


## David Lehmann, *After the Decolonial: Ethnicity, Gender and Social Justice in Latin America*

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*After the Decolonial* is a thought-provoking book in which David Lehmann argues that decolonial thought has deficiencies on normative and empirical grounds, traced back to a cardinal conceptual error. One way of framing this mistake is as a hyper-trophic conception of cultural difference, which dichotomises the Indigenous and the Western worlds into sealed, incommensurable and monolithic structures. This idea culminates in a view of ethnic and racial groups as bounded and relatively stable over time. From this perspective, the denial and erasure of otherness constitute the crux (if not the apex) of colonial violence, and the claim to recognition and reparation is seen as tantamount to cultural renewal and separation from the state and its bureaucratic institutions. In this denouncement of cultural erasure (or ‘epistemicide’) and call for cultural recognition and renewal, modernity (with its universal and emancipatory promises), human rights and science are perceived as part and parcel of the colonial project and hence trivialised and relativised as threats rather than as weapons against the long shadow of colonialism.

*After the Decolonial* acknowledges the colonial fact constitutive of Latin American societies, and recognises the importance of anti-colonial struggles. Lehmann is well aware that land dispossession, unequal resource distribution, the capture of the state by elites, corporate and criminal groups, ethnic conflict, informal networks and relations of patronage and corrupt structures of governance can only be understood against the backdrop of colonialism, and that the ‘abyss’ condemning vast, and often racialised, populations in Latin America to a life in informality and violence without rights or protection from the state indexes colonial violence. But the abyss indexes colonial violence in complex ways, nesting various intersecting processes and power dynamics at the national and international level, that fail to be adequately diagnosed exclusively in terms of erasure and silencing of cultural difference. There is no apex or crux to the colonial fact, but dynamic, fluid and parasitic social forms that require case-by-case ethnographic examination with intersectional approaches to reveal localised patterns of exclusion and inequality.

In Chapter 1, Lehmann attempts to clarify a normative confusion. The acknowledgement of the cultural aspects of the colonial fact – i.e. structures of cultural denial and silencing accompanied by the institutionalisation of racialised othering – shall not imply a normative commitment to a particularistic politics of recognition oriented by notions of cultural authenticity. Equally, it should not imply a rejection of the cultures of modernity and the universal values of

impartiality, objectivity and equality, despite some being manipulated strategically to justify colonialism. To strengthen his position, Lehmann returns to Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, arguing that their denunciations of cultural denial and racialised othering contain subtleties that decolonial thinkers often overlook or distort through notions such as ‘coloniality of being’ or ‘ecologies of knowledge’; these subtleties point away from notions of cultural authenticity and connect politics of recognition with larger universalist frameworks of equality and justice. What sustains these subtleties is a view of culture as messy and in flux, and of Western and non-Western worlds as internally differentiated and heterogenous, entangling progressive and regressive forces in complex ways.

Lehmann argues that, in contrast to the gurus of the decolonial project, *grounded* authors, such as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, in fact endorse a refined version of Said’s and Fanon’s critical diagnoses of colonial situations. The patterns of exclusion and inequality created by the colonial fact escape and typically cut across rigid ethnic and cultural lines. Lehmann proposes the idea of universal justice with an intersectional approach as a more appropriate normative stance in the face of the colonial fact.

In Chapter 2, Lehmann moves away from the armchair towards the field (where he seems more comfortable) to make explicit the normative principles in anti-colonial struggles, which in fact operate dynamically under subtle universalist tenets. He argues that neither the Zapatistas nor the Colombian CRIC attempt to reconstitute an idealised organic and cohesive Indigenous community, but instead aim at building institutions of local democracy, self-management and participatory government oriented by principles of universal justice and regulated by efforts towards transparency, accountability and impartiality. He reads the same ‘universalist vocation’ in intercultural practices and legal pluralism. The corollary of this chapter – explicitly developed in the conclusion – is that Indigenous movements and anti-colonial praxis constitute the major democratising force in the region because of their implicit and ‘discrete universalism’.

