resources, for conceptions and conditions of self-determination. Any conflict may have many facets but, at any given point in space-time, it translates itself into unequal power relations, and thus into dominant and dominated opponents, into oppressors and oppressed. The winning side is by definition the oppressor, but oppression may take many different forms and will evolve over time. Moreover, not all facets of the oppressor are equally oppressive and some of its facets may be appropriated by the oppressed to resist and overstep oppression. A good illustration of the latter in contemporary times is human rights. They are a Janus-faced entity. While the hegemonic conceptions of human rights have often been deployed as imperial impositions, human rights have also been used in a counter-hegemonic way to resist oppression (Santos, 2015).

The contradictions between the dominant and the dominated or between the oppressor and the oppressed are much more complex than one can imagine since any lasting system of domination ends up being a co-creation (Mamdani, 2020). In different contexts, some social groups may occupy contradictory locations

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<sup>2</sup>According to Subrahmanyam, there is a fundamental distinction between universal history, as it was practiced before the sixteenth century, and the new world history from the sixteenth century on: “Where universal histories are symmetrical and well ordered, world histories are accumulative in character, often disordered, and certainly not symmetrical in nature. Its authors are always tempted to add on yet another chapter, and still another one, substituting conjunctions for arguments, and rarely articulating a clear notion of what the skeletal structure of their text is (Subrahmanyam 2005: 36).

in the domination system (oppressors in some contexts are oppressed in other contexts). Some groups may be the key protagonists of the domination system while others are only marginal participants or mere accomplices. Some may even fall outside the dichotomy oppressor/oppressed. There is much room for hybrid or mestizo locations and histories (Glissant, 2020). There is, however, one limit in engaging with complexity in this domain: the idea that, given the complex entanglements between oppressors and oppressed, there is no way of distinguishing among them, and that, as a result, we live in a world of interdependence in which the ideas of domination, oppression, and unequal power vanish. De-identifying from oppression implies des-identifying both from the oppressor and from the oppressed. The idea that social oppression is a totality should always be borne in mind. It helps to identify, in each context, specific nuances and invites redefinitions of most of the analytical binary or counter-positions. Such counter-positions should be viewed as methodological devices to account for the messiness of social life, not to negate it. I intend to discuss twelve theses on decolonizing history in line with this argument. I have tried to foreground epigraphs to substantiate my discussion of theses.

## II

*Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.*

(African proverb)

**1. *Decolonizing history is an intellectual intervention that confronts the different modes of modern domination as they have shaped the hegemonic writing of modern history.***

The most widespread modes of modern domination are capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. The last two did exist before modern capitalism, but they were deeply reconfigured by capitalism to guarantee the sustainability of the exploitation of human labor and nature.

The exploitation of free labor does not sustain itself without highly devalued labor and non-paid labor provided by racialized (colonialism) and sexualized populations (hetero-patriarchy). In different parts of the world, the three modes of domination have historically been articulated with other satellite modes of domination, such as age, political religion, casteism, and ableism. Decolonizing history is thus a metonymy (*pars pro toto*) – it aims to challenge the ways in which the many different modes of modern domination have shaped the writing of history.

This is the dimension of the decolonizing task in which bringing into the picture a longer historical duration is most required. Since times immemorial,

human beings have been mobilizing their bodies in production both collectively and individually, both in voluntary or cooperative relations and hierarchical or violent relations. Capitalist production, however, required a qualitative change in such mobilization. It gave rise to new conceptions of the body/mind-soul complex converting the two sides of human existence into two separate entities with the purpose of more thoroughly exploiting both in apparently incommensurable ways, and in different clusters of complementarity in different regions of the globe. Complementarity meant relative weight: some populations were essentially more body than soul while others were essentially more spirit than soul. Hence, supposedly radical distinctions were generated or mobilized to diversify and intensify the access to human beings as resources for accumulation and exploitation. Among such differences, some of the most important were racial and sexual differences, distinctions between free salaried labor/slave labor, paid labor/non-paid labor or care, labor time/free or leisure time, and production/reproduction. All these differences were meant to allow for different modes and degrees of exploitation while creating the illusion that only certain areas of human activity were sacrificed to the god of exploitation while others were safely protected as sites of the noblest activities, values, and dimensions of human existence. After all, only the mind/spirit/soul elevated the humans above the other living creatures and granted them a shred of divine-like immortality. Body-related exploitation and mind-related exploitation would not recognize each other on the mirror of global capitalism. As incommensurable as the business model of mining and the business model of religious services.

Combining Cedric Robinson's historical research on racial capitalism (1983) with Silvia Federici's on patriarchal capitalism (2004), it emerges emphatically that capitalist domination cannot be thought of independently from colonialism (of which racism is a major component), and from patriarchy. Their work and much of the work that has been produced along the same lines in the last decades can be viewed either as a critique of Marxism (very evident in the case of Robinson) or as a more sophisticated and rigorous interpretation of Marx's work. Be it as it may, they have provided the theoretical grounding for the knowledges born in struggle (the epistemologies of the South) since social struggles almost invariably show that the three main components of modern domination are present albeit in different ways (dominant/recessive, foreground/background, most important/ most urgent, dominant in the public discourse/dominant in the private discourse) and composing diverse constellations of resistance.

I have shown elsewhere the limited horizon of sensorial possibilities imposed or induced by Western-centric epistemologies and proposed a vaster and deeper experience of the senses in consonance with the needs of militant research carried out in tune with the epistemologies of the South (Santos, 2018, pp.165-185). Western-centric domination gave rise to a dominant sensory model, to use Classen's concept, a specific way of defining and ordering sensory meanings and values according to which the members of a given society 'make sense' of the world

(1997, p. 402). This concept allows us to contextualize the modern sensory model based on verbocentrism and ocularcentrism. With similar purposes, Walter J. Ong (1967) recuperated the old concept of *sensorium*, an expanded conception of the senses prioritized by a given culture as a privileged way of decoding broader meanings and values underlying collective sociability. More recently David Howes has offered a path-breaking account of the analytical possibilities of the sensory turn in anthropology, proposing a “sensory studies manifesto” (2022). While focusing specifically on art and aesthetics the sensory manifesto offered us precious tools to identify the ways in which modern capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy have “guided” our senses and a vast landscape of sensory repertoires of resistance and struggle. Decolonizing the senses in modern epistemological thinking is becoming an important dimension of decolonizing history.

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*History is a highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone ‘made’ the history of the World. [...] It is this hierarchical process that we deny in our own emergent historical consciousness, in its ruptures, its sudden emergence, its resistance to exploration.*

(Glissant, 1989, p. 65)

## 2. *Decolonizing history entails identifying the domination of history in the history of domination.*

Two basic concepts characterize modern Western-centric domination: the abyssal line and linear time. The abyssal line is the radical line of separation between those considered to be fully human beings and those considered to be subhuman beings, the most radical naturalization of social segmentation and hierarchization in modern times. It lies at the core of modern European colonial expansion. Colonialism and patriarchy have been reconfigured to operate as privileged regimes of subhumanization. One crucial characteristic of the abyssal line is that it is as radical as it is invisible while underlining all the visible social distinctions and hierarchies. European liberalism, even while proclaiming the universal freedom and equality of all human beings, retained the privilege of defining which living beings really count as fully human. Whoever is not fully human cannot be treated as such. An example: the tragedy of the thousands of immigrants and refugees who drown every year in the Mediterranean is “trivial” while the imagined tragedy of the death of thousands of European tourists in the Mediterranean when their cruise ship sank would be “dramatic”. Hence, the abyssal line.

