

## Interview - Walter Mignolo/Part 2: Key Concepts

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview - Walter Mignolo/Part 2: Key Concepts

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**Walter D. Mignolo** is William H. Wannamaker Professor and Director of the Center for Global Studies and the Humanities at Duke University. He is associated researcher at Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Quito, since 2002 and an Honorary Research Associate for CISA (Center for Indian Studies in South Africa), Wits University at Johannesburg. Among his books related to the topic are: *The Darker Side of the Renaissance. Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization* (1995); *Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of Decoloniality* (2007), *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking* (2000); *The Idea of Latin America* (2006) and *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (2011). Currently, Professor Mignolo is working on two books, one co-edited with Catherine Walsh: *On Decoloniality: Analysis, Concepts, Praxis, and Decolonial Politics*.

This is the second of a two part interview. Read the first part [here](#).

**You developed the idea of decoloniality. Can you elaborate on it and briefly contrast it from postcolonialism?**

My contribution is part of a larger conversation among fellows of *the collective* modernity/coloniality/decoloniality. We have been working in tandem since 1998, approximately. But allow me first to tell you a little bit more about the distinction we (in *the collective*) are making between decolonization and decoloniality. Decolonialization was the current expression during the Cold War to refer to the struggle of decolonization in Africa and Asia. The goal of decolonization was to take hold of the state. In many cases it was half-successful: the native elites of the colonized country were able to send the imperial officer, institutions and people home and to control the government. It was half-failure for two reasons: the native elites did exactly what the colonizers were doing but in the name of national sovereignty. The second reason is that decolonization left intact the political theory and political economy (e.g. Capitalism and the modern-bourgeois Western state-form of governance). In the long run, the consequences of the failure were the turmoil in the MENA countries, a mixture of national failure and imperial interventions.

With the end of the Soviet Union and therefore of the Cold War and the evidence already by the 90s that decolonization failed, it was necessary to think through what decolonization may mean. That was the moment when Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, who has been involved in the debate on dependency theory in South America in the late 60s and early 70s, came up with two groundbreaking ideas/concepts.

Coloniality was not a concept, it did not exist at the time. Quijano made a distinction between colonialism and coloniality. By colonialism he referred to Western imperial/colonial expansion that started with Christianity, Castile and Portugal mainly with the conquest and colonization of the Americas, but also the expansion to Asia (Macao was the first Portuguese colony in Asia; Spaniards were in the Philippines and Formosa [today Taiwan]). Thus, the West (meaning Western Christian to the West of Jerusalem with center in Rome) extended its arms and laid the foundation for modern/colonial globalization. After Castile and Portugal came the Dutch, the French and the British mainly (Germany and Italy were "minor" imperial powers). And then the US which maintained colonialism, but without colonies. That would be the history of Western modern/colonial expansion. We are not talking for example about Roman colonies and the Roman Empire. That is another story. Rome was imperial but not capitalist. Modern/colonial empires (Western Europeans) were the founders and managers of a type of economy we today name capitalism.

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Quijano proposed coloniality to undrape the underlying logic of all Western (From Spain to England to the US) modern/colonial imperialisms. By so doing, Quijano made a second radical move: there is no modernity without coloniality, thus, modernity/coloniality are two sides of the same coin. Up until that moment everybody thought of modernity as a totality and colonialism as an unhappy situation that advancing modernity vision and ideals would end. Quijano's proposal was that coloniality is a necessary component of modernity and therefore it cannot be ended if global imperial designs in the name of modernity continue. Coloniality, in other words, is the darker side of Western modernity.

First, and given this distinctive theoretical frame grounded on the colonial history of the Americas and subsequently of the world, Quijano proposed that the decolonial task (he was still using the term decolonization at that time but the meaning was what today we understand by decoloniality) consists in epistemic reconstitution. He meant that on the one hand there is a civilizational rhetoric (in the sense of persuasive discourses) of salvation being the West (West of Jerusalem, former Western Europe and the US), the savior and the rest in need of salvation. Salvation has several designs, all co-existing today, but that unfolded over 500 years, since 1500: salvation by conversion to Christianity, salvation by progress and civilization, salvation by development and modernization, salvation by global market democracy (e.g. neoliberalism). Thus, the rhetoric of modernity is the constant updating of the rhetoric of salvation hiding the logic of coloniality – war, destruction, racism, sexism, inequalities, injustice, etc. All the “bad” things people notice today in the world cannot be changed to improve while modernity/coloniality remain in place.

