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From critical thought to ideological creed: A review of Decolonialism

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Abstract

Decolonial thought emerged as a tool to question colonial legacies in knowledge, culture, and politics. However, in recent decades, it has shifted from an epistemological critique to the configuration of an ideological framework that, in certain contexts, limits academic dialogue and empirical research. This article examines the intellectual trajectory of decolonialism from its theoretical foundations to its most recent manifestations, analyzing its expressions in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. It highlights the tensions between its emancipatory potential and the risks of dogmatization, as well as the ways in which certain uses of decolonial discourse have resulted in essentialisms and epistemic exclusions. Finally, it proposes a critical and dialogical anthropology that upholds methodological openness and theoretical plurality as guiding principles.

Keywords: Decolonialism; Critical Epistemology; Anthropology; Modernity; Ideology

1. Introduction

In the contemporary academic landscape, decolonial thought has consolidated as a critical framework against the persistence of colonialism and Eurocentrism. From Latin America, Africa, and Asia, multiple voices have denounced the endurance of epistemic, cultural, and economic structures inherited from colonization. However, this initial impulse has been strained by a growing trend toward orthodoxy. What began as an open and polyphonic critique has, in certain contexts, become a closed repertoire of categories and binary oppositions that hinder academic dialogue and the discursive practice of the social sciences.

This work argues that decolonial thought, originally formulated as a tool to make coloniality visible and dismantle it, has mutated into an ideological creed that essentializes the Global South, losing part of its critical potency by broadly dismissing contributions from Western modernity. Such a drift entails epistemological risks for the social sciences. In this context, the contributions of decolonial thought and its limitations are analyzed in three regional contexts, suggesting new guidelines to recover its dialogical character. The objective is to examine the contributions and critiques of transcontinental decolonial thought, its evolution and drifts, and to propose adjustments to its approach.

2. Theoretical Framework and Background

2.1. Emergence of Decolonial Thought in Latin America

This current of critical thought seeks to dismantle structures of power and knowledge inherited from European colonialism, analyzing how these persist today and affect the social, political, economic, and cultural reality of the region, promoting the decolonization of thought and the construction of alternatives from a Latin American perspective.

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The concept of *coloniality of power* (1) defines the interdependence between modernity and colonialism, noting that racial and epistemic hierarchies persist beyond political independence. The Modernity/Coloniality Group (2) has promoted epistemic disobedience and the recovery of subaltern knowledge. These contributions have strengthened a critical framework to make contemporary forms of colonial domination visible. This perspective advocates the recognition of epistemic diversity and emphasizes subjectivity and identity, with authors such as Enrique Dussel, Ramón Grosfoguel, Edgardo Lander, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, among others.

2.2. African and Asian Critiques of Colonialism

In Africa, Frantz Fanon [3-4] analyzed colonization as both structural violence and a psychological experience, while Achille Mbembe [5] developed the notion of *necropolitics*, examining how modern power decides who deserves to live or die.

In Asia, Gayatri Spivak [6] questioned whether the subaltern can truly "speak" within colonial discursive frameworks, and Dipesh Chakrabarty [7] called for "provincializing" Europe to decentralize historiography, preventing Europe from being the measure of all things. Ashis Nandy [8], from a psychological perspective, argued that colonialism internalizes values of domination and self-denial in individuals. Edward Said [9] argued that cultural representations were deeply implicated in relations of colonial power, forging the imaginary of a modern West and an exotic, irrational East. Partha Chatterjee [10], for his part, focuses his critique on Western narratives about nation and modernity, while highlighting the agency of subaltern sectors and the heterogeneity of national experiences. African and Asian thought was unanimous in its critique of colonialism.

2.3. Warnings about Ideological Drift

Gustavo Lins Ribeiro [11] argues that colonialism cannot be thought of "as an enduring force that always passes over others." If colonialism had had a totalizing power of devastation, we could not explain the persistence of contemporary Indigenous peoples as significant political agents. Ribeiro thus critiques the simplification of Western thought carried out by some decolonial theorists.

In my own analysis of decolonial thought, I warn about the tendency toward an uncritical idealization of the Indigenous and the communal, projecting the South as a passive victim without agency. There is a tendency in Southern theories to essentialize the Indigenous into the communal, as if they were pure forms of resistance incapable of constructing their own modernities, and even a tendency to absolve the precolonial world of any interest in power.

David Scott [12] also critically examines how Southern intellectuals sometimes re-project forms of historical fatalism or claims a heroic past without sufficient self-critique. In postcolonial history, when many anti-colonial utopias have bordered on corruption and authoritarianism, Scott argues for reconceptualizing the past in order to reimagine a more viable future. He describes how, before independence, anti-colonialists narrated the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism as a romance — a story of overcoming, redemption, and vindication. Scott argues that postcolonial thought assumes this same trajectory, which imposes conceptual limitations.