In time, the abyssal line became the most entrenched feature of modern social hierarchy, ever-present in our time. Powered by colonialism, racism, and sexism, it went on structuring the dominant conceptions of economic, social,

political, and cultural life. It outlived the end of historical colonialism brought about by the political independence of the European colonies and underlines the dominant versions of commonsense in our time. The history of the winners is an abyssal history in so far as it reenacts and hides the abyssal line. Decolonizing history amounts to denouncing the existence of the abyssal line, claiming the full humanity of populations deemed subhuman, and writing history by highlighting the processes of subhumanization and the struggles against them. Decolonizing history is the affirmation of a post-abyssal history. In line with this challenge, post-abyssal historians should engage creatively with the past “as a story of man’s being in the everyday world [...] in short, a call for historicity to be rescued from its containment in World-history” of the Hegelian type (Guha, 2002, P. 6). As identified by Guha, historicity is associated with what is more present in literature or poetry than in the historical archival documents, as the latter tend to emphasize elite politics and state concerns. Thus, a post-abyssal history requires to move beyond the modern pursuit of newer and newer histories, by showing that historical development is not always linear and teleological but sometimes cyclical and ultimately non-teleological.<sup>3</sup>

Linear time is a particular conception of time that understands time as moving in only one direction, in a cumulative duration and irreversible sequence. The modern European idea of progress established linear time as the universal conception of time, whereas the European colonizers claimed the right to decide what counted as more or as less advanced, that is to say, as progressive. Linear time was particularly functional regarding the objectives of the European conquest in that it easily translated time into space. The overseas territories were as remote in space as in time. Exotic lands with strange ideas of time were temporally very distant from the colonizer’s present. The efficacy of linear time consisted in justifying the idea that the past of the colonized had no future except the one offered by the colonizer. Once dispossessed of any future-making function, such a past was deemed irrelevant and should vanish into oblivion. Thus constructed, the idea of progress may convert oppression into liberation, oppressors into liberators, and barbarism into any civilizing mission. When Napoleon arrived in Egypt in 1798, this is how he explained his actions to the Egyptians: “People of Egypt: You will be told by our enemies, that I am come to destroy your religion. Believe them not. Tell them that I am come to restore your rights, punish your usurpers, and raise the true worship of Mahomet.”<sup>4</sup> Viewed from the side of the invaded, Napoleon’s Proclamation fooled no one as to its imperialist objectives. This is how the Egyptian

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<sup>3</sup> A critique of a classical theory of singular time is also present among several marxist philosophers, such being the case of Ernst Bloch in *Heritage of Our Times* (1935). In this book Bloch debates the difficulty of explaining the rise of the Nazism as an historical phenomenon using the Marxist model of the contradiction between the productive forces and relations of production. Bloch proposes a multispatial and multitemporal dialectic approach to account for the objective and subjective non-contemporaneities co-present in German society, to analyze the core contradiction of capital/labor.

<sup>4</sup> “Napoleon’s Proclamation to the Egyptians, 2 July 1798,” cited in Hurewitz (ed.) 1975: 116.

chronicler Al-Jabarti, an eyewitness of the invasion, dissects the proclamation point by point. “Then he [Napoleon] proceeds to something even worse than that, may God cast him into perdition, with his words: ‘I more than the Mamluks serve God...’. There is no doubt that this is a derangement of his mind and an excess of foolishness”. Al-Jabarti then exposes the grammatical errors in the weak Quranic Arabic of the proclamation and concludes: “However, it is possible that there is no inversion and that the meaning is ‘I have more troops or more money than the Mamluks...’ [...] So his words ‘I serve God’ are a new sentence and a new lie” (Al-Jabarti, 1993, p. 31). Al-Jabarti would feel reassured if he had had the chance of reading Napoleon’s memoirs and *correspondence* where the lie was laid out in full:

Europe is a molehill[...] Everything here is worn out [...]. [T]iny Europe has not enough to offer. We must set off for the Orient; that is where all the greatest glory is to be achieved...I saw the way to achieve all my dreams [...] I would found a religion, I saw myself marching on the way to Asia, mounted on an elephant, a turban on my head, and in my hand a new Koran that I would have composed to suit my needs. In my enterprises I would have combined the experiences of the two worlds, exploiting the realm of all history for my own profit. (Napoleon cited by Strathern, 2007, p. 190)<sup>5</sup>

These citations illustrate how linear time and the abyssal line are deeply intertwined. Progress is the progress of the abyssal line, never of its overcoming.

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*The past of the Great Asian peoples has gradually come to be considered as part of the general heritage of civilized man, and this may in time lead to a breakdown of the narrow Europeanism, which considered everything outside the experience of the West as of secondary importance.*

(K.M. Panikkar, 1959, p. 332)

**3. *The scales of history are a product of the history of the dominant scale, be it the national, regional, or global history.***

Before these modern scales of history became dominant other scales dominated, such as city histories, imperial histories, and religions’ histories. National history is a product of nation-building processes from the seventeenth century onwards in Europe, from the nineteenth century onwards in the Americas, and from the mid-twentieth century onwards in Asia and Africa. Such histories cannot be understood without the history of the rise of the West and of the Westernization of the rest which came to be known as global history, the history of the global expansion of Europe, especially from the fifteenth century onwards. The

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<sup>5</sup> In 1878 the young Napoleon launched a massive seaborne invasion of Egypt with 335 ships, 1,200 horses, 171 field guns and 35,000 troops.

new historical time reconfigured all aspects of social life deemed relevant for the colonizers from the chronological time to the laws of property. As argued by Timothy Mitchell “historical time, the time of the West is what gives modern geography its order, an order centered upon Europe” (2000, p. 7). A singular time for a singular narrative animated by a singular principle be it human reason, Enlightenment, technical rationality or power over nature. Non-Western temporal regimes were interrupted, genealogies destroyed, and new calendars were adopted (Steel, 2000; Ogle, 2015; Edelstein, Geroulanos, and Wheatley, 2020). In the same way, new conceptions of property and property laws were globally imposed. As argued by Brenda Bhandar, “laws of property reflect and consolidate language, ways of seeing, and modes of subjectivity that render indigenous and colonized populations as outside history”, because lacking the required cultural traits, forms of thought, and economic organization to be considered rational economic subjects (2018, p.3).

