

AN ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECT: ONTOLOGY/EPISTEMOLOGY OF RACE IN MODERNITY

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Introduction

In an essay called *Human Zoos, Racist Theme Parks for Europe's Colonialists*, written by Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire, we find the following explanation:

Helped by the press, racism became a backdrop to colonial conquest. The whole national press—from popular illustrated reviews like *Le Petite Parisien* and *Le Petite Journal* to travel and exploration magazines like *Le Tour du Monde* and the *Journal des Voyages*, and even quasiscientific journals like *La Nature* and *La Science Amusante*—portrayed exotic peoples (particularly those that were victims of colonial conquest) as vestiges of the earliest stages of human development. The terminology used to stigmatize the savage—bestial, bloodthirsty, fetishist, atavistically stupid—was reinforced by images of unprecedented violence, depicting a stagnant sub-species on the borderlines between human beings and animals. (Bancel et al., 2000)

I quote these words at some length so as to note the feeling of inquisitiveness they express. The whole essay is an interesting and problematic description of a popular practice that began in 1870 in several European countries. Human zoos were exhibitions whose meaning, and purpose ranged from mere entertainment to an elaborate scientific display of what European explorers had found in their many voyages through distant and unknown lands and territories of the world. The concept was adapted to events that had a social, political and scientific nature. Millions of Europeans learned how people different from themselves lived from visiting human zoos. From 1878 to 1889 human zoos were part of the urban setting's main attractions, providing vast revenue to the economic growth of Europe. Regional and international fairs integrated human zoos as part of their exhibitions and created special spaces where the reconstruction of villages, landscapes, and live shows displaying the identity of "exotic peoples," representing their customs and values. Most importantly, human zoos produced an ideological image of people from foreign lands. In the spectacle of human zoos,

the "savages" brought to the west were certainly an attraction, but they also aroused fear. Their acts and movements had to be strictly controlled. Presented as specimens of totally different beings, they were forbidden to show any sign of assimilation or westernization as long as they were exhibited. (Bancel et al., 2000)

In some cases, human zoos became a place to do research, where scientists and anthropologists could have direct access to a reservoir of specimens; human zoos also stimulated public interest and confirmed several hypotheses about how other people lived and affirmed the responsibility that Europe had toward the rest of the world. Human zoos were created and designed solely from the accounts and chronicles of *travelers and explorers* whose narratives usually mixed factual observations, colored by myths of "the savage and the uncivilized."

What is particularly interesting about the human zoo as a scientific practice is that its creation and popularity relied mainly upon the use of a specific language that aimed at describing and placing "other people" in a system of thought solely concerned with producing and retaining a scientific method which actually sustained the aim of the scientific investigation. Such method went beyond the use of techniques for investigating phenomena and acquiring new knowledge by a process of formulating and testing the hypothesis on the grounds of sound Aristotelian reasoning. A new vocabulary was created that included notions such as *species* and *sub-species*, *stages of human development*, *savage*, *stigmatization*, *race* and *conquest*. The usage of

these notions reflects a specific moment in the history of western thought when new terms and new methods were invented to accommodate new knowledge acquired through exploration. The new language and the specific methodology for acquiring new knowledge developed a system of thoughts and beliefs supported the establishment of what Enrique Dussel calls the myth of Modernity. As a myth, Dussel claims that modernity carries two ambiguous significations: on the one hand, it has a positive conceptual concept that signifies a critical rational process that opens new possibilities for human development. On the other hand, it has a negative meaning in so far as it poses itself as the most superior and developed by justifying an irrational praxis of violence in front of the resistance other people exercise; in Dussel's words: "For Modernity, the barbarian is at fault for opposing the civilizing process, and modernity ostensibly innocent, seems to be emancipating the fault of its own victims"¹. A myth that extends its explanatory aim to the elaboration of a system of thought that develops to the extent of its relationships with what it studies, analyzes and theorizes outside of its own boundaries. The creation of a new language to describe what Modernity found also developed an epistemological network of methods and scope.

