Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism

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The Semantic Slippage of the Concept of "Europe"

Let me begin by underlining the change in meaning of the concept of "Europe." This semantic slippage has generally been overlooked, making it difficult to address this issue in a productive manner.

First, the mythological Europa was the daughter of a Phoenician king and thus was Semitic.[1] This Europe that comes from the Orient bears little resemblance to the "definitive" Europe (the modern Europe); one should not mistake Greece with the future Europe. This future Europe was situated north of Macedonia and north of Magna Graecia in Italy. The future Europe was the home of everything that was considered barbaric (thus, in later times, Europe eventually usurped a name that did not belong to it). The classical Greeks were well aware that both Asia (the area that would later become a province in the Roman Empire and which corresponded to contemporary Turkey) and Africa (Egypt) were home to the most developed cultures. Asia and Africa were not considered barbaric, although neither were they considered wholly human.[2] What became modern Europe lay beyond Greece's horizon and therefore could not in any way coincide with the originary Greece. Modern Europe, situated to the north and west of Greece, was simply considered the uncivilized, the nonpolitical, the nonhuman. By stating this I am trying to emphasize that the unilineal diachrony Greece-Rome-Europe is an ideological construct that can be traced back to late-eighteenth-century German romanticism. Therefore, the single line

of development Greece-Rome-Europe is a conceptual by-product of the Eurocentric "Aryan model."

Second, the West consisted of the territories of the Roman Empire that spoke Latin (the eastern border of which was the area between present-day Croatia and Serbia) and thus included the north of Africa.[3] The West was opposed to the East, the Greek Empire, which spoke Greek. The East consisted of Greece and Asia (the Anatolia province), the Hellenist kingdoms that reached the banks of the River Indus, and the Ptolemaic Nile. At that time, there was no relevant concept of what would later be considered Europe.

Third, beginning in the seventh century, Constantinople (the eastern Roman Empire) confronted the steadily growing Arab Muslim world. Here one should not forget that from that point on the classical Greek world—the one traditionally associated with Aristotle—was as much Arab Muslim as Byzantine Christian.[4]

Fourth, the Medieval Latin European world confronted the Turkish Muslim world. Again, Aristotle was a philosopher considered to belong more to the Arab than the Christian world. Running against the grain of tradition and at the risk of condemnation, Abelard, Albertus Magnus, and Thomas Aquinas drew upon Aristotle's thoughts. Indeed, Aristotle's writings on metaphysics and logic were studied in Baghdad well before they were translated into Latin in Muslim Spain; then, from Toledo, they arrived in Paris by the end of the twelfth century. Thus, for the first time, Europe differentiated itself from Africa (given that the Maghreb was Muslim and Berber) and from the Eastern world (especially from the Byzantine Empire and from the Middle East, thanks to the traders of the eastern Mediterranean). In this context, the Crusades can be seen as the first attempt of Latin Europe to impose itself on the eastern Mediterranean. They failed, and Latin Europe remained isolated by the Turkish and Muslim world, which extended its geopolitical domination from Morocco to Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Mogul Empire of northern India, the mercantile kingdoms of Melaka, and finally, in the thirteenth century, to Mindanao Island in the Philippines. Thus, Muslim "universality" reached from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Latin Europe was a secondary, peripheral culture and up to this point had never been the "center" of history. This also applied to the Roman Empire, which, given its extreme western location, never became the center of the history of the Euro-Afro-Asian continent. To consider an empire the center of Eurasian regional history before the dominance of the Muslim world, one could only go back to the Hellenistic empires starting