Outside Europe, the birth of modern nations as integrated states was a direct product of colonialism. As underlined by K.M. Panikkar, in Asia the integration of vast territories into great nation States was unknown in the history of Asia before European colonialism, and the same argument applies to other regions of the non-European world. India, for instance,

all through her long history, had never been welded together into a single State as she is now ... Even more striking is the case of Indonesia. In the past these islands had never been united into a single political organization. Nor was it ever the dream of the great Empires of Java and Sumatra to weld the whole archipelago into one State... [In the case of China] it was only after the Kuomintang Revolution (1925-7) that the first effective steps were taken to convert China into a nation State with a proper central administration, a regular national army and defined national policies with regard to important matters. (1959, pp. 327-328)

The emergence of nations with a geopolitical base led to the rise of national histories but these could be designed in different ways and often served narrow political purposes.<sup>6</sup> Reflecting on his own historical work on Zimbabwe, Terence Ranger makes a distinction between nationalist historiography and history of nationalism - only the first is historicist in so far as it presents the roots of nationalism in a narrative leading to its triumphant emergence - and distinguishes both from “patriotic history” which for a time was promoted by Robert Mugabe to glorify the revolutionary tradition, demonizing “traitors”, repudiating academic historiography with its attempts to complicate and question and depicting Western

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<sup>6</sup> According to Panikkar “Two wars had to be fought before the Chinese could think of European nations as anything more than barbarian tribes occupying the outer regions of civilization. Imperial Commissioner Lin, addressing Queen Victoria in 1842, speaks in all seriousness and honesty of her being ‘the chieftainess of the tribe’” (1959: 331).



'bogus universalism' as a denial of the concrete history of global oppression (2004, p. 215).

This kind of "patriotic history" was indeed a self-serving project but it touched upon the dilemma of building new nations in conditions of continuing global oppression. Such dilemma is brilliantly laid out by Kwame Nkrumah while reflecting on his turbulent political trajectory in the struggle for independence of Ghana and in the immediate post-independence period. He affirms:

New nations like ours are confronted with tasks and problems that would certainly tax the experience and ingenuity of much older states. They would be difficult enough if we existed in a peaceful world, free of contending powers and interested countries eager to dabble in our internal affairs and manipulate our domestic and external relations in order to divide us nationally and internationally. As it is, our problems are made more vexed by the devices of neo-colonialists. And when we attempt to deal with them in ways which, having regard to all the facts that are known to us, seem most appropriate in the endeavour to maintain the internal unity upon which our viability and progress depend, we are misrepresented to the outside world to the point of distortion. (Nkrumah, 1964, p. xv)

The traps of the scales of history facing the non-European world in the modern world system are not limited to the convoluted construction of national history. Modern national history was from the outset intertwined with the larger scale of universal or world history. In terms of the Eurocentric framework of world history, political agency eventually granted to colonial and ex-colonial populations was limited to the national scale. On the world stage, their agency was either ignored or deemed dangerous and this state of affairs has remained largely the same up until today. From slavery to the current "migration crisis", ex-colonial populations are either resources or problems, never resourceful populations or problem solvers. No matter its different lineages—from the "histoire universelle", dating back to the European Renaissance and Enlightenment, to the world history or global history of the last sixty years or even the most recent transnational history—the "human community" sought for by this larger scales of history has always been viewed through the lenses of the knowledge produced by the center of the world-system to serve and promote the center's interests. The world stage has thus been selectively reserved to some actors through whose eyes the interpretation of the larger world is conveyed. Thereby an immense history of absences has been generated concerning the active and transformative movements of non-European populations.

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*The Signatory Powers exercising sovereign rights or authority in African territories will continue to watch over the preservation of the native populations and to supervise the improvement of the conditions of their moral and material well-being.*

(Article 11 of the General Act of the Berlin Conference on West Africa, 26 February, 1885)

#### 4. *Dominant history entails a theft of history.*

This term “theft of history” was coined by Jack Goody (2006) to designate the fact that many of the scientific, technological, political, or institutional inventions claimed by modern Europe existed before in other non-European contexts and were often appropriated and transformed without acknowledgment. However, the theft of history encompasses many other dimensions. The sense referred to below the history of absences and the epistemicides it produces constitutes a massive theft of history. But here I am referring to the physicality of the thefts and to the legal inventions put in place to legalize them. Three of such thefts deserve to be specially mentioned. The first two have been the object of abundant scholarship while the third one only recently gained political leverage. The first was slavery, a grotesque and massive theft of human bodies, of human life, and of human potential for making history otherwise. The second theft includes the theft of land, institutions, and history, leaving the people from the colonies hostages of the Eurocentric interpretations of themselves. The third theft - from outright robbery or plunder to grossly unfair deals or contracts - was that of objects and knowledges that would fill the European museums and archives, especially from the nineteenth century onwards (Lonetree, 2012; Sarr and Savoy, 2018; Hicks, 2020; Silverman, Abungu, and Probst, 2021). The three thefts are indeed related since in both cases the negation of the subject is a precondition for the appropriation and transformation of the objects. In the case of slavery, the African subject is transformed into a commodity whose legal status and value (both use value and exchange value) are determined by the usurper. From then on, subjectivity could only be recovered through resistance, from running away to abolition. In the case of property, colonized populations lacked the economic rationality and subjectivity presupposed by private property ownership. In the case of stolen objects in museums, the people, the cultures and the needs that created them must be bracketed out so that the objects are reborn to serve the colonial usurper’s cultural needs and tastes. In this case, recovering the original union of subject and object can only be achieved by devolution. Liberation in the case of slavery and of land and devolution in the case of museum objects are the preconditions for the deep decolonization of history so that other ontologies and epistemologies can challenge the still dominant narrative.

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*A people without a positive history is like a vehicle without an engine. [...But] only scant reference is made to African heroes; [...] the approach envisaged in bringing about "black consciousness" has to be directed to the past, to seek to rewrite the history of the black man and to produce in it the heroes who form the core of the African background.*

5. *Interruption and irruption are the social processes by means of which the oppressed lift up the weight of history.*

The oppressed tend to view the history of their relation with the oppressor as a discontinuity of defeats and victories. It is a sequence of redemptive repetition, as Walter Benjamin would call it, not of mechanic repetition (1969, pp. 253-264). In his corrosive style Samuel Beckett expresses it well: “Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better” (1983, p. 7). But how to fail better? We have to resort to Cabral for an answer: “Hide nothing from our people. Tell no lies. Expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories” (1970, p. 89). Non-conformity with oppression always involves the interruption of oppression and irruption. It is an unending process. Shortly before she was assassinated (1921), Rosa Luxemburg, another brilliant critic of Western capitalism, wrote: “Ich bin, Ich war, Ich werde sein” (I am, I was, I shall be) (1919a).<sup>7</sup>

Interruption and irruption make possible both the existence of alternatives and the capacity to struggle for them. It must be borne in mind that the oppressed’s effort to interrupt domination is a response to the original interruption caused by the modern colonial encounter. It is a counter-interruption aimed at interrupting the colonizer’s domination. When speaking of interruption, it is therefore imperative to specify who interrupts whom for the sake of whose continuity.

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Karl Marx stresses that “men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” (Marx, 1959, p. 320). This is as true of the oppressed as of the oppressor generations, but the dead weight is different in the two cases, as different as the current and the counter-current of a river. In the case of the oppressor, the tradition of continuity confirms its victory in advance and invites an unheroic will; in the case of the oppressed, the tradition of discontinuity demands a heroic will to disconfirm past history. There is nothing grandiose or romantic about heroism in this sense. Heroism is the willingness to take risks when confronting oppressive power. Moreover, heroism in this case is an inscription of resistance in the past conceived of as a task. Thus, the lives and experiences of past and fallen leaders from the Global South hold relevance not just for the sake of history but for current struggles.

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<sup>7</sup> This phrase is taken from the German poet Ferdinand Freiligrath in *Die Revolution* (1849: 5-10).

