

Enrique Dussel's concept of modernity: the intellectual evolution of a complex understanding of our age

Tomás Lima Pimenta

Tomás Lima Pimenta

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais – Belo Horizonte,
MG, Brasil

E-mail: pimet023@newschool.edu

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4614-8847>

Abstract: This paper examines Enrique Dussel's concept of modernity by offering an intellectual reconstruction of the evolution of his thought and argues that his conception of modernity is not a reductionist idea of Eurocentrism and colonialism. It emphasizes his transdisciplinary approach, spanning from history, economic history, metaphysics, and ethics, providing a rich and unparalleled understanding of modernity. This perspective reveals crucial aspects of the genesis and essence of modernity, as well as key insights to interpret its current state and fate. For this purpose, Dussel's intellectual trajectory is divided into different phases. For each period, it highlights his primary interlocutors, topics of investigation, and insights about the essence of modernity. In this context, this paper emphasizes the roles of economic history, World-System analysis, and geopolitics in his philosophical project. In short, it argues that Dussel's theory of modernity operates as a geopolitical turn in philosophy.

Keywords: Dussel; Decolonial thought; Modernity; Latin America

O conceito de modernidade em Enrique Dussel: a evolução intelectual de uma compreensão complexa de nossa era

Resumo: Este artigo examina o conceito de modernidade de Enrique Dussel, oferecendo uma reconstrução intelectual da evolução de seu pensamento e argumenta que sua concepção de modernidade não é uma ideia reducionista de eurocentrismo e colonialismo. Enfatiza que sua abordagem transdisciplinar, que abrange história, história econômica, metafísica e ética, proporciona uma compreensão rica e inigualável da modernidade. Essa perspectiva revela aspectos cruciais da gênese e da essência da modernidade e pistas relevantes para interpretar seu estado e destino atuais. Para esse fim, a trajetória intelectual de Dussel é dividida em diferentes fases. Para cada período, indica-se seus principais interlocutores, tópicos de investigação e percepções sobre a essência da modernidade. Nesse sentido, este artigo enfatiza os papéis da história econômica, da análise do sistema mundial e da geopolítica em seu projeto filosófico. Em suma, argumenta que a teoria da modernidade de Dussel opera como uma reviravolta geopolítica na filosofia.

Palavras-chave: Dussel; Pensamento decolonial; Modernidade; América Latina.

El concepto de modernidad en Enrique Dussel: la evolución intelectual de una comprensión compleja de nuestra era

Resumen: Este artículo examina el concepto de modernidad de Enrique Dussel, ofreciendo una reconstrucción intelectual de la evolución de su pensamiento y argumenta que su concepción de la modernidad no es una idea reduccionista del eurocentrismo y colonialismo. Subraya que su enfoque transdisciplinar, que abarca la historia, la historia económica, la metafísica y la ética, proporciona una comprensión rica y sin parangón de la modernidad. Esta perspectiva revela aspectos cruciales de la génesis y esencia de la modernidad y pistas relevantes para interpretar su estado y destino actuales. Para ello, la trayectoria intelectual de Dussel se divide en distintas fases. Para cada periodo, se indica sus principales interlocutores, temas de investigación y percepciones sobre la esencia de la modernidad. En este sentido, el artículo destaca el papel de la historia económica, del análisis del sistema mundial y de la geopolítica en su proyecto filosófico. En resumen, sostiene que la teoría de la modernidad de Dussel opera como un giro geopolítico en la filosofía.

Palabras clave: Dussel; Pensamiento decolonial; Modernidad; América Latina.

Introduction

In the last few years, there has been a renewed interest in the problem of modernity. From the outset, the modern age is characterized by a reflexive attitude, a permanent query about what we are in opposition to those who remained behind. In the last decades, this inquiry underwent two major transformations. On the one hand, doubts emerged about whether modernity was over and whether humanity entered a postmodern age. On the other hand, thinkers in the periphery of capitalism brought alternative interpretations of the genesis and essence of modernity to the fore. More recently, economic and geopolitical events such as the rise of China, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), and the crises in Europe have once again posed the question of whether we still live in modernity or transition to a new age.

Enrique Dussel's historical and philosophical works stand precisely at the crossroads of these questions. His investigations relentlessly sought an adequate understanding of modernity. Through a permanent and meticulous rework of his notions, he developed a significant concept of modernity that distinguishes itself for several reasons. First, it situates the modern age in a longer temporal stretch and a more comprehensive spatial extension. In this way, he overcame the traditional European narratives of modernity that are confined to European history. This comprehensive perspective could shed light on various aspects neglected by conventional narratives. Thus, his work became quite influential in Latin American decolonial thought (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; 2011; Mignolo, 2008). Second, Dussel's elaboration uniquely articulates historical material and philosophical reflection, which wards him off from abstract concepts of modernity typical of philosophers.

Today, a considerable literature reviews, discusses, criticizes, and builds upon Dussel's notions of modernity and transmodernity (Dussel, 2012c). Some of these works are Dallmayr (2004), Mayrhofer-Deak (2013), Camelo (2017), Montano (2018), Sánchez (2020), Lozano Suárez (2020), Arpini (2021), Guzmán (2023) and Pérez (2024). Nonetheless, the existing scholarship remains limited to specific dimensions of these concepts. Most of these accounts simply associate modernity with Eurocentrism, colonialism, instrumental reason, and transmodernity as a project to overcome it. In this sense, Lozano Suárez (2020, p. 326), based on the critique of Castro-Gómez, suggests that Dussel's concept of modernity is oversimplified by reducing it to instrumentality and colonality. Apart from the correctness of Castro-Gómez's overall critique of Dussel, this paper contends that the charge of reductionism is simply unattainable. Over the years, his understanding of modernity became increasingly complex and nuanced. This complexification was the result of various inputs: Sometimes the discovery of new theoretical perspectives, such as Lévinas and Marx; other times, the regard of different geographical regions, such as Palestine, Africa, and later China; often the debate with other intellectuals, the perpetual self-criticism and quest for more precise formulations.

This paper begins with the conviction that the best way to illuminate the sophistication of Dussel's concept of modernity is by tracing the many modifications and amendments imposed on it. Thus, it has two primary purposes. On the one hand, it reconstructs Dussel's intellectual development by focusing on how his concept of modernity becomes increasingly complex through time. In this sense, it contributes to

the history of ideas. On the other hand, it brings into view his full-fledged concept of modernity by discerning and examining these multiple modifications. By doing so, it seeks to articulate his contribution to the understanding of modernity and the question of its historical fate¹.

In order to reconstruct the evolution of Dussel's conception of modernity, this paper presents the main aspects of his thought in each stage of his intellectual development and shows how the question of modernity emerges as a problem. It indicates his main theoretical concerns and interlocutors and explores his way of combining reflections from different domains such as ethics, ontology, economic history, economics, and theology. As he suggested in the title of a 1996 article, I could say that his philosophy is an effort to theorize the economic World-System as a philosophical problem (Dussel, 1996; 2001a).

This presentation segments Dussel's intellectual development into five phases, corresponding to the paper's five sections. The first phase covers the years between 1964 and 1970, in which Dussel tried to apply Paul Ricoeur's categories to a symbolic interpretation of Latin American culture. In the following years, from 1969 to 1976, Dussel began to elaborate a Latin American Philosophy of Liberation, inspired by a reading of Emmanuel Levinas and the discovery of Dependency Theory. The third period runs between 1977 and 1989 when Dussel turned to Marx's work. The fourth phase, between 1989-1998, corresponds to the elaboration of an Ethics of Liberation in dialogue with European and North American philosophers and to the critical interpretation of the "discovery" of America. Finally, in the fifth phase, stretching from 1999 to 2018, he developed the Politics of Liberation and intensified debates with other philosophers from the Global South.