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│ Peoples of the North │   │    Egypt     │   │ Phoenicia,       │
└──────────────────────┘   └──────────────┘   │ Semitic tribes   │
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                    │ Classical Greek and      │
                    │ Hellenic world           │
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   │ Western Roman world    │
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   ┌────────────────────────────┐             │ Arab Muslim world        │
   │ Western German-Latin world │    b        │ (also Jewish) (from the  │
   │ (from the twelfth century) │◄────────    │ tenth century)           │
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 d              │ c
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       │ Italian Renaissance      │ ──────►  │ Spain, Portugal    │
       │ (fourteenth–fifteenth    │          └────────────────────┘
       │ century)                 │          ┌────────────────────┐
       └──────────────────────────┘          │ Discoveries of 1492│
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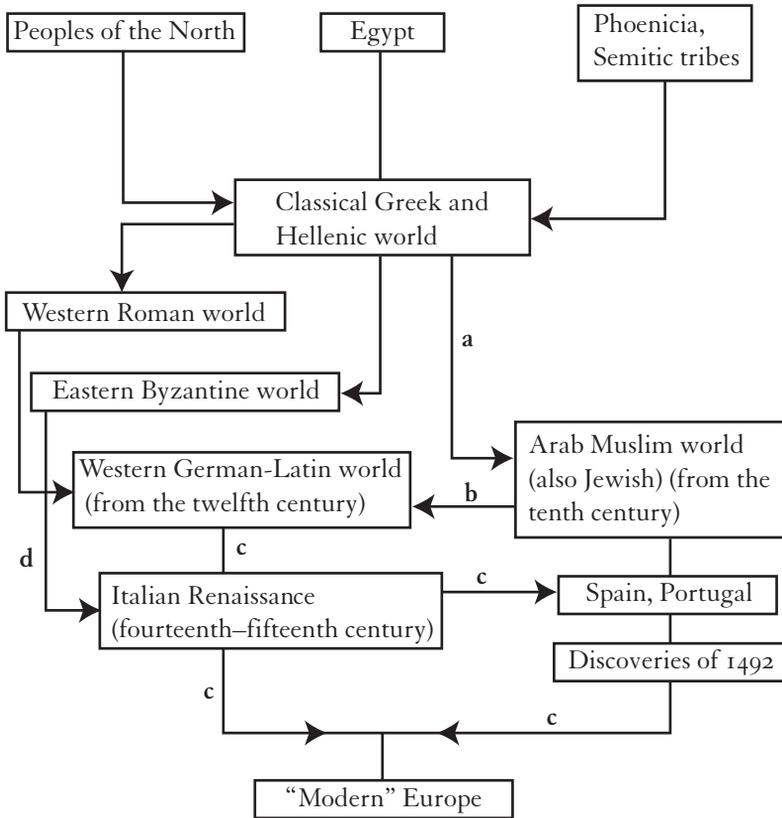
Figure 1. Historical sequence from the Greek to the modern European world.
Note: There is no direct Greek influence on western Latin Europe (it is
mediated by both arrows a and b). There is also no direct link between either
sequence c of modern Europe and Greece or the Byzantine world (arrow d),
but there is a direct link with the western Christian Latin-Roman world.

with the Seleucides and Ptolomies. But in any case, Hellenism could not be equated with Europe, and it did not attain a universality as extensive as the one attained by the Muslims during the fifteenth century.

Fifth, during the Italian Renaissance (especially after the fall of Constantinople in 1453), a novel coming together of heretofore independent cultural processes took place: the western Latin world (sequence *c* of figure 1) joined the eastern Greek world (arrow *d*), and they subsequently confronted the Turkish world. In turn, the Turks forgot the Hellenistic-Byzantine origin of the Muslim world and thus allowed to emerge the false equation Western = Hellenistic + Roman + Christian. In such a fashion,

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│   The history of Asia is a European prehistory │
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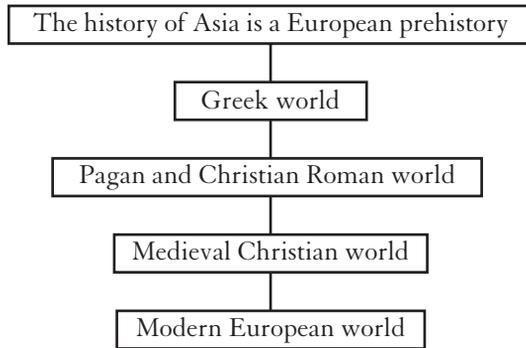
Figure 2. Ideological sequence from Greece to Modern Europe.