*[T]he moment imperialism arrived and colonialism arrived, it made us leave our history and enter another history.*

(Amílcar Cabral, 1970, p. 46)

**6. Decolonizing history involves both des-identifying with history as written by the victors (i.e. a closed past) and re-writing history from the perspective of the so far vanquished (the present past).**

The first task involves a history of absences; the second task involves a history of emergences.<sup>8</sup> The history of absences deals with erasure, forgetfulness, silencing, with identifying and denouncing the mechanisms by means of which so much social experience has been purposively wasted, discarded, made irrelevant or non-existent. The history of emergences deals with retrieving, recovering, and reimagining whatever was forced to survive as a ruin so that its potential for future liberation is unveiled. The two tasks make possible counter-histories. The idea of struggle is crucial to both tasks. Contrary to commonsensical ideas, the struggle is not necessarily an act of open, organized, dramatic, potentially violent confrontation. It is, in most cases, clandestine, spontaneous, often passive, small-scale, combining moments of confrontation with moments of withdrawal or even collaboration. The struggle is about mental and practical dissidence involving des-identification with the oppressor and disloyalty vis-à-vis the oppressor's objectives of domination.

*The history of absences.* Des-identification is achieved by identifying the main procedures used by the winners to portray the defeated as deserving of being defeated. I identify four main procedures: contrasting principles with practices; suspending principles in self-declared emergencies; de-specifying; and alternating brutality with tolerance. The first procedure generates massive *epistemicide* (the destruction of knowledges); the second, *kairoside* (after Gr. *kairós*, 'the right moment'), the destruction of qualitative time; the third and the fourth I call *timécide*, the destruction of honor (after Gr. *timé* 'honor').<sup>9</sup> Only through counter-histories of lived experiences through struggles is it possible to identify such absences.

The first procedure consists of contrasting the ethical and political principles of the oppressor with the practices of the oppressed. European liberalism constructed an arsenal of universal principles, ideals of freedom, equality, solidarity, and fraternity, catalogs of natural human rights, an impressive set that composed the idea of civilization. As the modern colonial expansion unfolded, the actions of conquest, plunder, occupation, and imposition of external narratives

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<sup>8</sup> The history of absences and the history of emergences have elective affinities with the sociology of absences and sociology of emergences. See Santos (2018a: 25-32).

<sup>9</sup> The words *epistemicide*, *kairoside*, *ontocide* and *timécide* are derived from ancient Greek, meaning specific conceptions of knowledge, time, being and honor, respectively.

about the colonized, no matter how violent and barbarian, were justified by counter-posing the liberal ideals, not to the practices of the colonizers, but to the practices of the non-European populations. The latter practices were deemed to be so utterly contradictory with liberal principles that only barbarians could undertake them. Thus emerged the dichotomy of civilization/barbarism, the abyssal line distinguishing humans from subhumans. The ideological valence of this procedure was double. It made it unnecessary to justify the contrast between the ideals of liberalism and the practices of the colonizers, as well as unthinkable that non-European populations might have ideals and principles, no matter how different from those of liberalism. This ideology legitimated an unmeasurable epistemicide – the systematic destruction of non-European knowledges, philosophies, and cosmovisions cherished by the colonized populations. Epistemicide goes hand in hand with genocide and linguicide.

The second procedure consists of claiming the privilege of setting aside or suspending ethical or political principles whenever extreme situations of social or political emergency so recommend. Such privilege covers both defining a given situation as an emergency and deciding about the suspension of principles. This procedure demands a radical separation and hierarchy between Eurocentric colonial powers and the populations considered to be ‘outside’ of the realm of civilization; it also activates the friend/enemy opposition instead of the civilization/barbarism opposition. In modern constitutionalism, this situation is called a state of exception. From the perspective of the colonial administration, the colonies were ruled by a permanent state of exception, in other words, the colonial use of declaring the state of emergency and suspending principles aimed at preventing or repressing any threat to colonial rule deemed more serious and more difficult to neutralize. In short, the colonized, in most situations, were objects of the colonial state, without rights, and without citizenship. As a result, in various contexts, concrete struggles of the colonized were crushed, while energies, practices, and ideas of resistance were prevented from fully unfolding (Buck-Morss, 2009). The absences were thus produced by destroying in the bud opportunities for social transformation, major as well as minor opportunities, for either small betterments of the livelihoods or for ambitious initiatives of revolt and liberation. Such systematic neutralizing of struggle I call *kairocide* to designate the destruction of opportune moments of resistance. Such crucial moments represent the deep time of social resistance emerging in social practice as the mature moment in which the chances of success are maximized. Declaring an emergency meant erasing the historic quality of time, disfiguring memories and the possibilities of a better future for the oppressed. *Kairocide* often involved epistemicide as well. In states of exception, protesters and social leaders were frequently assassinated. Social leaders were the guardians of traditional, vernacular knowledge and experience in organizing the resistance and choosing the most adequate forms of social struggle;

with their deaths, all such knowledge, experience, and wisdom were lost, as lost were the knowledges about the genealogies of resistance and struggle.

The third procedure of the history of absences is de-specification. It consists in reducing the identity of the colonized people to a single, a-historical and decontextualized characteristic, thereby discounting the complex texture of individual and collective lives and their unfolding in history. Rather than an exercise in philosophical abstraction – as in trying to convey in a synthetic manner the manifold concreteness of social and individual existence – de-specification is an ideological act of radical, selective empiricism and reductionism. It provides a measure for the immeasurable distance (and hierarchy) between the colonized and the colonizer, the substance of the colonial zone as defined by the abovementioned abyssal line, the zone where de-specified populations are thrown into, the zone of non-being, as Franz Fanon (1967) called it. Given the metonymic nature of the selected characteristic (be it savage, primitive, backward, noble savage, cannibal, magic, archaic, traditional, or underdeveloped), all social practices and beliefs of the de-specified population (including religion and culture) share the same characteristics.

The fourth procedure consists of defining tolerance which follows brutal atrocity, or violent destruction of life or culture by the colonizer or oppressor. This is a crucial procedure, since “tolerance” is deployed as a way of both confirming and disguising the surrender of the oppressed, of transforming real impositions into fake concessions, of signaling a change in strategy while performing a tactic move, of dividing the oppressed populations and recruiting collaborators, of simulating the recognition of difference while affirming the privilege of defining the intolerable. The ultimate goal of “tolerance” is to exhibit the moral superiority of the winners for better destroying the self-esteem and honor of the oppressed populations. I have already explained above why I call this form of destruction *timécide*, after ancient Greek: the dishonoring of both individuals and communities.

Five major strategies of de-specification were activated by colonial history. Each one of them is premised upon a monocultural and monolithic criterion. By the monoculture of rigorous knowledge, the colonial subject was de-specified as ignorant. By the monoculture of linear time, the colonial subject was de-specified as backward and primitive. By the monoculture of the dominant scales (the universal and the global), the colonial ways of life were de-specified as particular, exotic, local, and traditional, to be replaced by modern ones. By the monoculture of ethno-racial classification, the colonial subject was de-specified as inferior. Inherent to this monoculture is the humanity/nature separation and hierarchy, the colonial subject was de-specified as a natural, subhuman, and barbaric beast. Finally, by the monoculture of the capitalist criterion of productivity, the colonial subject was de-specified as lazy, otiose, and unproductive.

