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From Ego Conquiro to Ego Cogito: Dussel's Latin American History of Philosophy

Clara Isabel Pinton  

Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy

 pinton.2064408@studenti.uniroma1.it

Abstract. Modern Western philosophy has long excluded Latin America from its historical and conceptual narrative, reinforcing a Eurocentric understanding of historical development. This study aims to challenge that exclusion by analyzing how Enrique Dussel's philosophy – especially as developed in 1492: *El encubrimiento del Otro* and *Meditaciones anticartesianas* – reconstructs the origins of modern subjectivity from a Latin American, decolonial perspective. Through textual analysis of Dussel's works and comparative readings of canonical European thinkers such as Hegel and Descartes, this research investigates the historical and ontological link between the *ego cogito* and the *ego conquiro*. Following a philosophical and critical-historical method, the study combines close exegesis with genealogical reconstruction to identify how the myth of modernity emerged through colonial conquest and philosophical erasure. The results reveal that, according to Dussel, the Cartesian subject – the foundation of modern philosophy – is only made possible through the prior conquest and objectification of the colonial Other. This encounter is not peripheral but constitutive: Latin America and the broader colonial world played a crucial role in the birth of modernity, both economically and philosophically, and ontologically. As highlighted in its conclusions, this study represents only an initial step: a deconstructive phase within the broader tradition of the Philosophy of Liberation. The study calls for the reconstruction of a philosophical canon that acknowledges its colonial foundations and includes the voices it has historically silenced. Ultimately, it argues that decolonizing philosophy, a process that broadly extends from Latin America to the entire peripheral world, is not only possible but also necessary for a more just and inclusive global thought.

Keywords: discovery, Enlightenment, Eurocentrism, liberation, modernity, periphery, subject, Weltgeschichte

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От Ego Conquiro к Ego Cogito: латиноамериканская история философии Дюсселя

К.И. Пинтон  

Римский Университет Ла Сапиенца, Рим, Италия

 pinton.2064408@studenti.uniroma1.it

Аннотация. Современная западная философия долгое время исключала Латинскую Америку из своего исторического и концептуального повествования, укрепляя евроцентристское понимание исторического развития. Данное исследование направлено на то, чтобы оспорить это исключение, проанализировав, как философия Энрике Дюсселя – особенно в том виде, в каком она была разработана в 1492 году: «Уединение от мира» и «Антикартезианские медитации» – реконструирует истоки современной субъективности с латиноамериканской, деколониальной точки зрения. Посредством текстологического анализа работ Дюсселя и сравнительного прочтения канонических европейских мыслителей, таких как Гегель и Декарт, в этом исследовании исследуется историческая и онтологическая связь между *ego cogito* и *ego conquiro*. Следуя философскому и критически-историческому методу, исследование сочетает тщательную экзегезу с генеалогической реконструкцией, чтобы определить, как миф о современности возник в результате колониальных завоеваний и стирания философских ценностей. Результаты показывают, что, согласно Дюсселю, картезианский субъект – основа современной философии – становится возможным только благодаря предварительному завоеванию и объективации колониального Другого. Эта встреча носит не периферийный, а основополагающий характер: Латинская Америка и более широкий колониальный мир сыграли решающую роль в зарождении современности как в экономическом, так и в философском и онтологическом плане. Как подчеркивается в выводах, это исследование представляет собой лишь начальный шаг: этап деконструктивизма в рамках более широкой традиции философии освобождения. Исследование призывает к воссозданию философского канона, который признает его колониальные основы и включает голоса, которые он исторически заставлял замолчать. В конечном счете в нем утверждается, что деколонизация философии, процесс, который широко распространяется от Латинской Америки до всего периферийного мира, не только возможен, но и необходим для более справедливого и инклюзивного глобального мышления.

Ключевые слова: открытие, просвещение, европоцентризм, освобождение, современность, периферия, субъект, мировая история

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Introduction

In his work titled *16 tesis de economía política. Más allá de la Modernidad y el capitalismo* (2014) (“16 Thesis of Political Economy. Beyond Modernity and Capitalism”), Argentinian philosopher Enrique Dussel (1934–2023) writes, “Modernity begins with the opening of the Latin-Germanic world of medieval Christendom to the Atlantic Ocean, overcoming the Ottoman encirclement in 1492” [1. P. 297]¹. Such an apparently simple idea is the result of many debates that sprang up in the late twentieth century and has transformed the perception of what modernity is.

The Philosophy and Theology of Liberation movements have had, since the 1970s, the aim of rethinking history and the history of philosophy². The point of departure is the realization that an entire continent has been eclipsed from both Latin America's history and philosophical thought; it does not have a place in them. Alternatively, more precisely, it does not have a place within the history and philosophical thought built from a Eurocentric and “Westernist” perspective, which, by proclaiming itself as the “center” and relegating the rest of the world to the “periphery,” authorizes and legitimizes its domination over the latter. This is what Dussel calls the “myth of modernity.” The present work intends to propose a way of understanding and deconstructing such a myth, thereby building a history of philosophy from the standpoint of the world's poor and oppressed: from the nonentities of history.

