

COLONIAL SEMIOSIS AND DECOLONIAL RECONSTITUTIONS

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I

What could “semiosis of coloniality” mean today, entering the third decade of the twentieth first century and about half a century after the explosion of semiotics in the seventies? I pulled out from my bookshelves the English translation of Umberto Eco’s *A Theory of Semiotics*. The foreword was dated, Milano, 1967-1974. The introduction is titled “Toward a Logic of Culture”. The first section of the introduction is subtitled “Design for a semiotic theory”. The first sentence is this: “The aim of this book is to explore the theoretical possibility and the social function of a *unified approach* to every phenomenon of signification and/or communication” (italics mine). I was then, during those years, working on my doctorate in semiotics and discourse analysis in Paris. It was taken for granted that a *unified theory* was necessary, in any field. The obsession with a unified theory of anything, and in this case of semiotics, is a modern Western obsession. The flourishing of semiotics/semiology in the 1960s was a victim of such obsession. The obsession with the unification of a field provided by a unified theory is still alive and well. It is embedded in the political economy’s narratives defending global capitalism (although today capitalism is in many hands) and was the (now failed) political neo-liberal ambition to unify and homogenize the world order. The journal *Globalizations* is planning a special dossier in 2020 titled “Is an integrated theory of globalization possible (and desirable)?”. My contribution to this special issue added two more questions: for whom and what for?

The topic of *Echo 2* singles out “Semiosis of coloniality” in the title and adds “cultural dynamics at times of global mobility”. “Culture” is modified by “dynamics”, no longer by theory, as it was in Eco’s treatises. Semiosis is paired with coloniality that was absent in the seventies—the concept was not yet born. Both borderless world and mobility complement and reinforce “cultural dynamics”. This is a different scenario for *semiology* today—to say the least—compared to the scenario of the 1960s in France and Italy and Tartu (Juri Lotman, 1922-1993). It is a scenario more like the US version of *semiotics* from Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) in the nineteenth century to Charles Morris (1901-1979), less grounded on linguistic and more in the complexity of the life-world. The other keyword in the title, “migrations”, is teamed up with “cultural dynamic” and “global mobility”. This is the brand of semiotics that was closer to me and Juri Lotman a guiding thinker. Since *Echo 2* invited authors and readers to reflect on the global dynamics of migrations and on semiosis of coloniality, I will take up the invitation in this introduction.

Let’s then begin to honor my semiotic learning. While “colonial semiosis” is a syntactic accepted construction, “semiosis of coloniality” is less familiar, it sounds strange at first sight. And it would sound stranger if we substituted coloniality for semiosis and wrote “coloniality semiosis” instead of “colonial semiosis”.

A few decades ago, when I was involved in the conceptual and emotional frame of semiotics (and reading Umberto Eco!), I was investigating colonialism. Coloniality was not yet in circulation. It was neither visible nor sensed and consequently it was not thought out. At the time — and in parallel to ongoing semiotic conversations in reduced circles — they were critiquing and celebrating modernity. One of the outcomes was the coming into being of post-modernity (Modernity was an immense cloud that covered the horizon and did not allow us to ask or see that the cloud was hiding coloniality. Modernity covered our eyes, sedated our senses and numbed our thinking. It prevented *us* from asking questions of the enunciators because it

was presented as if modernity was the enunciated without enunciators: modernity just was, something that happens, no one is responsible. The only thing we can do is to study *it*. Legions of economists, sociologists, anthropologists and humanists were dissecting that entity called “modernity”. Philosophers decided that modernity had run its cycle and that by the end of the seventies we had learned that there was another entity, postmodernity (Jean-François Lyotard, 1978), a concept that evinced a change of sensibility and a line of demarcation with modernity, but always the same Western cosmology, disciplines and modes of thinking.

When Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (1928-2018) introduced coloniality, the silenced and darker side of both modernity and postmodernity was revealed. The geography of reasoning was shifted: modernity and postmodernity began to be looked at from the experience of their silence, the experiences of coloniality. Up to that point, *colonialism* was a common word, but it meant something alongside modernity and postmodernity. Colonialism was seen as derivative not constitutive of modernity and postmodernity. The concept of coloniality was still in gestation, although the phenomena that coloniality adumbrated when it came out of the underground, had a long history from the 16th century, a history that was encapsulated in the words “colonialism and colonization”. When coloniality came to the surface it was an explosion coming to the underground. It removed all the cement, mortar, stones and bricks that were blocking its coming to the surface. The debris of the explosion could not be unified with the prefix “post”. It was no longer an event in the universal linear time, but a concept that allowed us to see, behind the debris of the explosion, what modernity and more recently postmodernity were preventing us from seeing.

“Modernity” and “colonialism” are words and concepts of Western modernity, both accepted in the disciplines (social sciences and humanities) and in the public sphere (mass-media, social media, educated conversations). They were created in Europe because they were needed. And of course, that is fine. Coloniality was not needed in Europe. It was what European actors and institutions were doing. They did not need to say it. Coloniality is a decolonial concept. And equally decolonial is the compound modernity/coloniality. The compound is neither highlighting a contradiction nor a binary opposition. Both, contradiction and binary opposition, are interpretations controlled by the rhetoric and mind set of Western modernity. Coloniality, as a decolonial concept, breaks away from the spiderweb of Western modernity. It asserts that there is no modernity without coloniality—hence, we write modernity/coloniality. Which means that the barre “/” both and simultaneously unites and divides. Modernity/coloniality is a divided unit. Both terms are conjoined twins, but one of them was in this case kept in the basement. Now we understand for example that underdevelopment is not a socio-economic condition of inequality that will be eradicated by development. Underdevelopment cannot be overcome by development because it is development that needs underdevelopment to keep the privileges of the developed. Antonio Gramsci’s *Southern Question* was a warning to understand that the North needed the South to maintain its privileges.

In this context, what may the expression “semiosis of coloniality mean”? There is a parallel expression introduced by Latinx philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff (2007): “epistemology of coloniality” that could help us here. Towards 2002, during the meetings of the collective modernity/coloniality, Fernando Coronil asked this question: shall we talk about coloniality of power (which is Quijano’s formulae) or the power of coloniality? We talked about it, but a decision either/or was not necessary. It was and remained properly speaking an open question. For me, trained in philosophy first and familiar with epistemology and semiotics later, each expression makes different statements. Coloniality of power tells you that “power” is not a noun that can go without a modifier, as anything else in the vocabulary of Western modernity pretending or claiming universality, such as democracy, development, philosophy, man, woman, etc. Indeed, the modifier is absolutely necessary: the European idea of democracy, the US idea of development, the Greek-European idea of philosophy, etc. etc. It means that behind

economic, political, informatic, industrial, religious, etc. power framed and managed by Western actors and institutions, there is a hidden will to power common to all of them: coloniality. If we just say power, we refer to a Western concept describing certain type of relations among human beings: the potential of someone to do something. Power does not need to be modified in the rhetoric of modernity because it is posited as universal. No modifier is admitted!! Since power is not something that someone possesses but a relational concept of management and dissent, power is always up for grabs, rejected, or submitted to it.

Therefore, coloniality of power means just that, that there is a dimension of power that in its *essence* is implemented to legitimize and justify coloniality under the promises of modernity and the dissenting critiques of postmodernity. Significantly, Quijano's essay where he introduced the concept of coloniality was titled "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality" (Quijano 2007). If we say instead "the power of coloniality" we mean something else: we are saying that coloniality "has" or "needs" power to be enacted. In this case, power is the engine of coloniality, and that could be analyzed in the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, political sciences, economics). On the contrary, in Quijano's formulation power itself is embedded in coloniality—coloniality always already implies power. And here is the point: since coloniality is a decolonial concept, coloniality of power implies a decolonial analysis. Thinking decolonially delinks from thinking disciplinarily. Decoloniality is neither a disciplinary field of studies nor a method to be added to any of the constituted disciplines. Hence, what semiosis of coloniality and epistemology of coloniality imply is the following: the first means that coloniality is explored semiotically while the second that it is explored philosophically. Semiotics and philosophy are two different disciplinary frames. The first reveals the process of signification -- in this case of coloniality -- while the second unveils the epistemological dimensions of coloniality. However, "coloniality of semiosis" and "coloniality of epistemology" mean something different: it means that coloniality is embedded in any and every process of signification and in any and every process of knowing; it means that semiosis and epistemology are instruments of the coloniality of signification and of knowledge respectively.

