

*Marxism, Postcolonialism, and the Decolonization  
of Literary Studies*

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In the June 1949 issue of *Nouvelle Critique*, a Paris-based journal promoting “militant Marxism,” the Senegalese-French intellectual Gabriel d’Arboussier launched a furious attack on negritude. His *casus belli* was the recently published *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, a landmark volume of francophone poetry by Black writers edited by Léopold Sédar Senghor and prefaced by Jean-Paul Sartre. D’Arboussier’s main target was in fact Sartre’s preface, “Black Orpheus,” which soon would become the single most influential account of negritude. Despite Sartre’s use of a Marxist vocabulary, d’Arboussier took him to task for mystifying negritude as an “antiracist racism” (Sartre xl).<sup>1</sup> By recoding the epiphenomenon of race as a metaphysical category that would underwrite an emancipatory humanism, Sartre was seen here as obfuscating the material particularities of imperialism. Without denying that race could be an aspect of oppression, d’Arboussier questioned the assumption of a unified black identity. What exists, he said, “are different groups [peuples] . . . who are dominated and exploited not by another race, but by other groups, or, to be precise, by the *ruling classes of other groups*” (d’Arboussier 39).<sup>2</sup>

With remarkable precision, this polemic from 1949 puts the spotlight on the tight yet troubled relationship between Marxism and decolonization within the ambit of literature. D’Arboussier’s claims on behalf of an historical materialism that subsumes “race” under “class” have been repeated with variations through the decades. And so have the counter-claims that the colonial predicament undercuts central Marxist tenets. Frantz Fanon’s words in *The Wretched of the Earth* that in the colonial context “what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging or not belonging to a given race, a given species” (30–31) continue to resonate as a challenge to doctrinaire Marxism, with its privileging of political economy over questions of race.

What needs to be noted from the outset is that Marxists can credibly lay claim to being the *original* decolonialists, at least from a Western epistemic horizon. Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg offered thorough critiques of imperialism as a stage of capitalism, and in the colonial experience of the early twentieth century – as registered by, among others, Aimé Césaire, Doris Lessing, and C. L. R. James – Marxism was the only established branch of political theory and practice that steadfastly rejected colonialism and racism. With reference to James, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright, Cedric Robinson notes that Marxism was their “first encompassing and conscious experience of organized opposition to racism, exploitation, and domination” (5). In Lessing’s case, a novel such as *A Ripple from the Storm* shows how her protagonist Martha Quest’s only reprieve from the colonial claustrophobia of 1940s South Rhodesia was to be found in Marxism – Martha’s (and Lessing’s) later rejection of communism notwithstanding. As we follow the ups and downs of Martha’s communist faction in Salisbury – with its one African member, Elias Phiri – the anticolonial inflection of Marxism becomes clear. It is largely an intellectual exercise, buoyed by an almost religious faith in the imminence of world revolution and fueled by reading. As Anton, the leading figure in the group says: “If we are to be serious, we must study. We must study hard” (Lessing 67).

Although one might imagine that a historical-materialist politics always privileges “factory floor” mobilization, the example of Lessing shows how literature – and the culture of letters more broadly – has been of central importance to the anticolonial history of Marxism. Indeed, in the era after the World War II many (or even most) of the leading public intellectuals – in a wide range of settings – have been Marxists of one kind or another. Besides names already mentioned, one could add Amílcar Cabral of Guinea-Bissau, the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, South Africans such as Alex la Guma and Ruth First, the Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz, the Swedish writers Sara Lidman and Jan Myrdal, and so on.

And yet the relationship between Marxism and anticolonialism or postcolonialism has not been straightforward. D’Arboussier’s attack can be read as a template for subsequent battles between competing schools of thought, especially on the cultural arena. With regard to the decolonization of reading, it goes without saying that Anton Hesse’s admonition in Lessing’s novel to “study hard” referred to a European and Western archive of knowledge. As this chapter will show, there have since then been clusters of debates in different parts of the world whose common denominator has been disagreements over the extent to which Marxist analysis should be

privileged epistemologically and whether it can be combined with other, often culturally embedded, explanatory frameworks. When pushed to the limit, the stakes of these debates are exceptionally high: they concern nothing less than what counts as reality. Karl Marx, after all, was a philosopher with the highest ambitions. His sprawling, voluminous writings were not merely an exercise in economic theory but intended to provide an all-encompassing philosophical framework that could analyze, explain, and even change the nature of human reality. Famously, he adopted the dialectical method of Georg Friedrich Hegel, but set Hegel “on his feet” by viewing material conditions, and not the so-called Spirit (*das Geist*), as the foundational element of history and being. Materialism itself, then, as a mode of analysis, springs forth dialectically as a negation of Hegelian idealism. This is where we can locate the beginnings of many later rifts between Marxism and other schools of philosophy – including post-colonial and decolonial theory.

