

Some theses on decolonizing history

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‘The inner meaning of history [...] involves speculation and an attempt to get at the truth, subtle explanation of the causes and origins of existing things, and deep knowledge of the how and why of events. History, therefore, is firmly rooted in philosophy.’

– Ibn Khaldun¹

WHAT is the weight of history? In a novel historical context, as in the case of a revolution, the weight of history tends to be light on the generations that are there at the onset; let’s call them ‘the inaugural generations’. On the other hand, it tends to be heavy on the generations that follow; let’s call them ‘the after generations’. These two types of generations correspond to two different conceptions of the past, respectively: the past as a mission or a task, and the past as a treasure or a trophy. For the inaugural generations, the

past is open and unfinished; for the after generations, it is closed and accomplished. The relative prevalence of these two types of generations determines the relative weight of history. Which type of generation prevails in our time?

Since the 1970s the after generations have been prevailing. The farcical metaphor of the end of history signalled the final confirmation of the after generations and the irreversible defeat, if not even extinction, of the inaugural generations.² History became thereby extremely heavy, as heavy as the defeat of the inaugural generations. Even if in very diverse and extremely unequal terms, this is the time we are living in. The weight of history is becoming suffocating for the orphans of the inaugural generations.

Being orphans conveys the idea of loss. Not necessarily the idea of non-conformity. Conformity with orphanage calls for resignation and nostalgia; non-conformity, for revolt

1. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History, Vol. 1* (trans. by Franz Rosenthal, 3 vols). Princeton University Press, New York, 1958 (1377), p. 5.

2. Perry Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement*. Verso, London, 1992.

and hope. The conformist orphan of the inaugural generations aspires to belong to the after generations, thereby erasing inauguration from memory and replacing it with posterity. On the contrary, the non-conformist orphans of the inaugural generations aim at reconstructing inauguration. One of the tasks involved in such an enterprise is what I call decolonizing history.

*'White man, hear me! History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.'*³

– James Baldwin

Decolonizing history is a task to be carried out by the non-conformist orphans of the inaugural generations. The basic assumption of decolonizing is that there is no single entity called history, as no single narrative can account for the past. There is no single past either, but rather an entangled past with interconnected histories.⁴ What we call the past is in fact an optical illusion, since it is always in the present that we write about the past, and the writing 'we' may be us or them. The past is the current settling of accounts between conflicting social forces struggling for power, for access to scarce material and spiritual resources, for conceptions and conditions of self-determination.

3. James Baldwin, 'The White Man's Guilt', in *Collected Essays*. The Library of America, New York, 1998 (1965), pp. 272-273.

4. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia', in Victor Lieberman (ed.), *Beyond Binary Histories: Re-imagining Eurasia to c.1830*. The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 1999, p. 289-316.

The conflict may have many facets but at any given point in space-time it translates itself into unequal power relations, and thus into dominant and dominated opponents, into oppressors and oppressed. The winning side is by definition the oppressor, but the oppression may take many different forms and will evolve over time. Moreover, not all facets of the oppressor are equally oppressive and some of its facets may be appropriated by the oppressed to resist against and overstep oppression. A good illustration of the latter in contemporary times is human rights. They are a Janus-faced entity. While the hegemonic conceptions of human rights have often been deployed as imperial impositions, human rights have also been used in a counter-hegemonic way to resist against oppression.

The dichotomies between the dominant and the dominated or between the oppressor and the oppressed are much more complex than one can imagine, since any lasting system of domination ends up being a co-creation.⁵ In different contexts, some social groups may occupy contradictory locations in the domination system (oppressors in some contexts are oppressed in other contexts). Some groups may be the key protagonists of the domination system while others are only marginal participants or mere accomplices. Some may even fall outside the dichotomy oppressor/oppressed. There is much room for hybrid or mestizo locations and histories.⁶

There is, however, one limit in engaging with complexity in this domain: the idea that, given the complex entanglements between oppres-

5. Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler Nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities*. Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA., 2020.