the Eurocentric ideology of German romanticism, depicted in figure 2, was born.[5]

Today, this is considered to be the standard, traditional sequence.[6] Few consider this to be an ideological invention that first kidnapped Greek culture as exclusively western and European and then posited both the Greek and Roman cultures as the center of world history. This perspective can be considered erroneous from two standpoints. First, as we shall see, there was not yet a world history in an empirical sense. There were only isolated, local histories of communities that extended over large geographical areas: the Romans, the Persians, the Hindu kingdoms, the Siamese, the Chinese, or the Mesoamerican and Inca worlds in America. Second, their geopolitical locations did not allow them to be a center (the Red Sea or Antioch, the final destination of commerce with the East, was not the center but the westernmost border of the Euro-Afro-Asian market).

To sum up, Latin Europe of the fifteenth century, besieged by the Muslim world, amounted to nothing more than a peripheral, secondary geographical area situated in the westernmost limit of the Euro-Afro-Asian continent (see figure 3).

Two Concepts of Modernity

At this point in my description, I get to the heart of the discussion, where I oppose the hegemonic interpretation of Modern Europe, "modernity." In doing so, my opposition to the hegemonic interpretation should not be viewed as something foreign to Latin American culture, but rather as a crucial problem in defining, as Charles Taylor (1989) would put it,
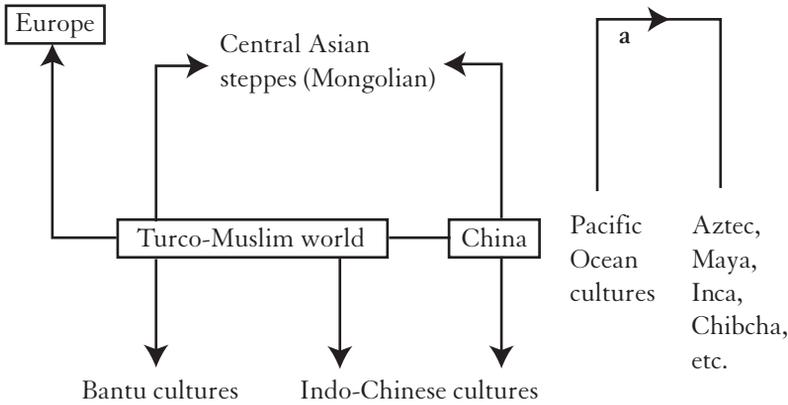
Figure 3. Major cultures and areas of contact at the end of the fifteenth century
(there is no empirical world history). Note: Arrow a indicates
the origin of Homo sapiens in America and the Neolithic influences from the
Pacific, nothing more.

the multipolar aspects of Latin American identity. In effect, there are two concepts of modernity.

The first concept is Eurocentric, provincial, and regional. Modernity is an emancipation, a Kantian *Ausgang*, or "way out," from immaturity by means of reason, understood as a critical process that affords humanity the possibility of new development. In Europe, this process took place mainly during the eighteenth century. The temporal and spatial dimensions of this phenomenon were described by Hegel and commented on by Jürgen Habermas in his classic work on modernity (1988, 27). Habermas's narrative, unanimously accepted by contemporary European tradition, posits, "The key historical events for the creation of the principle of [modern] subjectivity are the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution."[7] As can readily be observed, a spatial-temporal sequence is followed here. Furthermore, other cultural processes are usually added to this sequence as well, from the Italian Renaissance and the German Reformation to the Enlightenment. In a conversation with Paul Ricoeur (1992, 109), Habermas suggested that the English Parliament should also be included. Thus the sequence would run from Italy (fifteenth century) to Germany (sixteenth to eighteenth century) to England (seventeenth century) to France (eighteenth century). I label this perspective "Eurocentric," for it indicates intra-European phenomena as the starting point of modernity and explains its later development without making recourse to

anything outside of Europe. In a nutshell, this is the provincial, regional view that ranges from Max Weber (I have in mind here his analysis on "rationalization" and the "disenchantment of worldviews") to Habermas. For many, Galileo (condemned in 1616), Francis Bacon (*Novum Organum*, 1620), or Descartes (*Discourse on Method*, 1636) could be considered the forebears of the process of modernity in the seventeenth century.