Emmanuel Eze, in his book, *Race and the Enlightenment*, refers to the circular dependence of philosophical vocabulary produced in modernity as "intertextuality". This intertextuality was not limited to notions and categories but it extended to writers. According to Eze,

[...] we notice [in modernity] that Kant borrows historical perspectives from Buffon, but relies upon Hume for proof of specific opinions about the Negro. Blumenbach, meanwhile, relies upon the authority of Kant, in addition to Buffon and Linne, while Buffon, whom Kant cites, relied for evidence on Barrere, Littre, and Winslow, Cuvier appealed to Blumenbach, who cited Kant, who cited Hume, while Thomas Jefferson refers to Hume and borrows from the Encyclopedie, and so forth. (Eze, 1997, p. 6)

This intertextuality suggests that modernity's epistemic principles and practices such as human zoos relied upon a closed system of knowledge where truth was self-referred.

Moreover, truth was not only self-referred, but it also attained a superiority over other forms of knowledge which translated into the superiority of some individuals

1 Ibid

over other individuals. Santiago Castro-Gómez in his book, *La Hybris del Punto Cero* (2005), furthers the arguments contributing the understanding of the enlightenment in Latin America as proposed by Mignolo and Dussel² by arguing that the colonial and scientific projects during the enlightenment are two equal parts of the same geo-scientific imaginary which has been constructed under the idea of a modern world. I bring to discussion the work of Latin American philosophy because an analogous concern rests at the center of its development. The main preoccupation of Latin American philosophy has been to understand itself in relation to Europe's influence while simultaneously defining itself under the precepts of its own existence. Such apparent impossibility has motivated Latin American thought not only to create systems of thought whose aim have been to identify the primary sources of foreign influence, but also to develop a methodology to search for the roots of its desired autonomy. In the midst of reconstructing and recreating its own cultural and political reality Latin American philosophy has been defined by many traditions that have examined its political and cultural as well as economic reality at the level of the individual and the nation. CastroGómez contributes to these searches by providing us with an essential aspect of Europe's modern imaginary, namely, "being white", which have allowed Latin American thought to recognize the impact of Europe's influence and simultaneously detect what continues to rest underneath the foundation of the elaboration of its collective identity and individual subjectivity. By merging the work of Walter Mignolo and Quijano, CastroGómez (2005) demonstrates that in Latin America European culture during modernity became an "ontological aspiration" that reached the inner structures of an enlightened political project during state-formation. As a cultural ambition of Latin American newly born states, "blood cleansing" became the ontological axis on which individual's subjectivity was constructed. Such aspiration was a form of "epistemic violence" since it dominated and annihilated other forms of knowledge as well as images, symbols and modes of signification belonging to the people, in this case, of South America (Castro-Gómez, 2005).

Although the descriptions of individuals in human zoos demonstrate different aspects of how the image of the other was constructed and how human zoos contributed to the creation and establishment of Europe's colonial project, I would like to

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- 2 Both Mignolo and Dussel explained the roots of the ethnic superiority of Europe over the American colonies in a cognitive religious framework which justified a fair and just as well as legitimate colonization from the true source of knowledge and reason, namely Europe. Although Mignolo centers his arguments in the geopolitical order of the new world and how Europeans conceived it, that is, as the natural extension of Europe and ontologically different from Europe, Dussel argues that Europe's ethnic superiority was reinforced by knowledge's objectivity which in turn strengthened America's aristocratic.

pay attention to the epistemological and ontological conceptions that allowed the creation and development of such practices. In that respect, the work of Edward Said in conjunction with Dussel, and Mignolo and despite their theoretical differences, have contributed to the understanding how Modernity not only produced, through colonialism, cultural imaginaries about the Americas but developed theoretical discourses that have worked as disciplinary apparatus —and here lies Castro-Gómez's main argument—; Modernity has, ultimately, produced “concrete ‘scientific’ forms of subjectivity”. According to Castro-Gómez, to view modernity from a Latin American perspective, is to recognize that both the enlightenment and colonialism are two sides of the same coin, which allows the reconstruction of the relationships between the colonial project and the scientific project by acknowledging the epistemic status of how Modernity not only understands the rest of the world but how it also understands itself.