After exploring how Marxism fared in two contexts of decolonization, this chapter will focus briefly on one recent *literary* mode of Marxist analysis with far-reaching implications for our discussion: the Warwick Research Collective’s (WReC) notion of “world-literature” with a hyphen. How does their take on “combined and uneven development” square with the current push for decolonization? What are the pedagogical implications of juxtaposing, as WReC does, literatures from discrete spaces and traditions under the umbrella of materialist theory? Taking its cue from those questions, the conclusion contrasts WReC with some of Walter D’Mignolo’s claims on behalf of “decoloniality” to illustrate the sharp difference between their presuppositions. Rather than falsely trying to harmonize theoretical paradigms, this chapter will propose that the *specific* contribution of Marxism to contemporary decolonization might be – as d’Arboussier already suggested – to question tendencies to reify concepts such as “race,” “culture,” or the “West” as metaphysical categories. That contribution, in turn, is best received on the understanding that there are experiential dimensions relating to aesthetics, language, race, gender, sexuality, or indeed religion that the Marxist framework is ill equipped to account for in a nonreductive fashion. Ultimately, I argue that the dialectical *method* is the enduring lesson of Marxism – a method that may, by turns, bracket and then reintroduce the Marxist optic in the unending labor of making sense of the world.

Two different historical developments are illustrative of the depth and complexity of the matters I sketch out above. One is the parallel emergence in South Africa, in the 1970s, of Black Consciousness and a materialist

school of historiography. The other is the more famous formation of the Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) of Indian historians, also beginning in the late 1970s. Both cases need to be approached in a highly context-sensitive manner.

In the 1960s, South Africa reached the nadir of the oppressive legal and economic system known as apartheid. Following the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, virtually all political opposition had been silenced. Organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-African Congress (PAC) had been banned, their leaders had been persecuted and imprisoned, rigorous censorship laws had been imposed, and much of the country's intelligentsia had gone into exile. A compelling portrayal of the period's political atmosphere can be found in Nadine Gordimer's novel *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966), which conveys a sense of a crippling stasis that could not last. Nor did it. The budding generation of both Black and White intellectuals and scholars who came of age around 1970 took it upon themselves to craft a renewed critical analysis of South African society. The role Marxism played in this process is intriguing and not entirely predictable. It is nevertheless clear that just how these young intellectuals engaged their task was predicated on their racial positioning.

With Steve Biko and Barney Pityana as leading figures, what became known as Black Consciousness (BC) started not as a political movement, but as a profoundly existential and even theological exercise in reconstructing a sense of self. Famously, BC first entered the limelight in 1969 when the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) broke off from the multiracial National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). SASO was an all-Black student group who refused in this way to continue under what they saw as White tutelage. Instead, the guiding principle of BC was for the oppressed to take responsibility for their own liberation – and this entailed not least an internalized labor of affirming one's dignity and worth. The analysis undergirding such a project was that the strongest instrument of oppression was the minds of the oppressed.

The subsequent successes of BC and its merging with the objectives of a broader antiapartheid movement are well known. (As is the apartheid state's obscene confirmation of its significance in the heinous murder of Steve Biko in 1977.) The interesting point here is that BC created a dilemma for oppositional White intellectuals in South Africa at the time. When the BC activists refused on principle – if not always in practice – to collaborate with Whites, a certain category of White dissidents lost their political footing. If the “liberal” analysis had been that the pathology of apartheid could be resisted through a programmatically

colorblind approach that promoted the cause of representative democracy, BC rejected colorblindness and challenged “the legitimacy of oppositional politics by whites” (Ally 79). Its main target was precisely the White liberals in South Africa who were seen as hypocritically accepting the racial hierarchy, but the charge of irrelevance was keenly felt also by more radical Whites.

