

Decolonizing Western Uni-versalisms: Decolonial Pluri-versalism from Aimé Césaire to the Zapatistas¹

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This essay discusses the concept of the “Universal” within the Western philosophical tradition and proposes another, more decolonial way of thinking universality through the thought of Aimé Césaire, Enrique Dussel, and the Zapatistas. The first part examines the concept of the “Universal” from René Descartes to Karl Marx, while the second focuses on Aimé Césaire’s formulation of the concept, proposed from an Afro-Caribbean decolonial perspective. The third part analyzes the concept of transmodernity proposed by Enrique Dussel, and the fourth discusses the difference between postmodernity and transmodernity, using as an example the postmodern understanding of hegemony proposed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, as well as the transmodern understanding of politics proposed by the Zapatistas in the “Other Campaign.” Finally, I discuss the implications of all of the above for the debate on the left regarding the vanguard party versus the rearguard movement.

1. Western Universalism: From Descartes to Marx

There exists a long tradition of thought about the universal in the West. René Descartes, founder of modern philosophy with his motto “I think, therefore I am,” understood the universal as an eternal knowledge beyond time and space; that is, equivalent to a God’s-eye view. In the struggle against the hegemonic Christian theology of the period (mid-17th century), which, following Walter Dignolo (see *The Idea of Latin America*), I will call here the theo-politics of knowledge, Descartes placed the ego at the foundation of knowledge in a position previously reserved for the “Christian God.” All of the attributes of this “Christian God” came to be located in the “subject,” the ego. In order to be able to claim the possibility of a knowledge beyond time and space, from the eyes of God, it was fundamental to dissociate the subject from all bodies and territories; that is, to empty the subject of all spatial or temporal determinations. Hence this dualism between the subject and any spatial and temporal dimensions was a fundamental constitutive axis of Cartesianism. It was this dualism, which would allow Descartes to situate the subject in a “non-place” and a “non-time,” thereby making it possible to claim to speak beyond all the spatio-temporal limits of the cartography of global power. To be able to place the individual subject at the foundation of all knowledge, the internal monologue of the subject without any dialogical relation with other human beings allows him to claim access to truth in its *sui generis* form, that is, as self-generated, insulated from social relations with other human beings. The myth of the self-production of truth by the isolated subject

is a constitutive part of the myth of modernity, the myth of a self-generated and insulated Europe, which develops on its own without depending on anyone else on earth. So we can see that just like dualism, so too is solipsism constitutive of Cartesian philosophy. Without solipsism, there can be no myth of a subject with universal rationality that confirms itself as such. We see here the beginning of the ego-politics of knowledge (Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*), which is nothing less than a secularization of the Christian cosmology of the theo-politics of knowledge. In the ego-politics of knowledge, the subject of enunciation is erased, hidden, camouflaged by what Santiago Castro-Gómez has called zero-point philosophy. The latter is a point of view that hides itself as a point of view, or, put differently, the point of view that assumes having no point of view. We are dealing, then, with a philosophy in which the epistemic subject has no sexuality, gender, ethnicity, race, class, spirituality, language, or epistemic location within power relations, and a subject that produces truth from an interior monologue with himself without relation to anyone outside him. That is to say, we are dealing with a deaf philosophy, a philosophy without a face, which feels no gravity. This faceless subject floats through the sky without being determined by anything or anyone.

Enrique Dussel (see, for instance, *1492: El encubrimiento*) has reminded us on several occasions that the Cartesian “ego cogito” of “I think, therefore I am” is preceded by 150 years of the imperial “ego conquiro” of “I conquer, therefore I am.” We should recall that Descartes formulated his philosophy in Amsterdam at precisely the moment in the mid-17th century at which Holland came to be the core of the world-system. What Dussel is telling us with this is that the political, economic, cultural, and social conditions of possibility for a subject who assumes the arrogance of speaking as though it were the eye of God is a subject whose geopolitical location is determined by its existence as a colonizer/conqueror, that is, as Imperial Being. Therefore, the dualistic and solipsistic myth of a self-generated subject without any spatial-temporal location within global power relations inaugurates the epistemological myth of Eurocentered modernity. This refers to the myth of a self-generated subject with access to a universal truth beyond space and time by means of a monologue. That is, through a deafness toward the world and through erasing the face of the subject of enunciation, a blindness to its own spatial and corporeal location within the cartography of global power. This Cartesian solipsism will come to be questioned by Western philosophy itself. However, what will remain as a more permanent influence of Cartesianism up to the present day is the faceless, zero-point philosophy that would be taken up by the human sciences from the 19th century onward as the epistemology of axiological neutrality and empirical objectivity of the subject, which produces scientific knowledge.