Human zoos' most striking aspect is that they “tell us nothing about the exotic peoples themselves. They are, however, a unique tool for analyzing European mentalities from the late 19th century to the 1930's” (Bancel et al., 2000). To that end, asking for the epistemological conditions that made possible for Europeans to come to terms with what human zoos “invent” about other people is important in so far as it reveals what the practice of human zoos say about Europe's epistemic development. The practice of human zoos can only re-define the other because it negotiates between two attitudes to the knowledge it produces which in different ways misrepresent what other people are in the world. On the one hand, human zoos are a limited referent to the world “out there”. Such a view succeeds at framing what is seen in the world without any reference to the way knowledge mediates and determines what is observed. On the other hand, a European inspired position sees the world as having no valid knowledge except only in reference to what it is entirely constructed by Europe. This view would not allow for any knowledge of the world that has not been legitimized by the knower of the world; in other words, the world does not exist outside Europe and the world of other people is constructed within Europe's epistemic project. The epistemological status of misrepresenting other people precludes the possibility of recognizing the explicit circumstances of their concrete situation making of their subjectivity the object of study. Such epistemic impossibility in turn allows the discourse of the colonizer to intentionally reconstruct other people's conditions in view of his interests of positioning himself as superior and dominant. In that sense, human zoos do reveal a great deal about Europe and the conditions that gave rise to such a practice while they also provide us with a hint on how to first approach modernity's development of conceptions about different peoples. Human zoos were mainly possible because they benefited from the convergence of popular racism and scientific theories of racial superiority. The existence of the human zoos in Europe suggests that the ideological

success of modernity's project rests upon three conceptual meanings: 1) the construction of a social image of the "other", 2) the emergence of scientific theories of racial superiority in the wake of advances in physical anthropology, and 3) the carefully planned and designed enterprise for developing an image of Europe by re-picturing what is not European. Such re-defining of the other also yields the first step of Modernity's methodology: Modernity looks to the other in order to look at itself. Human zoos not only raise essential questions about the impact of these colonial practices on Africa and America, but they also provide the basis for showing what human zoos say about European culture, its social attitudes and scientific perspectives during Modernity. Furthermore, it is precisely at the center of Europe's re-picturing of the other that we find one of modernity's greater paradoxes: How could countries that proclaimed equality among all human beings also produce the categories and conditions that defined and described the other not merely as different but as inferior and unequal?

Prior to directing our discussion to addressing modernity's frame of references, there are three general considerations about the Enlightenment in Europe that we should keep in mind. In the first place, looking back at the eighteenth century through the glaring light of the French Revolution, we are inclined to consider the Enlightenment as essentially revolutionary in the political and social sense. Although this may be the truth, it is not the whole truth, for in one of its most essential aspects —its enthusiasm for the promotion of new knowledge about the other people of the world— the Enlightenment supported a very conservative and restricted view of the other. In fact, the new knowledge was actually used to reinforce the political and social status quo. This is important for our discussion about modernity's project because it was in this aspect that the Enlightenment reached its greatest dilemma in relation to the world it was studying and attempting to reform. Some of the categories used by the Enlightenment to promote new knowledge were also the categories that divided the world: to name a few, equality, freedom, race, class, sovereignty, and citizen. These notions belong to an extended realm of analytical categories that were created as a universe of discourse in so far as they dominated and determined how studies were done and also what was the object of scientific study.

In the second place, we should stress the conflict at the center of the Enlightenment between, on the one hand, the forces of nationalism and, on the other, the strong presence of an overarching scientific authority that enforces an order on the social arena. Modernity is defined by the constant resurfacing of choice between opposites: freedom or servitude, authority or liberty.

