

ABSTRACT

Calls to “decolonize” academic production may invoke progressive anti-Eurocentrism, but the theory of decoloniality identified with works by Walter Mignolo only trades in the most objectionable aspects of identity politics. Cloaked in an impenetrable jargon, decoloniality dehistoricizes and culturalizes colonialism, promoting some odious autocracies along the way.

The Jargon of Decoloniality

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I.

It's now been a number of years since the term "decolonial," together with its more activated verbal inflection, "decolonize," have become familiar across popular and media culture, especially in connection with identity politics. Still another variant, "decoloniality," joins these, though it is restricted to a narrower and more arcane academic lexicon. "Decolonization," located at a middlebrow point of discursive insertion, has by now followed. Here, however, those with sufficient awareness, if not a residual memory of its historical context, will recognize in "decolonization" an older term with a distinct political resonance that can be traced considerably further back to the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, if not earlier,

to the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland and the 1919 Amritsar massacre in British-ruled India. Certainly, by the time of the historic 1955 Bandung Conference of relatively newly independent and henceforth (for a time) nonaligned former colonies in Asia and Africa, a term such as “decolonial” would have been indissolubly linked to contemporary *anti*-colonial national liberation movements and to the actual historical process of decolonization then roughly at its apogee, particularly in what remained of formal European colonialism in many parts of Asia and much of Africa.

Not coincidentally, it was also a time well before the decolonial’s most immediate precursor among current academic jargon, the “postcolonial,” began making its appearance. This was in the 1980s, thanks in part to the earlier appearance and impact of Edward Said’s landmark *Orientalism*.¹ The intellectual ascendancy of poststructuralism and postmodernism had clearly left an imprint on this terminology as well. The postcolonial, comprising postcolonial theory, postcolonial studies, and postcolonial literature, seems so far to have resisted displacement by the decolonial. This is probably due to the rhetorical advantages of postcolonialism’s more narrowly descriptive and less militant resonance when it comes, for example, to such things as academic hiring and curricula.

A clear advantage of “decolonial” over “postcolonial,” however, is how easily it can be transformed into the imperative or exhortative, more conveniently transitive verb “decolonize.” This, as best as I can render it, means to “eliminate the racism from” or “expose the Eurocentric bias in” any given target perceived to be in need of such denunciation or critique. Along with more and more publications featuring the term “decolonizing” (e.g., book titles such as *Decolonizing the Map*; *Decolonizing the University*; and *Decolonizing Data*), see the new “Decolonize That!” series

1 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

being published by OR Books, with 2022 titles such as *Decolonize Museums*; *Decolonize Hipsters*; *Decolonize Self-Care*; and the forthcoming *Decolonize Multiculturalism*. The postcolonial will clearly not lend itself nearly so well to this kind of slogan-making. This is no doubt one reason for the challenge on postcolonialism's left flank to its niche as the more conventional status quo jargon.

II.

Yet slogans built around the terms “decolonial” and “decolonize” may in certain instances be traceable to “decoloniality,” despite its being the more narrowly academic term of art — and even to a Spanish original, “decolonialidad.” It may not be possible to be certain about this, but we likely owe such a possible crossover in significant part to the critic and scholar Walter D. Mignolo. Occupying an endowed chair at Duke University, Mignolo is without doubt the most frequently cited authority in the current explosion of scholarship proclaiming political and theoretical allegiance to decoloniality.² A native of Argentina initially trained as a scholar of both semiotics and Latin American literature of the colonial period, Mignolo credits the late Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano with introducing the concept of decoloniality — here in relation to Quijano's theory of the “colonial matrix of power” (originally “la colonialidad del poder”), purportedly first articulated in his 1991 article “Colonialidad y modernidad / racionalidad” (“Coloniality and Modernity / Rationality”).³ In Mignolo's numerous writings, stretching as far back as 1995's *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*:

2 An informal survey of dozens of articles featuring the terms “decolonial” and “decoloniality” archived on the well-known “academia.edu” website showed near universal allegiance to, or at least general approbation of, such authority.

3 Aníbal Quijano, “Colonialidad y modernidad / racionalidad,” *Perú Indígena* 13, no. 29 (1991). First published in English as “Coloniality and Modernity / Rationality,” in Göran Therborn, ed., *Globalizations and Modernities: Experiences and Perspectives of Europe and Latin America* (Stockholm: FRN, 1999).

Literacy, Territoriality, & Colonization and comprising his 2000 monograph, *Local Histories / Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*, decoloniality has either yet to make its literal appearance or has still not assumed its currently commandeering discursive position.⁴ Up until Mignolo's 2011 book, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, first preference is still being given to earlier coinages, such as Mignolo's erstwhile favorite, "post-Occidentalism," and to the by then (and still) ubiquitous "border thinking."⁵

In all the iterations of Mignolo's high-visibility theorizing, however, the allegedly subversive, de-Westernizing thrust of what is now an officially trademarked decoloniality is traced back to a point long predating the near-contemporary inception of its jargon. Its origins purportedly go all the way back to the beginnings of the European penetration, conquest, and colonization of the Americas, Africa, and southern and eastern Asia in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. As such, what is claimed to be the subversive power of contemporaneous decoloniality is already said to reside in an indigenous, non-European decolonial resistance — a resistance to which Europe's first colonial exploits assuredly did give rise.⁶ Whatever the truth and whatever the

4 Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003 [1995]); Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories / Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012 [2000]).