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*The conqueror is asked to forget about the past on the understanding that the benefits of conquest in an unjust war shall accrue exclusively to him. On the other hand, the conquered is asked to forget about the past on condition that they renounce their right to seek a remedy to the injustice of conquest in an unjust war.*

(Ramose, 2002b, p. 477)

**7. *The history of absences evolved and changed in the course of the last five centuries.***

Although present since early colonial expansion, the abovementioned procedures for producing absence were dramatically intensified from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Moreover, they were activated differently in different contexts and times. Over time, the relative weight of genuine curiosity and mechanic supremacy varied. Both on the colonizer's side and that of the colonized, oppositional voices denounced early on each one of the four procedures for producing absence. However, the most striking feature of the history of absences is its incessant metamorphosis and deep-seated entrenchment in Western-centric histories and ideologies.

The ideological procedures and political economy processes underlying the history of absences are at the core of Eurocentric modernity and its colonial libraries, thus negating "the possibility of a plural rationality and history" (Mudimbe, 1988, P. 208). Indeed, such procedures and processes structured from very early on—that is, long before the transoceanic colonial expansions - Europe's mental archive and world-making will.

For instance, the word slave comes from the word Slav as in the thirteenth-century Italian cities began to import Italy Slav slaves from Southeastern Europe and the shores of the Black Sea (Verlinden, 1970, P. 36). Enslaved people from a range of regions of Eastern Europe – Russians, Tatars, Bulgarians, Turks, Greeks, Albanians – were sold via Black Sea ports, and then transported to southern Europe (Barker, 2021, pp. 100-101). The expansion of the slave trade in the Mediterranean became a 'major commodity' in the early period of capitalism. In this respect, as Cedric Robinson argues, modern capitalism is more a continuity with feudalism than a break (2000). As slavery was at the foundation of racism, Robinson prefers to speak of racial capitalism instead of capitalism tout court. Following Robinson, and with a special focus on the Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean Dušan Bjelić defends that because "the Europeans arrived in the 'New World' already racialized, they racialized non-Europeans" (2022, p.8). The same entanglement of ideology and political economy was present in the so-called *Christian Reconquista of Al-Andalus*<sup>10</sup> from the eleventh century on (Evans, 1985; Witzenrath, 2015; García Fernández,

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<sup>10</sup> In 1085, Alfonso VI of Castile captured Toledo and in January 2, 1492, Emir Muhammad XII surrendered the Emirate of Granada to Queen Isabella I of Castile, thus completing the 'Christian Reconquista' of the peninsula (García Fernández 2019).

2019), as well as, later on, with the British colonial occupation of Ireland from early sixteenth century on (Rahman, Clarke and Byrne, 2017). With the colonial expansion to the Americas, slavery became vastly exercised in the overseas colonies (Alencastro, 2000; Nunn, 2010; Araújo, 2011).<sup>11</sup>

Slavery, although formally abolished late in the nineteenth century, has been redefined in newer forms, such as the forced labor systems in Africa, denounced still in the early 1920s as ‘conditions analogous to slavery’.<sup>12</sup> Thus, one of the key manifestation of slavery in our times is under the form of workers’ exploitation and subhumanization of those considered inferior. In the early twentieth century, the ideology of slavery returned to Europe on a large scale. It was operative under Nazism in the criminal persecution against the *Untermensch*, Jews, Romanis, homosexuals, and other “inferior races”. It was used both to justify the Holocaust and the planned colonization of Central and Eastern Europe. Referring to the Slavic populations in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Russia, the Reichsführer-SS Himmler proclaimed in 1943:

Whether nations live in prosperity or starve to death interests me only in so far as we need them as slaves for our culture; otherwise, it is of no interest to me. . . . We Germans, who are the only people in the world who have a decent attitude towards animals, will also assume a decent attitude towards these human animals. But it is a crime against our own blood to worry about them and give them ideals, thus causing our sons and grandsons to have a more difficult time with them.<sup>13</sup>

This demented project began to be defeated in the heroic battle of Stalingrad. (1942). Contemporary vibrations of the same subhumanization of subjected populations as found in slavery still abound. One of the most vicious is the over-incarceration of black people in Brazil or USA (Davis, 2003). Today, as before, for the sake of profits, people are put into prison even for the smallest of acts and are used as cheap labor to work for companies.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the Code Noir (Black code) of the French King Louis XIV, from 1685, defining the conditions of slavery in the French colonial empire (Santos 2023:239-68). See also Sala-Molins (2018).

<sup>12</sup> One of the first definitions of slavery in international law appeared in the League of Nations Slavery Convention of 25 September 1926 (Slavery, Servitude, Forced Labour and Similar Institutions and Practices Convention of 1926, League of Nations Treaty Series, vol. 60; the convention entered into force on 9 March 1927). The Slavery Convention defined slavery as “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised” (art. 1(1)).

<sup>13</sup> Available at <http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/holocaust/h-posen.htm>, accessed on 15 February 2023.

<sup>14</sup> See “Economics of Incarceration” available at [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/research/economics\\_of\\_incarceration/](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/research/economics_of_incarceration/), accessed on 18 September 2023.



Since the 1950s, the four main procedures of the modern history of absences have been justifying in Europe racism, sexism, discriminatory migration laws and practices, xenophobia, islamophobia, and homophobia. When laws formally prohibit discrimination, the justification operates indirectly by means of complicit omission to repress or effectively condemn them. The arrival of the colonized into former European empires as immigrants or asylum seekers and, more recently, as a suspect of terrorism is a permanent condition of European colonial contemporaneity. A Eurocentric history of absences came home to roost and is today constitutive of the Eurocentric world both in Europe and outside Europe.

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*Knowledge about the West is cultivated over decades, but knowledge about Africa is supposed to be absorbed, so to speak, through the mother's breast milk. I have nothing against mothers (I am one myself). But while we as African scholars are busy developing the "mother of all canons," who do we suppose will develop the knowledge-base for transforming Africa?*

(Oyéwùmi, 2002, p. 408)

**8. *Exposing the procedures of the history of absences opens the possibility of a counter-history: the history of emergences.***

The dominant history is written after the struggle. It expresses the privilege of the winner to write the history of its victory. On the contrary, the history of emergences is a history written before the struggle and while the struggle unfolds. Indeed, there is no "after the struggle". From the perspective of the history of emergences, to write history from an after-the-struggle perspective would amount to confirming defeat. In one way or another, certain crucial features of the colonized would likely be declared as extinct or a-posteriori evaluated as quixotic, desperate, or unrealistic survival actions. The long duration of resistance would thereby be lost and, with it, the dialectics of overground/underground techniques and practices of resistance.

From the perspective of the history of emergences, there are two historical times, the time "before the struggle" and the time "while the struggle unfolds". The ur-time or founding time before the struggle is the history of the world before modern colonialism, before the massive erasure of other historical processes. In precolonial times there were of course social struggles, struggles for power and domination, but the struggle that creates the need for decolonizing history is the struggle against European conquest and occupation. For the dominant history there is no "before the struggle", since whatever occurred before European colonialism is

either irrelevant or is so constructed to justify the colonial intervention. On the contrary, for the history of emergences, the prior history is where the energies and resources to struggle against domination are to be found, by reclaiming other narratives as a path to decolonize history.

