Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom

Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument

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INTRODUCTION

Guide-Quotes

One thing in any case is certain: man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge. Taking a relatively short chronological sample within a restricted geographical area—European culture since the sixteenth century—one can be certain that man is a recent invention within it. . . . In fact, among all the mutations that have affected the knowledge of things and their order, the . . . only one, that which began a century and a half ago and is now perhaps drawing to a close, has made it possible for the figure of man to appear. And that appearance . . . was the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge. . . . If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared . . . one can certainly wager that man would be erased.

—Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of The Human Sciences
The reality in highly indebted countries is grim. Half of Africa’s population—about 300 million people—live without access to basic healthcare or a safe water source. In Tanzania, where 40 percent of the population dies before age 35, the government spends nine times more on foreign debt payments than on healthcare. In 1997, before Hurricane Mitch, Nicaragua spent more than half its revenue on debt payments. Until recently, it has taken countries in structural adjustment programs six or more years to get debt relief. For lenders this seems like common sense—making sure the country has its economic house in order before canceling debts—but the human cost is tremendous. Six years is a child’s entire elementary school education. If governments are forced to cut subsidies for public education and charge fees that make schooling too expensive for the poor, it cheats a whole generation of children.


Step up to the White House, “Let me in!”

*What’s my reason for being? I’m your next of kin,*

*And we built this motherfucker, you wanna kill me ‘cause o’ my hunger?*

*. . . I’m just a black man, why y’all made it so hard?*

*Damn, nigga gotta go create his own job,*

*Mr. Mayor, imagine this was yo backyard,*

*Mr. Governor, imagine it’s yo kids that starve,*

*Imagine yo kids gotta slang crack to survive,*

*Swing a Mac to be alive, . . .*


*Tax-payers pay for more jails for black and latin faces*

—Nas, “CIA”

Definitions of the intellectual are many and diverse. They have, however, one trait in common, which makes them also different from all other definitions: they are all self-definitions. Indeed, their authors are the members of the same rare species they attempt to define. . . . The specifically intellectual form of the operation—self-definition—masks its universal content which is
the reproduction and reinforcement of a given social configuration, and—with it—a given (or claimed) status for the group.

—Zygmunt Bauman, Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity and Intellectuals

What is known as the Gregorian reform was actually an effort of modernization initiated and carried out by the Church from about 1050 until 1215 (the year of the Fourth Lateran Council). The reform first of all established the independence of the Church from secular society. And what better barrier could have been erected between clergy and laity than that of sexuality? Marriage became the property of lay men and women; virginity, celibacy, and/or continence became the property of priests, monks, and nuns. A wall separated the pure from the impure. Impure liquids were banished from the realm of the pure: the clergy was not allowed to spill sperm or blood and not permitted to perpetuate original sin through procreation. But in the realm of the impure the flow was not stanched, only regulated. The Church became a society of bachelors, which imprisoned lay society in marriage.

—Jacques Le Goff, The Medieval Imagination

The intellectual’s schizoid character stems from the duality of his social existence; his history is a record of crises of conscience of various kinds, with a variety of origins. In their ideologies the intellectuals cultivate certain particular interests until they have universalized them, then turn about and expose the partiality of those ideologies. . . . They articulate the rules of the social order and the theories which give them sanction, but at the same time it is intellectuals who criticize the existing scheme of things and demand its supersession.

—George Konrad, Ivan Szelenyi, The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power

Now the highest Father, God the master-builder, . . . took up man . . . and placing him at the midpoint of the world . . . spoke to him as follows: “We have given to thee, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift peculiarly thine, that thou mayest feel as thine own, have as thine own, pos-
sess as thine own the seat, the form, the gifts which thou thyself shalt desire.
A limited nature in other creatures is confined within the laws written down by Us. In conformity with thy free judgment, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself. . . . Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul’s reason into the higher natures which are divine.”

—Pico della Mirandola, Oration on the Dignity of Man

THE ARGUMENT PROPOSES THAT THE STRUGGLE OF OUR NEW MILLENNIUM WILL be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves. Because of this overrepresentation, which is defined in the first part of the title as the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom, any attempt to unsettle the coloniality of power will call for the unsettling of this overrepresentation as the second and now purely secular form of what Aníbal Quijano identifies as the “Racism/Ethnicism complex,” on whose basis the world of modernity was brought into existence from the fifteenth/sixteenth centuries onwards (Quijano 1999, 2000), and of what Walter Mignolo identifies as the foundational “colonial difference” on which the world of modernity was to institute itself (Mignolo 1999, 2000).

