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Beyond Structural Decoloniality: Swaraj, and the Ethical Transformation of the Subject

Carlos Efraín Montúfar Salcedo *

Department of Anthropology, Salesian Polytechnic University, Quito, Ecuador.

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Abstract

This article proposes a critical genealogy of decolonial thought, articulating influences ranging from Mahatma Gandhi to contemporary authors across diverse intellectual traditions. Its point of departure is Gandhian Swaraj, understood not merely as political independence but as inner self-rule, which integrates political emancipation with ethical and spiritual self-governance. Through a critical engagement with thinkers such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Frantz Fanon, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, and Gayatri Spivak, the article identifies a predominant tendency within decolonial theory to privilege structural and epistemic transformation over the ethical formation of the subject. It argues that an authentic decolonial project requires the integration of social justice with ethical self-mastery, since without inner transformation there is a persistent risk of reproducing the logic of domination it seeks to overcome. Finally, the article advances a conceptual framework that links structural change with ethical self-transformation as a necessary condition for sustained and comprehensive liberation.

Keywords: Decoloniality; Swaraj; Inner Ethics; Plural Epistemologies

1. Introduction

Decoloniality has emerged as one of the most influential critical currents for understanding and confronting the persistence of colonial domination in the contemporary world. Its emphasis—through concepts such as the "coloniality of power," the "geopolitics of knowledge," or the "ecology of knowledges"—has demonstrated how social, cultural, and epistemic structures continue to reproduce colonial hierarchies long after the end of formal colonialism.

However, within this intellectual genealogy there is a significant deficit: the limited attention paid to the ethical and subjective dimension of liberation. Without inner transformation—understood as self-governance, self-discipline, ethical formation, and the uprooting of internalized patterns of domination—structural change risks becoming merely a substitution of elites rather than genuine emancipation. This essay explores the plural roots of decoloniality, identifies its limitations, and proposes a framework to articulate its structural dimension with an inner ethics.

2. Gandhi and Inner *Swaraj*: Point of Departure

Mahatma Gandhi understood *Swaraj* not only as political independence from the British Empire, but as inner self-rule: the capacity to free oneself from desire, violence, consumerism, and the uncritical imitation of the West. Inspired by traditions such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, Jain *ahimsa*, and Tolstoy's radical Christianity, Gandhi argued that without this inner freedom, political independence would merely replicate the model of the oppressor.

* Corresponding author: Carlos Efraín Montúfar Salcedo

Nonviolent resistance (*satyagraha*), simple living, and self-sufficiency were concrete expressions of this philosophy. Gandhi viewed modern civilization as a "disease" that required treatment through an ethics of active nonviolence, thus linking social emancipation with ethical self-control.

3. Latin American and Global Decolonial Thought

In Latin America, Aníbal Quijano formulated the notion of the "coloniality of power," describing the persistence of racial, cultural, and epistemic hierarchies. Walter Mignolo extended this reflection toward the "geopolitics of knowledge," emphasizing the need for an epistemological turn that decenters the West. Boaventura de Sousa Santos proposed an "ecology of knowledges" that recognizes the legitimacy of diverse epistemologies, and a "cognitive justice" as the basis for social justice.

Frantz Fanon, drawing on his experience in anticolonial struggle, warned that the colonized subject internalizes racism and cultural alienation, thus requiring a decolonization of being itself. Despite their significant contributions, these approaches tend to privilege structural analysis and epistemic critique, while rarely proposing a personal ethics as a sine qua non condition of liberation.

4. Philosophical Influences and Complementary Critiques

Various philosophical traditions offer elements that complement decolonial thought. Paul Feyerabend defended epistemological pluralism and the rupture with a single method ("anything goes"), opening space for multiple forms of knowledge. Pierre Clastres demonstrated the existence of societies against the state, organized to prevent the concentration of power, challenging Western evolutionist assumptions. Johannes Fabian criticized the "denial of coevalness" in anthropology, which situates the Other in a past time.

Gayatri Spivak questioned whether the subaltern can be represented without being silenced, while Ashis Nandy analyzed how colonialism installs an "intimate enemy" in the psyche of the colonized, who internalizes inferiority. For this reason, structural change without a process of psychological and ethical healing leaves intact the core of colonization, which resides in subjectivities. These perspectives highlight the need for an emancipation that dismantles not only structures but also liberates subjectivities.

5. The Ethical Deficit in Decolonial Praxis

History shows that political independence and structural reforms do not always translate into freer or more just societies. In many contexts, the replacement of colonial administrators by local elites resulted in new forms of authoritarianism and exclusion. This pattern confirms that without inner ethics, structural change can reproduce the logic of the oppressor—in other words, the risk is to replace one tyrant with another without questioning tyranny itself.