To achieve the intended aim, Dussel's work serves as a constant reference in the three-fold approach the study takes. By primarily analyzing Dussel's 1992 *1492: El encubrimiento del Otro. Hacia el origen del “mito de la Modernidad”*³

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from non-English sources are the author's own. These translations were carried out to preserve the original meaning and style as accurately as possible.

² The philosophy of Latin American liberation, which gives its name to what is arguably Dussel's most well-known work [2], is a philosophical movement that, like any *movement*, arose from a specific historical conjuncture. “In a certain sense, the philosophy of liberation is a philosophical legacy of 1968. On a global scale, it is the emergence of critical thinking in the peripheries that has continued to develop up to the present. It is the realization of the peripheral world's reality within countries that were once Europe's colonies, where sciences, in general, and social sciences and philosophy, in particular, likewise bore a colonial character, repeating the categorical and methodological framework of Western sciences. It entailed an *epistemological rupture* of far greater magnitude than the one imagined by L. Althusser [...] – indeed, it was a rupture with Althusser himself” [3. P. XVII–XVIII].

³ English version [4]. It is important to emphasize, as the original title of the work does, the symbolic significance of the date to which this origin [*origen*] refers. As this study seeks to demonstrate, it is precisely in 1492, the year of the so-called “discovery” of the “new continent”, that modernity is

and 2008 *Meditaciones anticartesianas: Sobre el origen del anti-discurso filosófico de la modernidad*⁴, it is shown how, according to the philosopher, the systematic removal of the Latin American continent has its historical origin in 1492, with the so-called “discovery” of America, and has been perpetuated to the present day through targeted historical and philosophical narratives, as exemplified by Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1832). To counter this historical and philosophical erasure, the present work, through a constant reference to acclaimed Western thinkers, reveals Latin America not as a mere passive object in the hands of European modernity—a phenomenon, the latter, usually considered entirely internal to the Old Continent and the Enlightenment—but rather as a fundamental subject without which modernity could neither have emerged nor developed. The study remarks Dussel’s thesis that the encounter with the Other, that is, the Latin American *Indio* and the broader colonial world, was indispensable for the affirmation of the Cartesian *ego cogito*: not only from an economic perspective but also from a philosophical and ontological one. This “encounter,” according to Dussel, took in fact the form of “conquest”: the *ego conquiro*, the domination of the European white man over the supposedly inferior native, makes possible the constitution of the *ego cogito*, despite the myth of modernity having systematically concealed this foundational moment.

Latin America Has No Place in the *Weltgeschichte*

We aim to address a masked, yet subtle, component that often underlies philosophical thinking and many other theoretical positions within European and North American thought. This is “Eurocentrism” – and its concomitant component: the “developmentalist fallacy” [6. P. 19].

This is how the first of eight lectures, delivered by Enrique Dussel between October and December 1992 at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt, begins. He had also presented the same lecture series earlier that September at the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici in Naples; these lectures were later compiled into a single volume, published that same year and translated into English three years later under the title *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of “the Other” and the Myth of Modernity*.

At the time of that publication, Dussel was already internationally recognized for his work in the field of Latin American philosophy. His most celebrated contribution, *Philosophy of Liberation* (1977), had been circulating for nearly two decades, while his critical thought was gaining increasing visibility through lectures, seminars, university courses, and, of course, his prolific writing activity.

born, along with its accompanying myth, through the foundational experience of constituting the Other as dominated under the control of the dominator, *periphery* of a *center*; at the same time, everything that is non-European dies, as it is “eclipsed” and rendered invisible: it is the “other side” of modernity.

⁴ English version: [5].

It is with 1492, however, that Dussel explicitly brings into focus the question of the birth of modernity and modern European thought, locating its origins precisely in the moment when the “Old Continent,” in its exploration of the Atlantic Ocean, sought, and found, a way out of the narrow borders in which it felt terribly constrained by the Muslim world. Dussel addresses this by critically and carefully revisiting several canonical works of Western thought that have contributed to the consecration of the European continent and, by extension, its culture as the center of the world. It is hardly surprising that the two main interlocutors Dussel engages with are Kant and Hegel, whose *Was ist Aufklärung?* and *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte* exemplify the Eurocentrism which still today, “subtly masked,” underlies Western philosophy. It is precisely with these thinkers that Dussel begins a line of thinking that will lead him to condemn modernity as a myth born out of the encounter with—and immediate victory over, control of, and violence against – the Other.