The Latin American *Symbolique* (1964-1969)

Dussel's interest in the problem of modernity begins in the 1960s with an interrogation of the cultural significance of Latin America. Thus, the question of modernity emerges through an attempt to understand Latin America in its historical specificity. The central text of this period is *Hipótesis para el estudio de Latinoamérica en la Historia Universal*, which is the result of a course taught in Argentina in 1966. Other texts from this period can be found in Dussel (1973; 1997). These works concern two main questions. First, what is the nucleus of Latin American culture? And second, what should be the fate of Latin American culture as it is assimilated into technical civilization? Such interrogations troubled the generation of intellectuals who saw the rapid social transformations triggered by industrialization and economic development. They were faced with a question of becoming aware (*prise de conscience*) of being Latin American (Dussel, 1998).

As a trained historian in the *longue durée* tradition – he did a PhD at La Sorbonne under the supervision of Robert Ricard –, Dussel believed it necessary to situate the cultural nucleus of Latin America within the long world history. To explain the singular moment at which Columbus reached the American continent, Cortés conquered the Aztec Empire and Pizarro the Inca Empire – both formative events in the

¹ In light of his recent passing, this paper is also a tribute to his long-lived thinking and wishes to present his work to a broader audience.

genesis of Latin American culture – Dussel traces the movement of humankind from Africa towards the West (European cultures) and the East (Amerindian cultures). The emphasis on the “direction” of world history is always a counterpoint to Hegel’s claim that history moves from the East to the West (Hegel, 1956). On the one hand, he reconstructs the development of European medieval Christendom from the clash between the Indo-European and the Semitic worldviews;² on the other hand, he indicates the movement of goods, beliefs, and customs from Egypt towards the Americas through Mesopotamia, China, Polynesia, etc. Therefore, Latin American culture was understood as a complex intermingling of the ethical, mythological, and ontological elements from Indo-European, Semitic, and Amerindian worldviews.

At the same time, Dussel was deeply influenced by phenomenology and Ricoeur’s cultural hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1965; 1990) and often employed Ricoeur’s categories of civilization and culture. Civilization designates the complete system of human instruments that are impersonal and transmissible, while culture refers to “the organic set of behaviors that are predetermined by attitudes to/in the face of instruments of civilization, whose teleological content is constituted by the values and symbols of the group” (Dussel, 1997, p. 34)³. In this respect, culture is a self-coherent, substantial, and indivisible totality of behaviors and attitudes grounded in an ethic-mythical (Ricoeur) or mythical-ontological (Dussel) nucleus. For both thinkers, each culture has a unique intentional structure from which particular activities and productions develop (Dussel, 1966). In Heideggerian terms, the search for the mythical-ontological nucleus is formulated as an inquiry into the Being of Latin America (Dussel, 1973), and a cultural or hermeneutical history reveals this Being.

Since the identity of a culture is sustained by an ethical, mythical, and ontological nucleus, the consideration of religious manifestations and symbols is a privileged space for the disclosure of the cultural nucleus. Dussel investigates, for example, the scatological narratives of Iberian theologians (Charles V, Gonzalo Tenorio, Antonio Vieira) (Dussel, 1973). He synthesizes the mythical-ontological nucleus of Latin American culture under the notion of “popular Catholicism”, which he deemed inauthentic and infantile (Dussel, 1997).

Having an account of the cultural nucleus, it matters to consider the fate of “popular Catholicism” considering the emergence of technical civilization through economic development. In other words, the question was to ponder the destabilizing effects of the assimilation of technological progress for “traditional” cultures. Civilization as the transferable and progressively accumulated system of instruments is, ultimately, identified with European civilization. In contrast, culture is the set of attitudes and beliefs towards this system of instruments, grounded upon an ethical-mythical nucleus. The assimilation of this system of instruments would affect or even destroy the “popular Catholic” consciousness that characterizes Latin America, provoking a depersonalization of the region. Such assimilation is conceived of as a necessary process and, under the presupposition of its necessity, Dussel’s puzzle is how to “reap

² His first books – *El Humanismo semita* (1969) and *El Dualismo en la Antropología de la Cristiandad* (2012b) – attempt to capture the essential traits of the Semitic and Hellenic conceptions of the human and how they interacted in the first centuries of the common age through the mixture of Christian theology with Platonic and Aristotelean philosophies.

³ Translations by the author whenever not indicated.

with one hand and sew with the other”, that is, how to let die what has to die in the “progress of universal civilization” and how to root the values that should be fostered (Dussel, 1997). In other words, it was a question of the relationship between the past and future of Latin America. Dussel saw positively the dissolution of the inauthenticity of “popular Catholicism” and negatively the depersonalization of the culture; also, he took up the challenge of imagining a new Latin American civilization: a modern, secular, and urban Christian culture (Dussel, 1997) and, above all, a mestizo culture, with the incorporation of the indigenous heritage into modern society (Dussel, 1997).

The limits of Dussel's earlier approach are evident and, to a large extent, reflect the shortcomings of the hermeneutical approach. Culture was conceived of in a strongly ontological and substantial way, yet the search for a single and monolithic Latin American identity could not make sense of the plurality and contradictions of the various cultures in the continent. More devastatingly, the distinction between universal civilization and particular cultures also contains a false appeal to universality and a “developmentalist” ideology. First, a distinction between instruments of civilization and the ethos of culture is assumed without justifying how inventions that originate within a cultural milieu can transcend culture. Second, Ricoeur's approach also presupposes that the instruments of civilization, while initially transcending culture, can still somehow modify and disrupt particular cultures that are unfamiliar with such instruments. However, if the assimilation of an instrument reshapes the culture that appropriates it, this must be because there is something cultural about the very instruments of civilization. Otherwise, it would lead to the assertion that the dynamic connection between civilization and cultures without recourse to further explanation. Therefore, there is a “Particularist” fallacy at play in the conceptual distinction between civilization and culture (Dussel, 2013), as it becomes apparent in the first pages of Ricoeur's *Universal Civilization and National Cultures* (1990)⁴. Technical civilization is universal only because Europe imposes itself as the universal measure. Moreover, the idea of a transferable and assimilable universal technical civilization betrays the developmentalist ideology of the 1960s. Ricoeur (1990) saw the assimilation of universal civilization as the possibility of access of all men to basic welfare but could not see the internal contradictions to this process.

Dussel faced these perplexities in the following years and framed the problem of Latin American culture otherwise. Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, his early works already bear the germinal hypotheses that will become crucial later. Among them was the critical decision to investigate Semitic culture and anthropology rather than to focus on Indo-European humanism. Also, Dussel's initial historical works on ancient Semitic culture already indicated a move away from the “Hellenocentrism” typical of modern European philosophy. Second, bringing Latin America into discussions on Universal History

⁴ A detailed interpretation of Ricoeur (1990) falls outside the scope of this paper. It suffices to say that Ricoeur's effort is praiseworthy, for he intends to imagine a new moment in human history in which Europe can enter a real dialogue with other cultures, yet he falls prey to his own presuppositions. He incurs into a reductionism by identifying all aspects of “human or universal civilization” with European culture, for example science (which is the matrix force of technical civilization), technical development, modern state, economics and culture of consumption. He presupposes an identity between “universal civilization” and “modern civilization”. Finally, he argues – seemingly without acknowledging – that emulating European culture was the only way for surviving the assimilation of universal civilization since only a culture that can absorb scientific rationality could survive.

already challenges European historiography, represented by Alfred Weber, Toynbee, Jaspers, Spengler etc. In other words, in Dussel's decision to work through Latin American and Semitic histories, there is an enduring critique of the "Eurocentrism" prevalent in the work of his predecessors and contemporaries (Dussel, 1966). In similar veins, Dussel is already aware of the inadequacy of applying the tripartite periodization of history (ancient, middle, and modern ages) to any other culture beyond Western Europe (Dussel, 1966).

