

Coloniality: From Latin America to Africa?

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Michel Cahen is a historian of Portuguese colonialism, whose focus has been on the theme of coloniality over the last twenty years. He recent work includes “Colonialité: Plaidoyer pour la précision d’un concept” Karthala Editions (Paris, May 2024), providing an interpretation of the concept and its issues, in a critical dialogue with different authors, mainly South American decolonial theorists. He particularly emphasizes the diversity of “regimes of coloniality,” linked to different history of colonial and post-colonial experiences, which, in his view, should be differentiated. Mame-Penda Ba and Philippe Lavigne Delville have interviewed him.

Philippe Lavigne Delville & Mame-Penda Ba

In the prologue of your book, you explain that you were initially reluctant to the concept of coloniality before gradually being convinced “that it was essential to understanding the expansion of the capitalist world-system over the long term, while respecting the countless nuances necessary” (p. 13). Could you explain how these readings fit into a history of critical thinking on capitalism and add value to postcolonial and subaltern approaches, for example?

Michel Cahen

You have asked me two questions! To begin with, yes, for a long time I was very reluctant about postcolonial studies (there was not much talk about decolonial thinking back then). I am a Marxist-trained historian – a partisan of historical materialism – so I was already very familiar with concepts like exploitation, oppression, alienation, imperialism, dependence, the capitalist world-system, and so on. I found it difficult to understand how postcolonial theory could really provide new insights, and there was a good reason for this: I could not see the political consequences of the postcolonial approach.

As a Marxist, I was obviously highly critical of authoritarian paternalism regimes in Africa (and beyond), and of neocolonialism, including in the countries I studied, the former Portuguese colonies in Africa. Even though the five Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP) adopted a radical, even “Marxist-Leninist” discourse, I could clearly see that it was a discourse of power, not of people’s emancipation, from political-bureaucratic elites who were not real bourgeoisies and, for that reason, they absolutely needed state ownership for their social reproduction. Moreover, barely ten years after coming to power, these “revolutionary” elites embarked on a neoliberal turn.

Postcolonial texts were not particularly critical of this subaltern integration situation into the capitalist world-system. They were more interested in textual analysis, epistemological critique, and the coloniality of knowledge before the coloniality of power. Let us be careful however, as I am not saying the question of epistemic critique is secondary! I am saying it cannot be treated separately from the issue of power and class nature (or even race, in some contexts) of states and societies.

So– to answer the second part of your question –, I was still attentive to these new productions (and of the *Subaltern Studies* of Bengal in the 1980s) for two reasons: I saw in many Marxists a sort of economism and hyper-classism. In the final analysis, economics would have been determining, and only class consciousness would not be a false consciousness. I am exaggerating here, but there’s some truth to this. However, “in the final analysis” does not mean “in the end” or “ultimately in reality”: it means that, in the *analysis* we make of a society, the material question is determining. Notwithstanding that, in people’s daily lives and consciousness, that is far from always being the case. If all proletarians had a class consciousness that corresponds exactly to their social situation, the world socialist revolution would have been achieved a long time ago!

For the same reason, even though it seems to have been settled now, some Marxists found it difficult to integrate feminist issues because they could not be reduced to capitalist oppression, and because the feminist movement had to be autonomous (yet, as you well know, intersectional feminism does not deny class conflict at all!).

Furthermore, as a historian, how can we analyze colonial expansion from the 15th century onwards? Was it not already capitalism, both slave-based and mercantile, but capitalist nonetheless? Yes, it was, but it was not the Capitalist Mode of Production (CMP), either because it did not exist yet (before the end of the 18th century) or because modern capitalism had no interest in implementing it. My studies on colonial Mozambique and the reading of Immanuel Wallerstein helped me understand this: exporting the CMP to the imperialist era would have meant proletarianizing entire societies, but a proletarian lives (or mainly lives) off selling his labor power. If an employer pays him less than the cost of his social reproduction, he dies or flees. That is why it is more profitable not to proletarianize, but to maintain indigenous societies as subalternized and subjected to forced labor, where women’s labor still produces the majority of subsistence goods. Men go off to forced labor for the colonizer, while women stay in the village to produce food and ensure the survival of their children. This social space produced by capitalist expansion without implementing the CMP is the space of coloniality, a social formation where the proletariat (according to Marx) is weak and not necessarily the most exploited class, a space where indigenous societies could survive with part of their epistemes and domestic modes of production.