It was for this reason, then, that Marxism presented an alternative to many young White writers and academics at the time, not least through the History Workshop at Witwatersrand University that started running in 1977. With recourse to the work of the “New Left” in Britain, the Frankfurt school, and the 1968 Paris philosophers, a thoroughly revised analysis of apartheid emerged. As Ally explains, “Marxism refuted the liberal claim that industrial capitalism would erode the apartheid system in South Africa, by arguing that race was only an ideological justification for the class project of apartheid” (74). No longer seen as an atavistic aberration, apartheid was theorized as a particular mode of “racial capitalism” and “internal colonialism” in which the rigorous policy of segregation ensured the consent of the White working class, who benefited hugely from the system. In this way, White academics put a theoretical spin to the problem of race that moved beyond the immediate problem of how groups and individuals were identified or identified themselves.

There is in hindsight a striking complementarity to BC and Marxist revisionism in 1970s South Africa. If BC focused on the subjectivity of the oppressed, the Marxists privileged an “objective,” materialist account of society. But inversely, BC’s definition of Blackness, as it evolved in Biko’s thinking, became increasingly compatible with the Marxist analysis. In BC circles, “Black” eventually became an inclusive category, covering all those groups systemically excluded and divided by apartheid laws. “Coloureds” and “Indians,” who had different legal status, could therefore also claim Blackness, understood as a distinctly *political* identity constructed by the apartheid system. More than that, Magaziner even argues that Biko’s take on race was closer to Sartre’s dialectical understanding in “Black Orpheus” than to Frantz Fanon’s ontological position in *Black Skin, White Masks*. “Black selfhood,” as Magaziner writes, was seen as “contingent, topical, and limited” and could in principle yield to a nonracial “true humanity” under another political order (Magaziner 44). In this way, BC’s subjective focus led ultimately to a confrontation with the material conditions underpinning South African apartheid.

There are two distinctly literary interventions that illustrate this complementarity of BC and Marxism in South Africa: Mike Kirkwood’s early

essay “The Colonizer: A Critique of the English South African Culture Theory,” first delivered at a poetry conference in 1974, and Njabulo Ndebele’s influential collection of essays *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, published in 1991 but written over a number of years in the 1980s. Kirkwood’s sharp materialist analysis of a cultural “Anglo” identity was presented in a spirit of “White consciousness,” which aimed at an appraisal of the deep entanglement of race and power in South Africa. “The racial oligarchy,” Kirkwood insisted, was “not the creation of the Afrikaner alone. Our mining interests and our industries created the system of cheap contractual and migrant labour, and our White working class demanded, and got, a privileged stake in the maintenance of a prosperity dependent on that labour” (108). In its undermining of sentimental self-conceptions, this could be read as a mirror image of Njabulo Ndebele’s critique, which from a Black perspective aimed at cultivating a poetics of deep social analysis. It was only through “an honest rendering of the subjective experience,” Ndebele argued (*Rediscovery* 53), that writers could move beyond a focus on the surface effects of racial oppression. In this way, by engaging the full register of experience and the “dialectic between the personal and public,” literature could “provide an occasion within which vistas of inner capacity are opened up” (*Rediscovery* 55, 56). The wording is reminiscent of the BC movement, from which Ndebele had emerged in the 1970s, yet its compatibility with, for example, the Marxist realism of a critic such as Georg Lukács should be evident.

The South African example, which of course does not end with the 1980s, is one instance where theory and praxis converge dynamically, leading to a significantly renewed understanding of society and, by extension, to a “decolonization” of literary practice – although that particular word was not used in South Africa at the time. My other example, the SSG in India, is a more strictly academic development. In addition, it relates primarily to the discipline of history rather than literature. Its importance is such, however, that it has been regarded by some as the main Global South context where Marxism was (supposedly) displaced by a more diffuse theoretical agenda that attempted to account for the historical conditions prevailing in South Asia. With the historian Ranajit Guha as its early leading figure, “subaltern studies” became known when the book series by that name started publishing in 1982. Drawing on the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s use of the word “subaltern” to identify diverse subordinate groups, the intention here was to excavate histories of political contestation in India from “below,” that is, the histories that had been

silenced and suppressed in the dominant narrative of India's transition to national independence.