5 Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). The perhaps not so ironic sound and flavor of speculative finance and the commodity trading floor — "futures" right next to "options" — is hard to miss in the subtitle. At this point, "decolonial" has made it to the front cover — even if following the standard academic colon and sharing second billing with the then still highly fashionable term "global."

6 Situating the origins of the theory — if not literally the jargon — at a point in the past long predating the introduction of the terminology itself is a move already well-rehearsed in the earlier escapades of postcolonialism. Witness, for

terminology currently affixed to and projected back onto them, the social and political legacy and importance of such historical struggles are often ignored and underplayed. But in lieu of their deeper historical analysis, what prevails in Mignolo's work is what I will refer to as the mere *jargon of decoloniality*, often descending into outright bombast.⁷

This is certainly true of Mignolo's most recent book in English. *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations* (hereafter *PDCI*) is a

example, Robert J. C. Young's *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016 [2003]). Here, such historic pre-postcolonial, anti-colonial, and revolutionary figures as Mohandas Gandhi, Frantz Fanon, and Ernesto "Che" Guevara are explicitly claimed as virtual founders of postcolonial theory, thereby appearing to lend something of their revolutionary, anti-colonial credentials, according to Young's anachronistic reconstruction, to the poststructuralism of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. For a critique, see also Sarika Chandra and Neil Larsen, "Postcolonial Pedigrees," *Cultural Critique* 62 (winter 2006).

7 In fairness, much the same can be said, although with varying degrees of turgidity, of a number of other contemporary proponents of decolonial "theory," among whom Mignolo himself has continued to stand out as the leading mouthpiece. These include, strictly inter alia, Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Santiago Castro-Gómez, and Mignolo's occasional coauthor, Catherine E. Walsh. Although I find much to criticize in his later work, tending as it does toward hollow, Mignolo-esque jargon, I hesitate to include the still justly renowned Argentine-Mexican scholar, philosopher, and liberation theologian Enrique Dussel, whose record of genuine intellectual integrity is vouchsafed by, among other earlier works, his important 1988 contribution to Marx scholarship, *Hacia un Marx desconocido: un comentario de los manuscritos del 61-63*. Quijano himself, despite his long, eminent, and often brilliant history as one of the key representatives of the great tradition of Marxian historiography and social science at Lima's National University of San Marcos during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, and what were for many years his contributions as a visiting scholar to the Immanuel Wallerstein circle at SUNY Binghamton's Fernand Braudel Center, finally succumbs to the jargon of decoloniality, helping to provide one of its conceptual trip wires with the formulation of the theory of the "coloniality of power." Here the inversion, quasi-Foucauldian, is strategic: Why not the more unambiguously historicizable "power of coloniality," or even simply the "power of colonialism"? To my mind, this deceptively simple inversion constitutes the crucial, albeit late and regrettable, de-historicizing category mistake in Quijano's thinking. Quijano's relationship to "decoloniality" can perhaps be compared to the relationship of Said to postcolonialism: sharing responsibility for its political pitfalls, even if still more politically defensible than many who then claimed to be his acolytes.

newly introduced collection of fourteen previously published and evidently somewhat revised essays and articles totaling well over five hundred pages.⁸ With near-total uniformity, consistency, and monotony, it reads as a loop of quasi-ritualized, self-repeating, almost incantatory terms and phrases that, in their sheer vertiginous range and repetitiveness, parody a genuine theoretical system. Quijano, celebrated here as a kind of oracle — hailing, as we are repeatedly reminded, from the “*South American Andes*” (my emphasis) — is credited by Mignolo with the exposure of an all-pervasive, Western, and Eurocentric “colonial matrix of power” (CMP).⁹ To this, an opposing “decolonial option” is held out to those of us prepared — or culturally or ethnically predisposed — to “delink,” i.e., practice “epistemic disobedience.” In response to anyone rude enough to observe the intra-academic boundaries of decoloniality, its jargon becomes especially thick, casuistical, and imperious. Mignolo invokes “the knowing of everyday living in communities for whom academic, scholarly, and scientific knowledge is perfectly irrelevant” — leaving the reader to wonder, meanwhile, just how much “decolonial theory” these “communities” themselves are reading ... or formulating.¹⁰ But Mignolo is careful to stipulate that “delinking from Western epistemology and aesthetics doesn’t equate with delinking from the institutions.” Decoloniality must be “introduced” into the latter (not *re-linked*?) but “carefully to avoid tainting [it] with academicism.” While conceding that “decoloniality could be fashionably consumed,”

8 Walter D. Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

9 The redundancy is symptomatic here: Is there a North American or European Andean mountain range somewhere, from which the mythically pure original site of an Incan Tawantinsuyo has been deviously uprooted? Even physical geography is apparently in danger of being “re-Westernized.”

10 Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, 12.