There were Marxist studies on this, of course, notably with the very useful concept of the Articulation of Modes of Production, but apart from the accurate (but purely economic) concept of peripheral capitalism, it seems to me that it was difficult to conceptualize these *entire societies* shaped by non-capitalist integration (in the sense of “without CMP”) into the capitalist world-system. In this regard, part of postcolonial and, especially, decolonial thinking can be useful in enriching Marxism.

Some Marxists (I am thinking here of the collective work “*Critique de la raison décoloniale: Sur une contre-révolution intellectuelle*,” L’Échappée, Paris, November 2024), without falling into hyper-classism or economism I have just questioned, criticize the essentialism, culturalism, and neo-traditionalism of many decolonial thinkers, etc., and consequently identify themselves as anti-decolonial (while denouncing the reactionary critique of decolonial thinking). I feel very aligned with these criticisms and even add some of my own (orientalism, campism, hispanocentrism among *mainstream* decolonials, etc.). However I assert that reflecting on coloniality, understood as the social space produced by capitalist expansion without the CMP implementation, with all its cultural and epistemic consequences, allows for a better understanding of the world-system and avoids Eurocentrism. Let’s be careful, I am obviously not saying that Marxism is Eurocentric (I have thoroughly discussed this topic in my book.), but there are Eurocentric practices of Marxism. Reflecting on coloniality from a materialist perspective allows to recreate the unity of societies: there is no such thing as class conflict on one side – and which classes, in conditions of coloniality? - and epistemic resistance on the other, all of this is unified in the *individual* (which cannot be divided). It is pointless to know whether class or culture (including racial consciousness) will “first” provoke the conflict: the dynamics of social movements are quite different. A movement may be initiated for economic reasons, even when there has been no ideological rupture with the elites, but the movement will provoke this rupture, at least partially. Conversely, cultural aggression can provoke a social movement that will focus on improving living conditions, and so on. Once freed from its essentialist trappings, the decolonial approach thus seems to allow for being “better Marxists,” without economism and hyper-classism. Furthermore, we must end the idea that Marx thought only in terms of Europe. If there is one concept today that is well outdated, one that he developed with the limited documentation at his disposal, it is the “Asiatic Mode of Production”. but this at least proves that he (Marx) did not think only in terms of European class evolution.

Coloniality is not synonymous with colonization, nor with neocolonialism. Colonization is a form of coloniality, but coloniality is a broader concept. Coloniality encompasses all colonial-type social relations (with all the cultural consequences they entail), independently of the formal territorial status. What does “colonial-type” mean? Colonizations were extremely diverse, but they all shared “foundational” similarities: the presence of an invader, then occupier, historically exogenous (even if they become creolized over generations), who maintains power through discriminatory policies against indigenous populations (I use this term in the anthropological context), subalternizing entire societies (through unequal exchange, imaginary debt, authoritarian paternalism, the settlement of exogenous slaves on large portions of their territories), an ideology of evangelization/development based on a superiority complex, etc.

Here are two almost caricatural examples: Bolivia has been independent since August 6, 1825; thus, breaking with imperial Spain from that date. However, Bolivia remained a colony: it was the colonists who took power and founded their own state. This was an independence without decolonization. Until Evo Morales came to power in 2005, the country, with 70% indigenous, had maintained a purely Hispanic state. This is nearly a “pure” case of coloniality. Brazil proclaimed its sovereignty on September 7, 1822, but it was the imperial prince himself who declared independence and broke with Portugal: the society remained colonial! Coloniality continues to exist after formal colonization in many regions of the world.

Let us be careful here, I am not talking about neocolonialism: neocolonialism is a state or government’s policy that advocates and practices subaltern integration into the capitalist world-system. Coloniality is relative to the country, to the society. Both are certainly linked, but it is not the same level of analysis.

Philippe Lavigne Delville & Mame-Penda Ba

Simultaneously, you make several strong critiques of these theories. In particular, in the sections of your book on “regimes of coloniality,” you argue that they tend toward “a reification of the ‘West’ and ‘Modernity,’” and that they are guilty of “Latino-centrism.” Could you explain what you mean by this?