With the participation of well-placed Indian scholars in the Western academy – such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and indeed Guha himself – subaltern studies rapidly gained a high global profile at precisely the moment when poststructuralism reached its peak in the 1980s. Spivak's exceptionally influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," first presented at a conference in Illinois in 1983 (but published in its final version as late as 1999), offered perhaps the most consequential critical account of subaltern studies. By way of dense readings of Foucault, Deleuze, Marx, and the British colonial prohibition of Sati, or widow burning, Spivak focused on the equivocations of "speaking for" the subaltern. Even within the most radical Western iterations (and critiques) of Enlightenment thinking, Spivak concluded, the subaltern could never speak *as* a subaltern. She derided Deleuze's invocation of "*the workers' struggle*" as "incapable of dealing with global capitalism" (Spivak 250; emphasis in the original). Instead of assuming that there could be what she called "undivided subjectivity" (248) in such struggles, subaltern subjectivity would remain an "irretrievably heterogeneous" (270) cipher even as it was transposed, through an act of epistemic violence, to the type of speaking position that Enlightenment discourse acknowledged. In other words, the radical historians' wish to vindicate the rights-bearing citizen dwelling on the margins of society was itself an exercise of power.

As we can see, Spivak's argument was as critical of Foucault's and Deleuze's Eurocentrism as it was of the presuppositions of Guha's project. Moreover, it proceeded through a careful reading of Marx and insisted on the centrality of capital as an analytical concept. Indeed, the very theme of the 1983 conference was nothing less than "Marxism and the interpretation of culture" (Nelson and Grossberg). Even so, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is justly known as a pivotal moment in the formation of "postcolonial theory," a label that normally refers to *poststructuralist* postcolonial theory. Spivak had already contributed an earlier piece to subaltern studies in a similar vein, but it was here – on the back of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978 – that a significantly different, largely non-Marxist, approach to colonialism and imperialism gathered strength.

One of the most thorough and succinct statements of this *theoretical* difference is found in Dipesh Chakrabarty's widely cited *Provincializing Europe*. In the second chapter, Chakrabarty offers a careful reading of Marx's conception of history in *Capital*. Rather than subsume history wholesale under the history of capital, Marx suggested in fact that history

was split between a history that led to the formation of capital, and a history that did not belong to capital's "own life-process" (quoted in Chakrabarty 63). For pedagogical reasons, Chakrabarty dubbed these two "histories" History 1 and History 2. His philosophical account is detailed and too extensive to summarize here, yet the central point is clear: the history of capital, and hence of modernity, isn't all there is to history. But it would be wrong, Chakrabarty writes, to think of History 2 "as necessarily precapitalist or feudal, or even inherently incompatible with capital. If that were the case, there would be no way humans could be at home – dwell – in the rule of capital, no room for enjoyment, no play of desires, no seduction of the commodity" (67).

What we see in Chakrabarty's formulation is a more theoretical variant of the previously discussed subject–object tension between Black Consciousness and South African Marxism. Again, the subjective dimension, or what Chakrabarty with phenomenological vocabulary calls "life-worlds," is juxtaposed with the objectivist and totalizing aspects of Marxist analysis. This tendency is evident already in Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* – arguably the foundational text of subaltern studies – which places strong emphasis on the study of "negative class consciousness" (Guha 20). An important difference indicated in this phrase, however, is that subaltern studies tended to downplay race. It is not entirely absent, but class, caste, and ethnicity are more prominent categories. One should also observe that the ambitions of a work such as *Provincializing Europe* were far grander than anything to have come out of South Africa at the time. In his critique of what he called "historicism" (best understood as the ideology of progress), Chakrabarty implicated *all* of the formerly colonized world. To the extent that Europe was seen as offering a universally valid template for a transition to modernity, this relegated societies in the Global South to a status of "lack," or incompleteness. On a discursive, epistemological level, Chakrabarty was arguing, the historical and political analysis of a country such as India remained straitjacketed by the notion of "a certain 'Europe' as the primary habitus of the modern" (43). Hence his project to "provincialize" Europe and develop alternative conceptions of modernity.

