The Idea of Latin America
Blackwell Manifestos

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The Idea of Latin America

Walter D. Mignolo
To Andrea and Alexander Wylie Mignolo,
tireless interlocutors
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Preface: Uncoupling the Name and the Reference

An excess of confidence has spread all over the world regarding the ontology of continental divides. While it could be debated whether there are four, six, or seven continents, it is unquestionable that the count of six or seven includes the basic four-way subdivision of Asia, Africa, America, and Europe. That undisputed division underlies not only debates over continental divides but also ideas of East and West, North and South, and explicitly hierarchical categories such as first, Second, Third, and Fourth Worlds (the last a term invented to accommodate Indigenous people in the Americas, New Zealand, and Australia). It may be common practice to buy a plane ticket to “Australia” or “sub-Saharan Africa” as opposed to “north Africa,” but the wide acceptance of those geographical designations hides the fact that the division of continents and the geo-political structures imposed upon them are all imperial constructions of the past five hundred years. A god did not create the planet earth and divide it, from the very beginning, into four continents. “America,” the fourth, was appended to the three that had been imagined in Christianity, which St Augustine articulated in The City of God, as we will see in chapter 1.

The narrative and argument of this book, then, will not be about an entity called “Latin America,” but on how the “idea” of Latin America came about. One of the main goals is to uncouple the name of the subcontinent from the cartographic image we all have of it. It is an excavation of the imperial/colonial foundation of the
“idea” of Latin America that will help us unravel the geo-politics of knowledge from the perspective of colonality, the untold and unrecognized historical counterpart of modernity. By “perspective of colonality” in this case, I mean that the center of observation will be grounded in the colonial history that shaped the idea of the Americas. I refer to the process as an excavation rather than an archeology because it is impossible to simply uncover colonality, insofar as it shapes and is shaped by the processes of modernity. After all, the Americas exist today only as a consequence of European colonial expansion and the narrative of that expansion from the European perspective, the perspective of modernity.

You can tell the story of the world in as many ways as you wish, from the perspective of modernity, and never pay any attention to the perspective from colonality. I am here referring to something important and much more than a mere “conflict” of interpretations. To illustrate, consider that a Christian and a Marxist analysis of a given event, say the “discovery of America,” would offer us different interpretations; but both would be from the perspective of modernity. That is, the “discovery of America” would be seen in both cases from the perspective of Europe. A Fanonian perspective on “the discovery of America,” however, would introduce a non-European perspective, the perspective grounded on the memory of slave-trade and slave-labor exploitation, and its psychological, historical, ethical, and theoretical consequences. In this case, it would be a perspective from colonality and from the Afro-Caribbean rather than from Europe. Readers will be more familiar with Christianity and Marxism than with Fanonism – a critical current of thought (parallel with and complementary to, but not reducible to, “Marxism”) that is producing a decolonial shift in the domain of knowledge and action, inspired by the twentieth-century Martinican intellectual and activist Frantz Fanon, discussed in the following chapters – which should already point to an important aspect of the issue that structures my entire argument. Of course, I could have organized my argument from a European perspective, even if I was born and educated in South America. All I would need to do would be to embrace the philosophical frame of reference that is already in place and locate myself within a paradigm of knowledge that, in spite of conflicting interpretations within it, is based on the geo-historical location of Europe.
Instead, I situate my argument within the decolonial paradigm of knowledge and understanding enacted by Waman Puma de Ayala (see chapter 3), as well as other intellectuals after him belonging to the sphere of society that anthropologist Eric Wolf identified as “people without history.”

From the sixteenth-century Spanish missionary Bartolomé de Las Casas to G. W. F. Hegel in the nineteenth century, and from Karl Marx to the twentieth-century British historian A. J. Toynbee, all we can read (or see in maps) about the place of the Americas in the world order is historically located from a European perspective that passes as universal. Certainly, every one of these authors acknowledged that there was a world, and people, outside Europe. Indeed, both people and continents outside of Europe were overly present as “objects,” but they were absent as subjects and, in a way, out of history. They were, in other words, subjects whose perspectives did not count. Eric Wolf’s famous book title, _People without History_, became a metaphor to describe this epistemic power differential. By “people without history,” Wolf did not mean that there were people in the world who did not have memories and records of their past, which would be an absolutely absurd claim. He meant that, according to the regional concept of history as defined in the Western world from ancient Greece to twentieth-century France, every society that did not have alphabetic writing or wrote in a language other than the six imperial languages of modern Europe did not have History. In this view, History is a privilege of European modernity and in order to have History you have to let yourself be colonized, which means allowing yourself, willingly or not, to be subsumed by a perspective of history, life, knowledge, economy, subjectivity, family, religion, etc. that is modeled on the history of modern Europe, and that has now been adopted, with little difference, as the official model of the US. Perspectives from coloniality, however, emerge out of the conditions of the “colonial wound,” the feeling of inferiority imposed on human beings who do not fit the predetermined model in Euro-American narratives.