Despite the fact that some currents like psychoanalysis and Marxism have questioned these premises, Marxists and psychoanalysts still tend to produce knowledge from the zero-point, that is, without questioning the place from which they speak and produce this knowledge. This is fundamental for our purposes because the concept of universality that will remain stamped on Western philosophy from Descartes onward will be an abstract universalism. Abstract in two senses: 1) Universalism Type 1: The first, in the sense of utterances, a knowledge which is detached from all spatio-temporal determination and claims to be eternal. 2) Universalism Type 2: The second, in the epistemic sense of a subject of enunciation that is detached, emptied of body and content, and of its

location within the cartography of global power from which it produces knowledge. As a result, the split of the subject from body and space allows Descartes to produce knowledge with claims to truth, universally valid for everyone on earth. The first type of abstract universalism (that of utterances) is only possible if one assumes the second (that of the subject of enunciation). The first sense of abstract universalism, that of a universalism based in a knowledge with pretensions of spatio-temporal universality, of utterances “abstracted” from all spatiality and temporality, has been interrogated within this very same Western cosmology and philosophy. But the second sense of abstract universalism, the epistemic sense of a subject of enunciation that is faceless and placeless in spatio-temporal terms, that of the ego-politics of knowledge, has persisted in our own times through the zero-point of Western science -even among those who have criticized Descartes-, and this represents one of the most pernicious legacies of Cartesianism.

In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant, writing a century after Descartes (in the 18th century), sought to resolve some of the dilemmas of Cartesian universalism by making the categories of space and time innate to the minds of “men,” and as a result universal, *a priori* categories of all knowledge. The transcendental Kantian subject cannot produce knowledge outside the categories of time and space, as Cartesianism claims to do, because these categories are already within the minds of all men. For Kant, these are the conditions of possibility of universalist intersubjectivity, in which all men would recognize a form of knowledge as true and universal. Against Descartes, human knowledge for Kant has limits and cannot know “the thing-in-itself.” But reforming and continuing the Cartesian tradition, Kant sees the innate *a priori* categories shared in the minds of all men as what allows for the organization of the chaos of the empirical world in such a manner as to be able to produce a knowledge which is intersubjectively recognized as true and universal.

It is also important to note that Kant, also in *Critique of Pure Reason*, makes explicit the Eurocentrism that remains implicit in Descartes. In Kant’s work, transcendental reason is not a characteristic of all those beings who, from a decolonizing, anti-racist and anti-sexist perspective we would include among human beings. For Kant, transcendental reason belongs fundamentally to those considered to be “men.” If we take up his anthropological works, we can see that for Kant transcendental reason is predominantly male, white, and European (see Kant, *Anthropology*). African, Indigenous Asian, and Southern European (Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese) men and all women (including Europeans) do not have the same access to “reason” (see Eze). The geography of reason changes with Kant, since he writes from 18th-century Germany at precisely the moment in which other empires in Northwestern Europe (including France, Germany, and England) displace Holland and in competition among themselves constitute the new core of the world-system.

Kant maintains the Cartesian mind-body dualism and solipsism, but in a reformed and updated form. He questions the first type of abstract Cartesian universalism (that of the utterances), that is, the possibility of the eternal knowledge of the thing-in-itself, beyond all spatio-temporal categories. But he maintains and deepens the second type of abstract Cartesian universalism, the epistemological type, where upon making explicit what was implicit in Descartes, we see the privilege of “European man” in the production of universal knowledges. That is to say, on the level of the subject of enunciation a particular defines the universal for the rest of the planet. Therefore,

when Kant proposes his cosmopolitanism, this is really a European provincialism camouflaged as universalist cosmopolitanism and sold to the rest of the world as an imperial design (see Eze).

In the first three decades of the 19th century, Hegel revolutionizes Western philosophy in important ways. In both, the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* and the *Encyclopedia*, he questions solipsism in order to situate the subject of enunciation in its historico-universal context, and in the *Phenomenology* he overcomes dualism by proposing the identity of subject and object. Hegel accomplishes this by questioning Kantian transcendentalism in two ways: 1) instead of innate categories, Hegel historicizes philosophical categories (see *Lectures*), and 2) instead of the Kantian dualism about the impossibility of knowing the thing-in-itself, for Hegel truth is the whole, that is, the very process of the dialectical movement of thought that grasps the real movement of the thing-in-itself (see *Phenomenology*). For Hegel, the movement of thought moves from abstract to concrete. The development of categories runs parallel to universal history, as the latter is an expression of the former. Categories or concepts are deduced from the mediations, contradictions, and negations of thought, and move from abstract universals toward concrete universals. By the negation of categories, Hegel does not mean their disappearance, but merely their subsumption, that is, that simple categories are maintained as determinations of more complex ones. Through this movement, Hegel claims to arrive at an Absolute Knowledge that is valid beyond time and space. By abstract universalism, Hegel understands simple categories, that is, those lacking determinations, which do not contain within themselves other categories. Simple categories, abstract universals, are Hegel's point of departure for knowledge production.