Second, at the end of the 80s and beginning of the 90s, when Quijano launched his proposal, the US was still leading the world order. The end of the Soviet Union was seemingly the final triumph of the West. I understand Quijano's claim that decoloniality requires epistemic reconstitution as the following:

a) Modernity/coloniality are the two pillars of Western Civilizations. The two pillars are supported by a complex and diverse structure of knowledge, basically, Christian Theology and Secular Sciences and Philosophy. That edifice is at its turn supported by specific institutions created in tandem with the structure of knowledge: knowledge requires actors and institutions, and actors and institutions conserve, expand, change the structure of knowledge but within the same matrix: the colonial matrix of power.

b) Decoloniality means first to delink (to detach) from that overall structure of knowledge in order to engage in an epistemic reconstitution. Reconstitution of what? Of ways of thinking, languages, ways of life and being in the world that the rhetoric of modernity disavowed and the logic of coloniality implement. The failure of decolonization during the Cold War was due, mainly, to the fact that the decolonization did not question the terms of the conversation, that is, did not question the structures of knowledge and subject formation (desires, beliefs, expectations) that were implanted in the colonies by the former colonizers.

Today, epistemic reconstitution is taking place in many places and in many forms. But this is not a task you can find in the state and inter-state relations. This is a task of what I would call the emerging global political society: people taking their/our destinies in their/our own hands because the states as well as international institutions (IMF, World Bank) etc. are not to serve the people but to mediate between states, corporations and banks.

The difference between the ‘post-’ and the ‘de-’colonial are both historical and conceptual (that is, theoretical and political). Historically, decolonization/decoloniality has its founding formulation in the Bandung Conference, of 1955 lead by Sukarno. Several paths unfolded since—there was the struggle for decolonization, I already mentioned, but also the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement, in 1961, that gathered the Third World states during the Cold War between the First and the Second World. The post-colonial as I understand it was derived from post-modernity. The foundations of the ‘post-’ were the history of colonialism in India (Spivak, Bhabha) and Palestine (Said).

Briefly stated: post-colonialism and decoloniality have the history of Western colonialism in common. But while post-colonialism is based on the Indian and Palestinian experiences, they both are consequences of the enlightenment in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. While for us, the historical experiences are the colonization of America and the European Renaissance. That in what concerns the historical differences between the ‘post-’ and the ‘de-’. Conceptually, the ‘post’ keeps you trapped in unipolar time conceptions. As far as for Western (since the Renaissance) cosmology

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“time” is one, singular and universal, you have no way out: you are trapped in a universal time that is owned by a particular civilization. Therefore, what comes after X has to be conceptualized as post-X. Decoloniality instead opens up to the multiple times of cultures and civilizations upon which Western Civilizations impose its conceptualization of time. The ‘de-’ indicates above all the need and the goal of the re-: epistemic reconstitutions, re-emergence, resurgence, re-existence. That is, neither new nor post.

**You view modernity and coloniality as inseparable. How can Eurocentric modernity be critiqued in light of this colonial condition?**

How can Eurocentric modernity be critiqued, in the way as we, in *the collective* modernity/coloniality/decoloniality have been doing it, as many others as well. The critique of Eurocentric modernity is neither a privilege nor a property right of decolonial thinking in the way I embrace and practice it. But I think the core of your question is that Eurocentrism first of all is not the only regional centrism in the history of humanity since the Axial Age.

The problem with Eurocentrism is not the right Europeans had/have (and then passed on to the US) to be Eurocentric. The problem is the aberration. Eurocentrism for me is tantamount with Western Civilization, and the aberration is common to both configurations. The aberration is to pretend that the rest of the world has to follow their lead (and the US) because their centrism is the ‘best’. Clearly an aberration, and we are all on the planet paying the consequences.

So the answer to your question is two sided: First, everyone critiquing Eurocentrism, doesn’t matter in which conceptual frame, is critiquing not the right of Europe to be Eurocentric (neither denying the contribution of Western modernity to the long history of the human species, one contribution among many), but the aberration: the pretense that Europe has achieved the perfect and happy stage of humanity and everybody else has to bend to it. Hence, the uni-linear concept of time, and the universal fictions invented to sustain that aberration; second, the specific way that decolonial thinking and analytic contributes to the growing dismantling of the Eurocentric/US aberration, is by

- conceiving and analyzing the formation, transformation and management of the colonial matrix of power. The colonial matrix of power has been the tool, the instrument to enact the aberration;
- by analyzing the consequences, yesterday and today, of the aberration devaluing, destroying, expropriating, killing, marginalizing everyone who doesn’t comply with the aberration, and
- more important, being attentive to decolonial-oriented responses all over the world, including inside Europe and the US.

