



Why Decolonial Studies differs from Postcolonial Studies: Ramón Grosfoguel on Modernity, Capitalism, and Race

Posted on September 29, 2023 by Ashraf Kunnummal

[vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text]Within [this reading group](#) led by Ramón Grosfoguel, he will articulate a decolonial approach to modernity in the face of a Eurocentric approach. He will define modernity and discuss its relationship to capitalism. As someone who has been able to work with Grosfoguel, I will provide some initial perspectives on these ideas in the context of his scholarship. My familiarity with his work is largely defined by his English publications and it should be noted that his Spanish writings offer a distinct area of expertise.

As a prominent figure in the field of decolonial studies, Ramón Grosfoguel's critical contributions to anti-colonial nationalism, postcolonial studies, and the political economy framework of the Eurocentric Left serve as the foundation upon which decolonial studies are built, alongside

Why Decolonial Studies differs from Postcolonial Studies: Ramón Grosfoguel on Modernity, Capitalism, and Race

Enrique Dussel, Aníbal Quijano, Sylvia Wynter, Nelson Maldonado-Torres and Walter D. Mignolo and among others. Grosfoguel's intervention is particularly significant in how it integrates African studies and Islamic studies into the discourse of decolonial studies practically and pedagogically, making his scholarship a cognitive and embodied experience.

According to Grosfoguel, the critical perspective on modernity from the global south was initially intertwined with postcolonial and postmodern studies. This connection was especially evident in the South Asian subaltern studies collective. However, the introduction of new positions in these contexts, specifically within the realm of decolonial studies, gave rise to paradigms such as 'decoloniality' and 'modernity/coloniality.' This new paradigm emphasised unique critical viewpoints on power and discourse, marking a departure from the conventional framework of postcolonial studies.

Grosfoguel further expands this paradigm to encompass political economy and religion, envisioning a decolonial future that transcends divisions between religious, secular and modern perspectives while recognising and broadening the collective experiences of the diverse decolonial studies community. Additionally, Grosfoguel offers a critique of the vague connotations associated with the term 'decolonisation,' which frequently drift toward notions of nationalism and nativism. Moreover, he underscores the enduring connections between the economy, race and religion that persist in contemporary times as an important matrix of coloniality of power. This re-evaluation emerges from a world-historical analysis of race, spanning from Al Andalus in the fifteenth century to the colonisation of the Americas and continuing through the subsequent formation of the colonial world over the past five hundred years.

Despite the recognition gained by decolonial studies, Grosfoguel observed instances of misuse and appropriation. Some sought to resurrect outdated paradigms from postcolonial studies or promote nationalist elitism and religious revivalism within decolonial studies. These appropriations often ignored the original insights of the race/religion/economy/coloniality paradigm developed by scholars like Enrique Dussel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres and Grosfoguel himself. The vague application of intersectionality in the name of decolonial studies frequently overlooked gendered

Why Decolonial Studies differs from Postcolonial
Studies: Ramón Grosfoguel on Modernity, Capitalism,
and Race

dimensions highlighted by scholars like Sylvia Wynter and Gloria Anzaldúa. Ongoing dialogues and interventions, particularly in various discussion forums involving activist thinkers like Sandew Hira and Grosfoguel, aimed to address these issues.

In the face of these challenges in the evolving landscape of decolonial studies, Grosfoguel's work continues to exert a profound influence and his interventions serve as a critical node in navigating the pluriversal horizon of a new liberation philosophy.

Several of Grosfoguel's publications form the basis of the ideas gathered in this session, and readers are suggested to select from those that most interest them. [vc_column_text][vc_toggle title="Reading group event details" open="true"]

Date: 4th October 2023

Title: What is the relationship between Modernity and Capitalism?

Speaker: Ramón Grosfoguel

Chairs: [Claire French](#) and [Maria Jose Recalde-Vela](#)

Minuted by: [Nadeen Dakkak](#) [vc_toggle][vc_toggle title="Selected minutes"]

Ramón launched into his subject after introductions by Claire French and Maria Jose Recalde-Vela, in English and Spanish.

The topic I want to talk about today is basically the relationship between modernity and capital. The question of modernity, how to conceptualise it and how different it is from capitalism is important and creates a lot of confusion. Unfortunately, many people get confused about this question. In European settings, modernity has often been seen as emancipatory. But thinkers from the global south don't see it as an emancipatory project. This is a question not just raised by people within postcolonial studies, but also generally, we can think of how modernity in the west is seen as something positive while in our language, our part of the world, it's seen as something negative. – Ramón

European expansion was not just an economic expansion.