PDCI, like Britain's legendary King Cnut but without the latter's irony or humility, commands the tides to recede: "the political tasks of decolonial work *shall not be distracted* by its fashionable consumption."¹¹

Exercising the decolonial option further activates an impressively obfuscatory array of official decolonial neologisms, too overlapping, idiosyncratic, and numbingly baroque to catalogue fully here. But the latter follow a consistent and garish pattern formed by the purely terminological correspondences, often redundant variations, and pro forma substitutions that should be familiar to anyone reluctantly exposed to many modern intellectual and academic jargons. Thus, the Westernization said to be antithetical to decoloniality gives us not only a corresponding "de-Westernization" but even a subsequent, explicitly counterreformational danger of "re-Westernization." Still more: effectively synonymous with decoloniality and de-Westernization is something Mignolo dubs, in hushed tones, "the Third Nomos the Earth" — an ironic and telling spin-off from Carl Schmitt.¹²

Meanwhile, the rise of what Mignolo terms the "civilization-states" (as distinct from Westernized nation-states) of contemporary Russia, China, India, and Iran — with Turkey sometimes added on for good measure — is cited by *PDCI* as a sign that a radically new era of de-Westernization has dawned. In a telling

11 Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, 76, emphasis added.

12 See Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2006). Originally published in 1950, *Der Nomos der Erde* terms the new world-system inaugurated by the European discovery and colonization of the Americas, leading ultimately (and, for Schmitt, providentially) to the global hegemony of the United States, the earth's "Second Nomos." Mignolo has a curious penchant for conservative and right-leaning German intellectuals — including Oswald Spengler of *The Decline of the West*, for the presumably obvious reason, and Edmund Husserl, by analogy to whose *Logical Investigations* Mignolo claims to have conceived his own "decolonial" variety. (See *PDCI*, xviii, 6-7).

indication of how even relatively conjunctural, volatile, and reversible political oscillations and changes of government can evidently determine the difference between the “West” and its antithetical other, it is, according to *PDCI*, only the fall of Lula and Dilma Rousseff and the decline of the Brazilian Workers’ Party (PT) itself, giving way to the election of Jair Bolsonaro in late 2018, that tipped Brazil over into the camp of re-Westernization. Mignolo creates the impression here that Bolsonaro in fact took Brazil out of the BRICS summit, but this is false.¹³ Brazil itself, represented by the newly elected and fully engaged Bolsonaro, hosted the 11th BRICS summit in 2019. He continued to take part in both the 12th and 13th conclaves in 2020 and 2021 — events at which the Brazilian head of state shared the podium with such “de-Westernizers” as Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, and Narendra Modi. Regarding the “civilization-state” that is India under Modi and the BJP, Mignolo is, not surprisingly, all but silent — as he is regarding Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey and Iran under Ebrahim Raisi and the mullahs. Where the latter are mentioned in passing, the jargon of decoloniality après Mignolo takes on an equivocal flavor all its own:

The current tendencies in China, Russia, India, and Turkey to mutate the nation-state into the civilization-state are revealing signs of restituting what has been destituted. *I am not saying that civilization-states will be “better” than nation-states. I am just saying that most likely they will be.*¹⁴

BRICS, for Mignolo, becomes the CRI (China, Russia, and Iran): the “three pillars” of de-Westernization. Acronyms such as CRI and the ubiquitous CMP, grandiose epochal markers such as the

13 Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, xix, 294–5.

14 Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, xi–xii, emphasis added.

Third Nomos of the Earth and decoloniality itself, and especially prefixes acquire a particularly significant and exalted status in the jargon of decoloniality:

The change of era [from that of “Westernization” to “de-Westernization” or “decoloniality”] can no longer be captured by adding the prefix “post-.” The post- prefix is valid within re-Westernization, the counterreformation that intends to maintain the privileges built over five hundred years of Westernization, but it is meaningless for de-Westernization and decoloniality. The prefix “de-” takes the field, breaking up Western universality and totality into multiple temporalities, knowledges, and praxes of living. ... The de- prefix means that you disobey and delink from belief in universality and unipolarity; you take what you need to reconstitute that which has been destituted and that is relevant to the arising of multipolarity in the interstate relations and *pluriversality*.¹⁵

So much for the *post*-colonial! The “de-” of the decolonial, as jealous as the god of the Old Testament, shall have no other prefixes before it. “Multipolarity” and “pluriversality” are also continuously evoked lexical fixations in the Mignolo-certified jargon of decoloniality. Others include “destitution,” “restitution,” “the gnoseological” (evidently replacing and substituting a decolonially suspect epistemological), and “aesthesis” or “the aesthetic,” here conjuring a decolonized aesthetics.

But surely the most revealing feature of the jargon of decoloniality are *PDCI*'s pontificating instructions to the reader as to the genuine, full meaning — epochal, eschatological, and bordering on the cosmic — of nothing more than a change of prefixes. Encountering such extremes of rhetorical swagger and display brings to

15 Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, xi.

mind *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Theodor Adorno's scathing and still timely critical exposé of the debasement of language in the German existentialist philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers — described at one point as a jargon determined "by whether the individual words are loaded at the expense of the sentence, its propositional force, and the thought content."¹⁶ Setting aside the question of whether in *PDCI* and the Mignolo-esque jargon of decoloniality there still remains much, if any, sentence-level thought content available for sacrifice to the cult force of individual words, Mignolo here rests the very future of humanity on the variables of a linguistically subatomic level — on the difference between the "de-" and the "post-."