A second view on modernity takes into consideration a world perspective. This view posits the fact of being the center of world history as an essential trait of the modern world. This centrality is achieved from various perspectives: state, military, economic, philosophical. In other words, there was not a world history in an empirical sense before 1492 (as this date was the beginning of the "world-system").[8] Previous to this date, empires or cultural systems simply coexisted. It was only with the fifteenth-century Portuguese expansion (which reached the Far East in the sixteenth century) and the discovery of America by Spain that the whole planet became the space of one world history (Magellan and El Cano circumnavigated the world for the first time in 1521).

Spain, as the first "modern" nation, had the following attributes: a state that unified the peninsula, a top-down national consensus created by the Inquisition, a national military power (since the conquest of Granada), one of the first grammars of a vernacular language (Antonio de Nebrija's Castilian *Gramática* in 1492), and the subordination of the church to the state, thanks to Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros. All of these attributes allowed Spain to begin the first stage of modernity: world mercantilism. The silver mines of Potosí and Zacatecas (discovered in 1545–46) allowed the Spaniards to accumulate sufficient monetary wealth to defeat the Turks at Lepanto in 1571. The Atlantic circuit replaced the Mediterranean. For me, the centrality of Latin Europe in world history stands as the fundamental determination of modernity. The other determinations, such as constituent subjectivity, private property, or freedom of contract, all took shape around the centrality of Latin Europe. The seventeenth century (as exemplified in the work of Descartes and Bacon) must then be seen as the result of one-and-a-half centuries of modernity: it is a consequence rather than a starting point. Holland (which gained emancipation from Spain in 1610), England, and France would expand the path opened by Spain.

The second stage of modernity, that of the eighteenth-century industrial revolution and the Enlightenment, expanded and broadened the horizon started in the fifteenth century. England and France replaced Spain and Portugal as the hegemonic powers—especially from the beginning of

imperialism, around 1870, up until 1945—thus taking the helm of modern Europe and of world history.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, this "modern Europe," which since 1492 occupied the center of world history, defined all other cultures as its periphery for the first time in history. In the usual interpretation of modernity, both Spain and Portugal are left to one side, and along with them the Spanish American sixteenth century, which, in the unanimous opinion of the experts, had nothing to do with modernity but rather concerned the end of the Middle Ages. And yet it is my aim to stubbornly oppose this false unanimity and offer a different conceptualization of modernity by inserting it into a world context. In doing so, I shall put forward an interpretation of modern rationality different both from those offered by thinkers who wish to "fulfill" it (such as Habermas) and from the interpretations of those who wish to oppose it (like the postmodernists).[9]

Rationality and Irrationality, or the Myth of Modernity

If one understands Europe's modernity—a long process of five centuries— as the unfolding of new possibilities derived from its centrality in world history and the corollary constitution of all other cultures as its periphery, it becomes clear that, even though all cultures are ethnocentric, modern European ethnocentrism is the only one that might pretend to claim universality for itself. Modernity's Eurocentrism lies in the confusion between abstract universality and the concrete world hegemony derived from Europe's position as center.[10]

The modern *ego cogito* was anticipated by more than a century by the practical, Spanish-Portuguese *ego conquiro* (I conquer) that imposed its will (the first modern "will-to-power") on the indigenous populations of the Americas. The conquest of Mexico thus became the first sphere of the modern ego. Europe (in this case, Spain) had a clear superiority over Aztec, Maya, or Inca cultures[11]—especially in military terms, because the Spaniards' weapons, like those of other populations in the Euro-Afro-Asian continent, were made of iron, while the American Indian population used only stone and wooden weapons. From 1492, modern Europe used the conquest of the South American continent (North America entered into the picture only in the seventeenth century) as the springboard to obtain a crucial comparative advantage over its antagonistic cultures (Turkish Muslim, Chinese, and so on). For the most part, Europe's superiority would be the offspring of its accumulation of riches, experience, and knowledge derived from the conquest of the Latin American continent.[12]