6. Édouard Glissant, *Treatise on the Whole-World* (trans. by Celia Britton). Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2020.

sors and oppressed, there is no way of distinguishing among them, and that as a result we live in a world of interdependence in which the ideas of domination, oppression and unequal power vanish. De-identifying from oppression implies des-identifying both from the oppressor and from the oppressed. The idea that social oppression is a totality should always be borne in mind. It helps to identify, in each context, specific nuances and invite redefinitions of most of the analytical binary counter-positions. Such counter-positions should be viewed as methodological devices to account for the messiness of social life, not to negate it.

Conflicts unfold through struggle and the latter may be viewed as concluded or as ongoing. The past of the after generations is the past of the current winners of history, as well as the past of the losers, to the extent that they are resigned with their defeat. It is a past. The past of the inaugural generations is the past of non-conformist *damnés*, those for whom the struggle continues and real or imagined possibility of resistance are in place. It is a present past.

*'Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it.'*⁷

– Frantz Fanon

I call decolonizing history an intellectual intervention that confronts the different modes of modern domination as they have shaped the hegemonic writing of modern history. The main or most widespread modes of modern domination are capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. The last two did exist before modern capitalism, but they were deeply reconfigured by capitalism in order to guarantee the sustainability of the exploitation of human labour and

7. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, New York, 1968, p. 206.

nature. The exploitation of free labour does not sustain itself without highly devalued labour and non-paid labour provided by racialized bodies (colonialism) and sexualized bodies (patriarchy).

In different parts of the world the three modes of domination have historically been articulated with other satellite-modes of domination, such as generational conflicts, political mobilization of religion, and casteism. Decolonizing history is thus a metonymy (*pars pro toto*) – it aims to challenge the ways in which the many different modes of modern domination have shaped the writing of history.

*'History is a highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone "made" the history of the World. [...] It is this hierarchical process that we deny in our own emergent historical consciousness, in its ruptures, its sudden emergence, its resistance to exploration.'*⁸

– Édouard Glissant

Decolonizing history entails identifying the domination of history in the history of domination. Two basic conceptual concepts characterize modern western-centric domination: the abyssal line and linear time. The abyssal line is the radical line of separation between fully human beings and sub-human beings, the most radical naturalization of social hierarchy in modern times. It lies at the core of European colonial expansion. Colonialism and patriarchy have been reconfigured to operate as privileged regimes of subhumanization. Pre-existing, satellite-dominations have often been mobilized to reinforce the abyssal line.

One crucial characteristic of the abyssal line is that it is as radical as it is invisible, while underlining all the visible social distinctions and hierarchies. European liberalism, even while proclaiming the universal freedom and equality of all human beings, retained the privilege of defining which living beings really count as fully human. Whoever is not fully human cannot be treated as such. Hence, the abyssal line.

In time, the abyssal line became the most entrenched feature of modern social hierarchy, ever-present in our time. Powered both by colonialism, racism, and sexism, it went on structuring the dominant conceptions of economic, social, political, and cultural life. It outlived the end of historical colonialism brought about by the political independence of the European colonies and underlines the dominant versions of commonsense in our time. The history of the winners is an abyssal history in so far as it re-enacts and hides the abyssal line. Decolonizing history amounts to denouncing the existence of the abyssal line, claiming the full humanity of populations deemed subhuman, and writing history by highlighting the processes of subhumanization and the resistance against them. Decolonizing history is the affirmation of a post-abyssal history.

Linear time is a particular conception of time that understands time as moving in only one direction, in a cumulative duration and irreversible sequence. The European idea of progress established linear time as the universal conception of time, whereas the European colonizers claimed the right to decide what counted as more or as less advanced, that is to say, as progressive. Linear time was particularly functional regarding the objectives of the European conquest in that it easily translated time into space. The overseas

territories were as remote in space as in time. Exotic lands with strange ideas of time were temporally very distant from the colonizer's present.