Michel Cahen

The *mainstream* movement of decolonial studies (W. Mignolo, H. Dussel, R. Grosfoguel, N. Maldonado-Torres, etc.) has accentuated the epistemic drift already perceptible in their founder, the Peruvian Aníbal Quijano (1992). Instead of considering coloniality as a complete social system, they reduce it to an “epistemic matrix” (an ideology, as Marx would have said). There is practically nothing left but the subjective, cognitive aspect. According to them, we must break with this matrix, and they talk less and less about capitalism and more and more about the “West” and “Modernity,” without ever defining them. Emancipation would come from breaking away from Western values — the “epistemic disobedience,” according to Walter Mignolo. This reifies and homogenizes the West (which, after all, is a huge part of the world with very different societies), blames the entire population of the “North” (even the proletarians) for the misery of the “Global South” – note that this concept (“South”) has replaced those of peripheral capitalism and the Third World, turning into a “geographicalization” of concepts.

Some decolonial thinkers therefore advocate for epistemic conflicts against the West, without ever defining them. They decide that Putin (Russia), Assad (Syria), Narendra Modi (India) are anti-Western and must be supported. However these three regimes I just mentioned are as capitalist-imperialist as the United States or France. As a result, some no longer see the Ukrainian national liberation conflict; they reduce the war to an inter-imperialist conflict and choose to support the “anti-Western” camp. The fight against capitalism has disappeared, as have national liberation conflicts. For example, in the case of Ukraine, there is, of course, an inter-imperialist aspect to the conflict (it is not out of internationalism that NATO supports Ukraine, to a certain extent), but considering the *nature* of the conflict as purely inter-imperialist (leading to pacifist neutralism) simply obscures the Ukrainians’ desire to remain independent, to remain a nation.

However, as you pointed out in your question, this drift has an origin, which is Latino-centrism. Postcolonialism (I distinguish postcolonial theory – without a hyphen – from the post-colonial period – with a hyphen) rightly denounced the Eurocentrism still present in many literary, journalistic, and social science texts produced in Europe or North America. The decolonial movement continued along this path, initially in a more political, militant way, but it gave in to its geographical origin, in the Andean region of America and among Latino scholars in the United States. They considered that everything originated from their region: “1492” (the date of Christopher Columbus’s arrival in the “New World”) would be the birthdate of the capitalist world-system, race, gender, the nation-state... I cannot go into details here, but this reflects a complete ignorance of how the Old World (the entire Europe-Africa-Asia system) operated, with a world system already in place for centuries (trade with China, Ghana’s gold fueling all of medieval Europe, white slave trade from the Slavic countries until 1453 – the fall of Constantinople – or through piracy in the Mediterranean, trans-Saharan black slave trade, and the early (1440) East Atlantic trade along the coasts of West Africa). There were over 150,000 black slaves in the Iberian Peninsula and Italy by the early 16th century. I am not saying that “1492” is not an important date, far from it. I am saying that the emergence and expansion of the world-system was a *multi-century process* and did not begin in 1492. Our mainstream decolonial thinkers also seem to ignore that, initially (let us say until the mid-16th century), Portuguese expansion along the African and Asian coasts was more profitable than the plundering of the “*Descobridores*” (Explorers) in the Americas (which actually began twenty to thirty years after 1492).

However even if we only study the Americas, there is a tendency among many decolonial thinkers to homogenize the situations. Yet there is a huge difference between Bolivia, where the indigenous population makes up 70% of the total population, and Brazil, where it represents 0.6%. Both countries are shaped by coloniality, but in different ways [I have explained that I use the word “indigenous” because that is the term used by the people concerned; they certainly do not want to be referred to as

“Indians,” a colonial term – instead, they either use their ethnic names (Mapuches, Quechuas, Tupi, etc.), or they bound to the social category of indigenous peoples]. Mainstream decolonial thinkers are primarily Hispanic; they ignore the Portuguese colonization and the English and Dutch colonization in Asia far too much.

Philippe Lavigne Delville & Mame-Penda Ba

You emphasize the importance of the diversity of colonial and post-colonial histories (in the sense of a period that comes “after the colony”) and the varied connections between decolonization and independence. What are, in your view, the keys to analyzing this diversity, and in particular, how do African situations differ from Latin American situations?