The turn in subaltern studies toward incommensurability and multiple modernities failed to convince dedicated Marxists. There is in fact an entire genealogy of materialist criticism that has shadowed the poststructuralist tendency in postcolonialism from the word go, with notable interventions such as Benita Parry's numerous critiques beginning in the 1980s ("Problems"; "Signs"; "The Postcolonial"), Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory*,

Neil Lazarus's two books *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* and *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, and, somewhat controversially, Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (reviewed negatively by Lazarus, one might note, see "Vivek Chibber"). The volume *Marxism, Modernity, Postcolonial Studies* edited by Crystal Bartolovich and Lazarus is perhaps the most productive engagement between the two fields on record, with the intention to further a distinctly "Marxist postcolonial studies" (Bartolovich and Lazarus 1; emphasis in the original). More recently, a highly consequential literary result of the Marxist critique of postcolonialism is to be found in the WReC's *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*. With Parry and Lazarus as two of the seven listed authors of the book (the collective has expanded since then, but Parry passed away in 2020), the link to the long sequence of debates spurred by "postcolonial theory" is clear.

The underlying premise of *Combined and Uneven Development* is that literature in the modern era needs to be theorized not in relation to colonialism, which is a secondary phenomenon, but in relation to the global rule of capital. The forceful formula of the main title is derived from Leon Trotsky's analysis of Russia's supposedly anomalous revolutionary conditions when compared to western Europe. Being in the early twentieth century largely a nation of peasants, Russia was an unlikely candidate for revolution, at least if one considered the implications of Marx's *Capital*, which rather indicated that the most thoroughly capitalist and industrialized societies (such as Britain) would be the first to undergo revolution. Instead of assuming, however, that capitalism imposed itself on the world uniformly and comprehensively, Trotsky recognized that the old and the new coexisted. Peasants would be "thrown into the factory cauldron snatched directly from the plow," leading to an "amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms" (quoted in WReC 11). In the lineage of Marxist literary theory, this conception of differentiated social time has then been further developed by Fredric Jameson (building on Ernst Bloch) in terms of the "synchronicity of the non-synchronous" (Jameson 307).

The attraction of such a perspective to scholars wishing to devise a globally applicable method of reading should be obvious. It allows them to have their cake and eat it too – both History 1 and History 2, to use Chakrabarty's terms, but with clear precedence given to History 1, or the history of capital. Or rather, they see everything as being absorbed into History 1. Rather than move toward a pluralized conception of modernity, as does Chakrabarty, WReC insists on understanding modernity as

a singular, complex phenomenon: “Modernity is to be understood as governed always – that is to say, definitionally – by *unevenness*” (12). It is from such an understanding of an all-encompassing but endlessly differentiated and unbalanced world-system that WReC can take the next step to theorizing what they call “world-literature” (with a hyphen), understood precisely as the literature of the world-system of capitalism. Their assumption is that literature can be read as a “registration” of the world-system, and that the “effectivity” of this system “will *necessarily* be discernible in any modern literary work” (WReC 20).

A reflection one might make here is that WReC (as they explain on pages 28–48) ultimately is attempting to supplant the colonizer/colonized or West/rest binary that governs the paradigm of postcolonial studies. This is not because they deny colonial power relations – on the contrary – but because they see this as simply one form of the dominance of capital. There are some interesting methodological advantages to this view. One is, as *Combined and Uneven Development* demonstrates, that writers as diverse as Tayeb Salih, Halldór Laxness, and Victor Pelevin can be juxtaposed unapologetically within a comparative framework that looks at “discrepant literary subunits and social formations of the world-system” (WReC 68). Another is that in the contemporary capitalist order, where countries such as China, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have become key players, the explanatory value of a world-system analysis is clearly superior to the more restricted colonizer/colonized optic. A third is that the peripheries of wealthy societies (such as rural Louisiana) can be compared meaningfully to the peripheries of the Global South.