To understand this reversal of fortunes, it is necessary to shift—emotionally and rationally—the Western modern idea that there is a reality out there that the disciplines study, interpret and explain and that there are disciplines who regulate the job of understanding and explaining. In this scenario, semiosis refers to processes of signification in a sign system that semiotics explores, while epistemology highlights the shared principles in the philosophical disciplinary community that regulate processes of knowing. Hence, while epistemology of coloniality underscores its philosophical dimensions, semiosis of coloniality stresses its semiotic dimensions. The first gives emphasis to knowing and knowledge while the second points out understanding and meaning. In both cases, coloniality is embedded in these assumptions; these assumptions materialize coloniality in the very lifeblood of the disciplines and their epistemic regulations. Delinking and disciplinary disobedience require delinking from disciplinary formation and epistemic regulations to shift the geography of sensing and reasoning.

II

What did I mean by "colonial semiosis" when I was looking at Spanish colonialism and not yet at coloniality? In the late 80s and 90s, the proximity of the quincentennial of the "discovery of America" (which was not discovery because there was not yet an America to be discovered), I was interested in the philosophical and semiotic problem of naming and was confusing the naming with the *ontic* existence of what is named. Modern epistemology schooled and trained

us in the Platonic tradition of de-notation making us believe that the noun names something that exists and what exists is what the name says it is. Hence the trap of *representation* that is still clouding our understanding of Western manipulation and confusion of what there is with what it is said that it is. Ontology is an epistemological concept. And to make this statement I had to exit the trap and look at both concepts semiotically. Although I did not know of coloniality at the time, the semiotic training I received allowed me to read colonial signs, although the colonial question was absent from my semiotic training.

At that time, concepts such “colonial history”, “colonial economy”, “colonial politics”, “colonial art”, “colonial education”, “colonial literature”, were common in the vocabulary of the social sciences and the humanities. So, I saw my opportunity to address “colonial semiosis” that was absent in the family of concepts I just enumerated. Colonial semiosis came to light in an essay with that title. The subtitle was: “la dialéctica entre representaciones fracturadas y hermenéuticas pluritópicas”. I was still trapped by the word “representation”. However, colonial semiosis allowed me to deviate from the standard routes in the social sciences and the humanities.

Colonial semiosis allowed me to build a semiotic argument in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (1995). While colonial society, colonial economy, politics, art, literature, religion, philosophy, education were profusely investigated, no one—to my knowledge at the time—had explored colonial semiosis yet. I did it in two ways: a) focusing on three sign systems: language, history and cartography and b) I did it by stepping out of the Western gaze of the discipline that to that point studied different aspects of the colonial period. Which means that I did not only introduce a “field”, colonial semiosis, but I removed myself also from the “disciplines”. I was neither trained in the Renaissance, nor in history and cartography. Language was the subject of research and conversations: a privileged sign system in the humanities that was *à la mode* in the 1970s. Furthermore, all existing disciplinary interpretations were based on the monotopic Western hermeneutics (à la Gadamer) and therefore all were based on the same apparatus of enunciation although the enunciated (narratives, explanations, interpretations) were diverse. To do so I tried my best to “look” at the Spaniards (and Europeans in general) from the perspective of the Aztecs and Incas while every study was “looking” at the Aztecs and Incas from the perspective of the Spaniards (and Europeans in general). The outcome was an exercise in border thinking that I elaborated in the following book, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking* (2000).

After digging into colonial semiosis, I was prepared to be captivated by coloniality that I knew after finishing the manuscript of *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*¹.