Dependency Theory and the Philosophy of Liberation (1969-1976)

Dussel's project underwent a radical change in the turbulent years that followed. Three main influences encouraged this shift. The first influence was the discovery of Dependency Theory, which brought to the fore the questions of "domination" and "dependency" at a global level and offered Dussel the notions of center and periphery (Furtado, 1961; Prebisch, 2011). Second, the political events of 1968 and the "Cordobazo" of 1969 demanded a more energetic approach to current political affairs, and students demanded that professors take a stance on political affairs (Dussel, 2007). Finally, the encounter with Emmanuel Levinas invited Dussel to reevaluate the history of philosophy and question his phenomenological and hermeneutical background.

Dependency Theory undermined the culturalist approach since civilization could not grasp the dialectics of development and underdevelopment and the fact of domination and dependence between nations (or cultures). Ricoeur's conception of civilization seemed now inadequate since the assimilation of the instruments of industrial civilization comprises a "developmentalist" fallacy. Such an assimilation (i.e., economic development) is not a linear and necessary process that replicates Europe's model. On the contrary, development and underdevelopment are moments of a single totality (Furtado, 1961). Moreover, industrialization generates a divide at the global and within each nation.

Consequently, the quest for the Latin American culture as an ontological totality becomes inadequate. Instead, Dussel sees now the confrontation of different cultures cohabitating on the same territory and seeks to clarify how certain cultures impose themselves as dominant by oppressing others. What appeared before as a coherent ethical-mythical nucleus appears now as a web of relations of domination and the conflicts between the "popular culture" the culture of the colonial elites, the imperial culture that dominates from outside etc. (Dussel, 1997). As he formulates, "the 'North-Atlantic dominates 'from without,' but also 'from within'" (Dussel, 1997, p. 125). Nowhere is such logic of cultural domination better expressed than in Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo*. For Sarmiento, civilization is the expression of European culture, whereas barbarism is pictured by the indigenous, local cultures (Sarmiento, 1874).

Under the stress of the political events of the late 1960s, Dussel begins to clarify the political implications of his thought. The order of things required a "politicization" of philosophy – a process in which Marcuse's One-Dimensional Man is decisive (Dussel, 1973). Yet, on a theoretical level, Levinas exerted the most significant influence. For him, the philosophical conception of Being bears a totalitarian urge and always presupposes the exclusion and domination of an "Other". This influence prompted Dussel to realize

a radical revision of his Greek and European philosophical indoctrination (Dussel, 1973; 1973). For this purpose, Dussel situated the development of modern European philosophy within the larger scope of world history. In contrast to Semitic cultures, Indo-European cultures thematized Being as “what is seen,” as the “permanent,” as what appears in the light of the day (Jupiter, Zeus, Pita etc.). Such metaphysics expressed the original experience of man's confrontation with nature for the sake of domination – as Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) also argued. Consequently, totality is a central category. Dialectics expresses the movement of totality, which relates particular entities back to their foundation (Being or totality).

According to such perspective, “difference” is a determination of Being itself and hence just a moment of a higher identity, as Hegel (2010) develops in chapter *The essentialities or determinations of reflection* from *Hegel's Science of Logic*. Plato's “One and the Many” and Hegel's “*Entzweiung*” are indeed accounts of the production of difference. However, these differences are merely semblances and, thus, internal differentiations within the same totality. In the end, what persists is the identity that absorbs everything and nullifies any apparent difference, or, in other words, what prevails is the “same” (*τὸ αὐτό*, *das Selbe*, *lo mismo*, *le même*). Thus, comprehending consists of relating the entity (the “differentiated” or the *factum*) to the totality that grounds it. What distinguishes modern philosophy, however, is that grounding is understood as an “involution” movement from the *factum* into consciousness (Dussel, 1973b; 1986).

Totality becomes thus the main target of Dussel's criticism. Modern reason is regarded as an all-embracing totalitarian reason that dissolves any alterity and subjugates everything under its tyrannical rule. In Dussel's words: “modern thought intro-jects ‘the Other’ into ‘the Same’” (Dussel, 1973b, p. 108). He is primarily concerned with the pernicious ethical consequences that such metaphysics may entail. Modern reason is defined by its drive to comprehend, manipulate, and command things (Dussel, 1973b). When such drive is transposed to human relations, persons are reduced to means that can be comprehended, manipulated, and commanded over. The thought that the philosophical category of totality had some logical connection with the historical experience of totalitarianism was not uncommon in the post-war era, as can be seen in Adorno (1973), Levinas (2017), and Lefort (1981). In contrast to the others, Dussel shares with Levinas a return to Semitic ethics *against* Western ontology⁵. But unlike Levinas, Dussel adds a geopolitical dimension to this reflection.

If Critical Theory and Levinas politicalized ontology, it could be argued that Dussel *geo-politicalized* ontology. The categories typical of ontology were now applied to comprehend the logic of domination and dependency staged at the global level (Dussel, 1996; 2001a). As he programmatically states, “philosophy of liberation must always begin by presenting the historical-ideological genesis of what it attempts to think through, giving priority to its spatial, worldly setting” (Dussel, 1985, p. 1). In that connection, Dussel

⁵ As Dussel had lived in Israel, commanded Hebrew, and wrote extensively about Semitic humanism, his attraction to Levinas was inevitable. Instead of a logic of totality, the Semitic peoples provided a logic of alterity, which was based on the experience of listening (in contrast to the Greek seeing), of the face-to-face and of the revelation of the other as Other. The notion of exteriority expressed what is exterior to the totality, what cannot be identified with the totality, what transcends Being or ontology. Furthermore, the relation to the Other is fundamentally ethical, i.e., a relation between human beings, in contrast to the relation between man and nature.

employed Levinas' distinction between "totality" and "exteriority" to thematize Dependency Theory's "center" and "periphery" divide. The center is interpreted as Being, the "very foundation of the system, the totality of the sense of a culture" (Dussel, 1985, p. 4). Beyond the center is the periphery, i.e., "non-being, nothing, barbarity, non-sense" (Dussel, 1985, p. 4), in short, the exteriority of the totality. Whether Levinas' category of exteriority is appropriate for developing the philosophical meaning of Dependency Theory is a relevant question that will be left unaddressed. Yet, it matters to highlight that Dussel offered the first effort to flesh out the philosophical implications and significance of Dependency Theory (Dussel, 1997, p. 126). In his words: "Such ontology of the subject, the thematic expression of the 'factual' experience of the North Atlantic imperial domination [...] over its colonies, becomes concrete first as a mere universal will to domination, but real and historical as the dialectics of domination-dominated" (Dussel, 1973b, p. 153).

Europe, as the "center" of the system, regards the Other (i.e., the Amerindian, the enslaved African) as a thing at its disposal, i.e., as an entity within a totality. In this regard, the indigenous peoples were "introjected" into the totality of the conqueror and disposed of as tools (Dussel, 1997). Elsewhere, he states that Modern European philosophy "includes us [Latin America] as an 'object' or 'thing' in their world" (Dussel, 1973a, p. 109). European subjectivity inflates through this dialectical process of domination and introjection, epitomized by the figures of Cortés and Pizarro. This process culminated in the constitution of the modern conception of the "ego" as unconditional, undetermined, and absolute (Dussel, 1997). Alluding to Descartes' philosophy, frequently taken as the threshold of modern philosophy, he claims that the *ego conquiro* preceded the *ego cogito* (Dussel, 1985). In that sense, the modern subject is also a product of the factual experience of colonization and imperial domination.

In short, the influences of Dependency Theory and Levinas allowed Dussel to formulate a genealogy of modern reason situated in the world-historical experience of colonization. For him, modernity begins with the maritime expansion of the 15th century. Hence, 1492 expresses the emblematic "date of birth" of modernity. In the age of "world domination" (Dussel, 1977, p. 47), modernity is staged worldwide but centered around the Atlantic Ocean, the medium that connected the metropolises and the colonies. So "the modern age began when the Mediterranean millennium crumbled" (Dussel, 1985, p. 7). The modern subject – the Cartesian *cogito* – is represented by the European conqueror and his inflated subjectivity, that man who totalizes himself. The underside of such modern subjectivity is the negated alterity, namely the colonized indigenous peoples, the exploited *mestizo*, etc. Hence, modernity also encompasses the constitution of a dependent economy, a dominated subjectivity, and a pedagogy of mimicry in the colonies.