In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, delivered during the early decades of the nineteenth century, Hegel presents world history as a process oriented toward the *Aufklärung*, that Enlightenment which Kant had already defined as the exit from the state of *verschuldeten Unmündigkeit* [7. P. 5], “guilty immaturity.” Hegel teaches, in fact: “World history represents the *development* [*Entwicklung*] of the consciousness the Spirit has of its own freedom,” and he adds, “[*Development*] implies a *gradual process*, [...] a series of further *determinations* of freedom” [8. P. 86].

This “development” follows a *spatial* trajectory. Well-known is the east–west movement Hegel ascribes to universal history, famously asserting: “The history of the world goes from the East to the West: Europe is, in fact, absolutely the end of world history, just as Asia is its beginning” [8. P. 134]. America is not part of history; it is extraneous, external to it. And it is on this assumption that Eurocentrism is constituted – a pure ideology, because it is difficult to define it otherwise, which has nevertheless imposed and dominated over culture and history for centuries, as well as over how they are narrated not only in the Western world but, perhaps even more tragically, also in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

This exclusion is the inevitable consequence of what Hegel observes with a certain superiority: Latin America, he states, is in a condition of total *Unreife*, immaturity. In fact, the language used by the German philosopher is even more derogatory: “The inferiority of these individuals in every respect is quite obvious” [8. P. 108], he writes. He refers to a culture that is “completely natural, that vanishes the moment the Spirit approaches it [*sowie der Geist sich ihr näherte*]” [8. P. 108]. A few pages later, he adds, “With respect to its elements, America has not yet completed its formation” [8. P. 113]; it is thus, for Hegel, “the land of the future” [8. P. 113]. And he definitively excludes an entire continent from history with an impassive concluding remark: “As the land of the future, America does not interest us” [8. P. 113]. Thus, it has no place in the *Weltgeschichte*: as it will happen with

Africa, America is discarded, mentioned only to be concealed, *en-cubierta*, as Dussel would say.

Indeed, Africa is included, alongside Europe and Asia, in the Trinity into which, according to Hegel, the world is divided. Yet in this tripartition, from which Latin America is already obviously absent, Africa is immediately dismissed as a wild and closed land, inhabited by “men in their coarse state” [8. P. 120]. Here, the concept of a “center” of the world begins to take shape, so much so that even Asia is promptly disqualified. Its role in world history is reduced to one of preparation, a mere introduction to development; it is the childish beginning that must give way so that the Spirit may reach its peak, its center [*Zentrum*] and end [*Ende*]. And there it emerges, “finally, after having removed this matter from us” [8. P. 129], glorious Europe. But which Europe?

Certainly not that of the South, below the Pyrenees, now devoid of a central core—certainly not Spain nor Italy. One must move further north, though not toward the East—Poland and Russia are tied, perhaps too closely, to Asia. The gaze must, therefore, necessarily turn westward and consider the other North: Germany, France, Denmark, and Scandinavia. Hegel has finally found *das Herz Europas*, the heart of Europe. At this point, he begins to grow impassioned and writes: “The Germanic spirit [*germanische Geist*] is the spirit of the new world [*neuen Welt*], whose goal is the realization of absolute truth, understood as the infinite self-determination of freedom, of that freedom which has as its content its absolute form. [...] The mission of the Germanic peoples is to provide the bearers of the Christian principle [...], and to them was entrusted, in the service of the world spirit, the task not only of possessing [...] the concept of true freedom but also of producing it freely in the world, starting from subjective self-consciousness” [8. P. 413].

With this crucial passage, we definitely get to the heart of the matter. Hegel here expresses the exact opposite thesis to that around which Dussel will build his work and philosophy. Citing the German philosopher’s own words, Dussel underscores how, for Hegel, “modern Christian Europe has nothing to learn from other worlds, from other cultures. It possesses a principle within itself: its own full ‘realization’” [6. P. 26]. This is because the three epochs into which Hegel divides the Germanic world represent the *development* of the Spirit as it gradually realizes itself, culminating in the German Empire, the “realm of totality” [8. P. 417], where previous epochs are repeated. Germanic migrations during the Roman Empire ushered in the first of these epochs; the second, which Hegel links with the feudal Middle Ages, ends with three events that mark the beginning of the “New Age”: the Renaissance, the discovery of America, and the passage to the Indian Ocean via the Cape of Good Hope. The result of these three events is the opening toward the third epoch, modernity, which begins with the Lutheran Reformation and develops, progressively and definitively, with the *Aufklärung* and the French Revolution.

The peak of modernity is, therefore, Northern Europe (Hegel would identify the English as the *Missionarien der Zivilisation in der ganzen Welt* [8. P. 538]), which today could be extended to include the United States as well, before which

the rest of the world stands *rechtlos*: “Since history is the configuration of the Spirit in the form of event, [...] the people who receive such an element as a natural principle [...] are the dominant people in a given epoch of world history. [...] In contrast to the absolute right they possess for being the current bearers [*Träger*] of the stage of development of the world Spirit, the spirit of other peoples has no right whatsoever” [9] (§ 346–§ 347).