The correlated hypothesis here is that all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth resources (20 percent of the world’s peoples own 80 percent of its resources, consume two-thirds of its food, and are responsible for 75 percent of its ongoing pollution, with this leading to two billion of
earth’s peoples living relatively affluent lives while four billion still live on the edge of hunger and immiseration, to the dynamic of overconsumption on the part of the rich techno-industrial North paralleled by that of overpopulation on the part of the dispossessed poor, still partly agrarian worlds of the South)—these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle. Central to this struggle also is the usually excluded and invisibilized situation of the category identified by Zygmunt Bauman as the “New Poor” (Bauman 1987). That is, as a category defined at the global level by refugee/economic migrants stranded outside the gates of the rich countries, as the postcolonial variant of Fanon’s category of les damnés (Fanon 1963)—with this category in the United States coming to comprise the criminalized majority Black and dark-skinned Latino inner-city males now made to man the rapidly expanding prison-industrial complex, together with their female peers—the kicked-about Welfare Moms—with both being part of the ever-expanding global, transracial category of the homeless/the jobless, the semi-jobless, the criminalized drug-offending prison population. So that if we see this category of the damnés that is internal to (and interned within) the prison system of the United States as the analog form of a global archipelago, constituted by the Third- and Fourth-World peoples of the so-called “underdeveloped” areas of the world—most totally of all by the peoples of the continent of Africa (now stricken with AIDS, drought, and ongoing civil wars, and whose bottommost place as the most impoverished of all the earth’s continents is directly paralleled by the situation of its Black Diaspora peoples, with Haiti being produced and reproduced as the most impoverished nation of the Americas)—a systemic pattern emerges. This pattern is linked to the fact that while in the post-sixties United States, as Herbert Gans noted recently, the Black population group, of all the multiple groups comprising the post-sixties social hierarchy, has once again come to be placed at the bottommost place of that hierarchy (Gans, 1999), with all incoming new nonwhite/non-Black groups, as Gans’s fellow sociologist Andrew Hacker (1992) earlier pointed out, coming to claim “normal” North American identity by the putting of visible distance between themselves and the Black population group (in effect, claiming “normal” human status by distancing themselves from the group that is still made to occupy the nadir,
“nigger” rung of being human within the terms of our present ethnoclass Man’s overrepresentation of its “descriptive statement” [Bateson 1969] as if it were that of the human itself, then the struggle of our times, one that has hitherto had no name, is the struggle against this overrepresentation. As a struggle whose first phase, the Argument proposes, was first put in place (if only for a brief hiatus before being coopted, reterritorialized [Godzich 1986]) by the multiple anticolonial social-protest movements and intellectual challenges of the period to which we give the name, “The Sixties.”

The further proposal here is that, although the brief hiatus during which the sixties’ large-scale challenge based on multiple issues, multiple local terrains of struggles (local struggles against, to use Mignolo’s felicitous phrase, a “global design” [Mignolo 2000]) erupted was soon to be erased, several of the issues raised then would continue to be articulated, some in sanitized forms (those pertaining to the category defined by Bauman as “the seduced”), others in more harshly intensified forms (those pertaining to Bauman’s category of the “repressed” [Bauman 1987]). Both forms of “sanitization” would, however, function in the same manner as the lawlike effects of the post-sixties’ vigorous discursive and institutional re-elaboration of the central overrepresentation, which enables the interests, reality, and well-being of the empirical human world to continue to be imperatively subordinated to those of the now globally hegemonic ethnoclass world of “Man.” This, in the same way as in an earlier epoch and before what Howard Winant identifies as the “immense historical rupture” of the “Big Bang” processes that were to lead to a contemporary modernity defined by the “rise of the West” and the “subjugation of the rest of us” (Winant 1994)—before, therefore, the secularizing intellectual revolution of Renaissance humanism, followed by the decentralizing religious heresy of the Protestant Reformation and the rise of the modern state—the then world of laymen and laywomen, including the institution of the political state, as well as those of commerce and of economic production, had remained subordinated to that of the post-Gregorian Reform Church of Latin-Christian Europe (Le Goff 1983), and therefore to the “rules of the social order” and the theories “which gave them sanction” (See Konrad and Szelenyi guide-quote), as these rules were articulated by its theologians and implemented by its celibate clergy (See Le Goff guide-quote).
The Janus face of the emergence of Mignolo’s proposed “modernity/coloniality” complementarity is sited here. As also is the answer to the why of the fact that, as Aníbal Quijano insists in his Qué tal Raza! (2000), the “idea of race” would come to be “the most efficient instrument of social domination invented in the last 500 years.” In order for the world of the laity, including that of the then ascendant modern European state, to escape their subordination to the world of the Church, it had been enabled to do so only on the basis of what Michel Foucault identifies as the “invention of Man”: that is, by the Renaissance humanists’ epochal redescription of the human outside the terms of the then theocentric, “sinful by nature” conception/“descriptive statement” of the human, on whose basis the hegemony of the Church/clergy over the lay world of Latin-Christian Europe had been supernaturally legitimated (Chorover 1979). While, if this redescription was effected by the lay world’s invention of Man as the political subject of the state, in the transumed and reoccupied place of its earlier matrix identity Christian, the performative enactment of this new “descriptive statement” and its master code of symbolic life and death, as the first secular or “degodded” (if, at the time, still only partly so) mode of being human in the history of the species, was to be effected only on the basis of what Quijano identifies as the “coloniality of power,” Mignolo as the “colonial difference,” and Winant as a huge project demarcating human differences thinkable as a “racial longue durée.” One of the major empirical effects of which would be “the rise of Europe” and its construction of the “world civilization” on the one hand, and, on the other, African enslavement, Latin American conquest, and Asian subjugation.

**PART I**

*The Janus Face of the Invention of “Man”: Laws of Nature and the Thinkability of Natural, rather than Supernatural Causality versus the Dynamics of the Colonizer/Colonized Answer to the Question of Who/What We Are.*

This “enormous act of expression/narration” was paradoxical. It was to be implemented by the West and by its intellectuals as indeed a “Big Bang” process by which it/they were to initiate the first gradual de-supernaturalizing