III

Now, 25 years later (1995-2020) we are into the terrain of coloniality of semiosis rather than semiosis of coloniality; and I would add “coloniality of epistemology” for—as I said above—semiotics and epistemology are subjected to decolonial explanations. Which means, that they are two particular spheres of coloniality of knowledge. By reversing the relations between the two terms, our understanding of the world and of ourselves changes in this sense: decolonial understanding of the world and of ourselves is based on the concept of coloniality of power and of the colonial matrix of power and starts at the moment we sense how coloniality is touching us and, from that moment on, where do we perceive coloniality. Pedagogically speaking, all psychoanalytic interpretation of the world and of ourselves is based on the concept of the

¹ Gustavo Verdesio perceived the bridge that took me from semiosis to coloniality and explained it in the introduction to a collection of my articles: *De la hermenéutica y la semiosis colonial al pensar decolonial* (2013).

unconscious. But there is an important difference. Psychoanalysis, like semiotics and epistemology, belongs to the vocabulary of Western modernity. Decoloniality is a concept that did not emerge in Europe but in Asia and Africa to make sense of the experience and life of people struggling for decolonial freedom. When Quijano introduced coloniality, he was obviously well aware of the decolonial struggles that occupied most of the second half of the twentieth century. Decolonization was a struggle to liberate from colonization. Decoloniality is a struggle of liberation from coloniality. Decolonial liberation today doesn't consist of expelling the settlers from the territory (because they are almost all gone), but liberating ourselves from the mindset that allowed the settlers to settle in foreign territory and to implant their frame of mind (knowledge and ways of knowing) and leave it there after they returned to their own country. Decolonial liberation today means liberating ourselves from the ideals of modernity and modernization, which were gently forced upon us in all areas of experience.

Migrations are a consequence of coloniality; and the directionality of migrations is propelled by the power differentials between the splendors of modernity and the miseries of coloniality. "Migration" and "globalization" cannot be separated for it is globalization that established the power differentials that propel migrations. By globalization I mean this: a) historically globalization has structured the colonial matrix of power since the sixteenth century and b) the term globalization hides its real sense—globalism, the Western global designs from their theological formulations in the sixteenth century to its neo-liberal updating at the end of the twentieth century. In this manner, semiosis of coloniality is reverted into the coloniality of semiosis: the signs of migrations and the signs of globalism (that is the signs that allows us to understand sets of events as migration and as globalism) are surface manifestations of the colonial matrix or power. Which means that what I am looking at through migration and globalism is the underlying structure of control and management that—under those concepts—makes them appear on the surface as if they were the name that designates them.

Decolonially speaking, migrations and globalism are signs of the movement and dynamics of the colonial matrix of power, similar to dreams that are signs guiding the psychoanalyst to the unconscious. But let's be more specific about the kind of migrations that are propelled by the power differentials established in the constitution of the colonial matrix of power, which is a recent phenomenon in the history of the human species. But humans are not the only living organisms that migrate. Every living organism on earth (mammals, fish, insects) that can displace itself migrates. The planets in our solar systems are migrating constantly (and hopefully planet earth will not stop). Not to mention the constant flows of the universe. Migration means simply to change places:

"Change of residence or habitat, removal or transit from one locality to another, especially at a distance", 1610s, of persons, 1640s of animals, from Latin *migrationem* (nominative *migratio*) "a removal, change of abode, migration", probably originally **migwros*, from PIE *(e)*meigw-* (source of Greek *ameibein* "to change"), which is an extended form of root **mei-* (1) "to change, go, move" or perhaps a separate root. As "a number of animals migrating together" by 1880².

Migration implies mobility of every organism that can move and change places. But not all living organisms that can move build fences to stop other living organisms from trespassing over their boundaries—preventing the wolf from eating the sheep which constitute the narrative of earlier communities. Fences are signs of a semiotic system: the system of establishing physicality and giving meaning to those boundaries. Physical boundaries are the outcome of manual labor; meaning is coordinated by members of the community that fence in languaging. So that hands and languaging are two means of fencing and building territoriality. But when

² *Online Etymological Dictionary*. <http://icci.nativeweb.org/boletin/25/souza.html>

you do that you leave other organisms outside the fence and outside the meaning that legitimizes the fence.