The peoples of the “South” are thus denied not only any rights but even the very claim to them. Not only is this the clearest expression of Eurocentrism, but we witness here the sacralization of a power that, emerging from the North, declared itself the “center” and subsequently imposed itself on the periphery by colonizing it and rendering it dependent. “I believe no further commentary is necessary,” affirms Dussel. “These texts speak with their terrifying cruelty and with a cynicism so absolute that it becomes the very ‘development’ of Enlightened ‘Reason’ (*Aufklärung*)” [6. P. 27–28].

In light of these considerations, and returning to the premise set forth a few paragraphs earlier, not only is America excluded from history, but its “discovery” plays an utterly marginal role. In 1985, a landmark work of twentieth-century Western philosophical thought was published, one that reiterates and reproduces this same Eurocentric and Westernist vision—unsurprisingly, by drawing once again on Hegel. We refer to the milestone text *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (1985) by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. It is striking that, in his reconstruction of the decisive historical events that brought about that principle of subjectivity which, as in Hegel, marks the beginning of the modern age, there is not even a passing mention of the momentous event that occurred on October 12, 1492. *Italian Renaissance, German Reformation, Enlightenment, French Revolution*: in Habermas, as in Hegel, the discovery of America assumes no determining role whatsoever.

And yet, as Dussel seeks to demonstrate, “the experience not only of the ‘discovery,’ but especially that of the ‘conquest,’ will be essential in the constitution of the modern *ego*, not merely as simple subjectivity, but as a subjectivity that is the ‘center’ and ‘end’ of history” [6. P. 29]. In truth, this is a thesis that Hegel is already implicitly accepting at the very moment when, in his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, he acknowledges that civil society overcomes itself in the form of the “State” when the internal contradiction is resolved through the very establishment of colonies: “By a dialectic of its own, civil society is driven in order to overcome itself, to seek outside itself new consumers, and to find the means to survive among other peoples inferior to it through the surplus of resources it possesses or, more generally, through industry” [10] (§ 246).

He continues, two paragraphs later: “This web of relations also provides the instrument of colonization, toward which, whether systematically or sporadically, civil society is eventually impelled. Colonization allows part of its population in the new territory to return to the principle of family property while also creating a new possibility and field of labor” [10] (§ 248).

The theoretical-historical exclusion of the periphery, its *concealment*, falls apart at the very moment it must necessarily and inevitably be acknowledged for its economic and political significance. While in the tranquility of the center, European philosophers debated on the humanity, or lack thereof, of Latin American Indigenous peoples, on the ontological status of an entire continent, European shores were receiving vast quantities of gold and silver – between 1503 and 1660 alone, 185,000 kilograms of the former and seventeen million kilograms of the latter. Eduardo Galeano writes: “The metals torn from the new colonial domains stimulated European economic development and one could even say they made it possible” [11. P. 39]. Perhaps it is precisely to preserve its immense economic and political value that the periphery must remain just like that, concealed.

Where and When Does Modernity Begin?

The concealment, “hiding”, of an entire continent, an operation that occurred the moment after its so-called “discovery” and that we have just attempted to piece together, was necessary in order to justify a centuries-long slaughter. Its effects are still visible today. Faced with the awareness that Latin America has been made to disappear from both maps and history, this study, developed in the pages that follow and traced in Dussel’s work, aim to “reinsert” it within the history of philosophy and global geopolitics.

Before, and ultimately in order to do this, it is necessary to first engage in the question posed in the title of this paragraph. We will begin, in fact, by examining “one of the European histories of philosophy of the last few centuries” [12. P. 12], as Dussel states in the introduction to his *Meditaciones anticartesianas*. He continues:

Modernity originates, according to the prevailing interpretation that we will attempt to challenge, in a particular place and at a particular time. The geopolitical displacement of that place and time will thus imply, in turn, a *philosophical*, thematic, and paradigmatic displacement [12. P. 18].

Only by knowing and understanding such an interpretation will it be possible to develop a coherent critique of it. Let us then follow Dussel in *Meditaciones anticartesianas* in search of an answer to this question.

Not being the first to raise this issue, the Argentine philosopher finds it worthwhile to consider the work of those who, after thorough study, have attempted to provide their answer, undoubtedly personal despite any effort toward objectivity. Dussel never explicitly references Zygmunt Bauman, but one can observe a notable convergence with what the Polish sociologist and philosopher wrote in 1991 when he illustrated state of the art in clear and concise terms: “How old is modernity? is a contentious question. There is no agreement on dating. There is no consensus on what is to be dated” [13. P. 3]. However, due to the importance of the topic, Bauman proceeds to explore the issue in more depth in a lengthy footnote, from which we quote the most relevant passages:

Making one's own dating choice seems to be unavoidable [...]. Current datings range as wide as the assumptions of the French historians – contributors to the volume *Culture et idéologie de l'état moderne*, published in 1985 [...] – that the modern state was born at the end of the thirteenth century and fizzled out toward the end of the seventeenth, to some literary critics confinement of the term “modernity” to cultural trends that begin with the twentieth century and end at its middle [13. P. 18].