Three cases illustrate this dynamic:

5.1. Post-independence India (1947–present)

India's independence in 1947 did not fully realize Gandhi's vision of an integral *Swaraj*, which implied political independence together with ethical and communal self-governance. The British administrative model was largely preserved, and political elites adopted hierarchical and centralized structures inherited from the colonizer. Persistent social inequalities, the continuation of the caste system, and the adoption of an unequal economic model reproduced many of the logics Gandhi had criticized. Ashis Nandy interprets this phenomenon as the operation of the intimate enemy: the internalization of colonial values that drives liberated sectors to perpetuate imperial mentalities.

5.2. Postcolonial States in Africa

In several African nations, independence achieved in the 1960s led to a scenario in which national elites inherited and preserved authoritarian structures. Zimbabwe is emblematic: Robert Mugabe shifted from anticolonial liberation leader to head of a regime marked by clientelism, political repression, and corruption. Fanon had warned of this risk, noting that national bourgeoisies could become intermediaries of external domination if they failed to develop a political ethics oriented toward the common good. Political liberation without a profound change in consciousness thus resulted in the reproduction of colonial logics.

5.3. Post-independence Latin America

After nineteenth-century independence movements, many Latin American countries maintained colonial structures under the management of Creole elites. In nations such as Ecuador, Peru, or Mexico, extractivist economic models and systems of exclusion targeting Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and peasants persisted. Independence did not entail equitable land redistribution nor a substantial transformation of power relations. Creole elites, educated in European values and aspirations, reproduced a hierarchical order that left the colonial structure intact, confirming that political emancipation without ethical transformation can degenerate into a mere substitution of elites.

These historical and contemporary examples demonstrate that structural change without a praxis of ethical self-mastery and inner transformation does not guarantee full liberation. They therefore reinforce the need for an integral decoloniality that combines social justice with the transformation of the subject.

6. Counterexamples and Experiences of Ethical–Structural Integration

Nevertheless, there are cases in which, at least partially, structural change has been combined with ethical and cultural transformation, showing that an integral decoloniality is possible, even if difficult.

6.1. The U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1950–1968)

Structural dimension: It promoted landmark legal reforms such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, dismantling legal frameworks of racial segregation.

Ethical dimension: Led by Martin Luther King Jr., it incorporated a strong ethical-spiritual component grounded in nonviolence, love of neighbor, and moral resistance inspired by Gandhi. It stands as a clear example of a political struggle sustained by an ethical framework aimed at transforming not only laws, but also hearts and mentalities.

6.2. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995–2002)

Structural dimension: It facilitated a peaceful transition from apartheid to a multiracial democratic system, avoiding civil war.

Ethical dimension: Grounded in the concept of *Ubuntu* ("I am because we are"), it prioritized forgiveness, reconciliation, and collective healing over political revenge. Although imperfect, it showed that profound political transformation can be accompanied by an explicit process of ethical and emotional reconstruction.

6.3. The Zapatista Movement in Chiapas, Mexico (since 1994)

Structural dimension: The creation of autonomous communities exercising self-government, promoting communal justice, and collectively managing resources.

Ethical dimension: Based on principles such as "leading by obeying," rotation of offices, rejection of personal accumulation of power, and respect for cultural plurality. It combines political self-government with a strong communal ethos.

7. Toward an Integral Decoloniality

We propose a decolonial framework that articulates two inseparable dimensions:

- Structural dimension: epistemic decolonization, redistribution of resources, and recognition of cultural and political plurality.
- Ethical dimension: self-mastery, detachment from power, temperance, and critical reflection on the desire to dominate.

This second dimension may draw on traditions such as Stoicism and Kierkegaard's existentialism, which places responsibility for one's being at the starting point of freedom. Integral decoloniality does not merely aim to change structures; it seeks to form subjects capable of sustaining a more just order without reproducing oppressive hierarchies.

8. Conclusions

The critical genealogy presented here shows that decolonial thought, while powerful in its structural and epistemic critique, often neglects the ethical dimension of the subject. Gandhian *Swaraj*, understood as inner self-governance, offers a key to addressing this limitation. Integral decoloniality requires that social transformation and inner transformation advance together. Without this dual path, the risk is to perpetuate colonial logics under new guises. The challenge, therefore, is to cultivate a praxis that combines social justice with ethical self-mastery, so that liberation becomes not only a historical event, but a sustained personal and collective achievement.

Compliance with ethical standards

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