The concrete universal for Hegel represents those complex categories that, once thought, they have passed through various negations and mediations and are rich with multiple determinations (Hegel *Encyclopedia; Lectures*). By multiple determinations, Hegel understands those complex categories that contain through subsumption (but not disappearance) the simplest categories, after the latter are negated through a dialectical process of thought. The Hegelian dialectical method is an epistemic mechanism that subsumes and transforms all alterity and difference into part of the Same, until arriving at the Absolute Knowledge which would be "the knowledge of all knowledge" and which would coincide with the end of history, conceived in that way because from that point onward, nothing new could be produced on the level of thought and human history. In the claim to Absolute Knowledge, Hegel ends up betraying his innovation on the level of Type I universalism, that of utterances, when instead of continuing with his historicization of categories and utterances, Absolute Knowledge serves as a new sort of Cartesian universalism that is true for all of Humanity and for all time and space. The difference between Descartes and Hegel would be that for the first, eternal universalism is *a priori*, whereas for the second, the eternal universal would only be possible through an *a posteriori* historical reconstruction of the Universal Spirit throughout the entire history of Humanity. But by "Humanity," Hegel does not mean all humans. He saw himself as the philosopher of philosophers, as the philosopher of the end of history. In continuation with the epistemic racism of those Western philosophers who preceded him, Hegel understood Universal Spirit, reason, as moving from East to West (Hegel, *Lectures*). The East is the stagnant past, the West is the present that developed the Universal Spirit, and white

America is the future. If Asia represented an inferior stage of Universal Spirit, Africa and the indigenous world did not even form part of it, and women were not even mentioned, except when speaking of marriage and the family. For Hegel, Absolute Knowledge, which represents a concrete universal in the sense that it results from multiple determinations, could only be achieved by white-Christian-heterosexual-European men and the multiplicity of determinations of Absolute Knowledge are thereby subsumed to the interior of Western cosmology/philosophy. Nothing remains outside in a position of alterity in Hegelian Absolute Knowledge. As a result, the Cartesian and Kantian epistemological racism of abstract epistemic universalism (Type II), in which the universal is defined on the basis of the particular (Western man), remains intact in Hegel. Other philosophies like those in the East are deemed inferior, and in the case of indigenous and African philosophies, they are not even worthy of the name philosophy since Universal Spirit never passed through those geographic zones.

Karl Marx, writing in the mid-19th century, makes important modifications to this tradition of Western philosophical thought. I will limit myself here to the two types of universalism in discussion. Marx criticizes the Hegelian dialectic for its idealism and criticizes Feuerbach's materialism for its mechanicism/reductionism, that is, for its lack of dialectic in the face of the human practice of transforming nature and oneself. For Marx, the Hegelian movement from the abstract to the concrete is not simply a movement of philosophical categories, but rather one of categories of political economy (see *Grundrisse*). Against Hegel, for Marx the determinations of political economy over the social life of humans gain primacy over conceptual determinations. Therefore, in Marx, the Hegelian elevation from the abstract to the concrete is understood as a movement of thought within the political-economic categories of his epoch. Although his definition of the abstract and the concrete is very similar to that of Hegel, in which the concrete is rich in multiple determinations, Marx differentiates himself from Hegel in the primacy that he grants to the categories of political economy and in positing a movement prior to the elevation from the abstract to the concrete which Hegel does not recognize. This is the movement from the concrete to the abstract; that is, from sensory perception and empirical reality situated within a moment in the history of the evolution of political economy and class struggle toward more abstract categories (see Marx, *Grundrisse*).

Just like Hegel, Marx historicizes these categories. However, that which serves as a starting point for Hegel, that is, the most abstract universal categories from which reality is deduced, becomes arrival points in Marx. In Marx's materialist turn, the most abstract categories are those that are produced through a very complex historical-social process of thought. Therefore, for Marx, the movement of thought first moves from the concrete to the abstract in order to produce simple and abstract categories, only to then return from the abstract to the concrete to produce complex categories. Hegel saw the second movement (from the abstract to the concrete, from simple concepts to complex ones), but as a result of his idealism he was blind to the first movement (from the concrete to the abstract, from empty concepts to simpler ones). For example, the category of labor is a simple one that emerges in a particular moment of human history when labor is socially detached from its concrete multiplicity. In agreement with Marx, this only occurs in the capitalist

system when mercantile relations come to predominate in the social relations of production. Economic thought can only create this category as a simple and abstract concept at a determinate moment in the development of human history. Previously, to speak of labor one would refer to the concrete labor carried out by the person: shoemaker, seamstress, farmer, etc. It is only when these various tasks are measured socially according to their exchange value (the socially-necessary labor time for the production of a commodity), and not according to use value (the kind of qualitative labor involved in production), that the emergence of the category “labor” becomes socially possible as an abstract concept indifferent to particular concrete labor. That is to say, for Marx thought does not spring from the heads of people in a determinate moment of the development of Spirit as seems to be the case for Hegel, but emerges instead from the determinate, concrete, historico-social situation of the development of the political economy. So Marx epistemically situates the production of knowledge not as the result of the development of Spirit in an epoch, but rather of the material development of the relations of production and forces of production (“mode of production”).