The efficacy of linear time consisted in justifying the idea that the past of the colonized had no future except the one offered by the colonizer. Once dispossessed of any future-making function, such past was deemed irrelevant and should vanish into oblivion. Thus constructed, the idea of progress may convert oppression into liberation, oppressors into liberators, barbarism into civilizatory mission. When Napoleon arrived in Egypt in 1798, this is how he explained his actions to the Egyptians: 'People of Egypt: You will be told by our enemies, that I am come to destroy your religion. Believe them not. Tell them that I am come to restore your rights, punish your usurpers, and raise the true worship of Mahomet.'⁹

Viewed from the side of the invaded, Napoleon's Proclamation fooled no one as to its imperialist objectives. This is how the Egyptian chronicler Al-Jabarti, an eyewitness of the invasion, dissects the proclamation point by point. 'Then he [Napoleon] proceeds to something even worse than that, may God cast him into perdition, with his words: "I more than the Mamluks serve God...". There is no doubt that this is a derangement of his mind and an excess of foolishness.'

Al-Jabarti then exposes the grammatical errors in the weak Coranic Arabic of the proclamation and concludes: 'However, it is possible that there is no inversion and that the meaning is "I have more troops or more money than the Mamluks..." [...] So his words "serve God" are a

18 8. Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (translated and with an Introduction by J. Michael Dash). CARAF Books, Charlottesville, 1989, p. 65.

9. 'Napoleon's Proclamation to the Egyptians, 2 July 1798', cited in J.C. Hurewitz (ed.), *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1975, p. 116.

new sentence and a new lie'.¹⁰ These citations illustrate how linear time and the abyssal line are deeply intertwined. Progress is the progress of the abyssal line, never of its overcoming.

Tradition and innovation, continuity and discontinuity are some of the key operational concepts underlying linear time. The history of the winners, as told by the after generations, views tradition as a priceless, safely deposited, treasure; and innovation, as incessant repetition of victory. The oppressor is thereby led to view the past as the continuity of oppression and the oppressive condition as a natural condition. The history of the *damnés*, as told by the inaugural generations, views tradition as an imminent task, an as yet unexplored excavation site that, if carefully excavated, will provide reasons for denaturalizing, delegitimizing, and interrupting oppression, and for retelling the historical narrative.

For this reason, the oppressed tends to view the history of its relation with the oppressor as a discontinuity of defeats and victories. It is a sequence of redemptive repetition, as Walter Benjamin would call it, not of mechanistic repetition.¹¹ In his corrosive style Samuel Beckett expresses it well: 'Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better'.¹² But how to fail better? We have to resort to Cabral for an answer: 'Hide nothing from our people. Tell no lies. Expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories'.¹³

10. Abd Al-Rahman Al-Jabarti, *Al-Jabarti's Chronicle of the French Occupation, 1798*. Markus Wiener, Princeton, 1993, p. 31.

11. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Schocken Books, New York, 1969, pp. 253-264.

12. Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*. Grove Press, New York, 1983, p. 7.

13. Amílcar Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea. Selected Texts*. Monthly Review, London, 1970, p. 89.

On the other hand, innovation is the interruption of oppression, the irruption of resistance. Non-conformity with oppression involves always interruption and irruption. It is an unending process. Shortly before she was assassinated (1921), Rosa Luxemburg, another brilliant critic of western capitalism, wrote: 'Ich bin, Ich war, Ich werde sein' (I am, I was, I shall be).¹⁴

*'A people without a positive history is like a vehicle without an engine. [...But] only scant reference is made to African heroes; [...] the approach envisaged in bringing about "black consciousness" has to be directed to the past, to seek to rewrite the history of the black man and to produce in it the heroes who form the core of the African background.'*¹⁵

—Steve Biko

Interruption and irruption are the social processes by means of which the oppressed lift the weight of history. They make possible both the existence of alternatives and the capacity to struggle for them. It must be borne in mind that the oppressed's effort to interrupt domination is a response to the original interruption caused by the modern colonial encounter. It is a counter-interruption aimed at interrupting the colonizer's domination. When speaking of interruption, it is therefore imperative to specify who interrupts whom for the sake of whose continuity.