To excavate coloniality, then, one must always include and analyze the project of modernity, although the reverse is not true, because coloniality points to the absences that the narrative of modernity produces. Thus, I choose to describe the modern world order that
has emerged in the five hundred years since the “discovery of America” as the modern/colonial world, to indicate that coloniality is constitutive of modernity and cannot exist without it. Indeed, the “idea” of Latin America cannot be dealt with in isolation without producing turmoil in the world system. It cannot be separated from the “ideas” of Europe and of the US as America that dominate even today. The “Americas” are the consequence of early European commercial expansion and the motor of capitalism, as we know it today. The “discovery” of America and the genocide of Indians and African slaves are the very foundation of “modernity,” more so than the French or Industrial Revolutions. Better yet, they constitute the darker and hidden face of modernity, “coloniality.” Thus, to excavate the “idea of Latin America” is, really, to understand how the West was born and how the modern world order was founded.

The following discussion is, thus, written within the frame of what Arturo Escobar has called the modernity/coloniality research project. Some of the premises are the following:

1. There is no modernity without coloniality, because coloniality is constitutive of modernity.
2. The modern/colonial world (and the colonial matrix of power) originates in the sixteenth century, and the discovery/invention of America is the colonial component of modernity whose visible face is the European Renaissance.
3. The Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution are derivative historical moments consisting in the transformation of the colonial matrix of power.
4. Modernity is the name for the historical process in which Europe began its progress toward world hegemony. It carries a darker side, coloniality.
5. Capitalism, as we know it today, is of the essence for both the conception of modernity and its darker side, coloniality.
6. Capitalism and modernity/coloniality had a second historical moment of transformation after World War II when the US took the imperial leadership previously enjoyed at different times by both Spain and England.

Following these presuppositions, I organize the narrative and the argument of this book around three heterogeneous historico-
structural moments that link the empires and the colonies. The first is the entry of America into the European consciousness (the Renaissance). The second (the Enlightenment) is the entry of “Latinidad” – “Latinity,” “Latinitée”: see chapter 2 – as a double identity, imperial and colonial. In the third moment (after the Cold War), I change gears to focus on radical shifts in the geography of knowledge that we are witnessing now around the world and that, in the Americas, are questioning the ontology and the ideology of a continental divide between “Latin” and “Anglo” Americas.

Chapters 1 and 2 tell the story of the silences created by the entangled narratives that begin in the sixteenth century and cross the five hundred years since then to make modernity appear as the innocent point of arrival (the secular translation of Paradise in Christian cosmology) toward which History flows. Given this, I attempt a decolonial shift in the domain of history. Chapter 1 describes the building of the colonial framework and the invention of the idea of “America,” while Chapter 2 follows the emergence of the specific idea of “Latin” America.

Chapter 1 examines the consequences of the various narratives that underlie the “idea of America,” which subsumed the histories and cosmologies of the people living in Tawantinsuyu and Anáhuac, the territories of the Aztecs and Incas, when Europeans arrived. Christian Europeans could imagine the “discovery and conquest” of America as the most outstanding event since God created the world (a widely accepted view that even free-trade theorist Adam Smith and radical critic of capitalism Marx could agree on), but the Aymara of what is now Bolivia and Peru saw it as a Pachakuti, a total disruption of space and time – a revolution in reverse, so to speak, that did not yield the “progressive” consequences of the American, French, and Industrial Revolutions. We could say, metaphorically, that a Pachakuti has been taking place in Iraq since March of 2003. Christian cosmology, as we will discuss, organized the world into continents revolving around Europe. The fact that those in Cuzco or Tenochtitlan, capitals of the Inca and Aztec Empires, conceived of themselves as living in the center of space would have no bearing on the maps that were drawn.

The geo-politics of continental division are also of key importance for understanding the way that “Latin” America could
subsequently be imagined as part of the West and yet peripheral to it. America, as a continent and people, was considered inferior in European narratives from the sixteenth century until the idea was refashioned in the US after the Spanish-American War in 1898, when “Latin” America took on the inferior role. Chapter 2, therefore, goes on to explore the divisions within “America” after the revolutions of independence (North/South, Anglo/Latin), in which “Latin” America would come to be seen as dependent on and inferior to the United States. The concept of “Latinidad,” an identity asserted by the French and adopted by Creole elites to define themselves, would ultimately function both to rank them below Anglo Americans and, yet, to erase and demote the identities of Indians and Afro-South Americans. These are, in a nutshell, the history, meaning, and consequences of the “idea of Latin” America that I explore in more detail in the next two chapters.

Many secular scholars, intellectuals, World Bank officers, state functionaries, and journalists believe that “modernity is an incomplete project.” In my view, coming from the perspective of coloniality, to complete the incomplete project of modernity means to keep on reproducing coloniality, which is our current reality at the beginning of the twenty-first century. While we no longer have the overt colonial domination of the Spanish or British models, the logic of coloniality remains in force in the “idea” of the world that has been constructed through modernity/coloniality. Examining the evolution of the “idea of Latin America” should show that while its materialization belongs precisely to the manifestation of that logic in particular moments of imperial/colonial restructuring, the perspective of those who have been silenced by it can open up possibilities for radical change. Chapter 3, then, will focus on movements among Indigenous people and Afro descendants in “Latin” America, as well as among Latinos/as in the US who are unfolding new knowledge projects and making the “idea of Latin America” obsolete.

I did not write chapter 4 because of the limited length of the books in the “Manifesto” series. If I had had the chance to write another chapter, it would have dealt in more depth with the tense opposition between the idea of “Latin” America and the ideas of “nature” and “culture.” To look briefly at their evolution now,