III.

After prolonged exposure to the jargon of decoloniality, the "de-" in "decolonial" actually begins to sound more appropriate: signifying, as it well might, the erasure or reversal not of colonialism itself but of its concept and historical referent. Why, after all, is there so little to be found in *PDCI* — and generally throughout the decolonial screeds of Mignolo — concerning the specifics of colonialism itself, its material basis and conditions, not to mention the actual, practically inexhaustible details of its historiography, anti-colonial movements proving no exception to this rule?¹⁷ Whatever the deeper reasons for it, this factual deficit is crucial to the critique and critical decipherment of the jargon of decoloniality — almost as if its terminological extravagances and redundancies and its

16 Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 8.

17 I find that there is little to be said about *PDCI*'s immediate precursor, 2018's *On Decoloniality*, which, aside from being coauthored by Mignolo and his sometime collaborator, Catherine E. Walsh, and its manifesto-like title, might as well have been included as an additional chapter or two in the longer collection that followed in 2021.

flat-out rhetorical hubris were ironic compensation for an underlying historical vacuum.

Part of the answer will no doubt also reflect the typically contemporary and cosmopolitan purview of more vernacular calls to “decolonize.” While, as a slogan, the latter does not necessarily ignore the historical impact of colonialism on questions of present-day racial injustice and struggles against the barriers set by national-imperial privilege, even the most practical and engaged demand for decolonizing does not usually get beyond the limits of identity politics and its conventional intellectual backdrop, culturalism.

Culturalism amounts, in brief, to the theory that cultural and ethnic identities and differences are what ultimately explain the world. Accordingly, the cause of social emancipation comes to be defined and determined by — if not reduced to — the struggle against the myths of ethnocultural inferiority and superiority that underly an oppressive status quo. Mignolo and the jargon of decoloniality are no exceptions here: it is culturalism, in this sense, that constitutes the omnipresent horizon delimiting what can and cannot be said and thought in works such as *PDCI* and in Mignolo’s voluminous writings preceding it, stretching back at least as far as 2000’s *Local Histories / Global Designs*. Thus, although a work like *PDCI* may outwardly appear to concern itself with history in its objective reality and complexity, its historical scope and purchase are in fact severely constrained and impoverished. Although engaging in repeated, general, and sweeping invocations of the era, beginning in the late fifteenth century, of European and Western world conquest and colonization, this one very general historical reference (with minor and incidental exceptions) is the only indication of Mignolo’s interest in or commitment to historicizing decoloniality. There can be little point in exploring the deeper material-historical basis of colonialism

if, as Mignolo asserts, the “real” itself is merely “an epistemic projection” and if “governance and economy” are no more than “epistemic fabrications.”¹⁸ *PDCI* is always quick to proclaim the historic dawning, however embattled, of a new de-Westernized era or a Third Nomos of the Earth, but key categories such as the colonial matrix of power and decoloniality itself remain supra-historical absolutes that possess near-mythical origins not subject to historicization. To subscribe to Mignolo-ist decolonial theory is to relinquish any notion that the material and social factors that condition the historical formation and appearance of absolutes such as “the West,” “de-Westernization,” and “decoloniality” can themselves be investigated and determined.

This is a rather stunning and scandalous state of affairs in any work claiming actual purchase on something as quintessentially historical as colonialism, including anti-colonialism and decolonization. It begs, among others, the question — to be addressed in the fourth and final section of this review — of how it is that any “theory” pertaining to colonialism but practically devoid of both detailed historical reference and any intellectual engagement with contemporary struggles against neocolonialism and imperialism could attract as many “decolonial” converts as it evidently has. But it follows, logically and inevitably, from the fundamental and disastrous category mistake to which culturalisms like Mignolo’s are irrevocably condemned once they venture onto a terrain inviting or requiring historical explanation. Culture and ethnicity are, of necessity, *explanandum*: what must be explained before, as categories, they can become *explanans*, that is, capable of explaining anything else. And it is ultimately only history — a universal that resists and refuses culturalization — that conditions and makes this locally explanatory function a possibility. Mignolo’s culturalism

18 Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, xvii, 49.

inevitably reduces the category of the universal itself (whence history as well) to the status of an artifact, if not an artifice, of a particular culture, that of Europe and the West. But if, by virtue of their purported cultural origin, all universals are really to be eliminated, the result would be cognitive paralysis. One can no more think, theorize, or criticize without the category of the universal than one can without that of the particular. A proscribed universality simply reenters the jargon of decoloniality through the back door as, say, de-Westernization, decoloniality itself, or pluriversality. Why not go still further and issue a demand for “pluri-universality”?