Why Decolonial Studies differs from Postcolonial
Studies: Ramón Grosfoguel on Modernity, Capitalism,
and Race

Europeans arrived in the Americas, Africa and elsewhere carrying multiple structures, civilizational structures, structures of domination, which did not exist in the places where they arrived. This includes Christendom, for example, racism, patriarchy, and so on which did not exist in these places. These arrived with European conquest. – Ramón

Most of the westernised left thinks of European colonialism as an expansion of capitalism but that's not the full story. What we also have is a civilisational expansion. In political economy paradigms, this is often related to the emergence of the global capitalist system, but such approaches lose sight of the entanglements of these civilisation structures. We can't understand global capitalism without understanding the logics that organise capitalism. Capitalism does not exist in a vacuum. The global capitalist market from day one was born and organised from these entangled civilisational structures. Capitalism was from day one formed as colonial capitalism. This has consequences on the way we theorise historical capitalism. Capitalism as an economic system does not exist in isolation from the civilisation by which it expanded. If capitalism today is genocidal, or patriarchal or sexist, etc., it's because it's organised by the civilizational logic of modernity. If it's destructive of the planet or destructive of community and communal life, it's because its logic relies on dualism and on individualism. – Ramón

We cannot understand capitalism without understanding this logic of modernity. Today, people in the West, the percentage of the world which benefits from the surplus value of most of the world's population because of colonisation, have a different understanding of modernity because their life opportunities and privileges allow them to experience it differently from global south peoples who still experience domination, exploitation, poverty, etc. – Ramón

Why Decolonial Studies differs from Postcolonial
Studies: Ramón Grosfoguel on Modernity, Capitalism,
and Race

The question then is, how are we to define modernity? From whose point of view? Those whose lives were improved by colonialism and the expansion of European civilisation and capitalism? Or those who have experienced first-hand modernity as not emancipatory but as death? From whose side are we thinking? Depending on where we are located, we theorise modernity. We see scepticism amongst global south thinkers about modernity because it is seen as a turning point in their history, a moment in which things started going worse for their peoples, and the opposite of this happened in the west. – Ramón

In Europe, over more than a thousand years, the obscurantism of Christendom dominated and led to the persecution of scientists. There was stagnation while other parts of the world were flourishing in science. The same can be said about patriarchy and the position of women. This created a dualism which later became secularised with the expansion of European civilization. For example, nature in the modern world continued to be seen as something to be dominated like it was seen in Christendom. Hence the secularisation of Christendom. The problem with this dualistic understanding of human and nature (Cartesian dualism) is the assumption that human life can continue independently of what happens in nature, hence the relationship of domination and control. The result is technologies developed and built without taking into account nature, because it exists in isolation from human life. That's the idea that has been guiding the production of technology under capitalism in the last 400 years. – Ramón

In previous civilisations, we can see numerous differences in cosmology, but what they have in common is a non-dualistic holistic understanding of humans and nature. So when they produce something in nature, they have more care and rationality in this production because it was common sense that humans cannot exist except through nature and other forms of

Why Decolonial Studies differs from Postcolonial Studies: Ramón Grosfoguel on Modernity, Capitalism, and Race

life on which they are dependent. – Ramón

There is a strong continuity between Christendom and modernity. Modernity is a secularization of Christendom. Another example is how theologically and with the arrival of Europeans in other lands, indigenous peoples were seen as below human, because they were seen as animals, without soul, hence the justification for their exploitation as laborers. Pseudoscience in the nineteenth century replaced theological arguments in earlier centuries. The two are built on different structures, one theological and one scientific, but the latter is a secularisation of the former. The same way in which barbarians were seen in need of becoming Christians, they came in the nineteenth century to be seen as in need of being civilised. – Ramón

If we want to move beyond capitalism then, we have to organise in an anti-systemic way. If we only organise in an anti-capitalist way, what will happen is like the socialism of the twentieth century which failed because it continued to produce civilisational logics of modernity. We have to destroy the organisational logics of capitalism. Otherwise, we can become complicit with the same structures that have organised it. This is the point I make. We cannot fight capitalism and move to something better without fighting modernity, because capitalism is the economic system of modern civilisation and does not exist in isolation. Intersectionality is a useful term here, for lack of a better alternative. – Ramón

How is decolonial criticism of modernity different from traditionalist/conservative criticism of modernity? – reader