The “while the struggle unfolds” is equally crucial, as it conceives of the practices of resistance as an open field of possibilities in which there is no room or reason for fatality or conformism. The contingency of history is thereby fully confirmed. There is no “winner” either; there are just oppressors and oppressed – opposing sides – no matter how unequal the power relations between them may be. The size of a current enemy is much smaller than the size of the winner. No matter how devastating or destructive, the blows or aggressive actions of the oppressor are viewed by the oppressed-in-struggle as non-definitive and as leaving room to resistance and survival. The Italian poet of the thirteenth century, Dante Alighieri, wrote in the *Divina Commedia* (*Paradiso*, XVII, p. 27) that “foreseen an arrow comes more slowly” (“che saetta previsa vien più lenta”).

The history of emergences proceeds by reconstructing the wholeness of bodies, communities, livelihoods, struggles, resistances, ways of knowing, and ways of being which were erased, disfigured, amputated, made silent, or produced as absent by dominant history. It consists of confronting each one of the monocultures presiding over de-specification and replacing them with ecologies. Ecologies are the workings of mutually enriching and self-transformative interaction among different components of complex realities, be they human or non-human realities.

The monoculture of rigorous knowledge is challenged by retrieving and valorizing knowledges, cultures, and beliefs of the non-European, colonized people and how such epistemic and cognitive wealth has guided their resistance and resilience against foreign conquest and usurpation. The recognition of the epistemic and cognitive diversity of the world presupposes that all systems of knowledge are incomplete; as such, all of them are to a certain extent ignorant, useless, or even dangerous for certain purposes. This applies to systems of knowledge held by the colonizer as well to those held by the colonized. Despite the violence of the colonial encounter, the version of the universalizing European knowledge system prevalent in the colonies never succeeded in accomplishing full epistemicide. On the contrary, over time there was much interaction, hybridization, and creolization leading to what I call ecologies of knowledges. Such ecologies of knowledges contribute to strengthening the struggles for liberation.

The monoculture of linear time must be confronted by the recognition of other conceptions of time. If Aristotle is right when he says that memory is the imagination plus time, it follows that different conceptions of time generate different memories. The history of emergencies consists in retrieving the “strange” conceptions of time held by “exotic” people. The changes and sequences that linear time imposed after the colonial encounter are thereby questioned. Breakthroughs turn into breakdowns, gains, and progress, into loss and chaos, irreversible

transformation into cyclical movement, the virtuous eradication of the past into the precious guardianship of what remains and of what has been. The history of emergences destroys unilateral correspondences and points to mutually exclusive systems of temporal coherence. While linear time opposes big time to local time, the history of emergences opposes big time to counter-big time. While the temporal lens of linear time converts pastness into strangeness, the naked eye of the colonized sees pastness as familiarity. Systemic mutual exclusion does not mean a lack of communication or interaction. Once in contact, the different conceptions of time were shaken and adapted to the new vibrations, even if in radically different conditions. The history of emergences highlights these temporal entanglements and shows how resistance and struggle against oppression often benefitted from converting energy for restoration into energy for liberation.

The history of emergences confronts the monoculture of the dominant scales by constructing narratives that privilege de-scaling rather than upscaling or downscaling. Descaling is a sine-qua-non condition for liberating subaltern understandings of social life from de-specification, thereby allowing for alternative meanings and evaluations of resistance against domination. A horizontal universalism is at the most a point of arrival, not a starting point. It is nothing more than a shared consciousness of a plurality of cosmopolitan aspirations converging on intercultural understandings of human dignity and respect and combined transformative energies and actions to convert them into real-life existential flourishing.<sup>15</sup>

Confronting the monoculture of ethno-racial classification is a specially demanding task. Such classification combines differentiation with hierarchy. Differentiation is thus inherently biased as it is constructed to legitimize hierarchy, the primary impulse of colonial domination. To expose such bias from the perspective of “the other side of the abyssal line” becomes a crucial task.<sup>16</sup> In this case, the history of emergences aims at reconstructing differentiation by separating it from hierarchy.<sup>17</sup> Once the hierarchy is eradicated, the differences that remain or

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<sup>15</sup> As Aimé Césaire reminded us, “there are two ways to lose oneself: walled segregation in the particular or dilution in the ‘universal’.” His conception of the universal is that of “a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars” (2010: 152).

<sup>16</sup> For Glissant (1997: 69), the Caribbean is not insular, but rather it is defined through rhizomatic “submarine roots [...] floating free, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches.” He continues, “the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green. [...] the absolute unknown, projected by the abyss and bearing into eternity the womb abyss and the infinite abyss, in the end became knowledge”.

<sup>17</sup> According to Oyéwùmi “Many contemporary historians have assumed that, with a couple of exceptions, all the rulers on the lists are male, but what is their basis for this assumption?

emerge are the foundation of the history of the oppressed. The monoculture of ethno-racial classification was intimately related to the monoculture of the humanity/nature dichotomy. Both women and the “inferior races” were deemed inferior for being closer to nature. Hobbes, for example, called the indigenous people of the Americas the “naturals” (1976, pp. 186-187). In this regard, the history of emergences will show that the Cartesian Eurocentric binary humanity/nature was quite exceptional, exotic, and destructive. In the non-European world, the idea that nature belongs to humans was utterly incomprehensible. What prevailed, rather, was the conception that humans belong to nature. Considering the current ecological crisis, the history of emergences is in this respect an anachronistic anticipation of the ecological concerns of our time.

Finally, the monoculture of capitalist productivity is challenged by the history of emergences as it retrieves the diversity of livelihoods prevailing in the non-European world. Rather than residues, those non-Eurocentric ways of reproducing and expanding social life meant – differently in different moments – survival, adaptation, subversion, and resistance under very unequal power conditions. Here again, the history of emergences retrieves a present past rather than a past past. It functions as an anticipation of current grassroots claims that other, non-capitalist economies (peasant, cooperative, small-holding, indigenous, popular, feminist, associational) are an integral part of the struggles against and beyond capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy.

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*The irony is that even that which is genuinely universal in the West is imprisoned by Eurocentrism. Western civilisation itself becomes a prisoner, its jailors being its Eurocentric interpreters.*

(Thiong'o, 1993, p. 17)

### **9. *Decolonizing history is about both moving and proliferating the center.***

Centers and peripheries are produced and reproduced by predominantly unidirectional transfers of symbolic, material, human, and non-human resources from one entity (the periphery) to another (the center). They are therefore both products and producers of unequal power relations. The intermediaries in such transfers may acquire specific traits which, if sustained over time, comprise what in Wallerstein's conception of the modern world system is designated as semi-periphery (1974). Center and periphery thus belong to each other, but it is proper of the center to establish normative criteria that pretend to be universally valid irrespective of the specific contexts in which they arise. In the modern period, the center is the Western world, and the periphery is the rest. Such a center claims

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At the very least, the basis of assigning sex to each ruler has to be explained for the period during which there were no written accounts. Given the gender-free terms *oba* (ruler) and *alààfìn* (ruler), historians should provide evidence for such gender assumptions” (2002: 410).

universal validity in a whole range of areas from philosophy to ethics, from political economy and international relations to aesthetics and literature (Bloom, 1994). The center is the realm of the topdogs while the periphery is the realm of the underdogs; the center is what is rewarded, while the periphery is what is rejected. Conceived as the modern center, the West is a specific version of the Western world, the bourgeois, white, male version, in charge of the three main dimensions of modern domination, capitalism, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy. The social experiences that in the Western world don't fit or contradict this version of the West are promptly and radically eviscerated.