Yet more sinister implications follow from such a fallacy. By rejecting as Eurocentric and Westernized all claims to universality, Mignolo in *PDCI* clears a path for the surreptitious reentry of still other, thinly disguised universals far more insidious than self-parodies like pluriversality — so long, that is, as they possess the alibi of being anti-Western. Indeed, Mignolo’s explicit championing of the anti-Western “civilization-states” of China, Russia, and Iran exposes a flagrant decolonial flirtation with autocracy and great-nation chauvinisms. This is clearest in *PDCI*’s open, explicit, and frequently reiterated endorsement of Xi Jinping’s China and its challenge to re-Westernization. For, although “decoloniality is not” — and “cannot be” — “a state-led task,” “de-Westernization ... can only be advanced by a strong state that is economically and financially solid. That is why China is leading the way in this trajectory.”¹⁹ After an oddly condescending and dismissive nod to Mao Zedong (clearly an uncomfortable and by and large dispensable presence on the decolonial scene), Deng Xiaoping is credited by Mignolo with having de-linked China from Western dictates, as well as celebrated for having supposedly uncoupled capitalism

19 Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, xi.

from liberalism and neoliberalism.²⁰ “Capitalism with Chinese characteristics,” observes Mignolo, “was a sarcastic comment in Western media. And indeed it was and it is. And one could ask: what is wrong about that?”²¹ At the risk of sinning against decoloniality, one is inclined to ask, along with evidently increasing numbers of younger Chinese workers adhering to the philosophy of “tang ping” and opting to “lie flat” rather than work endless hours just to, at best, remain in place, whether what is wrong with that is not just capitalism itself.²² But Mignolo’s sympathies and admiration for Deng Xiaoping, Xi Jinping, and the upper echelons of the Chinese civilization-state do not appear to extend to rank-and-file Chinese workers themselves. Mignolo’s clear tendency to subordinate the class contradiction to questions of cultural and ethnic hierarchy and difference — if not to ignore class altogether — cannot conceal a de facto decolonial endorsement of current ruling, capitalist-class policies as long as they can be identified as “de-Westernizing.”

Meanwhile, Mignolo blithely dismisses the erstwhile Soviet Union, and with it an entire epoch in the history of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism of enormous, practically incalculable importance. There is nary a word in *PDCI* concerning the admittedly ambiguous, Cold War–overdetermined but nevertheless historic Soviet role up through at least the 1970s in helping to advance unprecedented anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles, including those of the PRC itself along with Cuba, Vietnam, and Angola. The USSR was, according to *PDCI*:

20 Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, 19.

21 Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, 19. The tendency to fumbling quasi-non-sequiturs is all too characteristic.

22 See Meagan Day, “China’s Downwardly Mobile Millennials Are Throwing in the Towel,” *Jacobin*, June 25, 2021.

a failed way to deal with the imperial difference, because it was acting on a Western system of ideas which did not correspond with or emerge from Russian local history. What was local were the rage and the anger against the Russian czarate. But the instrument, in this case communism, was borrowed.²³

No pan-Slavist, including Putin himself, would have put it any differently. That liberalism and Marxism, the “heirs of the Enlightenment,” neither could nor did assume a local Russian form must come as a shock to serious historians of eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth century Russia.²⁴ Applying the criteria of such blatantly culturalist — indeed, Orientalist — ideology, one wonders how Mignolo would classify such pre-Soviet Russian historical and cultural figures as Peter or Catherine the Great, Alexander Pushkin, Ivan Turgenev, or Nikolay Chernyshevsky. Are these Western or local Russian? And what of the millions of imperial subjects of pre-Soviet, tsarist Russia who were not themselves ethnic Russians or exclusively or primarily Russian-speaking? Do they, therefore, lie outside Russian history? Putin and his followers might, to be sure, prefer to see things this way.

IV.

Students of history informed by the works of Karl Marx as well as by the vast archive of historiography, social science, and philosophy

23 Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, 49.

24 For a careful and powerful refutation of the false opposition between the local and the universal, see, in particular, Nivedita Majumdar, *The World in a Grain of Sand: Postcolonial Literature and Radical Universalism* (London: Verso, 2021), 19: “Postcolonial theory’s misconceptions derive from an impoverished conceptual and normative repertoire, in which localism and universalism are not merely the only alternatives but are also mutually exclusive. This leaves us with an exotic and essentialized localism, and a Eurocentric universalism, as our sole options. I contend that the rejection of Eurocentric theories can be complemented by embracing another, richer and *non-parochial* form of universalism.” Ditto decoloniality.

they have helped to generate and shape will long since have learned how to counter the fallacies of culturalist anti-universalism. But to highlight, briefly, the basic ideas: Europe is the *historical* birthplace of capitalism and its correlative social formation — not the site of their purely mythical ethnocultural parthenogenesis. That social formation, once popularly known as bourgeois society, attempts, at first with relative success, to project the interests of the class that dominates it as universal, as identical with the interests of society as a whole. It is not long, however, before this claim to universality is contested from within the ranks of the mass of humanity oppressed and exploited by capitalism, including victims of its colonial and imperial interventions and violent territorial seizures and encroachments. And against that of the bourgeoisie — less and less credible as capitalism and its class interests become more openly repressive — there arises the opposing claim to universality advanced by revolutionary socialism and communism, the international, social universality of an aspirational classless society.