This grounding of the history of Hegelian Spirit in the history of the political economy and its relation to the thought of an epoch is what causes Marx to give a materialist turn to the Hegelian dialectic. As a result, Marx would emphasize the class character of the political, theoretical, and philosophical perspective in question. The point of view of the proletariat would be for Marx the epistemological departure point for a critique of what he deemed bourgeois political economy. This represented an important rupture with the Western philosophical tradition with regard to these two types of universalism. In Type I, the universalism of utterances, Marx situated these utterances, as did Hegel, in their historical context. Against Hegel, this historical context was no longer that of Universal Spirit, but rather the development of the political economy, the mode of production, and the corresponding class struggle. The conditions of production assume primacy over consciousness in all historical eras, still an abstract universal utterance, but one in which the operation of the determination “in the last instance” of economic processes will vary in each epoch. We have here an abstract universal that is filled with the political-economic content of every historical epoch, thereby becoming concrete.

In Type II, the abstract epistemic universalism of the subject of enunciation, Marx situated the position from which subjects think in relation to classes and class struggle. Hence, against the tradition that spans from Descartes to Hegel, Marx situates his geopolitics of knowledge in relation to social classes. Marx thinks from the historico-social situation of the European proletariat, and it is on the basis of this perspective that he proposes a global/universal design as the solution to the problems of all humanity: communism. What Marx maintains in common with the Western Bourgeois philosophical tradition is that his universalism, despite having emerged from a particular location—in this case, the proletariat—does not problematize the fact that this subject is European, masculine, heterosexual, white, Judeo-Christian, etc. Marx’s proletariat is a conflictive subject internal to Europe, which does not allow him to think outside the Eurocentric limits of Western thought. Neither cosmological and epistemological diversity nor the multiplicity of sexual, gender, racial, and religious power relations are incorporated or epistemically situated within his thought.

Just like the Western thinkers that preceded him, Marx participates in the epistemic racism in

which there only exists a single epistemology with access to universality: the Western tradition. In Marx, in the epistemic universalism of the second type, the subject of enunciation remains concealed, camouflaged, hidden beneath a new abstract universal that is no longer “man,” “the transcendental subject,” “the ego,” but instead “the proletariat” and its universal political project, “communism.” Hence the 20th-century communist project was, albeit from the left, yet another Western global imperial/colonial design which under the Soviet empire attempted to export to the rest of the world its universal abstract of “communism” as “the solution” to global problems. Marx reproduces an epistemic racism much like that of Hegel, which does not allow him to grant to non-European peoples and societies either temporal coevalness or the capacity to produce thought worthy of being considered part of the philosophical legacy of humanity or world history. For Marx, non-European peoples and societies were primitive, backwards, that is, Europe’s past. They had not reached either the development of the forces of production or the levels of social evolution of European civilization. As a result, in the name of civilizing them and pulling them out of the ahistoric stagnation of pre-capitalist modes of production, Marx would support the British invasion of India in the 18th century and the United States’ invasion of Northern Mexico in the 19th century.

For Marx, the “Asiatic mode of production” was the Orientalist concept through which he characterized non-Western societies. This “Asiatic mode of production” was characterized by its incapability of change and transformation, that is, by its always infinite and eternal temporal reproduction. Marx participated in the linearity of time characteristic of Western evolutionist thought. Capitalism was a more advanced system and, following Eurocentered modernity’s rhetoric of salvation (Mignolo, *Local Histories*), it was better for the non-European peoples to accelerate their evolutionary process toward capitalism through imperial invasions than to continue their stagnation in antiquated forms of social production. This economicist evolutionism would lead 20th-century Marxists down a blind alley. Marxist thought, despite being from the left, ended up trapped in the same problems of Eurocentrism and colonialism that had imprisoned Eurocentered thinkers of the right.

At this point, I want to highlight two crucial points:

- 1- Any cosmopolitanism or global proposal that is constructed through the abstract universalism of the second type, that is, through the epistemological universalism of the ego-politics of knowledge, will not be able to avoid becoming another global imperial/colonial design. If universal truth is constructed through the epistemology of a particular territory or body (whether it be Western, Christian, or Islamic), and through the exclusion of others, then the cosmopolitanism or global proposal that is constructed through this abstract universalist epistemology will be inherently imperialist/colonial.
- 2- Abstract epistemic universalism in the modern/colonial Western philosophical tradition forms an intrinsic part of epistemological racism. Another way of saying this is: epistemic racism is inherent to modern Western philosophy. If universal reason and truth can only emerge through a white-European-masculine-heterosexual subject, and if the only tradition of thought with this capacity for universality and with access to truth is the Western tradition (inferiorizing all non-Western knowledge), then there can be no abstract universalism

without epistemic racism. Epistemological racism is intrinsic to a Western “abstract universalism” which conceals who speaks and from where they speak.

So the question is: How can we escape the dilemma between isolated provincial particularisms and abstract universalisms camouflaged as “cosmopolitan,” but equally provincial? How can we decolonize Western universalism?