Dussel's critique of modernity is fundamentally an ethical critique. Modern European subjectivity, propelled by its totalizing drive, tends to situate "all men and all cultures [...] within its boundaries as manipulable tools, instruments" (Dussel, 1985, p. 3). Europe's claim for universality is therefore false because it relegates all other cultures and human beings to non-existence, to non-being, and transforms them into tools for exploitations: slave labor, labor of *encomienda* etc. The reestablishment of an ethical life depended on overcoming such a perverse structure. The movements of liberation in Latin America –

that inspired the radical transformation in Dussel's philosophy and the formulation of a "philosophy of liberation" – pointed out a form of life beyond such structure, i.e., after modernity.

In this context, he claims in 1976 that the philosophy of liberation is "postmodern" (Dussel, 1986). Nonetheless, modernity and post-modernity are understood in a very different way than by the so-called "postmodern" philosophers. The project of a "postmodern" philosophy was to overcome the "North-Atlantic thinking" as the intellectual manifestation of the "factual domination of the European empire over the colonies" (Dussel, 1997, p. 86). Thus, the philosophy of liberation is conceived of as the intellectual mirror of the revolutionary movements of liberation in Latin America, which proposed the practical overcoming of modernity.

The "Marxist" phase (1976-1989)

The political turmoil of the mid-70s in Argentina led to another stage in Dussel's thought. He is exiled from Argentina, moves to Mexico, and enters an academic environment dominated by Marxism. In parallel, the political situation in Argentina demanded from the Philosophy of Liberation a definite position regarding populism, which entailed a series of intense debates among its associates (Dussel, 1997; Mendieta, 2016). This new context urged Dussel to engage more seriously with a constellation of problems that revolved around the concepts of people (*pueblo*), nation, and class. Additionally, the rampant pauperization of Latin America during the economic crises of the 1980s brought the question of poverty and required a deeper understanding of Latin America's economic condition. The poor could no longer be treated as the metaphysical Other in the Levinasian sense. Instead, it had to be the concrete and corporeal poor whose condition of misery was explained by a critical economic theory. Thus, oppression could not be understood as abstract totalitarian violence but had to be elucidated by describing actual economic laws operating in the world market. This conjuncture invited Dussel to delve into Karl Marx's work. Horacio Cerutti's critique of his *Philosophy of Liberation* was also an important incentive to this shift (Cerutti, 1983). During this period, he undertook a detailed study of Marx's manuscripts, which resulted in the publication of several books.

The most distinctive feature of Dussel's reading of Marx is the use of Levinas's category of exteriority. Though Dussel recognizes the decisive influence of Hegel's dialectics, he situates Marx in a line of thinkers stretching from Schelling to Levinas, who are critics of the notion of totality. Indeed, his interpretation of Marx is highly heterodox, but it must be acknowledged that it is well-founded on textual evidence and always thought-provoking. His reading challenged the main practical-theoretical forces in operation in Latin America. First, Dussel searched for a conception of "people" that confronted right-wing populism by attempting to make sense of a revolutionary popular culture. Second, he attempted to overcome the limits of traditional Marxism, which reduced social conflicts to the class antagonism between labor and capital. For him, the revolutionary experiences in Latin America and other peripheral countries demonstrated that revolutions in the periphery were always moved by a particular conception of "people" that exceed the strictures of the labor-capital antagonism and, for that reason, a theoretical conception of

“people” from a critical standpoint was still necessary. Finally, the “return” to Marx was also an attempt to rehabilitate the dependency theory and explain the backwardness of the periphery of capitalism⁶.

In the writings of the 1970s, the Other as the poor was still an abstract category, for it was the Other of an abstract “totality.” Based on Marx’s distinction between the pauper ante festum and post festum in the Grundrisse, Dussel argues that the poor can be seen as a properly sociological and economic concept. Capital is the process of value valorization through the subsumption of living labor. On the surface, this relation is established through a labor contract in the market. Yet, this relationship can only occur if there is, beforehand, a poor person who is so divested that selling their labor force appears as the only possibility for subsistence. This is what Marx calls the pauper ante festum. Through the labor contract, the poor are subsumed by capital and become laborers, and the class dynamic is established. Hence, it is only in this condition, as a mediation of capital, that the laborer belongs to a class. As a mediation of capital, the laborer now appears as an entity posited by capital, i.e., the ground of capital now appears as posited by capital (Dussel, 2012a). The pauper post festum represents the mass of unemployed laborers that may have been already subsumed by capital but have been rejected by it. Thus, rigorously speaking, the pauper ante festum and the pauper post festum do not belong to the labor class. Since a significant portion of the Latin American population falls outside the formal relations of capital exploitation, Dussel believes that the “poor” is a relevant economic category. In that direction, the category of people as the collective of the poor is an attempt to give meaning to the plural fronts and temporalities of struggles in our societies.

Yet, the most decisive category of Marx adopted by Dussel was “living labor”. Dussel understands living labor as the “exteriority” of capital, and now his notion of exteriority finds an economic and anthropological fundament. The idea of living labor appears as the very source of “value” in Marx’s attempt to figure out the origin of surplus value. The source of value lies outside capital, in the negation of capital, namely in living labor. Dussel stresses that, in Marx, labor is the exteriority and, at the same time, the source [Quelle] of capital as dead labor. Marx is rigorous with his terminology: value is not “produced” but instead created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). Surplus value represents a life spending that is not paid to the laborer. In that sense, Dussel interprets Marx’s Capital as fundamentally an ethics, which lays the normative criteria for a critique of the modern modes of appropriation from the point of view of living labor. Living labor is thus the category that articulates an ethics of content or a material ethics as an ethics of life (Dussel, 1988).

I now examine how the insights gained from the reading of Marx transformed Dussel’s understanding of modernity. It is important to note that the question of modernity is not explicitly formulated in any of these writings, yet there are sufficient indications of such a theory. These new insights become clearer when Dussel, in the following years, dedicates other writings to the issue (Dussel, 2008). It is possible to argue that based on Marx, Dussel regards modernity as a system that negates human life. Modernity is identified with the “law of value” and capital’s valorization imperative. The critique of modern

⁶ Dussel offers his own version of a Marxist theory of dependency. In contrast to Marini, who develops a theory of surplus exploitation, Dussel explores a mechanism of value transference through competition between international capitals (Dussel, 2008). To that purpose, Dussel sketches a theory of “peripheral” and “core” capitals (Dussel, 2012a).

subjectivity expressed as the critique of a totalitarian ontology developed during the 70s, which criticizes ontology for including the other as a means, is now explained in terms of the totality of capital which, propelled by the law of value and its commandment of valorization, transforms life into a means for valorization. In that sense, the speculative logic of Hegel, which epitomized modern philosophies of totality, is now understood as the speculative movement of capital. The critique against the dualist anthropology of modern philosophy, which was the unfolding of the previous critique of Greek anthropology from a Semitic point of view, is now recast. Modern philosophy, as the expression of the philosophy of capital, is also dualist and negates the corporeality of human beings vis-à-vis the speculative moment of reason (Dussel, 2008). The dualism is now expressed as the dualism between living labor (corporeality) and dead/objectified labor (capital). In that sense, dialectics unfolds a matter of “life-death” (Dussel, 2008). Such dualism is paradigmatically expressed by contemporary economic theories that begin with the market and abstract from human beings and their needs (Dussel, 2008). The critique of modernity, through the ethical critique of political economy, is thus an attempt to recover human beings in their concrete and living welfare. The critique of modernity is, hence, the critique of fetishism, understood as the “restitution of the person” (Dussel, 2008, p. 138). Such insights will gain radical importance in the following years, when Dussel moves away from the interpretation of Marx and, in a dialogue with Karl-Otto Apel, begins elaborating his Ethics of Liberation.