Modernity, as a new paradigm of daily life and of historical, religious, and scientific understanding, emerged at the end of the fifteenth century in connection with control over the Atlantic. Thus the seventeenth century was already the product of the sixteenth century. In other words, since Holland, France, and England developed the possibilities already opened up by Portugal and Spain, they constituted the second modernity. In its turn, Latin America entered modernity—well before North America—as the "other side," that which was dominated, exploited, and concealed.[13]

In this framework, modernity implicitly contains a strong rational core that can be read as a "way out" for humanity from a state of regional and provincial immaturity. On the other hand, this same modernity carries out an irrational process that remains concealed even to itself. That is to say, given its secondary and mythical negative content,[14] modernity can be read as the justification of an irrational praxis of violence. The myth could be described as follows:

1. The modern civilization casts itself as a superior, developed civilization (something tantamount to unconsciously upholding a Eurocentric position).

2. The aforementioned superiority makes the improvement of the most barbaric, primitive, coarse people a moral obligation (from Ginés de Sepúlveda until Kant or Hegel).

3. The model of this educational process is that implemented by Europe itself (in fact, it is a unilineal, European development that will eventually—and unconsciously—result in the "developmentalist fallacy").

4. Insofar as barbaric people oppose the civilizing mission, modern praxis must exercise violence only as a last resort, in order to destroy the obstacles impeding modernization (from the "colonial just war" to the Gulf War).

5. As the civilizing mission produces a wide array of victims, its corollary violence is understood as an inevitable action, one with a quasi-ritual character of sacrifice; the civilizing hero manages to make his victims part of a saving sacrifice (I have in mind here the colonized indigenous people, the African slaves, women, and the ecological destruction of nature).

6. For modern consciousness, the barbarians are tainted by "blame"[15] stemming from their opposition to the civilizing process, which

allows modernity to present itself not only as innocent but also as absolving the blame of its own victims.[16]

7. Finally, given the "civilizing" character of modernity, the sufferings and sacrifices—the costs—inherent in the "modernization" of the "backward," immature people,[17] of the races fitted to slavery, of the weaker female sex, are understood as inevitable.

For these reasons, if one aims at overcoming modernity, it becomes necessary to deny the denial of the myth of modernity from an ethics of responsibility.[18] Thus, the other denied and victimized side of modernity must first be unveiled as "innocent": it is the "innocent victims" of ritual sacrifice that in the self-realization of their innocence cast modernity as guilty of a sacrificial and conquering violence—that is, of a constitutive, originary, essential violence. By way of denying the innocence of modernity and of affirming the alterity of the other (which was previously denied), it is possible to "discover" for the first time the hidden "other side" of modernity: the peripheral colonial world, the sacrificed indigenous peoples, the enslaved black, the oppressed woman, the alienated infant, the estranged popular culture: the victims of modernity, all of them victims of an irrational act that contradicts modernity's ideal of rationality.

Only when the civilizing and exculpating myths of modern violence are denied and the injustice inherent to sacrificial praxis both inside and outside of Europe is recognized is it possible to overcome the essential limitation of "emancipatory reason." This overcoming of emancipatory reason as a liberating reason is possible only when both enlightened reason's Eurocentrism and the developmentalist fallacy of the hegemonic process of modernization are unmasked. It is my contention here that these operations can still be performed from enlightened reason when one ethically discovers the dignity of the other (of the other culture, sex, or gender), when one pronounces innocent the victims of modernity by affirming their alterity as identity in the exteriority. In this manner, modern reason is transcended not as denial of reason as such, but rather as denial of the violent, Eurocentric, developmentalist, hegemonic reason. What is at stake here is what I have called "transmodernity," a worldwide ethical liberation project in which alterity, which was part and parcel of modernity, would be able to fulfill itself.[19] The fulfillment of modernity has nothing to do with a shift from the potentialities of modernity to the actuality of European modernity. Indeed, the fulfillment of modernity would be a transcendental shift where modernity and its denied alterity, its victims, would mutually fulfill