Bruno Latour [13], in turn, questions the total rejection of modernity without viable alternatives. He proposes that society is not a preexisting entity, but the result of constant interaction between human and non-human actors, creating dynamic networks. Latour critiques modernity for its supposed separation between nature and society, instead proposing a hybrid world. For Latour, not only humans but also objects, technologies, and institutions have agency. Consequently, the imaginary of a completely powerless colonized subject is incoherent. These critiques warn of the risk that decolonial discourse may reproduce the same exclusionary logics it denounces.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a comparative critical review approach. Primary and secondary sources in English and Spanish published between 1978 and 2025 were analyzed, selected for their relevance to the academic debate. The comparison focused on three regional contexts (Latin America, Africa, and Asia) and on identifying discursive patterns that reveal both the strengths and limitations of decolonial thought. The objectives of the analysis include examining the main contributions and critiques of decolonial thought in various contexts, identifying ideological drifts and their effects on contemporary anthropological practice, and proposing a critical orientation that recovers the dialogical potential of the approach without falling into essentialisms.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Original Emancipatory Potential

At its origin, decolonial thought made it possible to question Eurocentric universalism and to recover epistemologies that had been rendered invisible. Its emphasis on the plurality of knowledges provided tools to decolonize cultural policies, educational programs, and academic practices.

Decolonial thought expanded the theoretical and methodological references of the social sciences. It also rediscovered orality, collective memory, and community meanings in the construction of knowledge, provoking an epistemic turn that had political impact. Moreover, it contained an ethical component, as it drew on concepts of historical and social justice.

However, in its critique of Western thought, it lost the Socratic method and the principle of acknowledged ignorance, allowing the discourse to become an unquestionable canon.

4.2. Risks of Dogmatization

It is clear that, in their desire to create an egalitarian post-imperial world, decolonizing movements sought to transcend legal, political, and economic hierarchies, guaranteeing the right to self-determination. For Adom Getachew [14], decolonization revolutionized the international order during the 20th century. However, conventional histories that present the end of colonialism as an inevitable transition from a world of empires to one of nations — where self-determination was synonymous with nation-building — obscure the radical nature of this change. Decolonization reveals the unprecedented ambition not only to transform nations but also to remake the world.

In this laudable ambition for liberation, decolonial ideas, principles, or convictions metamorphosed from an epistemic proposal into a profession of faith. The conversion of decolonialism into a creed can lead to a rigid ethnification of knowledge production, assigning fixed epistemic identities to regions or peoples. There is also a denial of the complex agency of the peoples of the Global South, reducing them to supposedly passive entities without power interests, and an indiscriminate rejection of universal contributions such as human rights or modern science.

4.3. Concrete Manifestations

In academia, some programs have excluded European bibliography as a matter of principle, without a critical evaluation of its relevance. For example, the guide of The London University – SOAS for “decolonizing the curriculum” [15] recommends reducing the focus on classical authors such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and prioritizing voices from African or Asian studies, without qualifying the dialogue between traditions (*The Times*). The argument is that figures like Socrates and Aristotle have been used to legitimize colonial power structures and perpetuate a Eurocentric worldview. However, sidelining Socrates and Aristotle, or any other foundational figure, can be a form of intellectual protectionism that limits the scope of philosophical inquiry. Decolonizing philosophy does not consist solely in excluding certain thinkers; it involves broadening philosophical inquiry to include diverse perspectives and challenging the idea that Western philosophy is the only valid or relevant form of philosophical thought.

In the field of cultural heritage studies, Milton Raimundo [16] also proposes a decolonization of the curriculum to rethink education systems specifically in relation to the conservation of art and heritage in Europe. In cultural policy more broadly, a static notion of “authenticity” has often been privileged, which obscures historical processes of mestizaje, adaptation, and cultural hybridization. The unconditional defense of the colonized’s values can undermine the richness of the Global South’s own multiverse.

4.4. Perspectives for a Critical Anthropology

Recovering the open character of decolonial thought requires integrating decolonial critiques without falling into reductive anti-Westernism. This involves restoring intercultural dialogue as a method, recognizing the plurality of modernities, and defending science as a space open to critique rather than a closed ideological territory. In other words, it means integrating its critique without adopting reductionist anti-Western visions, promoting the use of dialogical methodologies that recognize the plurality of modernities, and defending science as a space for debate rather than a field of orthodoxies or grievances.

It is likely that decolonial thought needs to return to the humble vital exercise of *re-knowing*, ignoring the presumption of knowing, questioning its own need for historical reparation, and challenging the beliefs and ideas it has itself

conceived all with the aim of reaching a deeper understanding of truth and continuing the long path of human self-understanding.

5. Conclusion

Decolonial thought has been essential in making visible the persistence of colonial structures as a systemic phenomenon and in questioning Eurocentrism in the production of knowledge, expanding theoretical and methodological references. It also emphasized the importance of orality, collective memory, and community experience in the construction of knowledge, promoting an epistemic, ethical, and political turn.

However, the dogmatization of decolonial thought limits its critical potential, resulting in self-reduction to a rigid ideological framework, essentializing the Global South and denying its complex agency. The rejection of universal contributions has generated reverse epistemic exclusion, academic politicization, and diminished dialogue, reducing its ethical value. A truly critical and plural anthropology must articulate diverse knowledges without falling into essentialisms, maintain interdisciplinary dialogue that speaks not only *about* the other but *about us*, and uphold complexity as a principle.

Promoting situated epistemic activism does not guarantee an understanding of social and cultural phenomena. Social science must remain open to new evidence, where both differences and similarities construct complex reality. A pluralist, methodologically open and symmetrical framework is suggested, with critical integration of modernity and an ethics of shared knowledge.

As a projection for future study, we consider that research could explore: case studies on the use of decolonial discourse in public and academic policy; comparisons between university programs that adopt a pluralist approach and those that are exclusively decolonial; and empirical analyses of how local communities articulate elements of modernity, ethics, and tradition without conforming to essentialisms or grievances.

Compliance with ethical standards

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