The challenge, of course, is to make this work as a *literary* methodology. It is one thing to provide a broad theory of capitalism as an economic system, and quite another to connect it to practices of reading – which has been a perennial challenge for Marxist literary critics. For some empirically minded scholars, systemic postulates such as those proposed by WReC have the effect of effacing the uncontainable heterogeneity of the actual textual material at hand. In a cowritten article, Karima Laachir, Sara Marzagora, and Francesca Orsini bluntly state that “deterministic models like the Warwick Research Collective’s or Moretti’s use frameworks derived from the social sciences like world system theory to explain literary phenomena, including stylistic choices, in a way that becomes flat and reductionist” (292). Not unlike Spivak’s “irretrievably heterogeneous” subaltern, we seem to be faced once again with a methodological aporia: for all its flexibility, the optic of combined and uneven development hardwires aesthetic production to the economic model of capitalism.

This premise works to the extent that one *believes* in it, but there is a point beyond which the assumption of causality between capital and literature may seem to have explanatory value, yet without being able to ground itself in anything outside of itself. If we revisit the WReC quotation above about literary “registration,” this happens “necessarily” because “the world-system exists unforgoably as the matrix within which all modern literature takes shape and comes into being” (20). This is circular reasoning, pure and simple. Textual analysis proves what is already assumed by the theory, and whatever does not fit – such as the deep time of literary traditions – is suppressed.

This should not be taken as a blanket rejection of this mode of reading – it is just an indication of its perils and limitations. With, say, the Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz’s magnificent work on the nineteenth-century novelist Machado de Assis, we encounter a “decolonizing” Marxist interpretation at its level best, and it is for a good reason that WReC identifies Schwarz as a key inspiration. This, however, is scholarship of the most demanding kind, where Schwarz mined the Brazilian archives for years to arrive at a wholly original and unexpected understanding of the novelist’s ironic style. It is, in other words, not the kind of work that lends itself to easy polemical points but is an outcome of engaging with the full complexity and internal contradictions of a particular Brazilian and European cultural legacy.

On a slightly different tack, WReC could also be accused of privileging just one line of capitalist history – the one we normally think of as Western – whereas current world-system analyses tend to emphasize the plural origins of capitalism itself. Janet Abu-Lughod and Kenneth Pomeranz belong to the forerunners in this line of debate. In their more recent work on capitalisms in the plural, Kaveh Yazdani and Dilip Menon discuss the complexity of tracing multiple economic and historical trajectories of what might credibly be called “capitalism” – without turning the term into an abstract historical constant. They not only point out that “political economy in Western Europe cannot be disentangled from developments in and encounters with Asia and Asians” (Yazdani and Menon 8) but also that Ibn Khaldun already in the fourteenth century developed “a labour theory of surplus production” (9). The former point is entirely compatible with WReC’s global vistas, but the latter definitely challenges their narrow historical timeframe.

There is of course yet another branch of contemporary critical theory that apparently undercuts much of WReC’s brand of Marxism, even as it nominally adheres to some version of Marxism. I am thinking of the so-called “decolonial” variety of theory with its main grounding in Latin America. If by decoloniality we mean its most encompassing formulations

by Aníbal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, María Lugones, and other Latin American thinkers, then Marxism is embraced but also absorbed into a theory of the “coloniality of power” (Quijano) – a formulation which already tips the balance toward a more Foucauldian mode of analysis and is also, arguably, more flexible than the metropole–colony model of mainly anglophone postcolonialism.

Sociologically, decoloniality resembles the other regional groupings of scholars discussed in this chapter, the historical materialists in South Africa and the SSG, insofar as it emerges from a distinct regional context – Latin America – but has achieved a global presence, thanks not least to scholars placed at US universities (such as Mignolo and Lugones). Its theoretical claims are less easy to pinpoint, although there clearly is some overlap with tendencies in the other two groupings. A difficulty with decoloniality, however, is that it tends to place a tremendous rhetorical premium on a few, totalizing concepts – notably the triad modernity/coloniality/decoloniality and the colonial matrix of power (CMP) – while at the same time, again on a rhetorical level, downplaying the importance of conceptual thinking and stressing the unfathomable “pluriversality” of decolonial praxis.