2. Aimé Césaire and an “Other” Universalism

In order to escape the predicament of the ego-politics of knowledge, it is absolutely necessary to shift the geography of reason toward “an-other” geopolitics and ego-politics of knowledge. Here we will shift the geography of reason from Western philosophers to the Afro-Caribbean thinker Aimé Césaire, native from the island of Martinique, who was Frantz Fanon’s teacher. Césaire is one of the most important decolonial thinkers and his immense contribution forms the point of departure for an era of “Césairean Decolonial Sciences” as opposed to “Cartesian Colonial Sciences” (see Maldonado-Torres). I am going to focus here on an unexplored area of the literature on Césaire’s thought: his unique and original decolonial concept of “universality.” In his letter of resignation to the French Communist Party in the mid-1950s, which was addressed to the Secretary General of the time Maurice Thorez, Césaire attacks the abstract universalism of Eurocentric Marxist thought. Césaire writes the following:

Provincialism? Absolutely not. I’m not going to confine myself to some narrow particularism. But nor do I intend lose myself in a disembodied universalism. There are two ways to lose oneself: through walled-in segregation in the particular, or through dissolution into the “universal.” My idea of the universal is that of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all particulars, the deepening and coexistence of all particulars. (84)

Eurocentrism lost itself down the path of the disembodied universalism that dissolves all particulars into the universal. The concept of “disembodied” is crucial here. For Césaire, abstract universalism is that which from a hegemonic particularism seeks to set itself up as an imperial global design for the entire world, and which through presenting itself as “disembodied,” conceals the epistemic locus of enunciation. This epistemic movement, typical of the Eurocentric epistemologies of the “zero-point” and the “ego-politics of knowledge” has been central to colonial projects. With this critique, Césaire, setting out from the memory of slavery and the experience of the body-politics of knowledge of a French Caribbean Black subject, discloses and makes visible the white-Western geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge camouflaged under the “disembodied” abstract universalism of the ego-politics of knowledge.

The universalist republicanism of the French empire has been one of the most important exponents of abstract universalism in its effort to subsume, dilute, and assimilate all particulars under the hegemony of a single particularity, in this case white Western man. It is this universalism that a large part of the white, creole elites in Latin America, imitating French imperial republicanism,

have reproduced in discourses of the “nation” that dissolve African and indigenous particularities into an abstract, universal “nation” that privileges the particularity of the European heritage of white creoles over all others. But we see the reproduction of this colonial, Eurocentered universalism not only in discourses of the right, but also in contemporary Marxist and post-Marxist currents, as will be discussed below.

Against this project of abstract, racist, imperial universalism, and against Third World fundamentalisms, Césaire’s decolonization, based on the Afro-Caribbean experience, does not affirm a narrow and closed particularism which leads to a segregationist provincialism or fundamentalism that closes itself in its own particularity. For Césaire, decolonization instead means the affirmation of a concrete universal into which all particulars are deposited. If abstract universalism establishes vertical relations between peoples, Césaire’s concrete universalism is necessarily horizontal in the relations that it establishes between particularities. Here, the idea of concrete universalism acquires a very different meaning than it had in Hegel and Marx. If concrete universalism in Hegel and Marx referred to those concepts rich with multiple determinations but within a single cosmology and a single episteme (in this case the Western), in which the movement of the dialectic crushes all alterity into the Same, for Césaire, the concrete universal is that which results from multiple cosmological and epistemological determinations as opposed to a uni-verse). Césairean concrete universalism is the result of a horizontal process of critical dialogue between peoples who relate to one another as equals. Abstract universalism is inherently authoritarian and racist, while Césaire’s concrete universalism is profoundly democratic. Césaire’s philosophical intuition, thought through an Afro-Caribbean geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge, has been a source of inspiration for the formulation of practical ways out of the dilemmas of exploitation and domination in the contemporary world-system beyond Eurocentric fundamentalism and Third World fundamentalisms. Inspired by Césaire’s philosophical intuitions, I will attempt to answer the following questions: What would represent today a Césairean concrete-universalist project of decolonization? What are the political implications of this project? How can these philosophical intuitions of Césaire be concretized in a project for the radical transformation of the colonial power-matrix of this “European/Euro-North-American capitalist/patriarchal modern/colonial world-system” (see Grosfoguel)?