While migrations are common praxes of living for organisms that have the possibility of moving, physical and legal fencing is a praxes of certain living organisms. In Chinese the word “Ren” refers to that class. Persian language, I understand, has two words “Bashar” and “Ensan”. All living organisms of the species that build fences and coordinate the praxis of living by certain kinds of regulations, that in Greek is *nomos*, are born Bashar and then become Ensan. Bashar is earth/cosmo/biological. Ensan is cultural, that is, one becomes Ensan in worlds made by previous Ensan. In the West the words “anthropos” and “humanus”, are used to refer to the same species. In Quechua, the word is “Runa”, and highlights the relations of the species with earth and the cosmos. *Runa* is not an isolated species, but it can only be in relation to all living earth and cosmos. In the West the words “anthropos” and “humanus”, refer to that class of living organisms.

Fencing may be as old as the species or organisms that began to fence and by doing so, they became a species of living organisms distinct (but not separated) from other moving living organisms. Once Runas (or humans if you feel more comfortable) began to use their hands to gather and take care of their own food and to create aural signs with their mouth and their tongue (because the mouth was liberated from gathering food) they were able to tell stories among themselves. At the moment that Runas invented a second order of signs based on the first order constitutive of all living vertebrate organisms in the biological coordination of their deeds (e.g., birds flying in amazing formations; lamas traversing the Bolivian plateau in harmonized displacements), Runas constituted themselves as a species. The current dates for the constitution of *Runa Sapiens* is about 300.000 years ago. The trajectories since then where many, diverse temporalities (only Western chronological fiction could have invented a linear time from primitives to civilized “men”) all over the planet. So that Karl Jaspers (1951) identified the Axial Age as around 7000 BC.

But it was not until 1500 of the Christian Era that fencing and the law, properly speaking, joined forces and settled the conditions for the problems of migrations we have today. From then, the earth was no longer an open field to move around in with significant flexibility, at the same time that for the first time in the history of human kind the planet was interconnected: the Atlantic and the Pacific acquire a relevance that until then were dominated by the Indic Ocean first and the Atlantic Ocean later. The planet was inhabited by many complex organizations of *Runakay* (or humanity if you feel more comfortable) that by the fourteenth century of the Christian era had distinctive formations: China, Persia, Kingdoms of Africa, Aztecs, Mayas, Western Christians, Arabs, Muslims, etc. By 1500 one civilization of the many co-existing ones (Western Christian civilization), managed to become the first civilization that impinged over all the others. Fencing and the law became two basic strategies to enclose and separate. And time was the third strategy of demoting. Carl Schmitt (2006) identified the emergence of the *second nomos* of the Earth. The first *nomos* was polycentric. The particularity of the second *nomos* was to build itself on the principle of mono-centrism. Since the center of the second *nomos* was located in Western Christian Europe, Schmitt could say with confidence that the second *nomos* was Eurocentered. He said it around 150 years after Hegel’s lessons in the philosophy of history. In that narrative, Hegel (2011) lined up previous civilizations in a chronology and a trajectory that ended up in the present of Europe and Germany that were simultaneously at the center of space. Hegel and Schmitt provided two narratives from the same enunciation: Eurocentered, as Schmitt himself recognized. That is, his narrative was told within the constitution of the second *nomos* of the earth.