The history of philosophical ideas illustrates well the evisceration procedure. The philosophy of Baruch Spinoza represents the most radical version of European modernity and yet, as its subversive character contradicts the premises grounding both the religious and secular invested in the European colonial expansion, Spinoza will be demonized in the following centuries (two excommunications, one by the Catholic Church and one by Judaism) and his philosophy will be forbidden as devil's work. This fatal selectivity behind modern domination is highlighted and lamented in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's epigraph. Theodor Adorno denounced in *Negative Dialectics* (1990) the antinomies of the center as it contains what it negates (its underside) and whatever is negated always exceeds what is made of it by the center. Due to the negation of its underside, the modern center actively forgets that its centrality is dependent on the peripherality of those social entities and experiences excluded from the center. Besides, the periphery is always something other than being peripheral (as much as a slave is always more than a human commodity) and, accordingly, a potentially alternative center. Accordingly, what best characterizes the center is its fatal incapacity to question itself and to remain opaque to the social processes that account for its existence as the center. Because of this incapacity for self-interrogation, the European Enlightenment is its own fatal enemy.

Decolonizing history means capturing the center's unacknowledged propensity for self-destruction, in a moment of breach and tension— *mis en abyme* —so that both suppressed and emergent alternative realities might become visible. Decentering always begins by demonumentalizing the center thereby opening the ground for proliferating alternative centers. Decolonizing includes denouncing what Arjun Appadurai calls the gatekeeper concepts, those theoretical metonyms that impose on different peripheries such characteristics that prove their specific peripherality:

[A] few simple theoretical handles become metonyms and surrogates for the civilization or society as a whole: hierarchy in India, honor-and-shame in the circum-Mediterranean, filial piety in China [...]. Thus it is that Africa becomes the locus of many classical social forms, such as the lineage or the segment; tropical South

America, the arch representative of dual organizations and structured mythological discourse; Melanesia, the principal exhibit for the manipulation of bodily substances in the management of society and the cosmos; aboriginal Australia, the supreme example of the tension between structural simplicity and classificatory complexity; Polynesia, the central place for the mechanics of reciprocity, and so forth. (Appadurai, 1986, pp. 357-358)

Whatever analytical value may be ascribed to the gatekeeper concepts it gets nullified as such concepts are used to both hide the peculiarity of the center - as the modern capitalist, colonialist, and patriarchal center - and to congeal the historicity of the center-periphery relations. Moreover, the reductionism of the gatekeeper concepts feeds back upon the social experiences that serve as contrasting realities in the Western center. A double reductionism emerges that results in a reciprocal opacity (a double history of absences) that represses the *not-yets* of complex and contradictory historical transformations confronting topdogs and underdogs. As a result, open-ended historical unfolding is replaced by parallel destinies of eternal topdogness and eternal underdogness.

As these epistemic procedures are exposed and the binary center-periphery is questioned, the diversity of social experiences emerges more fully and the political processes accounting for center-periphery relations become more visible. Moving the center, proliferating centers and peripheries, and making and unmaking them through perspectivism are different and convergent ways of replacing abstract universalism with bottom-up cosmopolitanism. Such cosmopolitanism is, in fact, not different from the rooted universalism as used by Thiong'o when he declares being an "unrepentant universalist": "For I believe that while retaining its roots in regional and national individuality, true humanism with its universal reaching out, can flower among the peoples of the earth, rooted as it is in the histories and cultures of the different peoples of the earth" (Thiong'o, 1993, pp 16-17).

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*From time to time we try to delude ourselves with an apparently nobler explanation, but our only motive is one of retrospective impatience.*

(Jacob Burckhardt, 1979[1871], 321)

**10. *Decolonizing history entails confronting modern domination with patience. Both analytical and political patience.***

As a multi-secular phenomenon, modern domination permeates social life much beyond its most evident manifestations and is so deeply entrenched that it easily eludes analytical and political scrutiny and manages to reproduce itself in the analytical and political processes aimed at confronting it. A call for complexity is imperative which at the analytical level entails focusing on multi-dimension,

multiscale, and context. Political complexity entails a sustained combination of different repertoires and strategies of resistance. The main dimensions of analytical complexity are the following. First, modern domination consists of three main pillars - capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy - that are deeply entangled with specific threads or clusters of entanglement varying across time and space. It is therefore a vain effort trying to confer priority to one of them in the abstract or to disentangle them at the level of social praxis (where does capitalism end and colonialism begin?). Decolonizing history is thus a conceptual metonymy since anti-colonialism, anti-capitalism, and anti-patriarchy, however autonomous in theoretical terms, are always jointly present in social struggles against domination even if the specific mix among them varies according to the historical contexts or the scales of resistance. Decolonizing history means retrieving the specific mix in the historical process under analysis.

Second, the binary oppressor-oppressed is as revealing as it is concealing. At the level of social praxis, rather than binaries, there are mixes: due to the multilayered structure of domination, the oppressors may also be in some sense oppressed, and vice versa, the oppressed may be in some sense oppressors. At the level of concrete social experience, domination is the aggregate result of the unequal prevalence of oppressor factors and oppressed factors. The unequal mix results from the interaction among different scales and layers of domination.

Third, oppressors and oppressed are not inverted mirror images of each other. While it is unthinkable that an oppressor may desire to become an oppressed as it faces resistance, it is highly probable that the oppressed may desire to be an oppressor if the struggle unfolds in its favor. To counteract or neutralize such desire the oppressed must dispose of (1) an emancipatory idealism (ideas, not ideology, of liberation) that aims beyond the rules and terms of the game established by the oppressor and (2) a grassroots democratic practice that countervails the temptation of demagoguery and caudillism. In the absence of such an expansive idealism and grassroots practice, there is no exit from the spiral of domination-resistance-domination.

Fourth, modern domination, however, a key component of Western or Western-dependent modern societies, does not exhaust the immense diversity of social interaction in any complex society. Oppressors are always something more than oppressors and the same is true of the oppressed. There is life, both sad and joyful life, in society beyond domination. Our sensorial experiences are the signposts of what exceeds domination. Food is a good example of collective existence with some dimensions that bear witness to domination (hunger imposed on populations, agro-industry, GMOs, fast food) and other dimensions that exceed domination (tasting, culinary cultures, kitchen sociabilities). This excess may be alienating or liberating but it is what often makes life bearable.

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*The forest is the flesh and skin of our earth, which is the back of the old sky Hutukara that fell in the beginning of time... What the white people call “minerals” are the fragments of the sky, moon, sun, and stars, which fell down in the beginning of time. This is why our long-ago elders have always called the shiny metal mareaxi and xitikarixi, which are also our names for what the white people call the stars.*

(Kopenawa and Albert, 2013, p. 283)

**11. Decolonizing history must have in mind that humankind is in history but it is also in the planet and in the cosmos.**

Modern domination is premised upon a specific conception of nature in the terms of which nature is an entity separate from and inferior to humanity, an infinite resource unconditionally at the disposal of humans to be explored and exploited to their benefit. Human nature is considered qualitatively different from non-human nature, but both are constants, unchanging through history or culture. Thus conceived, such binary underlies the three main dimensions of modern domination. As far as capitalism is concerned, the contradiction between capital and labor is mediated by a contradiction between capital accumulation and the metabolisms of natural resources. In the case of colonialism and patriarchy, the racialized and sexualized populations are deemed ontologically degraded, beginning with their lands and their bodies, because of their supposed greater proximity to non-human nature. Nature is outside history.