3. Transmodernity as a Utopian Decolonization Project

A horizontal, liberatory dialogue as opposed to a vertical, Western monologue requires the decolonization of global power relations. We cannot assume a Habermasian consensus (see Habermas) or horizontal relations of equality between cultures and peoples when these are divided on the global level into the two poles of the colonial difference. However, we can begin to imagine “alter-ative” worlds beyond the dilemma of Eurocentric fundamentalism versus Third World fundamentalisms. I will focus here on the concept of transmodernity as conceived by Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel.ⁱⁱ His particular use of the concept is an utopian project meant to transcend the Eurocentric version of modernity. In opposition to the project of Habermas,

which sees as its central task the need to complete the unfinished and incomplete project of modernity, Dussel's transmodernity is a project that seeks through a long process to complete the unfinished project of decolonization. Transmodernity would represent the concretization at the level of a political project of the concrete universalism that Césaire's philosophical intuition invites us to construct. Instead of a modernity centered on Europe/Euro-North-America and imposed on the rest of the world as an imperial/colonial global design, Dussel argues for a multiplicity of critical, decolonizing perspectives against and beyond Eurocentered modernity, from the various epistemic locations of the colonized people of the world. Just as there is no absolute outside of this world-system, there is not an absolute inside. Alternative epistemologies can provide what Caribbean cultural critic Édouard Glissant proposes as a "diversality" of responses to the problems of the actually existing modernity (see particularly his *Poetics of Relation*). The philosophy of liberation can only come from the critical thinkers of each culture in dialogue with other cultures. Women's liberation, democracy, civil rights, and those forms of economic organization that represent alternatives to the current system can only emerge from the creative responses of local ethico-epistemic projects. As a number of Third World women have pointed out, Western women cannot impose their understanding of liberation on women from the Islamic or Indigenous world (see Mohanty, *Feminism*; Lamrabet, *El Corán*). Similarly, Western men cannot impose their understanding of democracy on non-European peoples. This does not represent a call to seek fundamentalist or nationalist solutions to the global coloniality of power. It is a call to seek in epistemic diversality and transmodernity a strategy or an epistemic mechanism towards a decolonized, transmodern world that moves us beyond both the Eurocentric First-Worldist and Eurocentric Third-Worldist fundamentalisms.

During the last 520 years of the "European/Euro-North-American capitalist/patriarchal modern/colonial world-system" we went from "convert to Christianity or I'll kill you" in the 16th century, to "civilize or I'll kill you" in the 18th and 19th centuries, to "develop or I'll kill you" in the 20th century, and more recently, the "democratize or I'll kill you" at the beginning of the 21st century. We have never seen respect or recognition of Indigenous, Islamic, or African forms of democracy as a systematic and consistent Western policy. Forms of democratic alterity are rejected *a priori*. The Western liberal form is the only one that is considered legitimate and accepted, provided that it does not begin to infringe upon hegemonic Western interests. If the non-European populations do not accept the terms of liberal democracy, it is imposed on them by force in the name of progress and civilization. Democracy must be reconceptualized in a transmodern form in order to decolonize itself of its Western, liberal form, that is, from the racialized and capitalist form of Western democracy.

By radicalizing Emmanuel Levinas's notion of exteriority, Dussel sees the epistemic potential of those relatively external spaces that have not been completely colonized by European modernity. These external spaces are neither pure nor absolute, but rather they have been produced and affected by the modernity/coloniality of the world-system. It is from the geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge of this exteriority or relative marginality that decolonial thinking emerges as a critique of modernity, towards a transmodern, pluriversal, decolonized world of multiple and diverse

ethico-political projects in which there can exist a truly equal and horizontal communication and dialogue between the peoples of the world that goes beyond the logics and practices of domination and exploitation characteristic of the eurocentered world-system. However, in order to achieve this utopian project it is fundamental to transform the system of domination and exploitation of the colonial power matrix within the current “European/Euro-North-American capitalist/patriarchal modern/colonial world-system” (see Grosfoguel).

4. Post-modernity vs. Trans-modernity?

Nothing that I have said up to this point has anything to do with the postmodernist perspective. The transmodern position is not the equivalent of postmodernist critique. Postmodernism is a Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism, and as a result reproduces all of the problems of modernity/coloniality. We will take the example of the postmodernism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and contrast this perspective with that of Zapatismo.

For Laclau and Mouffe, the processes of the formation of hegemony are constituted when a particular subject becomes an empty signifier through which all particulars are identified and stamped with meaning, establishing chains of equivalence between themselves and simultaneously creating chains of difference against a common enemy. This counter-hegemonic power bloc is always hegemonized by a particular that becomes the representative of all forms of oppression against a common enemy, but which does not incorporate each particularity into itself, instead dissolving these into the abstract universal of the empty signifier which represents the particular subject, articulated into chains of equivalence among the oppressed. Therefore, the shout of “Viva Perón” is an example of a hegemonic process (Laclau, *La razón*). This cry of “Viva Perón,” through which all of the oppressed would identify with one another, dissolves all particular demands into an abstract universal, in this case privileging the Peronist movement through its signifier “Perón,” which hegemonizes the popular power bloc against the common enemy. The problem with the position of Laclau and Mouffe is that they cannot conceive of other forms of universalism beyond the abstract, Eurocentered universalism in which a particular presents itself as representative of all particularities without recognizing them in their plenitude, thereby dissolving their particularity and preventing the new universal from emerging through the negotiation among particulars. Of course, for them there is a limit to the recognition of difference: epistemological alterity. The epistemic alterity of non-European peoples is not recognized in their work. They recognize only those differences internal to the horizon of meaning of Western cosmology and epistemology. For Laclau and Mouffe, there is no outside—not even a relative outside—to Western thought.