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Karl Marx writes that 'men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and

14. Rosa Luxemburg, 'Die Ordnungsherrschaft in Berlin', *Die Rote Fahne*, 1919.

15. Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like*. Heinemann, Nairobi, 1979, p. 29.

transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.¹⁶

This is as true of the oppressed as of the oppressor generations, but the dead weight is different in the two cases, as different as the current and the counter-current of a river. In the case of the oppressor, the tradition of continuity confirms its victory in advance and invites an unheroic will; in the case of the oppressed, the tradition of discontinuity demands a heroic will to disconfirm past history. There is nothing grandiose or romantic about heroism in this sense. Heroism is the willingness to run risks when confronting oppressive power.

*'...the moment imperialism arrived and colonialism arrived, it made us leave our history and enter another history.'*¹⁷

—Amílcar Cabral

Decolonizing history involves both des-identifying with history as written by the victors (i.e. a closed past) and rewriting history from the perspective of the so far vanquished (the present past). The first task involves an history of absences; the second task involves an history of emergences.¹⁸ The history of absences deals with erasure, forgetfulness, silencing, with identifying and denouncing the mechanisms by means of which so much social experience has been purposively wasted, discarded, made irrelevant or non-

16. Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*. Doubleday, Garden City, 1959, p. 320.

17. Amílcar Cabral, 1970, op. cit., p. 46.

18. The history of absences and the history of emergences have elective affinities with the sociology of absences and sociology of emergences. See B. de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire. The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*. Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2018, pp. 25-32.

existent. The history of emergences deals with retrieving, recovering, reimagining whatever was forced to survive as a ruin so that its potential for future liberation is unveiled. The two tasks make possible counter-histories.

The idea of struggle is crucial to both tasks. Contrary to commonsensical ideas, the struggle is not necessarily an act of open, organized, dramatic, potentially violent confrontation. In fact, it is in most cases clandestine, spontaneous, passive, small scale, combining moments of confrontation with moments of withdrawal or even collaboration. Struggle is about mental and practical dissidence involving des-identification with the oppressor and disloyalty vis-à-vis the oppressor's objectives of domination.

The history of absences. Des-identification is achieved by identifying the main procedures used by the winners to portray the defeated as deserving being defeated. I identify four main procedures: contrasting principles with practices; suspending principles in self-declared emergencies; de-specifying; alternating brutality with tolerance. The first procedure generates massive epistemicide (the destruction of knowledge); the second, kairoside (the destruction of qualitative time); the third and the fourth I call timécide, the destruction of honor (after Gr. timé 'honor'). Only through counter-histories of lived experiences through struggles is it possible to identify such absences.

The first procedure consists in contrasting the ethical and political principles of the oppressor with the practices of the oppressed. European liberalism constructed an arsenal of universal principles, ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity, catalogues of natural human rights, an impressive set that composed the idea of civilization. As the modern colonial

expansion unfolded, the actions of conquest, plunder, occupation and imposition of external narratives about the colonized, no matter how violent and barbarian, were justified by counter-posing the liberal ideals, not to the practices of the colonizers, but to the practices of the non-European populations. The latter practices were deemed to be so utterly contradictory with liberal principles that only barbarians could undertake them.

Thus emerged the dichotomy civilization/barbarism, the abyssal line distinguishing humans from sub-humans. The ideological valence of this procedure was double. It made it unnecessary to justify the contrast between the ideals of liberalism and the practices of the colonizers, as well as unthinkable that non-European populations might have ideals and principles, no matter how different from those of liberalism. This ideology legitimated an unmeasurable epistemicide – the systematic destruction of non-European knowledges, philosophies, and cosmovisions cherished by the colonized populations. Epistemicide goes hand in hand with genocide and linguicide.