All this may strike the orthodox jargon of decoloniality as nothing but a Eurocentric “restitution” of Western privilege and the colonial matrix of power, but there is nothing egregiously “colonizing” about it. Nor does it seem plausible that the broader sympathy for “decolonizing” contemporary cosmopolitan institutions or even for a more generic, Mignolo-inspired decoloniality would choose to draw up its anti-universalist battle lines here. For all its default-setting culturalism and its touting of “pluriversality,” decolonial theory per Mignolo as a rule seems hesitant to cast a self-evidently global capitalism itself in strictly cultural terms or to declare it to be a mere “epistemic projection.” Excepting those less overt instances in which it can be slipped in on the back of “de-Westernization” and its “civilization-states” (see again Mignolo’s indirect endorsement of “capitalism with Chinese characteristics”), capitalism as such ultimately and effectively drops

out of the overall picture envisioned implicitly in *PDCI* and the jargon of decoloniality.²⁵ Insofar as capitalism approaches the vanishing point in decoloniality's worldview, so, too, accordingly, does Marxism, understood here as capitalism's most systematic and radical theory and critique. And as the latter, as anything other than a hyper-abstract caricature, recedes from view, there disappear along with it any rigorous conceptions of anti-capitalism or of a liberated post-capitalist society as fully historical, concrete universals.

A less obvious but no less crucial point to be recalled here, however, is that the form of society to which modern capitalism gives rise, a social formation mediated and "synthesized" (to use Alfred Sohn-Rethel's term) by the relations inscribed in the real abstraction of the commodity or value-form, appears, necessarily to the individuals composing it, to be itself something abstract

25 Mignolo does devote some space to what he terms "capitalism" in the long introduction to *PDCI*. The latter (characterized, not incorrectly, as "living to work") figures here as just one of the four "domains" — the others are "knowledge/understanding," "human/humanity," and "governance" — in a diagrammatic mapping of the CMP (40). Situated at its center is "enunciation/epistemology/constitution," again attesting to Mignolo's reduction of all such compartments of the real to the status of "epistemic projections." Thus it is, we are told, that "the economy (*meaning here economic coloniality or capitalism*) cannot be changed if the actors running institutions do not change their assumptions, convictions, and beliefs in redirecting their desires toward the well-being of humanity at large and in harmony with living Earth" (41, emphasis added). One may be tempted to dismiss such ideas as naive wishful thinking, until it becomes clear that *PDCI* effectively attributes such "redirection" to the "de-Westernizing" capitalism promulgated, according to Mignolo, by the likes of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew and China's Deng Xiaoping. The latter "uncoupled capitalism from liberalism and neoliberalism and usurped it to advance de-Western liberation" (19). Redefined as "economic coloniality," capitalism is already, in effect, culturalized. And once culturalized, it is then but a short step to its "usurpation" by identity politics — whether, as in *PDCI*, in a "de-Western" or, according to the same logic, in more explicitly and notoriously sinister variants. The jargon of decoloniality may stop far short of such extremes, but one cannot help thinking here, for example, of the identity politics of German National Socialism, with its mythology of good, Aryan national-industrial capital versus evil, Jewish international-finance capital.

and, correspondingly, universal in contrast to all earlier forms of society. This is one of the ramifications of the well-known but still often poorly understood phenomenon of the fetishism (the “phantom objectivity”) of commodities first discovered by Marx and given theoretical explication in *Capital*. A society “synthesized” by commodity production and exchange — by the social relations inscribed in value — takes a form that is both abstract and alien, seeming to exist only (to use Marx’s expression) “behind the backs” of those comprising it. Europe, initially its western and northern zones, again happens to be the place where this form of society first emerges fully. But unlike the universality that can be ascribed and reduced to the sociological immediacy of bourgeois ideology, and thereby relatively more easily falsified, the deep-structural and alien universality of commodity-mediated society cannot be so readily or easily exposed or falsified. Indeed, it is not, on a more immediately ideological plane, a false universal but is rather a form of socially necessary false consciousness.²⁶ For the falsehood of its apparent universality to be exposed to view, the social relations of commodity production must themselves enter into crisis — and be elevated to the level of conscious theoretical and social awareness.

May it not then be worth considering whether decoloniality’s ban on universals, their dogmatic relegation to a pseudo- or ahistorical “Eurocentrism,” is not itself symptomatic of the persistent theoretical and intellectual intractability of capitalism’s socially false universality on the aforementioned deep-structural plane? This could at least help to arrive at an explanation, however hypothetical, of the not-inconsiderable appeal of Mignolo and the

26 I take the concept of necessary false consciousness from Sohn-Rethel as well. See Alfred Sohn-Rethel, “Necessary False Consciousness,” in *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020) 160–3.

jargon of decoloniality among intellectuals and scholars, many of them evidently younger, progressive-leaning, and identified with, if not native to, regions of the postcolonial Global South. Barring statistical and empirical inputs that are beyond the scope of this review and may be impossible to obtain, we can't be certain about this. But no critique of Mignolo-authorized decoloniality, especially considering the sheer banality of its jargon, could in the end be considered complete without some effort to account for what is, to say the least, the puzzling fact of its relative popularity.