The North-South dialogue, globalization and exclusion (1989-1998)

The fourth period of Dussel's philosophical investigations (1989-1998) is probably the most complex. During these years, Dussel preserves most of the intuitions present in previous texts. Yet, he engages with a series of new problems and different philosophical discourses, demanding an articulation of different layers of reflection. In this period, modernity itself became a key problem. There are two decisive factors in this period: The debates around the 500 years of America's “discovery” in 1492; and the continuous effort to establish a philosophical North-South dialogue. In the wake of 1992, a series of debates took place around the meaning and significance of the European invasion and colonization of the continent. The main outcome of this enterprise was the publication of *1492: El encubrimiento del Otro: Hacia el origen del “mito de la Modernidad”*, which consists of a series of lectures taught in 1992 in Frankfurt, translated as *The Invention of the Americas* (Dussel, 1994; 1995).

At the same time, Dussel embarks on the project of establishing a dialogue between philosophers from the global South and from the global North and, in that context, he writes commentaries to the works of Apel, Ricoeur, Habermas, Rorty, Taylor, and Vattimo⁷. The ten-year-long exchange with Apel was the most fruitful dialogue, which decisively impacted Dussel's thought. The Ethics of Liberation, one of his most substantial and far-reaching works, is a direct response to Apel's ethics. This exchange pressed Dussel to engage with areas of philosophy he had ignored, such as analytic philosophy, philosophy of

⁷ Most of these pieces have been edited and published by Eduardo Mendieta in *The Underside of Modernity* (1996). See also Dussel (2001) and Apel and Dussel (1994).

language, and pragmatism. In problematizing Apel's discourse ethics, the question of exclusion becomes crucial. Alongside the Marxist concern with the exploitation of living labor and material poverty (princípium oppressionis), Dussel fleshes out a theory of exclusion from a discourse community (princípium exclusionis).

During this period, Dussel also endeavors to formulate a theory of critical intercultural dialogue. Since the 1970s, with the establishment of Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), which gathered theologians from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, the need to develop practical principles for these intercultural dialogues became apparent. This is the moment when intercultural dialogue takes on an even greater degree of ethical importance in Dussel's thought. The discussions around the meaning of globalization – alongside the acknowledgment of the catastrophic humanitarian and ecological crises that excluded and burdened masses in the peripheries of the World-System – demanded an ethical theory that promoted intercultural and planetary responsibility (Mignolo, 2000). In advocating for such intercultural debate, his philosophical interlocutors shifted toward the “liberal multiculturalists” (represented by Taylor and Rawls) and postmodern relativists (such as Rorty). Against these positions, Dussel realized that the structural impediment to intercultural dialogue and, consequently, to the formulation of a planetary ethics, was the Eurocentric provincialism of most philosophers.

At this juncture, understanding modernity as the historical backdrop to such Eurocentrism became a crucial task. By revising the history of modernity, Dussel could articulate the intercultural relations of domination and exclusion more accurately. In that sense, the historical analysis in the introduction to *Ethics of Liberation* is not intended to be “a mere chapter in empirical-historical science” (Dussel, 2013) but rather the location of the ethical problem on a geopolitical stage. As he puts it, his project shifted away from the obsession with situating Latin America in world history (and the corresponding formulation of an ethics for Latin America) to the questioning of Eurocentric accounts of universal history (and pointing out to the requirements of a planetary ethics) (Dussel, 2013). In short, global exclusion and ecological crisis impose ethical requirements that cannot be thought of outside of a planetary perspective.

The invention of the Americas

As the title of the 1992 Frankfurt lectures indicates, Dussel intended to disclose the origin and what he calls the myth of modernity. For that purpose, he offers a phenomenological reconstruction of the sequence of events that took place in the years around 1492, both from the perspective of indigenous populations of Mesoamerica and of European conquerors. In general, the lectures provide a further development of some hypotheses already formulated in the 1970s, namely that 1492 represents the “birth” of modernity and that the conquest of America (*ego conquiro*) creates the conditions for modern subjectivity (*ego cogito*). However, the phenomenological approach permits a more nuanced account of the subjective effects following the events of 1492. Instead of referring solely to the conquest and domination of the Other, Dussel explores now four different shapes (*Gestalten*) of European consciousness corresponding to four distinct stages, namely “invention”, “discovery”, “conquest” and “colonization”, and from the indigenous perspective, “parousia” and “invasion”.

Moreover, Dussel ascribes a great philosophical significance to the *Valladolid Debate* (1550). In short, the *Valladolid Debate* was concerned with the existence of an “absolute ethical criterion” (Dussel, 1995, p. 56) for the domination of the indigenous population in the Americas. In that sense, after the discovery of the territory and the military conquest of the bodies, the Valladolid Debate laid the grounds for the ideological domination of the population. The main characters of this controversy, Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de las Casas (not Kant, as Habermas would argue), embody the modern standpoint and the first critic of modernity, respectively. According to this new interpretation, the Valladolid Debate represents the birth of modern philosophy. Though Sepúlveda and Las Casas still used the old language of Medieval metaphysics, they already dwelled on a properly modern question: what are the (rational) grounds that legitimize the process of colonization?

This text defines modernity as having two distinct elements: a concept and a myth. Modernity designates (a) the belief that Europe is more developed than other cultures and (b) the belief that modernization is a rational and emancipatory project (universal rationalism), which indicates the “exit” from immaturity (Kant, 1999). With the concept of modernity, Dussel designates the enlightened view of modernity, as expressed by Kant's seminal text. Thus, the concept expresses modernity's self-conception or modernity as it presents itself *ad intra* (Dussel, 1995; 2001a).

On the other hand, the myth of modernity designates the belief (a) that European violent domination is fair because it is a work of modernization (the “just war” doctrine); (b) that the European conqueror is innocent and laudable; and (c) that the victims are guilty of this violence (Dussel, 1995). The myth of modernity expresses thus the sacrificial rituals inflicted by colonizers *ad extra* to carry out the process of “modernization”. In that connection, the mines of Potosí appear as a compelling illustration. Domingo de Santo Tomás described those mines as a “mouth of hell [...] into which a great quantity of people descended each year. These victims, sacrificed by Spanish greed to its god, work in the silver mine called Potosí” (Dussel, 1995, p. 47). The myth of modernity thus expresses the deadly practices of economic expropriation imposed by the demands of mercantile capital and the mercantilist fetishism of gold that historically preceded commodity fetishism.

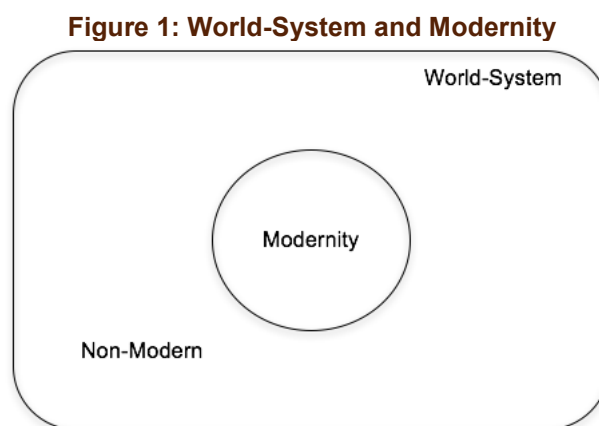
Another hypothesis peculiar to this text is the distinction between the “gestation” and the “birth” of modernity. Dussel (1995, p. 12) states: “Whereas modernity gestated in the free, creative medieval European cities, it came to birth in Europe's confrontation with the Other”. He seems to argue that the conditions for the emergence of modernity were already present in the “free, creative medieval European cities” (intrauterine gestation) and that the events of 1492 only triggered the conditions that were already present (birth). Such a claim coincides with Weber's attempt to explain modernity as a purely immanent development springing from medieval cities and relativize the historical significance of the domination of the other, which started in 1492. As evident below, Dussel soon abandons the distinction between modernity's immanent intrauterine gestation and contingent birth through maritime expansion. Dussel will also give up the concept/myth distinction.