Bauman finally concludes the note by stating: “[...] I call “modernity” a historical period that began in Western Europe with a series of profound social-structural and intellectual transformations of the seventeenth century and achieved its maturity: (1) as a cultural project – with the growth of Enlightenment; (2) as a socially accomplished form of life – with the growth of industrial (capitalist, and later also communist) society” [13. P. 18].

Returning to *Meditaciones anticartesianas*, Dussel notes how, a year before Bauman's publication, British philosopher Stephen Toulmin, in *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, had written: “Some people date the origin of modernity to the year 1436, with Gutenberg's adoption of moveable type; some to A.D. 1520 and Luther's rebellion against Church authority; others to 1648, and the end of the Thirty Years' War; others to the American or French Revolution of 1776 or 1789; while modern times start for a few only in 1895, with Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* and the rise of “modernism” in the fine arts and literature” [14. P. 5].

The same conviction was held, as we have already briefly recalled, by Jürgen Habermas, who in his aforementioned 1985 work has modernity undergo a movement – Renaissance, Lutheran Reformation, Scientific Revolution, the English, North American, and French political revolutions – from south to north, east to west, clearly echoing Hegel. Hegel who does, indeed, suspect something, as when he dares to affirm: “[With modernity] the human being gains confidence in himself [*Zutrauen zu sich selbst*] [...]. With the invention of gunpowder, individual enmity disappears from war. [...] Man discovers America, its treasures and its peoples, he discovers nature, he discovers himself [*sich selbst*]” [15. P. 62].

Yet, as detailed above, the German philosopher does not dare delve any further. It is perhaps worth recalling that the discovery of gunpowder, which he mentions here, as well as other technical inventions and discoveries such as paper, movable-type printing (cited by Toulmin), and the compass, had already taken place in China centuries, if not millennia, before Hegel wrote those pages. Nor can we ignore the phrase, “man discovers America,” as if the Indigenous peoples were not themselves men (and women!), as if they had not already discovered that continent thousands of years before. “Until finally, someone came to discover me!” [16. P. 15], we can imagine an *indio* saying in recounting October 12, 1492.

Despite the difficulties in establishing a precise date, Dussel cannot help but observe that we are dealing with the beginning of modernity, in a commonly accepted identification set around the seventeenth century, which is entirely and

internally European. So much so that it is with a European philosopher, born at the dawn of 1600 in France and dying fifty-four years later in Sweden (almost as if he was embodying, with the migrations of a lifetime, that south-to-north movement culminating in the Scandinavia so admired by Hegel), that “the philosophy of modern times [*die Philosophie der neueren Zeit*]” [8. P. 60] is said to begin: Descartes.

René Descartes lived in the early seventeenth century. He was orphaned shortly after his birth and, in 1606, entered the Jesuit college of La Flèche, which had been founded just two years earlier. Thus began his education, where he studied his first philosophical work, *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, by the Spanish philosopher and theologian Francisco Suárez, written in 1597. The Château of La Flèche had been donated by King Henry IV of France to the Jesuits precisely so that they might turn it into a place to cultivate the finest minds of the time (“Et néanmoins j’étais en l’une des plus célèbres écoles de l’Europe” [17. P. 4–5], writes Descartes in his *Discourse on Method*). The education, as Dussel illustrates, was entirely modern: “Each Jesuit constituted a singular, independent, modern *subjectivity* [...] and daily performed an individual “examination of conscience.” That is, the young Descartes had to retire in silence three times a day, think about his subjectivity, and “examine” with extreme clarity and self-awareness the intention and content of each of his actions [...]. It was the daily practice of the *ego cogito*: “I am self-aware of having done this or that;” all of which dominated subjectivity in a disciplined way” [12. P. 16].