Consider, further, that in the conjuncture dating as far back as the turn of the millennium — the same that has seen the publication of Mignolo's major works and his rise to intellectual prominence — the vulgar and flagrantly ideological universalisms claiming the mantle of "Western" bourgeois civilization are more and more readily exposed as chauvinist particularisms and hence, notwithstanding their growing "populist" bases of support, all the more readily discredited. Think, for example, of Samuel-Huntington-esque manifestoes proclaiming the "clash of civilizations" or, even more blatantly and more au courant, of the white-supremacist and often Christian-nationalist dystopian idylls of today's far-right "populisms" à la Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Jair Bolsonaro, and Marine Le Pen. Their capacity to win apparently larger numbers of adherents than would have been the case thirty, twenty, or even ten years ago comes at the cost of a growing social polarization that likewise increases the numbers of their antagonists. But this transpires even as the social, historical truth of capitalism's "real" commodity abstraction and corresponding form of universality, ideologically more hermetic, remains comparatively more resistant to conscious, secular disclosure. Ethnic and cultural claims to universality, that is, are more easily exposed as false and pernicious, but their underlying source — capitalism's sociohistorical, structural, but alienated universality — flies under culturalism's radar,

so to speak. The effect grows increasingly transparent, while the cause, culturally invisible but historically contingent and hence no less ideological in the end, remains obscure.

But behind the evident, possibly still growing popularity of Mignolo and decoloniality is surely the concrete reality of combined and uneven development as experienced in the contemporary Global South and its metropolitan diaspora. As the late Aijaz Ahmad and other Marxist critics who early on challenged its post-structuralist-influenced, discourse-centered, and de-historicizing tendencies did not fail to observe at the time, the rise of postcolonial theory, at least in a first iteration enshrined in the works of Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha, clearly paralleled the crisis and effective collapse of what still remained of the anti-colonial national liberation movements that had been catalyzed at the end of World War II.²⁷ This was a watershed that Ahmad memorably termed “the end of the Bandung era,” a historical terminus he sensibly linked to the triumph of the anti-secular and anti-Marxist Islamist faction in the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The collapse of the socialist Eastern bloc and of the USSR itself a decade-plus later — and the crisis and eventual undermining of the Central American anti-imperialist insurgencies and revolutions in El Salvador and Nicaragua during that same ensuing decade — only reinforced the culturalist and anti-universalist tendencies of postcolonialism, not least in the latter’s impact on Latin Americanism and Latin American literary and cultural criticism and theory.

Over the roughly three decades that have since elapsed, resistance to imperial, neocolonial domination in the Global South may be said to have ebbed and flowed. Witness the so-called pink

27 See especially Ahmad’s landmark work, *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992). See also, inter alia, my own critique of postcolonial theory, greatly indebted to the work of Ahmad, in *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas* (London: Verso, 2001).

tide across many parts of Latin America, from the ascendancy of the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil, especially after 2002, and more recent, if volatile, electoral trends favorable to the parliamentary and social-democratic left in Argentina, Honduras, Perú, Chile, and Colombia.²⁸ But there is little to suggest that the end of the Bandung era has not continued to play out across the Global South in relentless and agonizing ways. Neither can the fortunes of imperialism (synonymous with the US superpower) or of global capitalism itself be said to have prospered. Although punctuated by overt acts of violent imperial and superpower aggression, most significantly and dramatically the disastrous US invasion of Iraq and the abject failure of its twenty years' war in Afghanistan, the prolonged crisis of Third World anti-imperialism over the last thirty years has not, despite a brief spate of "end of the Cold War" Western triumphalism following the demise of Soviet and Soviet-bloc state socialism, resulted in a corresponding rebound for the imperial fortunes of the world's former colonialists and neocolonialists. If, by the end of the 1979–89/91 decennium, the passing of Third World national liberationism's heroic phase had become conclusive, and had begun to echo in postcolonialism's high-theory influenced form of culturalism, some historical memory and awareness of, say, revolutionary Cuba's phase of successful anti-imperial resistance beginning in the early 1960s or insurgent Vietnam's final defeat of the US war machine in 1975 clearly persisted, even among those least skeptical of postcolonialism's version of "epistemic" subversion. And Central America, meanwhile, seemed for a time, during the late 1970s and the 1980s, poised to extend

28 The PT's rise was followed, of course, by its no less precipitous decline with the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016; the temporary imprisonment of Lula in 2018; and the election of Bolsonaro later that same year. The real possibility, as of this writing, of Lula's return to office with the national elections in October 2022 will not, it seems all but certain, see a return of the social democratic reforms enacted under the PT before the collapse of Brazil's export commodity boom in 2014.

those victories, supplying, at the very least, a host of witnesses and martyrs to the cause of revolutionary anti-imperialism, from Óscar Romero to Rigoberta Menchú.