each other in a creative process. The transmodern project is the mutual fulfillment of the "analectic" solidarity of center/periphery, woman/man, mankind/earth, western culture/peripheral postcolonial cultures, different races, different ethnicities, different classes. It should be noted here that this mutual fulfillment of solidarity does not take place by pure denial but rather by subsumption from alterity.[20]

All of this implies that what is at stake here is not a premodern project that would consist of a folkloric affirmation of the past, nor is it an antimodern project of the kind put forward by conservative, right-wing, populist or fascist groups. Finally, it is not only a postmodern project that would deny modernity and would critique all reason, thus falling into a nihilist irrationalism or a pure affirmation of difference without conmensurability. This is a transmodern project that would emerge by real subsumption of the rational emancipatory character of modernity and its denied alterity (the other of modernity) by way of the denial of modernity's sacrificial-mythical character (which justifies modernity's innocence over its victims and, by this token, becomes irrational in a contradictory manner).

It is true that the culture that will subsequently produce modernity formally developed in certain medieval European cities, especially in those of the Renaissance quattrocento. However, modernity only truly began when the historical conditions of its real origin were met: in 1492, when a real worldwide expansion took place, when the colonial world became organized and the usufruct of its victims' lives began. Modernity really began in 1492: that is my thesis. The real overcoming of modernity (as subsumption and not merely as Hegelian *Aufhebung*) is then the subsumption of its emancipatory, rational, European character transcended as a worldwide liberation project from its denied alterity. Transmodernity is a new liberation project with multiple dimensions: political, economic, ecological, erotic, pedagogic, religious.

Thus there are two contradictory paradigms: that of a mere Eurocentric modernity, and that of a subsumed modernity from a postcolonial worldwide perspective, where it achieved an ambiguous double function as an emancipatory project and as a mythical culture of violence. The fulfillment of the second paradigm is what I have called a process of transmodernity; it should be noted here that this second paradigm is the only one that includes the modernity/alterity of the world. In Tzvetan Todorov's *Nous et les autres* (1989), the "us" refers to the Europeans and the "others" refers to the peoples of the peripheral world. Modernity defined itself as an emancipatory project with respect to the "us," but did not realize

its mythical-sacrificial character with respect to the "others." In a sense, one could say that Montaigne (1967, 208) somehow perceived this when he wrote, "Thus, we can call them barbaric with respect to the standards of our reason, but not with respect to ourselves, given that we surpass them in all kinds of outrages."[21]

Five hundred years after the beginning of modern Europe, the *Human Development Report 1992* (35) issued by the United Nations reveals that the wealthiest 20 percent of humanity (principally Western Europe, the United States, and Japan) consume 82 percent of the world's resources.[22] Meanwhile, the poorest 60 percent (the historical periphery of the world-system) consume only 5.8 percent of these resources. This amounts to an accumulation never before seen in the history of humanity, a structural injustice never imagined on a world scale. Is this not the offspring of modernity, of the world-system started by Western Europe?

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Notes

1. See Dussel 1969, where I disentangled Greece from the modern myth. Martin Bernal (1987, 85) also takes note of this: "Homer and Hesiod both referred to Europa, who was always seen as a sister or some to her close relative to Dadmos, as the *daughter of Phoinix.* . . . However, given Homer's frequent use of Phoinix in the sense of *Phoenician*, and the later universal identification of Europa and Kadmos with Phoenicia, this argument seems rather far-fetched."

2. In his *Politics* (I, 1) Aristotle does not consider the inhabitants of these regions human like the Greeks ("inhabitants of the polis"), but neither does he consider them barbaric.