The second procedure consists in claiming the privilege of setting aside or suspending ethical or political principles whenever extreme situations of social or political emergency so recommend. Such privilege covers both defining a given situation as an emergency and deciding about the suspension of principles. This procedure demands a radical separation and hierarchy between Eurocentric colonial powers and the populations considered to be 'outside' of the realm of civilization, but it also activates the friend/enemy opposition instead of the civilization/barbarism opposition.

In modern constitutionalism this situation is called state of exception.

From the perspective of the colonial administration, the colonies were ruled by a permanent state of exception, in other words, the colonial use of declaring the state of emergency and suspending principles aimed at preventing or repressing any threat to colonial rule deemed more serious and more difficult to neutralize. In short, the colonized in most of the situations were objects of the colonial state, without rights, without citizenship. As a result, in various contexts, concrete struggles of the colonized were crushed, while energies, practices, and ideas of resistance were prevented from fully unfolding.¹⁹

The absences were thus produced by destroying in the bud opportunities for social transformation, major as well as minor opportunities, for either small betterments of the livelihoods or for ambitious initiatives of revolt and liberation. Such systematic neutralizing of struggle I call kairocide (from Gr. kairós, 'the right moment') to designate the destruction of opportune moments of resistance. Such crucial moments represent the deep time of social resistance emerging in social practice as the mature moment in which the chances of success are maximized.

Declaring emergency meant erasing the historic quality of time, disfiguring memories and the possibilities of a better future for the oppressed. Kairocide often involved epistemicide as well. In states of exception protesters and social leaders were frequently assassinated. Social leaders were the guardians of traditional, vernacular knowledge and experience in organizing the resistance and choosing the most adequate forms of social struggle; with their deaths all such know-

19. Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*. University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 2009.

ledge, experience, and wisdom were lost.

The third procedure of the history of absences is de-specification. It consists in reducing the identity of the colonized people to a single, a-historical and decontextualized characteristic, thereby discounting the complex texture of individual and collective lives and their unfolding in history. Rather than an exercise in philosophical abstraction – as in trying to convey in a synthetic manner the manifold concreteness of social and individual existence – de-specification is an ideological act of radical, selective empiricism and reductionism. It provides a measure for the immeasurable distance (and hierarchy) between the colonized and the colonizer, the substance of the colonial zone as defined by the abovementioned abyssal line, the zone where de-specified populations are thrown into, the zone of non-being, as Franz Fanon called it.²⁰

Given the metonymic nature of the selected characteristic (be it savage, primitive, backward, noble savage, cannibal, magic, archaic, traditional, underdeveloped), all social practices and beliefs of the de-specified population (including religion and culture) share the same characteristics.

The fourth procedure consists in defining as tolerance what follows after brutal atrocity, violent destruction of life or culture by the colonizer or oppressor. This is a crucial procedure, since ‘tolerance’ is deployed as a way of both confirming and disguising the surrender of the oppressed, of transforming real impositions into fake concessions, of signalling a change in strategy while performing a tactic move, of dividing the oppressed populations and recruit collaborators, of simulating the recog-

20. Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press, New York, 1967.

nition of difference while affirming the privilege of defining the intolerable.

The ultimate goal of ‘tolerance’ is to exhibit the moral superiority of the winners for better destroying the self-esteem and honour of the oppressed populations. Above, I have already explained why I call this form of destruction timécide, after ancient Greek: the dishonoring of both individuals and communities.