Michel Cahen

I just mentioned a country, Bolivia, where the indigenous population represents 70% of the total population, and another country where the population makes up 0.6% (Brazil). This is naturally the result of very different histories. In Brazil, 0.6% of the people are indigenous, but over 50% are Black (in the Brazilian sense of the term, which in Senegal would include mixed-race people). This is not by chance. And there are also different internal geographies: in Colombia, for example, the majority of the population is Hispanic-mestizo, but the Western Province (Pacific) is predominantly Black due to the former African-origin slave plantations. There are so many different social systems, diverse histories, and distinct regimes of coloniality that lead to huge political consequences. Evo Morales made a major step toward decolonizing Bolivia, meaning its re-indigenization, when he (Evo Morales) tried to promote the Plurinational State of Bolivia. Decolonization means that a territory, once indigenous and then colonized, becomes indigenous again (this does not mean that European elements must leave, they can remain, but without racial privileges; it is *Majority Rule and Minority Rights*). This decolonization can be headed by a neocolonialist *government*, though the *country* has been decolonized. This is the case with Senegal, for example. But Brazil, where indigenous people are only 0.6% of the population, can never be decolonized. However, we can fight against the coloniality of power.

I mentioned Bolivia and Brazil. However in the case of Africa and the Americas, if I use the same term, in Africa (except South Africa), “Indigenous” people represent 99% of the population. Does this mean there is no economic, social, or cultural coloniality? Of course, there is. It is present in the very definition of the country: in most cases, it was the colonial borders that established new territories for African countries, which were forced to become nations even though these borders divided pre-colonial African nations into two parts or more (which today are undervalued and labeled “ethnicities” or “tribes”). For example, the same people will be Mauritanian or Senegalese because the colonizer decided that a river would serve as a border, when, historically, it had been a link, a unifying factor. Many other examples could be cited.

Political vocabulary, or even anthropology, has undervalued pre-colonial African nations as “pre-modern,” arguing that they should gradually disappear in favor of the post-colonial nation. It is the idea that “the tribe must die for the nation to live,” even though other models are possible, like a nation of nations, with nested identities. The colonizer initiated this negation, especially in the French and Portuguese cases, where all indigenous people had to gradually become French or Portuguese – though this did not prevent class and racial discrimination. But it is important to note that most African elites who came to power continued this work: having accepted the colonial territory – despite a Pan-Africanism of convenience – they continued in various ways (I cannot go into details here) the “nation-building process” with no respect for pre-colonial nations. I just mentioned that other models are possible, such as nations of nations; is it not the reality... in the United Kingdom, which includes four nations: English, Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish? In my country, France, this would be unthinkable; there can only be one nation and one people in France! Thus, the existence of Bretons, Basques, Corsicans, etc., is denied, not to mention the “Overseas Territories.”

There is also a certain idea of “nation-building,” largely copied from the European and Latin models: not only is there the devaluation of former nations, but there is also the idea that modernity is made of concrete and not just improved clay (for “modern” buildings), that it involves literacy in the colonial language (even though, in preschool classes, national languages are used not in order to widespread multilingualism, but to better learn the colonial language subsequently), and that traditional religions are inferior to monotheistic religions.

Lastly – though I do not address this aspect in my book – I believe that regional integration is also very shaped by coloniality. We must distinguish the issue of Pan-Africanism in general from that of integration organizations. There is a lot of discussion about the challenges and the best way to overcome them, but the fundamental question is rarely asked: is integration essential? For what purpose? If country A produces corn and country B produces corn, will they exchange much? Of course, I am exaggerating! But the goal should not be to clone the European Union, as ECOWAS does. Contrary to popular belief, unity should first and foremost be political, and only then could we see whether this induces economic unity. Regional integration cannot succeed if it is built as a mere “constituency” of globalized capitalism.

This naturally raises the issue of the nature of peripheral capitalism (or peripheral capitalisms). Here, governmental neocolonialism aligns with the coloniality of nations. Preferring to export raw oil rather than to merely extract what can be processed locally (chemical industries, fertilizers, etc.) and prioritize family farming and food crops, is typical of the coloniality of the ruling elites: generating convertible currencies to ensure their social reproduction through the State and live according to their habits, more or less... European.

Philippe Lavigne Delville & Mame-Penda Ba

You have a definition of decolonial and decoloniality that differs from that of Latin American theorists. You write that “defining decolonial only as a disengagement from the ideological hegemony of the ‘West’ is an idealistic dead-end that quickly falls into culturalism” (p. 172). Could you clarify this critique and explain how your definitions avoid it?

Michel Cahen

Anti-colonialism fights against colonization and colonialism. Decolonial fights against coloniality and leads to decoloniality. The terms are related, but they are not the same thing. Mainstream decolonialism has shifted towards a purely epistemic perspective and, despite sometimes radical-sounding vocabulary, in reality, it has become depoliticized: what are the political consequences of the proposals made? Are we simply going to propose to Africans to “break with Western values”? But what are Western values? It is not just about defending LGBTQ+ rights or sometimes clumsy efforts to fight against female genital mutilation funded by European NGOs! Will this weaken capitalist economic domination (and not “Western” domination) wherever it comes from (Russia is as capitalist as France)? There is no decoloniality without social movements, without intersectional feminism, without class conflicts.