The Ethics of Liberation

As suggested, Dussel's investigation of the concept of modernity belonged to his engagement with Habermas's and Apel's discourse ethics and aimed at elaborating a planetary, not universally formal, ethics. The most important result of this effort is the historical introduction to the Ethics of Liberation, which condenses most of his hypotheses regarding world history. Essentially, this text expands hypotheses that had already been formulated and provides them with more reliable historical grounds based on the discoveries of World-System Analysis and the history of technology. In this text, Dussel distinguishes between a Eurocentric and a Planetary paradigm of modernity. In a few lines, the first paradigm claims that modernity emerges in Europe and that its historical conditions are to be found in the internal historical development of Europe itself.

Further, the advent of modernity produces a cultural phenomenon with universal validity and bestows Europe a relative advantage over other cultures, allowing it to dominate them and spread its (superior) cultural principle. A series of events illustrates the internal transformations that constitute modernity – the Italian Renaissance, the German Reformation, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution – that follow a northward geographical movement. Such a view is expressed with variations by well-known theorists of modernity, such as Hegel, Weber, Habermas etc. (Dussel, 2013).

In contrast, the planetary interpretation of modernity understands modernity as the culture of the center of the World-System and “not an independent, autopoietic, self-referential system, but, instead, is ‘part’ of a world system: its center” (Dussel, 2013, p. 25). The referential totality is the World-System split between the center and the periphery:



Source: The author (2024).

Modernity designates hence the culture of the center. The determinations of (European) modernity are thus effects of the condition of centrality and can only be explained in reference to this primary fact. In other terms, Dussel describes modernity as the “management” of planetary centrality. Consequently, any attempt to explain modernity uniquely based on Europe's internal conditions is unsatisfactory. For example, Dussel rejects the claim that modernity resulted from an inherent comparative advantage of Europe over other cultures. Instead, Europe's comparative advantage was “the effect of the simple fact of

the discovery, conquest, colonization, and integration (subsumption) of Amerindia (fundamentally)" (Dussel, 2013, p. 26).

Dussel's central hypothesis that modernity began in 1492 is preserved. But it is now interpreted also from the perspective of the World-System analysis. As articulated before, the European "modern" consciousness emerges in contraposition to the previous European "medieval" consciousness, the consciousness of Latin Christendom. This transfiguration corresponds now to a more extensive transformation of the World-System, to the transition from the third interregional system ("Asiatic-Afro-Mediterranean") – whose centers were the Persian, the Muslim world, and China – to the first "World" System properly speaking. European medieval consciousness is now explained as the result of Europe's isolation from the intellectual, commercial, and productive centers of the third interregional system since Europe was "locked" by the Islamic expansion in the North of Africa and the Ottoman Empire. The Iberian attempts to trace alternative routes to reach the system's center in Asia attest to Europe's backwardness. However, the "discovery" of the Americas yielded the collapse of the previous interregional system and created the conditions for the first World-System proper. Because of the advantages of colonization, Europe became the intellectual and economic center of this World-System, and modern subjectivity flourished.

Furthermore, Dussel distinguishes two phases of modernity: First, The humanist and renascent modernity under the rule of Spain, and second, the Anglo-Germanic modernity. The first phase is still embedded in the shell of the previous system. In the mood of the Reconquista, Spain saw the process of colonization as a "just war" against the heathens and ambioned to establish a World Empire through military occupation, bureaucratic-political domination, and the imposition of culture, language, and religion (Dussel, 2013). In this context, the Valladolid Debate takes place (Dussel, 2013). Additionally, the accumulation of silver and gold, especially after the discovery of the mines of Zacatecas and Potosí, provides Europe with a comparative advantage over other cultures, expressed, for instance, in the victory over the Othman Empire in the famous battle of Lepanto in 1571 (Dussel, 2013). Nevertheless, the Spanish project collapsed with Carlos V, and the Netherlands assumed the hegemony of the World-System (Wallerstein, 1974).

The second moment of modernity corresponds to what is usually considered the beginning of modern philosophy, namely the 17th century, under the hegemony of the Dutch capital. It is interesting to note that Descartes, Spinoza, and Grotius lived, taught, and wrote important works in Amsterdam, the capital of the World-System then. In contrast to the project of a World Empire through cultural, religious, and linguistic domination, the Dutch hegemony is illustrated by the rationalization of the Dutch East India Company, founded in 1602 (Dussel, 2005, p. 27). At this moment, the essential determinations of modernity, which are the effect of the management of planetary centrality, become more evident. Dussel (2012, p. 35) argues: "This new paradigm corresponded to the exigencies of efficacy, technological 'feasibility' or governmentality of the management of an enormous world system in expansion; it was the expression of a necessary process of simplification through the 'rationalization' of the life world of the subsystems (economic, political, cultural, religious etc.)."

The demands of the “managerial reason” include the essential determinations of modernity, namely, the reduction of all qualities to quanta; the exploitative relation towards nature; a particular conception of political freedom and administration, i.e., liberalism; asceticism, the anthropological dualism, and the negation of corporeality. Even capitalism is regarded as an effect conditioned by the primitive accumulation of gold and money. Finally, in this position of centrality, Europe emerges as the “reflexive consciousness” of the World-System and describes itself as the source of all sorts of values, discoveries, and inventions (Dussel, 2013, p. 26). Here, the question of Euro-centrality becomes a problem of Eurocentrism. Dussel is aware that each culture is self-centered and ethnocentric to a certain extent. What is peculiar to modernity is that, as the culture of the center of the first historical World-System, Europe became the first ethnocentric culture on a global scale. Therefore, “universality and European identity became fused into one” in such a way that European culture “became identified as equivalent to the human universal abstractions of culture, civilization, philosophy, and subjectivity in general, without further qualification” (Dussel, 2013, p. 43).

Dussel distinguishes at least three positions toward the fact of modernity. The first, represented by Apel and Habermas, conceptualizes modernity as the expression of Europe's “formal” superiority over other cultures and believes that the promise of modernity should yet be fulfilled. The second position, represented by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and some postmodern philosophers, negates the “positive qualities” of modernity and proposes “more or less an annihilation without exit” (Dussel, 2013, p. 38). Both share a complete disregard for the relationship between Europe and its periphery. Consequently, the critique of modernity is understood as a product of modernity itself and, hence, Europe. A third position, defended by Dussel, begins with the exteriority of modernity, from the non-modern or, in other words, from the periphery of the World-System. From this point of view, the World-System as such must be denied because it contains both the periphery (non-modern) and centrality (modern).

On the one hand, Dussel rejects Habermas's project to complete modernity because that would entail the persistence of the peripheral condition (Dussel, 1990; 1996; 2000; 2012c). On the other hand, he rejects the “postmodern” total rejection of reason altogether. As he says, “we are not, as periphery, the Other than reason”. In contrast, “we pretend to validly express the reason of the Other” (Dussel, 1996, p. 20-21). Therefore, Dussel's rejection of modernity does not entail a rejection of the formal principles of rational validity, for example, the ones proposed by discourse ethics. Instead, his position attempts to “recuperate what is redeemable about Modernity” and overcome the pernicious aspects of the World-System (Dussel, 2013, p. 38). The critique of modernity is not only immanent to modernity, but also requires the affirmation of what has been denied by modernity.

The Politics of Liberation (1998-2022)

After concluding his Ethics, Dussel felt the need to give concreteness to the abstract ethical principles and embarked on the project of the Politics of Liberation (Dussel, 2001b). In this new phase, he extrapolates from the ethical principles a theory of social transformation that considers the social movements, state, and institutions. This project spanned many years and resulted in the writing of three

large books, the first volume of which offers Dussel's most developed account of modernity (Dussel, 2007). In general lines, the book presents a deepening of the theses that compounded the general structure of the argument formulated in the 1990s. Nevertheless, there is a significant methodological clarification.