3. This partly explains the fact that the struggles that have torn apart the former Yugoslavia since 1991 have a long history (Latin Croatia, which later converted to Catholicism, warred against Greek Serbia, which later converted to Orthodox Christianity).

4. In this respect, we can only agree with Samir Amin when he writes in *Eurocentrism* (1989, 26), "Christianity and Islam are thus both heirs of Hellenism and remain, for this reason, twin siblings, even if they have been, at certain moments, relentless adversaries." Amin aptly demonstrates how the Hellenist philosophy served first Christian Byzantine thought (from the third to the seventh century), then Arab Muslim thought (whose splendor began

in the eighth century and ran through the twelfth century, a period heavily influenced by Aristotelian thought), and finally the classical scholastic Latin thought (which was also Aristotelian in nature) from the end of the twelfth century. In contrast, the resurgence of Platonic thought in fifteenth-century Italy was of Christian Byzantine origin.

5. One of the merits of Bernal's hypothesis (1987, 189–280) is to show the importance of the movement started by Friedrich Schlegel in the 1803 *Ueber die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, which allowed Prussian "ideology" to directly unify classical Greek culture with German culture by linking India, Indo-Europe, and the decadence of Egypt's centrality (Egypt being, for the Greeks, the origin of Greek culture and philosophy from Herodotus, Plato, and Aristotle until the eighteenth century). This move gave birth to an "Aryan," racist thinking which promoted the invention of the histories of philosophy. These histories relate Greece and Rome to the Middle Ages and then directly to Descartes and Kant, all without mediation. Rudolf Pfeiffer (1976, 170) writes: "A break was made with the Latin tradition of humanism and an entirely new humanism, a true new Hellenism, grew up. Winckelmann was the initiator, Goethe the consummator, Wilhelm von Humboldt, in his linguistic, historical and educational writings, the theorist. Finally, Humboldt's ideas were given practical effect when he became Prussian Minister of Education and founded the new university of Berlin and the new humanistic Gymnasium." This sequence must be thoroughly revised in a context immune to both Hellenocentrism and Eurocentrism.

6. For example, Charles Taylor (1989) speaks of Plato, Augustine, and Descartes, viewing the Greek–Roman Christian–Modern European sequence as unilineal.

7. Translation mine.

8. See Dussel 1995, Wallerstein 1974.

9. See the historical introduction to Dussel 1998 (19–86). The English translation is forthcoming from Duke University Press.

10. Abstract universality is what Kant aims at with, for example, his moral principle. In fact, Kant's move entails the identification of the European maxim with the universalizable one.

11. In contrast, it should be noted that the Spanish or Portuguese did not have cultural superiority in regard to the Turkish Muslim or Chinese cultures.

12. China, whose presence was felt from Kenya to Alaska, did not have any particular interest in occupying an inhospitable America, which did not have an economy complementary to that of the Chinese.

13. See Dussel 1996.

14. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1971) defined a mythical instance of modernity that Habermas is unable to recognize. The "myth" of modernity is not situated at an intra-European level (as is the case in Horkheimer, Adorno, or Habermas), but rather at a world level, the coordinates of which could be described as center-periphery or north-south. In this respect, see Habermas 1988, 130–57.

15. Kant (1968, A481) mentions "guilty" (*verschuldeten*) immaturity.

16. Francisco de Vitoria, a member of the School of Salamanca, offers the indigenous peoples' opposition to the preaching of the Christian faith as a last-resort justification for declaring war.

17. In Kantian terms, *unmundig*: immature, coarse, uneducated.

18. See Dussel 1998, chap. 4.

19. To argue this from a political, economical, or cultural point of view goes beyond the range of the short article.

20. I am using the word here in Marx's sense of subsumption, which, given its Latin etymology, corresponds to Hegel's *Aufhebung*; see Dussel 1985, sec. 5.3, "The Analectic Moment."

21. My translation.

22. In 1930, the ratio between the richest 20 percent of humanity and the poorest 20 percent was one in thirty, while by 1990 the ratio had risen to one in sixty (the figure doubled in only 30 years).

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