But, apart from scattered and largely ethnically motivated references to *zapatismo*, it is in vain that one searches the pages of *PDCI* or of Mignolo's many other works for any sense that this history either existed or continues to matter, even if only to diagnose the reasons for its passing — much less in order to speculate regarding the prospects for its redemption in a future as yet only dimly or partially discernible. Mignolo himself is more than old enough to know what's missing here, but for many of his followers, this seems far less likely to be true. What can the end of Bandung even begin to mean to those decolonizers, for whom the fact that it once actually *began* remains hazy at best?

It may be that the widespread support for anti-racism and the elimination of white supremacy and Eurocentric bias from contemporary social and cultural institutions expressed in the slogans and demands of decolonialism operates within the constraints of this same, severely diminished historical consciousness. That, per se, subtracts nothing from what is surely often the justice and urgency of many such slogans and campaigns. Even if, for example, calls to decolonize art galleries or hipsterism are unable or unwilling to connect such objectives to recent murderous US-backed and US-armed Saudi bombing raids on thousands of Yemeni civilians, or, more broadly, to mass, catastrophic poverty and threats to human survival itself across the Global South, enforced by capitalism's international division of labor, at least it does not automatically or necessarily translate into Mignolo's explicit support for anti-Western autocracy. The more limited and localized such campaigns and demands — that is, the less universal — the smaller the risk that they will mutate into Mignolo-sanctioned decoloniality.

But once the will or even the temptation to theorize enters the fray, the category of the universal enters along with it. This it does of necessity, however seemingly discredited and disfavored by the prevailing conjunctural reality. As we have seen in the case of Mignolo and the jargon of decoloniality, a ban on universals, out of dogmatic fidelity to whatever imagined condition of cultural or ethnic sanctity or alterity, leads, at best, to the self-parodies and grotesqueries of the “de-,” vanquisher of the “post-” and king of kings among prefixes. As *PDCI* demonstrates, the culturalist ban on universals as a priori Eurocentrist easily morphs into the repressive, surreptitiously universalizing cult of de-Westernizing autocracies. The latter are simply to be preferred as the only possible or consistent allies of a decoloniality that has abjured not only liberalism and Marxism as “heirs of the Enlightenment” but evidently democracy itself. But how much really separates a decoloniality fixated on a Manichaeian hostility to the West from the right-wing and authoritarian populisms currently ascendant across Europe, not to say North America? Despite Mignolo’s characteristically but thoughtlessly self-assured claim, often repeated in his writings and in numerous interviews, that the West ends east of Jerusalem, it is a notoriously relative and elastic term, as easily and readily denounced at one point as it might be invoked at another. Hungary’s Orbán or Poland’s Andrzej Duda might very well express fealty to the Western-Christian values supposedly under threat of non-European (nonwhite) immigration and in the next moment denounce the Western-liberal, ostensibly more immigration-tolerant politics of the European Union. The “West” is west of whatever ethnoculturalist, crypto-universal “East” is commanding decolonial allegiance. And, *mutatis mutandis*, the same applies to the East — or shall we say the “de-West”? One wonders, given recent events in Russia and Ukraine, where Mignolo would situate the latter on decoloniality’s East/West *mappa mundi*.

It seems reasonable to conclude that some, perhaps many, among the enthusiasts of Mignolo and decoloniality, will not, in the end, permit their enthusiasm to carry them as far as the perverse and frankly reactionary extremes on display in *PDCI*. That is some consolation. But, as long as decolonial theory's culturalist ban on universals is not itself challenged and overthrown, the material roots of colonialism and imperialism cannot be traced back historically and socially to their ultimate source: capitalism. And as long as the precondition for abolishing colonialism and imperialism and for the eventual liberation of their victims — of *our* liberation — is not consciously understood as the social universal of a post-capitalist, classless society that has transcended the domination of the commodity form — the universal of *communism*, in this sense — “decoloniality” remains at best a futile exercise, a deviation, and a dead end.

Little to none of this, unfortunately, seems likely to penetrate the thinking of those beguiled by and entrapped within the jargon of decoloniality. It would be difficult to imagine a linguistic and cognitive apparatus better designed to blind a reader to this plane of social and historical reality than what is on display in *PDCI* — though it appears to possess little awareness of what it obscures.

As Adorno wrote in a 1967 author's preface to *The Jargon of Authenticity*, here with uncharacteristic optimism:

As irresistible as the jargon appears in present-day Germany, it is actually weak and sickly. The fact that the jargon has become an ideology unto itself destroys this ideology as soon as this fact is recognized. ... The jargon is the historically appropriate form of untruth in the Germany of the last years. For this reason one can discover a truth in the determinate negation of the jargon.²⁹

29 Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, xii.

One hesitates to accord to the jargon of decoloniality anything like the “historically appropriate form of untruth” in, say, present-day North America, much less in Latin America, although, as a variation or subset of culturalist anti-universalism, it may indeed be one of them. But perhaps its sheer opacity in relation to anything resembling social or historical reality may be the jargon’s negative saving grace: the closest thing there is to its determinate self-negation. That and, to try to be optimistic about it, the fact that the jargon in works like *PDCI* becomes so flagrant and transparent that, despite its more sinister and openly reactionary dimension, it readily invites parody and laughter. ☞