However never unanimously accepted, this conception of the binary society/nature has remained dominant in Western modernity, but its legitimacy (and even, credibility) has been increasingly questioned in the last decades. I leave aside scientific developments in biology, genetics, ecology, psychology, neurosciences, geology, or astronomy, all of them converging in building bridges and bringing history to the intrinsic relations between humanity and nature with a decisive impact on a whole range of topics such as the cosmic evolution, earth history, Neo-Darwinism, chaos and order or chance and necessity in complexity studies and the nature/nurture relations in biology as well as in psychology. As a result, the modern humanity/nature dichotomy has been replaced by the humanity/nature complex. On the other hand, new social movements have been proposing convergent understandings of the society/nature relationships. Four of them have been most determinant in destabilizing the modern society/nature dichotomy: the anti-colonial/anti-racial movements, the feminist movements, the indigenous movements, and the ecological movements.

The first three movements have denounced the underlying affinity between the conceptualization of nature as a profitable or expendable resource and both the plunder of natural resources in the colonies or ex-colonies and the imposed degradation of racialized and sexualized bodies. On the other hand, the indigenous movements have been most outspoken in propounding new conceptions of



society/nature complex. According to them, nature is territory and territory is an essential component of cultural and political identity. In the case of the ecological movements, the old society/nature dichotomy has been challenged in the light of destructive impact of capitalist development upon nature, which is dramatically visible in the consequences of global warming and the imminent ecological catastrophe. Together, these movements have shown that rather than nature belonging to humans, humans belong to nature.

As discussed above, the task of decolonizing history must be viewed as being a component of a multilayered history that besides humanity/society, includes, life, earth, and even the cosmos. Responding to different but convergent concerns, a new field of interdisciplinary inquiry has emerged in the last half century combining different scales of historical time and propounding an enormously expansive conception of the past. This field, called big history, brings together researchers trained in different disciplines, from biology to physics, from biochemistry to anthropology and history, and from geology and archeology to astronomy and cosmology (Christian, 1991, 2004; Spier, 2008, 2015, 2022; Alvarez, 2017; Chaisson, 2006, 2014).<sup>18</sup>

The geologist Walter Alvarez identifies “four regimes” in big history - Cosmos, Earth, Life, and Humanity - and, while recognizing that the academic chasm between the sciences that study the first three regimes and the humanities and social sciences that study the forth is truly difficult to bridge, he sees the challenge in combining them as very rewarding. In his words, the idea behind big history is “to increase our understanding of the situation in which we humans find ourselves by developing ‘historical mindedness’ – the habit of thinking historically about whatever we encounter in our lives, reaching across the whole range of Big History, from the beginning of the universe to today. We found that historical mindedness offers wonderful insights into the human situation” (Alvarez, 2017, p. 21). According to the astrophysicist Eric Chaisson “Human beings and our cultural inventions are not special, unique, or apart from Nature; rather, we are an integral part of a universal evolutionary process connecting all such complex systems throughout space and time. [...]. A wealth of observational data supports the hypothesis that increasingly complex systems evolve unceasingly, uncaringly, and unpredictably from Big Bang to humankind” (Chaisson, 2014, p. 1).

A new understanding of the human condition is emerging that includes it in much vaster time frames, offering a much broader picture of the past in which the condition of humans cannot be told apart from the condition of nature, the same being true of their histories. This broader picture is very relevant for the task of decolonizing history formulated here. From the Renaissance to industrial colonialism and neoliberal globalization, Western modernity pushed to the

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<sup>18</sup> Even bigger than big history is cosmic evolution as conceived of by Chaisson (2014).

extreme the idea that nature belongs to humans rather than that humans belong to nature.

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*Have we – we who have returned – been able to understand and make others understand our experience?*

(Levi, 1988)

**12.** *History without the memories and testimonies of those who lived and experienced violence and oppression is a false window painted on a wall of conformism.*

The theft of history and the history of absences has always targeted the life experiences of those who have resisted modern domination, depriving them of representations, emotions, reconstructions, and imaginaries that might contradict their status as passive losers surrendered to the fatality of an overwhelming history. Decolonizing history thus necessarily involves vindicating the lived memories, the subjective experiences of those that were on the other side of the winners of history. Such testimonies subvert the official sequence of linear time as they presentify the past in ways that destabilize the hegemonic narratives and their amnesia. Remembering and bearing witness are the responses to the dominant amnesia by those who cannot afford to forget. They are reconstructions as truthful as the genuine pain they cause while being relived in the living present. Their credibility lies in the privilege of originary experience, a privilege lack of which always escapes and sometimes haunts the historian. It is the recovery of dignity by those that were treated with often grotesque indignity or were forced to act in undignifying ways in order to survive and to be here and now (Boulbina, 2015). Along the same lines, Chinua Achebe draws our attention to storytelling:

[...] if you look at the world in terms of storytelling, you have, first of all, the man who agitates, the man who drums up the people — I call him the drummer. Then you have the warrior, who goes forward and fights. But you also have the storyteller who recounts the event — and this is one who survives, who outlives all the others. It is the storyteller, in fact, who makes us what we are, who creates history. The storyteller creates the memory that survivors must have — otherwise surviving would have no meaning [...]. This is very, very important [...]. Memory is necessary if surviving is going to be more than just a technical thing.” (Achebe, 1988)

More than anything else history and memories are about recovering experiences and subjectivities. Baldwin notes that “[h]istory is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are history. If we pretend otherwise, to put it very brutally, we literally are criminals. (Baldwin, 2010 [1980], p. 154).

### III

To conclude, we should be aware that a decolonizing edit of history must live up to the following aporia. It cannot by itself guarantee either the non-repetition of past atrocities and systemic injustices or the return of dominant historical narratives of such past. Decolonizing history must be aware of the danger of recolonizing history, as long as capitalist, colonialist, patriarchal, religious, aging, casteist, and ableist dominations last. Indeed, even though much intellectual and political effort has been invested in the last half century by different social groups in the task of decolonizing history, the overall dominant *Zeitgeist* of our time is one of recolonizing history rather than of decolonizing it. The global rise of extreme-right political forces is both a symptom and an incubator of increased violence in the deployment of modern domination, as illustrated by the return (or public resurfacing) of fascist ideologies and practices, the dramatic erosion of labor rights and new forms of quasi-slave labor, the aggravation of racism and sexism, the grotesque violence against immigrants, the ongoing impunity of environmental crimes (ecocide) and the replacement of diplomacy by warfare of different types. In the womb of this secular trend, alternatives to capitalism are said to be absent or are discredited. Historical colonialism is defended as civilizational progress, and sexism and racism show extreme resilience despite all the achievements of feminist and anti-racism movements. Therefore, “[i]f imperialist domination has the vital need to practice cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture” (Cabral 1979: 143). Under these conditions, decolonizing history becomes as urgent as it becomes ever riskier for those involved in either the academic or political task of decolonizing minds, practices, and representations that go on reproducing colonial ways of living and knowing as if they are the natural ways of being human.

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