After completing his classical studies, Descartes began his formal philosophical education with logic around 1610. The key text, used in all Jesuit colleges throughout Europe and translated and widespread across the continent, including in Germany and the Netherlands, was the *Logica mexicana sive Commentarii in universam Aristotelis Logicam* (1605), a work by the philosopher Antonio Rubio de Rueda (1548–1615). A thinker who, Dussel points out as part of his argument, was indeed of Spanish origin but arrived on the coasts of Mexico at the age of eighteen and remained there for the next twenty-five years, concentrating his education and philosophical work in Latin America. In Mexico, Rubio also wrote commentaries on the *Dialectica*, the *Physica*, *De Anima*, and *De Caelo et Mundo*. “Who would have thought,” Dussel exclaims, “that Descartes studied the hard part of philosophy – logic, dialectic – through a work by a Mexican philosopher!” [12. P. 17]. In 1612, Descartes added astronomy and mathematics to his curriculum, and between 1613 and 1614, he devoted himself to metaphysics and ethics. He confesses that his first reading had been the *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, precisely during that period. A work that, Dussel emphasizes, is no longer merely a commentary on the *Metaphysics* but the first *systematic* work on the subject, preceding all the ontologies that would follow in the subsequent centuries and to which Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten would explicitly refer.

To the questions posed in the title of this paragraph, we can, therefore, only respond with further questions, to which, however, Dussel seems to have already

found answers: “The *method* [...] was one of the subjects passionately debated in the classes of Jesuit colleges. These, as is evident, come from southern Europe, from Spain, from the sixteenth century, and from the Mediterranean recently overturned onto the Atlantic. Could the sixteenth century have some philosophical interest then? Could Descartes be the result of a *previous* generation that paved the way? Could there be *modern* Ibero-American philosophers prior to Descartes who opened up the issues of modern philosophy?” [12. P. 18].

What the present work has sought to highlight in these pages, in short, is how the history that is for centuries being studied in the most prestigious centers of Western education, and that has always been internalized in Western culture, is nothing more than the claim, the myth, of modernity as a process that originates in Europe, reaches its culmination in the Enlightenment, and then expands to the rest of the world, becoming universal. Max Weber provides us with the words to describe this exact standing—both conscious and unconscious – when, in the “Preliminary Remarks” to the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (1904), he writes: “In addressing the problems of universal history, modern European culture’s child will inevitably and rightly ask the following question: through what concatenation of circumstances was it precisely here, in the West, and only here, that cultural phenomena emerged [...] and followed a developmental trajectory of universal meaning and validity?” [18. P. 1].

“We all study this. Where do we get it from?” Dussel asks, referring to the myth just outlined: “From the German Romantics of the eighteenth century, who invented history from a Eurocentric point of view” [19. P. 19].

Not from 1637, but from 1492. Rethinking the Building of Modern Subjectivity

Weber sought in the Middle Ages the *potentiality* of Europe’s evident superiority over other cultures. Still, how can this be? As we briefly recalled earlier, during that same period China was certainly more advanced⁵. Dussel’s hypothesis cannot be but confirmed: “Europe [...], which had never been a center,” not even with the Roman Empire!, “with the discovery of America [...] will become a center” [19. P. 22]. Following on the considerations drawn from the previous two paragraphs, this study wishes now to prove the above-formulated statement finally.

At least until the fifteenth century, and in many respects even later, what we now consider “Western Europe” did not extend to the East, beyond Vienna, which was constantly threatened by the expansionist ambitions of the Muslim Turks. Similarly, vast territories to the west, corresponding to modern-day Spain, were in the hands of Arab Muslims who, until the so-called Reconquista of 1492, controlled them in the form of *taifas* or sultanates. On January 5 of that year, the Catholic

⁵ In addition to the technological discoveries – such as paper, printing, and the compass – it has been a few decades since evidence emerged demonstrating the superiority of the East over Europe, at least until 1492, even in terms of navigation and geographical discoveries [20].

Monarchs – the same who would support Christopher Columbus’s project – expelled the last Arab European king, Muhammad III Boabdil, from what was then the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada. Dussel writes: “The Muslims were in Morocco, Africa. They advanced toward the South of the Sahara [...], they were in Egypt [...]; the Turks had conquered nothing less than all of Greece [...]; what is now Russia remained in Mongol hands, and these Mongols were of Muslim religion. [...] Northern India was in the hands of the Delhi Sultanate (which was Muslim) [...]. When the Spaniards left Acapulco in 1565 and arrived in the Philippines, they encountered Muslims, just as Columbus had expected” [19. P. 20].

The population of Latin-Germanic Europe was smaller than that of the Chinese Empire alone: it was therefore a population that needed to break out of the isolation to which it was confined. It attempted to do so with the Crusades, the first effort to impose itself on the eastern Mediterranean – and failed. There was little that was truly religious in this belligerent undertaking, and much that was economic: the site of the Holy Sepulcher was, not coincidentally, also a strategic point along the trade routes that came from China to Antioch and connected with present-day Palestine via the maritime routes of the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf. Failing in the Crusades also meant being denied the possibility of asserting a presence within the Turkish-Muslim world. At the same time, the Turkish occupation of Constantinople in 1453 plunged Europe even further into a state of stagnation and minimal expression.