It is highly instructive in this regard to juxtapose WReC and the account Walter D. Mignolo gives of decolonial theory in *On Decoloniality* (cowritten with Catherine Walsh). If WReC is entirely committed to Marxist world-system theory and the ways in which literature can “articulate powerful critiques of *actually existing reality*” (WReC 83; emphasis added), Mignolo turns this assumption on its head. What matters, he writes, “is not economics, or politics, or history, but knowledge” (Mignolo and Walsh 135). From a decolonial perspective, “it is epistemology that institutes ontology, that prescribes the ontology of the world” (147). It is not that Mignolo is anti-Marx. On the contrary, he sees him as a leading figure among the “internal critiques” of Western thought (3), yet the claim that no reality exists outside of its discursive articulation is – strictly speaking – incompatible with Marxist materialism.

Once again, it would seem that decoloniality rehearses the subject–object antinomy I have been tracing throughout this chapter, albeit with a vocabulary of its own. The lesson I draw from the archives of Marxist studies and decolonization is however not to rigidly choose sides, but to consider the antinomy dialectically. Any attempt to articulate the “*actually existing reality*” of our material existence must inevitably confront the limitations of its own language and methods of investigation. There are, so to speak, turtles all the way down, and knowledge becomes that Nietzschean abyss that stares back at the knower. Yet, conversely, the

struggles motivating the full range of “decolonizing” practices and discourses today, even as they find anchorage in other languages and conceptions of social being (among Andean peasants, say), will just as inevitably have to reckon with the material deprivations (as well as affordances) produced by the long and always-localized histories of contemporary political economy. On such an understanding, it is the flexibility of the dialectical method itself, rather than any specific Marxist doctrine, that holds the greatest promise for decolonial modes of reading.

In closing, I will exemplify this open-ended methodological stance by turning to the aforementioned Njabulo Ndebele’s much-loved short story “The Prophetess.” Focalized through a young boy in a township in apartheid South Africa, it recounts the boy’s encounter with the local prophetess, who is said to possess awe-inspiring magical powers. The boy’s mother, who is ill, has sent him there to ask the prophetess to bless a bottle of water on her behalf. In anticipation, the ritual fills the boy with amazement: “She would then lay her hands on the bottle and pray. And the water would be holy” (*Fools* 31). On his way back with the precious water, the boy drops and breaks the bottle. In his anguish and shame, rather than admit what happened, he quickly fills another bottle that he hands over to his mother – who visibly improves as she drinks the water. The boy’s sense of devastation transforms into triumph: “He had healed his mother” (*Fools* 52).

In “The Prophetess,” Ndebele strikes a fine balance between an ironic and earnest mode of narration. The ironic reading is constantly latent and even explicitly articulated when the boy overhears a group of commuters debating whether to believe in what was said about the prophetess’s powers. Indeed, the outcome of the story, with the boy getting away with his deception, apparently supports the ironic – and hence secular and knowing – reading: it made no difference whether or not the prophetess blessed the water. In that interpretation, the “objective” antithesis of human bodies and plain water prevail over the “subjective” cultural beliefs entertained by some of the township inhabitants.

But is the boy really deceiving his mother? And who is the woman known as the prophetess? There are the rumors, but then there is also the boy’s encounter with her, which shows us a different person. She speaks to him warmly about his mother. She sings him a song, allegorically prophesying the downfall of White power. “Always listen to new things,” she tells him. “Then try to create too” (*Fools* 40). She is in other words a counsellor and a teacher and an artist, not a magician, and her power is only equal to the strength of the communal relations that she helps to maintain. This, of course, is the key to how we may read the redemptive ending, where the

boy himself contributes to those communal bonds: “He had healed her” (*Fools* 52). The phrase is not a mockery of the boy’s false consciousness, but on the contrary an affirmation of how a locally grounded and internally differentiated set of cultural practices can contribute to making the world new. Out of the story’s subject–object dialectic – which, at a stretch, could also be read as an Africa–West or Black–White dialectic – something unprecedented springs forth, intimating a decolonized future. The subsequent realization that the story’s implied future, in contemporary South Africa, has turned out to be troublingly different to the horizon of struggle and hope in the 1980s hardly detracts from Ndebele’s story. It shows, rather, the unceasing need to provide renewed dialectical accounts of our social worlds as they unfold in time.

### Notes

1. “un racismisme antiraciste.”
2. “il y a des *peuples* divers . . . soumis dans leur ensemble à l’oppression et à l’exploitation non pas d’une autre *race*, mais d’autres *peuples*, ou, plus exactement, des *classes dominantes d’autres peuples*.”

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