Let us contrast this form of universalism to that which is proposed by the Zapatistas and the “Other Campaign.” It is worth clarifying that here I am not prejudging the failure or success of a political vision, since in political struggle nothing is guaranteed. It can win or lose, but what I want to emphasize here is an Other understanding of politics. The Zapatistas, far from coming to the people with a pre-made and canned program as is the case with most if not all political parties from right to left, set out from the Tojolabal Indigenous notion of “walking while asking questions.” This

“walking while asking questions” proposes an Other way of doing politics, very different from the “walking while preaching” of the Judeo-Christian, Western cosmology reproduced in equal measure by Marxists, conservatives, and liberals. “Walking while asking questions” is linked to the Tojolabal understanding of democracy as “commanding while obeying,” in which “those who command obey, and those who obey command,” which is very distinct from Western democracy, in which “those who command do not obey,” and “those who obey do not command.” Setting out from this “Other” cosmology, the Zapatistas, with their “Tojolabal Marxism,” begin an “Other Campaign” from the “rearguardism” that moves forward “asking questions and listening,” instead of a “vanguardism” which “preaches and convinces.” (see EZLN). The idea or hope of the “Other Campaign” was that after a long critical transmodern dialogue with all of the Mexican people, it will be possible to bring together a program for struggle, a universal concrete (in the Césairean sense) which bears within it the particular demands of all the subjects and epistemes of all oppressed Mexicans. The Zapatistas do not set out from an abstract universal (socialism, communism, democracy, the nation, as floating or empty signifiers) in order to then preach to and convince all Mexicans of the correctness of this view. Rather, they set out from the idea of “walking while asking questions,” in which the program of struggle is a concrete universal constructed as a *result*, never as a starting point, of a critical transmodern dialogue which includes within itself the epistemic diversity and the particular demands of all the oppressed people of Mexico. Notice that this is an-Other Universal, or as Walter D. Mignolo (see *Local Histories*) would say, a pluriversal very much different from those abstract universals of the “empty signifier” which characterizes the hegemonic processes of Laclau and Mouffe, Gramsci’s “subaltern,” or Hardt and Negri’s “multitude.” The decolonization of the Eurocentered, Western understanding of universality is a central task in order to make possible the Zapatista motto of constructing “a world in which other worlds fit.”

5. Vanguard Party vs. Rearguard Movement

This discussion has fundamental implications for contemporary debates on the left. The Leninist party sets out from a messianic Christian understanding of cosmology. When Lenin tells us “without revolutionary theory, there is no revolutionary movement,” (23) he is using Karl Kautsky as a model. Lenin cites Kautsky to say that the workers were incapable of producing class consciousness and revolutionary theory because they did not have the capacity to spontaneously produce either their own theory or class consciousness. As a result, these can only arrive to them from without, that is to say, by preaching to them. And who is it that produces this theory and goes forth to preach it? For Lenin, following Kautsky, it is only bourgeois intellectuals, critical of their own class position, who can produce the consciousness and theory that the proletariat needs in order to emancipate itself. Hence the need for a vanguard party.

This is another old debate which must be reconsidered through decolonial lenses. In Lenin via Kautsky, we see the old colonial episteme reproduced, in which theory is produced by white-bourgeois-patriarchal-Western elites and the masses are passive beings, objects rather than subjects of theory. Behind a purported secularism, this perspective reproduces Judeo-Christian messianism

embodied in a secular, leftist Marxist discourse. The difference between Lenin and Kautsky lies in the type of messianism. Lenin reproduces in a very crude manner Christian messianism, whereas Kautsky reproduces Judaic messianism.

In Jewish messianism, since the Messiah has never arrived, what is important is the message rather than the messenger. On the other hand, in Christian messianism, since the Messiah is believed to have not only arrived, but also resurrected and still lives, the messenger is more important than the message. In Jewish messianism, the prophets announce the arrival of the Messiah and the end of earthly empires. In Christian messianism, the Messiah is there and the task is not so much to question what he said, but rather to give oneself over to the Truth (the Holy Message) of the Messiah unquestioningly. From this Leninist Christian messianism, we arrive at Stalin, a Christian seminarian converted to Bolshevism. Stalin is the result of Lenin.

What happens when politics abandons Judeo-Christian cosmology for other cosmologies? Without denying the possibility of other messianisms, in the Zapatistas the decolonial turn appears in an “Other” form of doing politics which, setting out from Indigenous cosmologies from Southern Mexico, proposes alternate forms of political practice. The Zapatistas set out from “walking while asking questions,” and from there propose a “rearguard movement” which contributes to linking together a broad movement on the basis of the “wretched of the earth” of all Mexico. “Walking while asking questions” leads to what the Zapatistas call a “rearguard movement,” against the “walking while preaching” of Leninism, which gives rise to the “vanguard party.”