Yes, I use the word fundamentalism for this. I find that the most

Why Decolonial Studies differs from Postcolonial
Studies: Ramón Grosfoguel on Modernity, Capitalism,
and Race

important fundamentalism in the world is Eurocentric fundamentalism from whose perspective anything that is coming from the global south is always seen as inferior. Eurocentric fundamentalism is hidden under the other fundamentalisms as the norm, not as a form of fundamentalism. The problem is that the binary of west vs. rest that Europe exported to the rest of the world is accepted by these other global south fundamentalisms who take the binary as it is and invert it. They place themselves as the superior. It's problematic then that the non-western is often seen as decolonial when that's not necessarily the case. Take ISIS for example, who have taken the Islamic concept of the Caliphate and turned it into nation-state, when Caliphate historically was never nation-state but multicultural and multiethnic. A western-centric concept is taken without challenging the binary. And the same goes with how Hindu nationalism in India does not question the binary. Non-western does not mean decolonial. Not when the binary is being reproduced. Traditionalists, when they are not questioning the binary, are as Eurocentric as the west. – Ramón

As a biomed scientist, I caution against talking about 'bad science' as 'pseudosciences' because really, the colonial logics are still alive and well here – and some of those terrible discourses are still reproduced in our circles, even if they don't necessarily make it to published literature. Though they also do sometimes. Biomed scientists should never just be left unattended, honestly. – reader

What we have today is science of death, science that takes humanity to its destruction. I mentioned the obscurantist period that Europe had with Christendom. When they found science in the Islamic civilization and translated their texts, the knowledge they got was appropriated in a way that left out spirituality. A white man was placed at the centre of this knowledge and no acknowledgement was given to where this knowledge was taken

Why Decolonial Studies differs from Postcolonial
Studies: Ramón Grosfoguel on Modernity, Capitalism,
and Race

from in the first place, hence white supremacy. When the spiritual aspects were taken out, Europe started to produce science in opposition to religion and in line with the dualism produced by the dogmatism of the church. This was not the case in scientific production in other civilizations where an anti-dualistic cosmology existed and science was not persecuted. When you have a science without spirituality, you have science without ethics, science without limits, science where everything goes, science that destroys. – Ramón

Would the current assertion of China as a challenge to US world geopolitical domination provide a major solution to this problem of 'modernity', racism and Eurocentrism? – reader

China is bringing something interesting, still within capitalism, still within modernity, but at least there is respect for the sovereignty of other countries. It's a multipolar world that is different from the unipolar world of Europe where the civilisational logic of modernity and capitalism were imposed on other civilisations and other countries. China and the multipolar world is providing an alternative to western imperialism. It's a positive move, even if it's still an imitation of modernity and operates within capitalism. – Ramón

Minutes made by [Dr Nadeen Dakkak](#)*

*These minutes have been edited and selected by the author, based on the arc of the conversation and the multiple perspectives offered. [vc_toggle][vc_toggle title="Final thoughts" open="true"] Ramón reminded us of how modernity is differently conceptualised across the ten percent of people that it has benefited and the ninety percent of people who have consequently suffered. The canon of modernity is established through the contributions of men from five European countries. He emphasised how the increase in the quality of life for all has created an illusion whereby those who have suffered the most still perceive some

Why Decolonial Studies differs from Postcolonial
Studies: Ramón Grosfoguel on Modernity, Capitalism,
and Race

sense of benefit from modernity, despite the continued systemic oppression. The problem with modernity, according to Ramon, is that it does not see itself as one viewpoint among many; instead, it helps hide its geopolitics and body politics from the eyes of the world by pretending to be a universal perspective.

His insights didn't end here: He qualified a view of such a system as reliant on the Cartesian duality that is thoroughly embedded within Christendom. Although it emerged from a specific version of western Christianity as a form of Christendom even sidelining the multiple forms of Christianity, it further secularised to evolve into a form of modernity. The long historical view of the last 500 years of colonialism and modernity was explained by Ramón as a dual system of oppression and exclusion, which argues that one cannot divorce modernity from colonialism.

The larger point that Ramón made was the master signifier of race in the formation of the world, which has hitherto shaped our perceived binaries of religious/secular, tradition/modernity, colonial/postcolonial, modern/post-modern, feminine/masculine, and so on. The binaries that dominate in the humanities and science, in general, need to consider race as a master signifier in decolonising the knowledge and power of the world. Ramón also discussed the drawbacks of superficial anti-colonial 'fundamentalist' critique, which often inverts these dichotomies without challenging the grammar of the modern/colonial world.

Ramón's presentation was influenced by multiple historical references from South America to Asia to Africa, spanning various spaces and times. The presentation engaged with the concept of the power/knowledge of modernity; however, the 'strategies of resistance' were not extensively discussed. There wasn't a chance to discuss in detail the potential that Islam, religion and sexuality, in general, may have for a reconceptualisation of modernity, but we will be sure to have Ramón return to Reading Decoloniality to continue this discussion.[/vc_toggle][/vc_column][/vc_row][vc_row][vc_column][vc_separator align="align_left" el_width="50" css_animation="fadeIn" css=""]

Editor: CLAIRE FRENCH
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