The methodological principles are now enunciated as eight limits that should be overcome to understand world history and modernity better (Dussel, 2007). These limits are: 1) The "Hellenocentrism" that believes that everything began in Greece; 2) The Occidentalism that overlooks the importance of the Eastern Roman Empire; 3) The Eurocentrism that underestimates other traditions of thought and hinders a correct understanding of world history; 4) The tripartite periodization of ancient, medieval, and modern ages; 5) Secularism; 6) The theoretical colonialism of most peripheral philosophies unaware of their situatedness; 7) The absence of Latin America in traditional accounts of modernity.

Regarding the general structure of the argument, Dussel holds on to the main theses formulated earlier and offers a more detailed discussion of some points that had only been briefly mentioned. For example, Dussel dedicates many more pages to understanding the philosophical development within Europe in the 16th century, demonstrating the importance of the Second Scholasticism and how the philosophical innovation of Cartesian philosophy is rooted in Hispanic humanism. By doing so, he gives substance to the claim that the *ego cogito* is preceded by the *ego conquiro*, establishing a robust connection between the subjective revolution caused by the invasion of America and the birth of modern philosophy. He also gives prominence to critiques of modernity that spring from the exteriority of the colonial enterprise. While he focused before on the *Valladolid Debate* (1550), now he dedicates a separate chapter to the interpretation of Guamán Poma de Ayala's critique of colonization (Dussel, 2007; 2014).

Overall, the horizon of historical interest is widely expanded. In contrast to the *Ethics of Liberation*, in which Dussel sketches a very general overview of different ethical worldviews and, when discussing modernity properly, focuses on Europe and its relation to the "other" in the Politics, to understand the "context of modern politics," he offers a broader overview of world politics, describing the political contexts of China, Ottoman Empire, Venice, Genova, etc. In general, these historical investigations aim to challenge several traditional claims about the intellectual history of political theory. Also, the widening of the horizon of reflection challenges several theses about modernity, such as the meaning of the Reformation, the Western origins of the parliamentary system, and the conditions for the industrial revolution.

In that connection, the case of China deserves particular attention. With the publication of Frank's *ReORIENT*, Dussel turned his attention to the place of China in modern history (Frank, 1998). The works of Needham and Ronan (1978), Pomeranz (2000), and later Menzies (2009) and Arrighi (2007) provoked a profound impact on Dussel's understanding of modernity (Dussel, 2001a; 2004). These books triggered a reconsideration of the development of global capitalism and challenged several prejudices regarding the so-called "Asiatic mode of production". They challenged the pretension of a scientific and technological superiority of Europe over China (at least until the 19th century), the idea that capitalism emerged in Europe, and all the theses that are derived from it (e.g., Weber's attempt to find in the Jewish-Christian "ethical-mythical nucleus" the explanation for Europe's "miracle"); and also Dussel's thesis that Europe was already the "center" of the World-System after 1492. Dussel discovers that Europe's centrality – and

here, centrality means being the productive, commercial, and military center of the World-System – begins with the transition to the 19th century. In fact, anticipating Pomeranz (2000), he already suggests in 1998 that capitalism developed in China (Dussel, 2001a).

Under the impact of the “discovery” of China, Dussel had to modify his interpretation of modernity. The implications of this fact to Dussel's theory of modernity are evident. In the *Ethics of Liberation*, he defines modernity as Europe's “management” of planetary centrality, but now “centrality” is no longer coetaneous to the invasion of the Americas. There are two theoretical alternatives: either modernity begins with Europe's centrality and, thus, it starts in the transition to the 19th century, or modernity has distinct phases, some in which Europe is the center and some in which it is not. Dussel adopted the second route and distinguished between three phases: 1) “Early Modernity”: Hispanic, humanist (1492-1630); 2) “Early Modernity”: whose hegemonic center was Netherlands (1630-1789); 3) “Mature Modernity” in England and France. The “centrality” of Europe now corresponds only to the third phase.

Conclusion

Dussel's late theory of modernity is marked by a tension, for modernity is simultaneously a particular phenomenon of Europe and a global phenomenon of humanity. On the one hand, modernity is understood as the internal transformations that took place inside Europe through a reciprocal interaction with non-European cultures. Following the tradition, Dussel most often expresses the first paradigm of modernity, circumscribing modernity to the internal transformations within Europe through an interaction with its exteriority. According to this point of view, modernity is still understood, in general, as the cultural, economic, and political transformations that took place in Europe after the colonization of the Americas. Modernity is thus a moment of a larger whole in which the periphery is another moment (Dussel, 2015). In that sense, modernity is a unique European fact that can be, to a limited extent, imitated in other parts of the globe (Dussel, 2015). On the other hand, modernity is an age of the world consisting of various determinations: the cultural transformations inside Europe, colonialism, and global capitalism. In that sense, European culture is only one moment of it. This aspect becomes more explicit to the extent that Dussel dissociates modernity from the actual centrality of Europe in the World-System (Dussel, 2015).

Rather than revealing any internal contradiction or inconsistency in Dussel's thought, these diverging sentences express the very complexity of the concept itself and point towards a richer understanding of modernity. Modernity is both global and European; it takes place in different territories inside and outside, contains different temporalities – the pre-modern and the modern –, and involves the modernization of the periphery and, nowadays, even the peripheralization of Europe⁸. Above all, they reveal the fragility of accounts that attempt to explain modernity from Europe's history alone and depict it as a linear development of certain essential aspects.

⁸ This is a question explored by many intellectuals in the last decades. Stephen Graham (2010) suggests that urban characteristics of peripheral countries are now spreading to cities in the Global North. Agostino Petrillo (2021) refers to a certain peripheralization of European nations. Bernt and Liebmann (2013) discuss the process of peripheralization in the German context. For a summary of this debate, see Canettiieri (2020).

These questions become increasingly relevant as we witness substantial transformations in the world economy and geopolitics. The rise of China, the peripheralization of the Atlantic Ocean and the regained centrality of the Pacific Ocean, China's new Silk Road and the economic growth of Eurasia, the deindustrialization and impoverishment of European countries, and the emergence of the BRICS are events that call for new interrogations about the essence and fate of modernity (Dussel, 2015). Dussel's theses about the fate of modernity must still be evaluated and tested in light of new historical-economic events. Yet, his relentless effort to capture the multiple determinations of modernity resulted in essential clarifications about the nature of our age, which are not at all simplistic and certainly contribute to making our present intelligible.