Six major strategies of de-specification were activated by colonial history. Each one of them is premised upon a monocultural and monolithic criterion. By the monoculture of rigorous knowledge, the colonial subject was de-specified as ignorant. By the monoculture of linear time, the colonial subject was de-specified as backward, primitive. By the monoculture of the dominant scales (the universal and the global), the colonial ways of life were de-specified as particular, exotic, local, traditional, to be replaced by modern ones. By the monoculture of ethno-racial classification, the colonial subject was de-specified as inferior. By the monoculture of the humanity/nature separation and hierarchy, the colonial subject was de-specified as natural, subhuman, barbaric, beast. Finally, by the monoculture of the capitalist criterion of productivity, the colonial subject was de-specified as lazy, otiose, unproductive.

The history of absences evolved and changed over the last five centuries. Although present since early colonial expansion, the above-mentioned procedures for producing absence were dramatically intensified from the mid-19th century onwards. Moreover, they were activated differently in different contexts and times. Over time, the relative weight of genuine curiosity and mechanic supremacy varied. Both on the colonizer’s side and on the colonized’s side, oppositional voices

denounced early on each one of the four procedures for producing absence. However, the most striking feature of the history of absences is its incessant metamorphosis and deep-seated entrenchment in western-centric histories and ideologies.

The ideological procedures underlying the history of absences are at the core of Eurocentric modernity and its colonial libraries, thus negating ‘the possibility of a plural rationality and history’.²¹ From very early on they structured its mental archive and world-making will. For instance, they were present in the so-called Reconquista of Al-Andalus in the 15th century, as well as in the British colonial occupation of Ireland from early 16th century until the 1920s. They were then vastly exercised in the overseas colonies; in the early 20th century they returned to Europe on a large scale. They were operative under Nazism in the criminal persecution against the *Untermensch*, Jews, Romanis, homosexuals, and other ‘inferior races’. They were used both to justify the Holocaust and the planned colonization of Central and Eastern Europe.

Referring to the Slavic populations in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Russia, the Reichsführer-SS Himmler proclaimed in 1943: ‘Whether nations live in prosperity or starve to death interests me only in so far as we need them as slaves for our culture; otherwise, it is of no interest to me... We Germans, who are the only people in the world who have a decent attitude towards animals, will also assume a decent attitude towards these human animals. But it is a crime against our own blood to worry about them and give them ideals, thus causing our sons and grandsons to have a more difficult

21. Valentin Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*. University of Indiana Press, Bloomington, IN, 1988, p. 208.

time with them'.²² This demented project began to be defeated in the heroic battle of Stalingrad (1942).

This was not the last time that an history of absences operated in European territory. In the last seventy years its four main procedures have been justifying racism, sexism, discriminatory migration laws and practices, xenophobia, islamophobia, homophobia. When laws formally prohibit discrimination, the justification operates indirectly by means of complicit omission to repress or effectively condemn them.

The arrival of the colonized into former European empires as immigrant or asylum seeker and, more recently, as a suspect of terrorism is a permanent condition of European colonial contemporaneity. A Eurocentric history of absences came home to roost and is today constitutive of the Eurocentric world both in Europe and outside Europe. This explains why the counter-hegemonic task of decolonizing history today must confront new or renewed initiatives to recolonize history. The history of absences is the other side of the sociology of absences that informs the dominant accounts of our present.

'We [the Caribbean] are the roots of a cross-cultural relationship. Submarine roots: that is floating free, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches.

*We, thereby, live, we have the good fortune of living, this shared process of cultural mutation, this convergence that frees us from uniformity.'*²³

—Édouard Glissant

22. Available at <http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/holocaust/h-posen.htm>.

23. Édouard Glissant, (1989), op. cit., p. 67.

The history of emergences. Exposing the procedures of the history of absences opens the possibility of a counter-history. The history of emergences carries out such possibility. The dominant history is written after the struggle. It expresses the privilege of the winner to write the history of its victory. On the contrary, the history of emergences is an history written before the struggle and while the struggle unfolds. Indeed, there is no 'after the struggle'.