Chapter 3 examines the hypertrophic concept of cultural difference on empirical grounds. Lehmann highlights the lack of attention that decolonial gurus pay to the field of *lo popular*, in general, and popular religiosity, in particular. In this field, binaries and boundaries dissolve in the ritualistic symbolic messiness and everyday *mestizaje* of Latin American societies. The problem seems to lie with the decolonial notions of cultures as distinct and incommensurable epistemologies and of colonisation as epistemicide (or *encubrimiento*). From this perspective, actually existing *mestizaje* is yet another, perhaps more subtle, face of cultural imposition and silencing, and discourses of *mestizaje* are seen as instruments of power veiling the engineering of ethnic relations.

Lehmann goes beyond hegemonic and comforting versions of syncretism and reveals the enigmas and insights of *mestizaje*. He reconstructs the different patterns and dynamics of conflictive mix, borrowing, and asymmetrical mutual contamination. The seamless incorporation of opposites bears the mark of colonial conflict – constituting a site of resistance where legitimacy is built and contested. Lehmann argues (p. 126) that we must conceive of this coexistence of opposites as dialectic (rather than hybridity) to underscore that in this dynamic ‘there is a subtle and even tricky reflexivity at play’. The dynamic of *mestizaje* displays elements of

projection, appropriation, transgression, resistance and disguise, and is hence indifferent to questions of authenticity.

Lehmann's view resonates with the study of Latin American cultural forms in terms of a baroque cultural synthesis (for the lack of a better word), analysed in culturalist terms by Pedro Morandé and in historical materialist terms by Bolívar Echeverría. The studies on the baroque attempt to define a historical epoch that gestated the templates, dynamics and logics shaping Latin American identities and institutions, and hence offer more complex accounts of the different historical transitions bringing us to the present than the decolonial notions of epistemicide and *encubrimiento*.

Chapter 4 focuses on the exponential expansion of (Neo-)Pentecostalism, a topic that – we are told – is notably absent from the writings of the gurus. The pressing peculiarity of (Neo-)Pentecostal churches is that they straddle the regressive and repressive tendencies of both sides of the 'abyss' from within the territories most affected by the patterns of exclusion and discrimination of the colonial fact. They are not conducive to universal justice, interculturalism or intersectional redistribution. Instead, under a backdrop of conservative morality, they promote individualistic ideals of prosperity and entrepreneurialism, while undermining popular culture and communal ties, and have acted as vehicles for anti-gender campaigns, reactionary politics and the destruction of civic culture.

What is more perplexing and disconcerting is that these churches are not the most dangerous and corrosive vehicles bridging the abyss. Drug trafficking entangles the illegal economy with corrupt politicians and judges, prisons with police forces, and harbours cultural aspirations indifferent to (if not at odds with) progressive politics. These bridges transform the abyss into a maelstrom pulling vast territories and populations into webs of patronage, dependency and naked violence. They have the potential to undo the democratising achievements of anti-colonial struggles, but also to suck the whole society into an existential nightmare.

Despite its polemical tone, *After the Decolonial* is not an outright dismissal of Latin American decolonial thought. In fact, the main targets are its 'gurus'. There is an alternative genealogy within sectors of the decolonial project, unexplored by Lehmann, that attempts to retrieve the subtle ways in which universal promises operate and are reformulated in the contestation of different aspects of the colonial fact in the anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles grounded in radical feminist, anti-colonial and Black traditions.

In some way, *After the Decolonial* can be read as an extended and multifaceted argument against theoretical lenses that overemphasise and misconstrue cultural difference when thinking about colonialism (from which follow notions such as 'other epistemologies', 'the coloniality of being', 'ecology of knowledges' or 'pluriversality'). And one might legitimately ask whether Lehmann is fighting a strawman of the decolonial project. Some might find Lehmann's arguments unnecessarily controversial and combative, or even outright incorrect. Be that as it may, Lehmann makes a compelling case in arguing that an overinflated conception of cultural difference fails to provide the decolonial with coordinates to attend to its empirical object adequately and to provide credible and effective political orientation.