References

- ADORNO, Theodor. *Negative dialectics*. New York: Continuum, 1973.
- ADORNO, Theodor; HORKHEIMER, Max. *Dialectic of the enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- APEL, Karl-Otto; DUSSEL, Enrique. *Debate en torno a la ética del discurso de Apel*. Ciudad de México: Siglo XXI, 1994.
- ARPINI, Adriana María. Trans-modernidad y moral de la emergencia: críticas a la modernidad y propuestas alternativas desde Enrique Dussel y Arturo Andrés Roig. In: RAMAGLIA, Dante (Org.). *Recorridos alternativos de la modernidad: derivaciones de la crítica en el pensamiento contemporáneo*. Buenos Aires: Teseo, 2021, p. 89-117.
- ARRIGHI, Giovanni. *Adam Smith in Beijing: lineages of the 21st century*. Nova York: Verso Books, 2007.
- BERNT, Matthias; LIEBMANN, Heike. *Peripherisierung, stigmatisierung, abhängigkeit*. Berlin: Springer, 2013.
- CAMELO, Diego Fernando. Enrique Dussel y el mito de la modernidad. *Cuadernos de Filosofía Latinoamericana*, v. 38, n. 116, p. 97-115, 2017.
- CANETTIERI, Thiago. *A condição periférica*. Rio de Janeiro: Consequência, 2020.
- CERUTTI, Horacio. *Filosofía de la liberación latinoamericana*. Ciudad de Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1983.
- DALLMAYR, Fred. The underside of Modernity: Adorno, Heidegger, and Dussel. *Constellations*, v. 11, n. 1, p. 102-120, 2004.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. Hipótesis para el estudio de Latinoamérica en la Historia Universal. Chiaco: Resistencia, 1966.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *El humanismo semita*. Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1969.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *América Latina: dependencia y liberación*. Fernando García Cambeiro, 1973a.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *Para una ética de la liberación latinoamericana*: tomo I. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1973b.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *Para uma ética da libertação latinoamericana*: tomo III. São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 1977.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *The philosophy of liberation*. Eugene: Orbis Books, 1985.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *Método para uma filosofia da libertação: superação analética da dialética hegeliana*. São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 1986.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *Ethics and community*. New York: Orbis, 1988.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *El Último Marx (1863-1882) y la liberación Latinoamericana*. Ciudad de Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1990.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *1492: el encubrimiento del Otro*. La Paz: Plural Editores, 1994.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *The invention of the Americas: eclipse of "the other" and the myth of Modernity*. New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *The underside of modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the philosophy of liberation*. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International Inc., 1996.

- DUSSEL, Enrique. *Oito ensaios sobre cultura Latino-americana e libertação*. São Paulo: Paulinas, 1997.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. En búsqueda del sentido (origen y desarrollo de una filosofía de la liberación). *Revista Anthropos*, n. 180, p. 13-36, 1998.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. The formal thought of Jürgen Habermas from the perspective of a universal material ethics. In: HANN, Lewis Edwin (Ed.). *Perspectives on Habermas*. Chicago; La Salle: Open Court, 2000, p. 235-256.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *La ética de la liberación (ante el desafío de Apel, Taylor, y Vattimo)*. Ciudad de Mexico: Universidad Autonoma de Mexico, 2001a.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *Hacia una filosofía política crítica*. Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001b.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. China (1421-1800): razones para cuestionar el Eurocentrismo. *Revista Anthropos*, n. 48/49, p. 6-13, 2004.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *Ética del discurso: ética de la liberación*. Madrid: Trotta, 2005.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *Política de la liberación: Historia Mundial y Crítica*. Madrid: Trotta, 2007.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *Marx y la Modernidad*. La Paz: Rincón Ediciones, 2008.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *A produção teórica de Marx: um comentário aos Grundrisse*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2012a.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *El Dualismo en la Antropología de la Cristiandad*. Buenos Aires: Docencia, 2012b.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. Transmodernity and interculturality: an interpretation from the perspective of philosophy of liberation. *Transmodernity*, v. 1, n. 3, p. 28-59, 2012c.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *Ethics of liberation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. Anti-Cartesian meditations: on the origin of the philosophical anti-discourse of Modernity. *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, v. 13, n. 1, p. 11-53, 2014.
- DUSSEL, Enrique. *Filosofías del sur: descolonización y transmodernidad*. Ciudad de México: Ediciones Akal México, 2015.
- FRANK, Andre Gunder. *ReOrient: global economy in the Asian Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- FURTADO, Celso. *Desenvolvimento e subdesenvolvimento*. Rio de Janeiro: Fundo de Cultura, 1961.
- GRAHAM, Stephen. *Cities under siege: the new military urbanism*. London: Verso Books, 2010.
- GUZMÁN, Diana. The dialectic between the two faces of political discourse in mature Modernity. *Texas Education Review*, v. 11, n. 1, p. 52-60, 2023.
- HEGEL, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Science of logic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- HEGEL, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Philosophy of History*. Mineola: Dover, 1956.
- KANT, Immanuel. *Practical philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- LEFORT, Claude. *L'invention démocratique: les limites de la domination totalitaire*. Paris: Fayard, 1981.
- LEVINAS, Emanuel. *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité*. Paris: Kluwer Academic, 2017.
- LOZANO SUÁREZ, Luz Maria. Transmodernidad: método para un proyecto político decolonial: de Enrique Dussel a Santiago Castro-Gómez. *Eidos*, n. 34, p. 322-350, 2020.
- MALDONADO-TORRES, Nelson. On the coloniality of being: contributions to the development of a concept Footnote11. *Cultural Studies*, v. 21, n. 2/3, p. 240-270, 2007.
- MALDONADO-TORRES, Nelson. Thinking through the decolonial turn: post-continental interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique – an introduction. *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, v. 1, n. 2, p. 1-15, 2011.
- MAYRHOFER-DEAK, Marietta. Die Auflösung der Aporien der Moderne? – Ein Entwurf aus Lateinamerika. *Kult*, n. 36, p. 2-4, 2013.
- MENDIETA, Eduardo. Philosophy of Liberation. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2016. Disponível em: <https://abre.ai/IAbf>. Acesso em: 28 nov. 2024.
- MENZIES, Gavin. *1434: the year a Chinese fleet sailed to Italy and ignited the Renaissance*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 2009.

MIGNOLO, Walter. Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation: ethics and the geopolitics of Knowledge. In: ALCOFF, Linda Martin; MENDIETA, Eduarda (Orgs.). *Thinking from the underside of History: Enrique Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000, p. 27-50.

MIGNOLO, Walter. Preamble: the historical foundation of Modernity/Coloniality and the emergence of Decolonial thinking. A companion to Latin American literature and culture. In: CASTRO-KLAREN, Sara (Org.). *A Companion to Latin American literature and culture*. Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 2008, p. 12-32.

MONTANO, Rudy. El ego conquiro como inicio de la modernidad. *Teoría y Praxis*, v. 16, n. 32, p. 13-27, 2018.

NEEDHAM, Joseph; RONAN, Colin. *The shorter science and civilization in China: Series*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

PÉREZ, Juan Manuel. Vattimo, Dussel, Negri: agitaciones y piedrazos a la idea de Modernidad. *Cuadernos del Centro de Estudios de Diseño y Comunicación*, n. 227, p. 177-185, 2024.

PETRILLO, Agostino. *La periferia non è più quella di un tempo*. Roma: Bordeaux, 2021.

POMERANZ, Kenneth. *The great divergence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

PREBISCH, Raúl. *O manifesto latino-americano e outros ensaios*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Contraponto, 2011.

RICOEUR, Paul. Tâches de l'éducateur politique. *Esprit*, n. 348, p. 7-8, 1965.

RICOEUR, Paul. *Historia y verdad*. Madrid: Encuentro Ediciones, 1990.

SÁNCHEZ, Esteban Gabriel. Crítica a la modernidad capitalista: aportes desde Enrique Dussel y Franz Hinkelammert. *Revista de Ciencias Humanas, Teoría Social y Pensamiento Crítico*, n. 11, p. 117-130, 2020.

SARMIENTO, Domingo. *Facundo ó civilización i barbarie en las pampas argentinas*. Paris: Hachette, 1874.

WALLERSTEIN, Immanuel. *The Modern World-System: capitalist agriculture and the origins of the European World-Economy in the sixteenth century*. New York: Academic Press, 1974.



Available in:

<https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=589281974001>

How to cite

Complete issue

More information about this article

Journal's webpage in redalyc.org

Scientific Information System Redalyc
Diamond Open Access scientific journal network
Non-commercial open infrastructure owned by academia

Tomás Lima Pimenta

Enrique Dussel's concept of modernity: the intellectual evolution of a complex understanding of our age

O conceito de modernidade em Enrique Dussel: a evolução intelectual de uma compreensão complexa de nossa era

El concepto de modernidad en Enrique Dussel: la evolución intelectual de una comprensión compleja de nuestra era

Revista NUPEM (Online)

vol. 17, no. 40, e2025001, 2025

Universidade Estadual do Paraná,

ISSN-E: 2176-7912

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33871/nupem.2025.17.40.8514>