Aníbal Quijano told the same story from a distinct enunciation: what for Schmitt was the second *nomos*, for Quijano was the modern/colonial world order that emerged in 1500. I would add that the modern/colonial world order emerged from the colonial revolution

constituted by the simultaneous destitutions of existing civilizations. Physical fencing separating the native population and later on the massive transportation of enslaved Africans, was necessary for the constitution of territorial interiority that needed fencing (physical and legal) to justify destitutions and justify also the rightfulness of the humanity advancing over pagans and barbarians. The concept of time served as the third instrument of destitution: the invention of the past. Greece and Rome became the territorial past of Western interiority: antiquity, then the Middle Ages and finally the Renaissance. Beyond Europe all was exteriority to be civilized, modernized, developed. Exteriority is not the outside of Western Civilization but the invention of the *outside* and of the *other* to define and defend the *inside* and the *self*. Decolonization, massive migrations towards Western Europe and the US, are all manifestations of the global restitutions of the destituted--the exteriority redressing the aberrations of Eurocentrism.

IV

I offer below, in a gross and superficial outline, three historical periods in which both the semiosis of coloniality and the coloniality of semiosis help us to understand the directionality of migrations and the power differential entangling the place of departure with the place of arrival.

The first wave of intercontinental migrations that impacted and shaped the historical foundations of the modern/colonial world order, befell in the sixteenth century. If people migrated long before from Asia to the Americas through the Bering Strait or by navigation from what is today Polynesia to what is today the South of America, it did not have the impact when global navigation connected the continent and educated people in every continent knew it. To talk about intercontinental migrations there has to be an awareness image of the globe to which cartography made perhaps the largest contributions, both in the flat map version and in the *globus terraqueus*. Consequently, one thing is to trace the history of migrations since what today we call *Homo Sapiens* began to move around and the other is to trace the history of migration in the global order that was established by European migrations to the continent they did not know existed, that they called New World first and America later. Two trajectories shaped intercontinental migrations: Europeans invited themselves, without passport, and settled in lands that they did not have the right to possess. Once there, they forced captive Africans to migrate to the New World and be enslaved, mainly in the plantations.

The second large wave of migrations started around 1850. The dynamic was propelled by the industrial revolution: the steamboat made possible the transportation of large contingents of people. The major destinations between 1860 and 1918 (the initiation of WWI) were in the Americas, all the ports of the Atlantic coast from Argentina to the US, were welcoming contingents of European migrants attracted by the promises that the Americas offered to them and that Europe could not provide first for the excessive concentration of wealth and incrementation of inequalities from the mid-nineteenth century to WWI and from WWI to 1950, the devastation of Europe. Less known were migrations from China and India mainly to the Caribbean to provide indentured labor once slavery was legally banned.

We are now in the third planetary wave of mass migrations. The directions have been inverted: the dynamic and the major routes of migrations by their will from Asia to the Emirates or Qatar, from Africa to Europe and from South and Central America to the US. Europe and the US have closed their doors, forcing migrations without their permission. The rhetoric of national security is implemented. Sure, today there are more routes of migrations, but these three lines are the signs of two frames of meaning in the modern/colonial world order. One frame is the economic differential that moves migrations from underdeveloped to developed

centers and the second frame moves migrations to the metropole of former colonies. By 1900 the entire African continent was in the hand of European states; since 1950 Central and South America, and above all after the Cuban Revolution, were under the vigilance, economic and political management of the US.

V

Since the volume is devoted to the third wave of migration, I will stop here with one last observation. The second wave of migration was conditioned by the formation of the nation-state in Europe and the Americas. The rest of the world was under a different form of governance. The third wave is taking place when most of the planet has adopted the nation-state and few monarchies remain on their own, mainly in the Middle East. However, inter-state relations (wrongly called inter-national), are structured globally by power differentials. The directionalities of migrations follow, first, the route traced by modern/colonial power differential, secondly, they are entrapped in the racial classification and hierarchy that structures the colonial matrix of power. Nation-states privilege “human” nationalities, rather than human beings. And here we encounter the fundamental difference between the Western concept of humanity and the parallel concepts of humanity in China, Persia and Quechua that I outlined before. In the West “human” is the measuring stick for racial and sexual classifications that justifies the ranking of humanity in humans and lesser humans (coloniality of being). Today migrants and refugees are ranked according to their nationalities, religions and languages, beyond their ethnicity and gender. Here, we have both the semiosis of coloniality and the coloniality of semiosis.

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Sitografía

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