Faced with this situation, Dussel reiterates that to speak of a Europe as the *Zentrum* and *Ende* of history, as we have seen Hegel do, means falling, in the words of Samir Amin, into a “Eurocentric myopia” [21]. Never was “Latin” European history, up to the fifteenth century, the “center” of the world; it could not even be the center of the Eurasian world, given its extremely western position. We must wait until the fateful year 1492 for the empirical centrality of Western Europe to begin constituting other civilizations and peoples as its “periphery.” The West had to make itself the center of the system, and therefore had to *move toward* the center of the system. In the fifteenth century, that center passed through the Middle East (Baghdad had been the most populous city on Earth for at least half a millennium) and extended to India: “Spices, silk, Chinese caravans passed through here, through the Silk Road, Samarkand” [19. P. 22]. Portugal was the first Western European country, aware of this, which turned toward the center with all its available energy.

“Why didn’t the Chinese discover America?” [19. P. 22] Dussel provocatively asks: simply because they, too, were looking toward the center of the system – they, too, were heading toward Baghdad and India. There was nothing of interest, for their trade, in America, and they knew it because they had thoroughly “discovered” and mapped those lands. These are claims that Dussel supports by referring to works such as *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* by Andre Gunder Frank, which, despite criticisms from the academic community regarding the presumpt inaccuracy of some historical data, still, according to the Argentine philosopher, performs the valuable work of including China in the debate on modernity. Reference is also made to the already mentioned study by Gavin Menzies, thanks

to which we now know that the Chinese Empire undertook a series of maritime expeditions from 1421 to 1424 that reached the eastern coasts of North America as far as Greenland, the coasts of South America as far as Patagonia, the coasts of Australia, and the Indian Ocean—thanks to what is considered “the largest fleet in world history,” commanded by merchant and navigator Zheng He (1371–1434), a Muslim Mongol. At that time, a series of maps and detailed accounts were produced prior to the Spanish, Portuguese, or English voyages—topographical studies that indicate a precise knowledge of territories that would later be “discovered” with Prince Henry the Navigator (1394–1460) or thanks to the Spanish *Casa de Contratación*. These maps arrived in Europe through Niccolò da Conti (1395–1469) and Fra Mauro (15th century–1459), popularizing the buying and selling of Chinese maps. In a passage from *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*, Menzies writes: “As valiant and determined as they were, Columbus, Diaz, Da Gama, Magellan, Cook, and the rest of the European explorers set out to sea with maps that showed them the way to their destinies. They owed it all to the first explorers, the Chinese, in their epic journeys of 1421–1423. The fortune of the Europeans ran parallel to the misfortune of China” [20. P. 417].

Ming Emperor Hongxi (1378–1425), by decree of September 7, 1424, decided to halt all treasure ship voyages, abandoning their undisputed dominance over the oceans. A strategic mistake, perhaps, which allowed Portugal and Spain to be the first to fill the “void” left by their ships and trade routes.

If Portugal was the first country to set sail toward the center, Spain was indeed the second; unable to head south, it then launched itself across the Atlantic. “Spain stumbles upon America, without intending to” [19. P. 23], and consequently conquers a territory five times the size of Europe, with vast wealth in gold, silver, and sugar.

It is now finally clear, according to Dussel, when modernity begins: “The departure of Western Europe from the narrow borders to which the Muslim world had confined it constitutes, in my opinion, the birth of modernity. 1492 is the date [...] of the origin of the “experience” of the European *ego*: to constitute the Other subjects and peoples as objects, tools that can be used and controlled for Europeanizing, civilizing, modernizing ends” [6. P. 126].

This is the Europe that would set out to conquer the world; it had already begun a few years earlier with Ivan II the Great’s Russia, with its expansion through the taiga all the way to the Pacific, which was reached in the seventeenth century. It will continue with Spain and Portugal from the conquest of Mexico, “the first ‘strong’ experience of the European *ego* in controlling another empire, in making the Other servile, colonized, dominated, exploited, and humiliated” [6. P. 128–129]. It is worth noting Europe expands from its marginal places (Russia, Spain, England...); it is Spain, that country which will be forgotten and despised – Hegel does not even consider it Europe – the place where modernity begins. “We see now, and only now,” Dussel states with some disdain, “how the Indian lived the arrival of those Europeans, marginal to the Muslim world, who were beginning their triumphant path toward the ‘centrality’ of World History” [6. P. 129].

Spain is therefore, according to Dussel, the first modern State: a bureaucratic State, with the bureaucracy of the Archives of the Indies in Seville, and the Holy Inquisition (“The first *modern* intelligence service” [19. P. 24]). The expansion of this State, its modernization through violent colonial processes, constitutes for Dussel the “First modernity,” the Spanish modernity. “The *conquistadores*, who arrive in America, would thrust burning embers into the eyes of the Indigenous people demanding gold, the gold they demanded from Atahualpa. A feudal does not demand that. That is demanded by a modern man, in monetary capitalism” [19. P. 25]. It is the Spanish, Renaissance, humanist, bourgeois modernity. Silver and gold are the first global currency: “Look how sadly we enter history, sacrificing our Indians to extract the first global money which, by accumulating in Europe, then gave (Europe) total priority over other cultures” [19. P. 25].