This response moves toward epistemic and emotional re-constitutions, reemergence, resurgences and re-existences. In a nutshell: people realizing the lies of modernity, Western Civilization, democracy etc., when they are at the service of advancing the aberration in the name of peace, progress, development and happiness. The era of Eurocentric aberration is ending, but its devastating consequences are far reaching.

**Decoloniality blurs the boundaries between theory and practice, scholarship and activism. Why is decolonial analytics not enough to get to the core of the politics of knowledge production?**

As I read your question, which follows the statement asserting that ‘decoloniality’ blurs the boundaries between theory and practices, scholarship and activism, I understand it to be asking for the relations between knowing, doing, sensing and believing; that is, the composite of body, nervous system, heart, brain, all the senses, hands, that make all of us the human species that has a particular way of living and knowing. For all organisms need to know in order to live (otherwise they will die), and at the same time they (and us) have to live in order to know. For without living there is no knowing and without knowing there is no living. Now, your question about the ‘core of the politics of knowledge production’ makes me think that you are assuming that decolonial analytics (and perhaps any analytics) is not enough to get to the core of the politics of knowledge production. So let me try to answer your question arguing for decolonial politics.

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What shall be understood by decolonial politics? Well, first of all, that there is no “politics” by itself, politics without adjective. Politics without adjectives is one of the powerful universal fictions of Western modernity, philosophy of knowledge and of knowing. Western philosophy of knowledge and knowing (assumptions, principles, theories guiding the knowing an actual world-making knowledge) is ‘imperial/colonial politics’.

Consequently, to get to the core of the imperial/colonial politics of knowledge production, decolonial analytics may not be enough, but it could contribute to it. The imperial/colonial politics of knowledge production is to transform and at the same time maintain the colonial matrix of power. To do so, institutions like the University were transformed and adapted continuously. The University, as we know, is a medieval institution, but it was transformed in the Renaissance and was transplanted to the Americas. After the 18th century, the Renaissance University was transformed in Europe into the Kantian-Humboldtian university, which was also transplanted and became the model to transform the universities in the Americas from Renaissance type into Enlightenment type universities. A new curriculum (Kant) oriented to the formation of citizens in the emerging nation-states in Europe.

Now decolonial politics is enough and necessary to understand the Eurocentric (imperial/colonial) politics of knowledge. As far as I know, there is no other “theory” that has exposed the strategies of epistemic Eurocentrism as we are doing. The subsequent question is to move from decolonial politics of knowledge analytic to decolonial politics world-making. And that is precisely when delinking and epistemic reconstitution comes to the fore; and that is the moment in which re-constitution, resurgence, reemergence, re-existence lead the way to ‘emancipate ourselves from mental slavery’. Briefly, decolonial analytics and decolonial enactment are two sides of the same movement. Decolonial analysis is not a scholarly enterprise, although it may follow scholarly procedures. Our goals are not to update or improve a discipline. To the contrary, we are using the disciplines (whatever the disciplines are of the disciplinary training of fellows in *the collective*), to advance political goals in all the domains of the colonial matrix of power (knowledge, politics, economy, subjectivity, gender/sexuality, race/racism, nature/living). This reversal is a fundamental move to blur the lines separating theory/praxis and scholarship/activism.

In sum, if the decolonial politics analysis unveils the core of imperial/colonial knowledge production, enacting decolonial politics in work-knowing making (emotioning and reasoning) is necessary to delink from the core of the imperial/politics of knowledge production. I think I have addressed your question, or at least part of it, in my essay ‘Epistemic disobedience: independent thought and decolonial freedom’.