Mainstream decolonial approach (purely epistemic) points to the “West” as the enemy, homogenizing this vast and heterogeneous space. In a way, it is like the former Orientalists who invented the “Orient” from their fantasies, creating a reverse orientalism. The same applies to “Modernity,” which supposedly “was born” in 1492, without seeing that this historical period included very diverse movements, including anti-slavery and anti-colonial movements (with the words and concepts of the time, of course). It does not defend the idea of “alternative modernities” as the *Subaltern Studies* did; it argues that we must break with modernity, thus falling into neotraditionalism. It homogenizes the “West,” but on the other hand, it considers there to be an infinity of epistemes in the “South,” although it rightly accuses colonialism of having caused a generalized epistemicide. How can these two propositions be possible simultaneously? A uniform “West” (or “North”) and a protean “South”?

Why is this the case? That said, the issue of epistemes is important. Any serious revolutionary militant knows that it is crucial to take into account each people's thinking system. However there is no need to make them closed systems.

Furthermore, the affirmed great plurality of epistemes in the "South" does not guarantee that there is no essentialization of the "South" itself. Decolonial writings are often very vague and never show how an indigenous people's episteme would be liberatory or contain substantial liberatory elements. Assuming that all these social formations share principles radically opposed to those of the "North" obscures their immense diversity and somehow reproduces the "great divide" of the 19th century between "modern societies" and "traditional societies," by simply reversing the stigma. Making this infinity of epistemes in the South a global pledge of anti-Westernism is just as homogenizing and reifying as the abuse of the "West" and "Modernity" concepts. Ultimately, mainstream decolonial approach essentializes both the "North" and the "South."

One mistake leads to another: the catastrophic confusion between universalism and uniformity. Does the fact that many imperialist policies have cloaked themselves in a "universalist" discourse mean that we must abandon the concept? Could we then do the same with other concepts like "nation" or "democracy"? However, the real contradiction in practice is between the abstract universalism and the concrete universalism of the bourgeoisie. Concrete universalism is the convergence of what is common in all peoples, affirming that there are no radical (insurmountable) differences between peoples. This is why the "pluriversality" of decolonial thinkers is not at all the plurality of universals (if that even makes sense), but the negation of all universals. Furthermore, mainstream decolonial approach does not distinguish between abstract and concrete universalism; it condemns universalism as a whole!

I also explain in the book that "Global South" means nothing. First, "South" by itself means nothing; the term appeared when, with the fall of Stalinist (so-called "communist") countries that were supposed to be the "second world," the term "third world" was no longer used. Instead of saying "peripheral capitalism" or even "third world" (a term that included the notion of dependency), we used this geographical expression, "the South." But what is the South? An Indian, Angolan, or Brazilian billionaire? A Mouride Khalif? A Casamance separatist? A Brazilian quilombola? A street child from Maputo? A Chilean fascist dictator? And so on.

As for the expression "Global South," it is even worse, as it means the opposite of what is being explained: The "South" (peripheral capitalism) is indeed *globalized*, just like the "North" (central capitalism), but it is the world itself that is *global*! Using the term "Global South" suggests that it refers to a territory with its own world-system, "global" all on its own.

My definitions are historicized and materialist. I speak of social systems, century-old processes, and the diversity of situations (hence my concept of "regimes of coloniality"); I do not essentialize "West" and "South" and I judge critical theories based on their practical and political consequences. I assert that there is no decoloniality without social movements. I integrate the issue of epistemic (and subjectivity in general) into the decolonial social movement.

As I said at the beginning, some Marxists who offer critiques very similar to mine are "anti-decolonial," against the very concept of coloniality. On the contrary, I believe that a materialist decolonial approach is both possible and desirable, to take into account the great diversity of capitalisms on Earth in Marxist analysis. However there is work to be done to develop this orientation, which is certainly critical but does not throw the baby out with the bathwater!

The decolonial approach, which was practically absent in Africa just a decade ago, is now spreading rapidly there (particularly in South Africa, Senegal, and Cape Verde). The danger is simply to "Africanize" the flaws of the Latin American-originated decolonial approach. The debate must continue.

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