From the perspective of the history of emergences, to write history from an after-the-struggle perspective would amount to confirm defeat. In one way or another, certain crucial features of the colonized would likely be declared as extinct or a-posteriori evaluated as quixotic, desperate or unrealistic survival actions. The long duration of resistance would thereby be lost and, with it, the dialectics of overground/underground techniques of resistance.

From the perspective of the history of emergences, there are two historical times, the time 'before the struggle' and the time 'while the struggle unfolds'. The ur-time or founding time before-the-struggle is the history of the world before modern colonialism. In precolonial times there were of course social struggles, struggles for power and domination, but the struggle that creates the need for decolonizing history is the struggle against European conquest and occupation. For the dominant history there is no 'before the struggle', since whatever occurred before European colonialism is either irrelevant or is so constructed in order to justify the colonial intervention. On the contrary, for the history of emergences the prior history is where the energies and resources to struggle against domination are to be found.

The 'while the struggle unfolds' is equally crucial, as it conceives of the

practices of resistance as an open field of possibilities in which there is no room or reason for fatality or conformism. The contingency of history is thereby fully confirmed. There is no 'winner' either; there are just oppressors and oppressed—opposing sides—no matter how unequal the power relations between them may be. The size of a current enemy is much smaller than the size of the winner. No matter how devastating or destructive, the blows or aggressive actions of the oppressor are viewed by the oppressed-in-struggle as non-definitive and as leaving room to resistance and survival. The Italian poet of the 13th century, Dante Alighieri, wrote in the *Divina Commedia*²⁴ that 'foreseen an arrow comes more slowly' ('che saetta prevista vien più lenta').

The history of emergences proceeds by reconstructing the wholeness of bodies, communities, livelihoods, struggles, resistances, ways of knowing and ways of being which were disfigured, amputated, made silent or produced as absent by dominant history. It consists in confronting each one of the monocultures presiding over de-specification and replacing them by ecologies. Ecologies are the workings of mutually enriching and self-transformative interaction among different components of complex realities, be they human or non-human realities.

The monoculture of rigorous knowledge is challenged by retrieving and valorizing knowledges, cultures, and beliefs of the non-European, colonized people and the ways in which such epistemic and cognitive wealth has guided their resistance and resilience against foreign conquest and usurpation. The recognition of the epistemic and cognitive diversity of the

24. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Paradise, canto XVII, l. 27.

world presupposes that all systems of knowledge are incomplete; as such, all of them are to a certain extent ignorant, useless or even dangerous for certain purposes. This applies to systems of knowledge held by the colonizer as well to those held by the colonized.

In spite of the violence of the colonial encounter, the version of the universalizing European knowledge system prevalent in the colonies never succeeded in accomplishing full epistemicide; on the contrary, over time there was much interaction, hybridization, creolization leading to what I call ecologies of knowledges. Such ecologies of knowledges contribute to strengthen the struggles for liberation.

The monoculture of linear time must be confronted by the recognition of other conceptions of time. If Aristotle is right when he says that memory is the imagination plus time, it follows that different conceptions of time generate different memories. The history of emergencies consists in retrieving the 'strange' conceptions of time held by 'exotic' people. The changes and sequences that linear time imposed after the colonial encounter are thereby questioned. Breakthroughs turn into breakdowns, gains and progress, into loss and chaos, irreversible transformation, into cyclical movement, the virtuous eradication of the past, into the precious guardianship of what remains and of what has been.

The history of emergencies destroys unilateral correspondences and points to mutually exclusive systems of temporal coherence. While linear time opposes big time to local time, the history of emergencies opposes big time to counter-big time. While the temporal lens of linear time converts pastness into strangeness, the naked eye of the colonized sees pastness as familiarity. Needless to say, systemic

mutual exclusion does not mean lack of communication or interaction.

Once in contact, the different conceptions of time were shaken and adapted to the new vibrations, even if in radically different conditions. The history of emergences highlights these temporal entanglements and shows how resistance and struggle against oppression often benefitted from converting energy for restoration into energy for liberation.