**In “The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference” you mention a planetary dimension of human history which remains silenced. Can you describe this image of human history and expose the dominant forces enabling this silencing?**

First, we (in *the collective* modernity/coloniality/decoloniality) trace the origination of the institutional and conceptual (theoretical, empirical and political) uni-verse of meaning around 1500, when Christian theology and the transplant of the Renaissance uni-versity to the New World, implies silencing, disavowing, shattering down, demonizing co-existing ways of knowing, sensing, believing and living/being in the world. Incas or Aztecs, to take two of the better-known civilizations, were not perfect, but neither were Christians. However, Christians managed to install, by military force, institutional settlements, actors in those institutions and languages (Spanish and Portuguese grounded in Greek and Latin), their world-sense and world-view (cosmo-sense and cosmo-vision) over the co-existing ones. That was the beginning of a long history that lasts until today, although in a growing dispute of Western self-asserting privileges and superiority.

Second, conceptually, these arguments have been advanced by us in *the collective*. My version is in the article you quote from 2002, as well as a shorter and updated version in a more recent one, published in 2013: “Geopolitics of sensing and knowing: On (de) coloniality, border thinking and epistemic disobedience.” The genesis of Europe and Eurocentrism is often analyzed by European scholars as a phenomenon which was an isolated outcome of an isolated history, that of Europe. Whether you take, for example among many, Vassilis Lambropoulos’s *The Rise of Eurocentrism* (1993) or Gonzalo Bravo Castañeda, editor, *La Caída del Imperio Romano y la Génesis de Europa* (2001), all are analyses from Greece on or from Rome on. For us, *the collective* who are not Europeans, that

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history, memories, sensibility, concerns and interests are alien. We are concerned with Europe since 1500 when it invaded the lands that they named America with all the consequences for Pueblos Originarios, Africans and people of European descent, whether thankful to Europe for bringing civilization to the Americas or ungrateful to Europe for bringing death, genocide, exploitation, and silencing and disavowing non-European knowledge and way of living. Thus, for us, the 'beginning' is neither Greece nor Rome but the formation of the Atlantic Commercial Circuit that for the first time in the history of humanity connected the planet by European navigators. This is historical. What we are interested in is at that moment the colonial matrix of power was formed and it was a European invention in the name of salvation to justify their crimes.

From then on, the colonial matrix of power operates in two simultaneous movements: building itself as a civilizational project and destroying other civilizations. That means, silencing, disavowing, racializing in a vast vocabulary from barbarians, to primitives, from communists to terrorists. It happened in the 16th century with the dismantling of ancient civilizations of the Americas, and happened in similar fashion in Iraq at the beginning of the 21st century. In the sixteenth century silencing needed missionaries to rebuild knowledge they destroyed, officers of the monarchic State to establish governance following their European models, and merchants who built a capitalist economy over the destroyed and silenced economy of communal reciprocity. You can bridge the gap between the 16th and the 21st centuries by recalling the Opium War, the colonization of India, of Africa, to the Kosovo War and today West Asia (Middle East in European and US vocabulary).

### **What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars and activists grappling with decoloniality?**

One that I have been giving to graduate students in my seminars: First, know your place in the colonial matrix of power, where you have been located and classified. Second, remember that the colonial matrix of power cannot be "observed" from outside because there is no outside: we are all in it, like in the movie "The Matrix." Third, once you find yourself in the colonial matrix of power (e.g., your nationality, your religion, your language, your sexuality, your gender, your racialized ethnicity—whether you are white or of color, and whether you are white in Germany or in Namibia, in the Netherlands or in South Africa, in Paris or in Argentina; in the US or in Russia, etc.—Putin is as white as Trump and Clinton, but it is not the same whiteness), you realize that you will have a number of options: disciplinary options, religious options, ideological options (e.g. secular system of ideas), political options, ethical options. Fourth, if you decide to embrace the decolonial option, you shall know that it is an option, that everything is an option, and then you begin to act, be, think decolonially, for decoloniality is both analytic-doing and prospective-doing: building and rebuilding the ways of life that modernity disavowed and destroyed. And fifth, do not assume that the decolonial option is the universal best: it would be the universal best for you, as the other options are best for the person who assumes it. The problem is that we have to confront still the belief that "my options" (whichever it is) is the only, it is the best, is superior to all others. That is a modern legacy. Decolonial thinking moves in a different direction. And it is happening at various levels, many spheres of the social/communal and in different parts of the world. And remember, decoloniality is not de-westernization. Of course, not re-westernization either, which are at this point the three larger optional trajectories in the twenty-first and for the twenty-first century.

Thanks, Alvina, for your questions and for allowing me to tell stories that I do not often tell jointly like I did here.

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*This interview was conducted by Alvina Hoffmann. Alvina is an Associate Features editor at E-IR.*