It is from this centrality, conquered through violence, that the European begins to see himself as a constituting *I*: it is the birth of the history of modern subjectivity.

From the “I conquer” the Aztec (1521) and Incan worlds, and of all of the Americas (the first holocaust of modernity); from the “I enslave” the Africans (the second holocaust), sold for the gold and silver obtained through the deaths of the Indigenous peoples in the depths of the mines; from the “I defeat” in the wars fought in India and China up to the shameful Opium War; from that “I” unfolds the Cartesian thinking of the *ego cogito* (1636) [2. P. 24].

The *conquistador* is the first modern active man who, through the process of conquest, on the one hand denies the Other in their diversity and forces them to become alienated and incorporated into his Totality as “the Same,” and, on the other hand, simultaneously, subjectivizes himself. In 1492, Dussel frequently refers to the detailed accounts found in the work *Monarquía indiana* by the Spanish-born Franciscan friar and historian Juan de Torquemada (1557–1624). The three volumes, the first of which published in 1615 in Seville, constitute one of the most extensive reports on the Spanish colonization of Mexico, and in particular on the “just” religious conversion imposed upon the peoples who inhabited it. What interests Dussel are the excerpts in which the constitution of the modern *ego* emerges; for example, when speaking of Hernán Cortés, perhaps the first true *conquistador* in history, Torquemada writes: “[Cortés] began here [when preparing to lead the troops toward the conquest of the Aztec Empire] *to treat his person* as captain general; for he established a household with a steward, chamberlain, master of the pantry, and other officials” [22. P. 37]. From a poor nobleman of Extremadura, Cortés is now “captain general”; his *ego* begins to take form. Later, he will become God and Lord: “Our God and our Lord, be most welcome, for we your servants and vassals have awaited you for a long time” [22. P. 63].

Conclusions

The construction of the modern subject, as this study has sought to demonstrate, is inseparable from the colonial enterprise that accompanied and enabled the birth of modernity. Far from being a self-contained, endogenous

development of European thought, the modern *ego* emerges from an asymmetrical encounter with the Other – a violent process of domination, expropriation, and silencing that formed the constitutive “outside” of the European self. Enrique Dussel’s critical philosophy reveals how the *ego conquiro* historically and ontologically precedes the *ego cogito*, and how the Cartesian subject is founded upon the denial and erasure of Latin America and the colonial world more broadly. By tracing modernity not to Descartes in 1637 but to Columbus in 1492, Dussel displaces the geographical and conceptual center of philosophical inquiry. This displacement challenges the universalism of European modernity, exposing it as rooted in exclusion and myth. In re-centering the role of Latin America and the colonial experience in the history of philosophy, Dussel not only critiques the Eurocentric narrative but also opens up a space for a new, decolonial philosophical project – one grounded in the lived realities of those who have long been rendered invisible by history.

If modernity has always been global in its violence, the critique of modernity must also be global in its justice. This study, following Dussel as one of the most prominent and prolific Latin American thinkers, does not claim to offer a definitive or exhaustive account. Rather, it aims to contribute to the ongoing process of reconstructing the history of philosophy from a decolonial perspective. In doing so, it inscribes itself within the broader tradition of the Philosophy of Liberation, which has long worked to uncover the hidden foundations of modern Western thought and to reclaim the silenced voices of the Global South – in this sense, it has greatly benefitted from the works of thinkers such as Leopoldo Zea, Ramón Grosfoguel, Arturo Roig.

In particular, this research remains consciously situated at the initial stage of this philosophical task – that of deconstruction, of critical unveil of the colonial foundations of modern subjectivity. It is fully aware that such aim must continue in the direction of construction or reconstruction: the formulation of new categories, practices, and concepts capable of affirming the voice and experience of the excluded. This is the long-term work that, thus, remains open and collective: to rethink philosophy from the underside of history, with the Other, and against the Eurocentric myth.

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About the author:

Clara Pinton Isabel – MA in Philosophy, Graduate Student of the Department of Philosophy, Sapienza University of Rome, 2 Via C. Fea, Rome, 00161, Italy. ORCID: 0009-0004-5277-1218. E-mail: pinton.2064408@studenti.uniroma1.it

Сведения об авторе:

Пинтон Клара Изабель – магистр философии, аспирант кафедры философии, Римский Университет Ла Сапиенца, Италия, 00161, Рим, ул. Ц. Феа, д. 2. ORCID: 0009-0004-5277-1218. E-mail: pinton.2064408@studenti.uniroma1.it