The history of emergences confronts the monoculture of the dominant scales by constructing narratives that privilege de-scaling rather than upscaling or downscaling. De-scaling is a sine qua non condition for liberating subaltern understandings of social life from de-specification, thereby allowing for alternative meanings and evaluations of resistance against domination. A horizontal universalism is at the most a point of arrival, not a starting point. It is nothing more than a shared consciousness of a plurality of cosmopolitan aspirations converging on intercultural understandings of human dignity and respect and on combined transformative energies and actions to convert them into real life existential flourishing.²⁵

Confronting the monoculture of ethno-racial classification is a specially demanding task. Such classification combines differentiation with hierarchy. Differentiation is thus inherently biased as it is constructed to legitimize hierarchy, the primary impulse of colonial domination. In this case, the history of emergences aims at reconstructing differentiation by separating

25. As Aimé Césaire reminded us, 'there are two ways to lose oneself: walled segregation in the particular or dilution in the "universal".' His conception of the universal is that of 'a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars.' Aimé Césaire, 'Letter to Maurice Thorez', *Social Text* 28(2), 2010 (1957), p. 152.

it from hierarchy. Once hierarchy is eradicated, the differences that remain or emerge are the foundation of the history of the oppressed. The monoculture of ethno-racial classification was intimately related to the monoculture of the humanity/nature dichotomy. Both women and the 'inferior races' were deemed inferior for being closer to nature. Hobbes called the indigenous people of the Americas the 'naturals'.²⁶

In this regard, the history of emergences will show that the Cartesian Eurocentric binary humanity/nature was quite exceptional, exotic, and destructive. In the non-European world, the idea that nature belongs to us was utterly incomprehensible. What prevailed, rather, was the conception that we belong to nature. In light of the current ecological crisis, the history of emergences is in this respect an anachronistic anticipation of the ecological concerns of our time.

Finally, the monoculture of capitalist productivity is challenged by the history of emergences as it retrieves the diversity of livelihoods prevailing in the non-European world. Rather than residues, those non-European ways of reproducing and expanding social life meant – differently in different moments – survival, adaptation, subversion, and resistance under very unequal power conditions. Here again the history of emergences retrieves a present past rather than a past past. It functions as an anticipation of current grassroots claims that other, non-capitalist economies (peasant, cooperative, small-holding, indigenous, popular, feminist, associational) are an integral part of the struggles against and beyond capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy.

26. T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*. Ed. by C.B. Macpherson. Pelican Classics, Middlesex, 1976 (1651), pp. 186-187.

*'If imperialist domination has the vital need to practice cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture.'*²⁷

–Amílcar Cabral

The Epistemologies of the South²⁸ with its history of absences and the history of emergences are both a product and an enabling factor of the struggles of liberation or emancipation. They both bear witness that the past is not closed and that social struggles may thereby be strengthened. Together, they make the decolonization of history possible. They aim at interrupting the dominant history and at irrupting as forms cognitive innovation and creativity. Together, they show that it is not possible to write the history of liberation without liberating history.

While the history of absences permits to measure realistic fear, the history of emergences grounds realistic hope. We should however be aware that a decolonial editing of history must live up to the following aporia. It cannot by itself guarantee either the non-repetition of past atrocities and systemic injustices or the return of dominant historical narratives of such past. Decolonizing history must be aware of the danger of recolonizing history, as long as capitalist, colonialist, patriarchal, religious, casteist, and ableist domination lasts.

27. Amílcar Cabral, 'National Liberation and Culture', *Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings*. Monthly Review Press, New York, 1979 (1970), p. 143.

28. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South. Justice Against Epistemicide*. Paradigm Publishers, Boulder/London, 2014; Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*. Duke University Press, Durham, 2018; Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Maria Paula Meneses (eds.), *Knowledges Born in the Struggle. Constructing the Epistemologies of the Global South*. Routledge, New York/London, 2019.