The vanguard party sets out from a canned, *a priori* program which, through being characterized as “scientific,” is self-defined as “true.” From this premise follows a missionary politics of preaching in order to convince and recruit the masses to the truth of the vanguard party program. Very different from this is the post-messianic politics of the Zapatistas, which sets out instead from “asking questions and listening” and in which the “rearguard” movement becomes a vehicle for a critical, transmodern dialogue which is epistemically diversal, and as a result, decolonial.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article is to show the limits of Western male concept of “uni-versal” and to show a different concept of “universal” produced from a different geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge. While the Western Male philosophical tradition uses a “Uni-versal” notion that is imperialist and authoritarian, there are critical notions that are “pluri-versal” or “multi-versal” developed from the Global South that represent a truly democratic decolonial alternative to the former. I tried to argue that the Western male philosophical tradition uses a concept of “Universality” that is inherently epistemically sexist and racist. I tried to show how Césaire, Dussel and the Zapatistas are examples of an-Other way of thinking about the “Universal” that is open to epistemic diversity and inter-epistemic dialogues. The call for epistemic diversity here is not an “epistemic liberal multiculturalism” where every subalternized epistemic identity is represented leaving intact the epistemic racist/sexist privilege of Western males. On the contrary, this is a call to overcome the provincialism of Western male epistemology and the invisibility it produces on the

social-historical experience of subjects that have been submitted to gender, sexual and racial oppression. The idea here is to produce a more comprehensive and rigorous critical thought beyond epistemic racism/sexism. However, in order to have a more rigorous concept of Human Dignity, Democracy, Women Liberation, etc., we need to overcome the hegemonic temptation of defining these concepts in a Western-centric provincial way. The latter is the epistemology that leads to imperialist, patriarchal and colonial paternalism where one (Western Man) defines what is good for the rest (Women, Third World people, gay/lesbians, etc.). To move beyond this schema would imply to take seriously the critical thinking produced from other genealogies of thought that have been historically subalternized and considered inferior to the West. This is neither a relativism of “everything goes” nor an epistemic populism where everything said by a “subalternized” subject is already equivalent to “critical thinking.” If I do not belong or do not know anything about a “non-Western” tradition of thought, I need a minimum rationality to decide with whom I will establish critical inter-epistemic dialogues. The criteria for me is political. In order to build dialogues and coalitions, we need to look for alliances and inter-epistemic conversations with those subjects that reunite in their epistemic-ethic-political projects a combination of two or more of the following “negative universality”: anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist. This “negative universality” leads to conversations within the Muslim world with Islamic Feminist and not with Al-Queda, or within the Aymara world with Evo Morales and not with Victor Hugo Cárdenas, or within the African-American world with Angela Davis and not with Condoleeza Rice, or within the Western world with Boaventura de Sousa Santos and not with Nicolas Sarkozy.

Since not every “subalternized” subject or thinker from an “inferiorized” epistemology is already a critical thinker, “epistemic populism” should be refused. The success of the system is precisely to make those who are socially below to think epistemically like those who are socially above. So, we cannot use social location as the only criteria. Epistemic location is crucial here. What I am calling for is to take seriously the critical thinking produced by “subalternized” subjects from below as a point of departure to a radical critique of the hegemonic power structures and knowledge structures. The West does not have a monopoly over critical thinking. The “Westernized Left” falls into a coloniality of knowledge from the left that is as epistemically racist and sexist as the Westernized right wing discourses. There are critical thinkers from other traditions of thought that have to be taken seriously not due to a “liberal multiculturalism” or a particularistic “identity politics,” but because of their important contributions to a better understanding of the power and knowledge structures of the system we inhabit for the past 520 years. To ignore them or to not take them seriously, is a lost to the struggles for a more humane future. What we need to avoid is the kind of “positive universality” about solutions where one defines for the rest what is “the Solution” (socialism, communism, radical democracy, etc.). We need a “negative universality” to identify friends and enemies but we should not have a “positive universality” about solutions. There will be as many solutions as ethic-epistemic-political projects exist in the world. How to solve the problems of patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism and coloniality should be open to the diverse local imperial/colonial histories, diverse epistemic perspectives and diverse contexts faced by resistance movements. The important thing is that we are all struggling for a more egalitarian, democratic,

transmodern world beyond capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism and coloniality. “Positive Universality” would imply to reproduce from the left once again the problematic Western-centric concept of “universal” discussed in this article. The “pluri” as opposed to the “uni” is not to support everything said by a subaltern subject from below, but a call to produce critical decolonial knowledge that is rigorous, comprehensive, with a worldly-scope and non-provincial.

NOTES

ⁱ Translated by George Ciccariello-Maher. An earlier version of the essay was presented at the “Latin American Colloquium on Rural Education: Coloniality of Power and Alternative Latin American Perspectives,” National Pedagogical University, Centro Regional Valle de Tenza, Sutatenza, Boyacá, Colombia (21 September 2006).

ⁱⁱ See Dussel’s contribution to this special issue for an account of his conception of transmodernity.

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