In the third place, we should notice that the diffusion of the Enlightenment was in large part measured by the reach of its institutions. This is important because the

institutions and its policies were for the most part contributors to the expansion and implementation of new knowledge and new understanding. The newness that characterized modernity is the platform that has also established a firm commitment to intellectual and scientific rigor and social justice.

At stake, here is a deep regard for understanding the ontological values and epistemological practices that have built on the histories and struggles of those excluded and marginalized because of race, gender, class, and political subjectivity. It is from these standpoints that we can best approach modernity's portrait of "itself" and "the other". Now, these considerations about the Enlightenment, as the conditions for its unfolding, affects the totality of Modernity, that is the scope of its political principles and knowledge. The political principles were the motivation for the consolidation of its humanistic project, and the concept of knowledge is what Adorno calls the "standardization of the intellectual function" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002), the "mastery" of the sciences, for example, the license of thought to organization and administration. We do not have to go into all the problems caused by these definitions. Let us cite Adorno and Horkheimer only to the point that interest us:

Mind becomes in reality the instrument of power and self-mastery for which bourgeois philosophy has always mistake it. The deafness which has continued to afflict the submissive proletarians since the myth—the myth of modernity—is matched by the immobility of those in command. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002)

The main consequence to be drawn from Adorno's critique of the enlightenment is that Modernity's project is inscribed in a system of economic, moral and political principles by means of the systematic use of definitions produced for its own dawn/emergence. Such use is thus no longer a system of thought, but rather the possibility for the instauration of a project. For the same reason, Modernity is not simply an enterprise, that is, what is generally represented as an initiative but rather a concept, a self-referential unity that propels and perpetuates a system of thought. A partial answer to the above question is found in Adorno's essay *The Concept of Enlightenment* (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002) which not only critiques the epistemological, metaphysical, cultural and economic bases for the Enlightenment's unfolding, but it questions the role of rationality in Modernity'. For Adorno, the Enlightenment was also a period of the impoverishment of thought due to the unmediated establishment of man as a master of nature. Although in its original plan the Enlightenment according to Adorno "aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002), the Enlightenment due to its dialectic-

tical thinking, in which the objectifying definition of the things of the world become separate from their concept, induced agencies of mass production to standardize behavior by domination against those consider of insufficient righteousness (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002).

The Enlightenment's scientific enterprise depended on standard instrumental codification, classification, and ordering of the natural world and human beings to produce categories and notions that made possible the advancement of knowledge. Although ordering and classifying all species was also done by Aristotle, what is unique to modernity is the belief in *science* as the *only* method by which knowledge can be produced, and its content only that which legitimized the methods for making its conclusions universal. As we saw at the beginning of this essay, it was through the exhibitions of human zoos and the knowledge they produced that Europe discovered the new world, and through the understanding of living in the age of light that those racially diverse were considered to be living in dark times.

According to Emmanuel Eze, the fundamental assumption of modernity is that its thinkers were not ambiguous about rejecting the relationship between the Enlightenment scientific project and racial diversity. For Eze,

When writings on race by the major Enlightenment figures have been noted in traditional philosophical scholarship, it is often to dismiss them as journalistic, or as having little that would be of serious philosophical interest. (Eze, 1997, p. 3)

Such dismissal also ignores that the Enlightenment produced the conceptual basis upon which it was possible to have an understanding of human beings without direct reference to God, not only to allow nature to replace the authority of religion but to maintain natural hierarchy as essential for positioning flora, fauna, and human beings in an assigned status. While developing and producing new knowledge under new categories, modernity's project required a justification of the right to expand the content of its scientific findings while positioning Europe as the most developed and superior region of the world. The production and proliferation of knowledge was accompanied by a colonial expansion that required the transgression of national frontiers that privileged and reaffirmed Europe's superiority. The notion of race, along with a normative logic and a contract theory legitimizing political power and social order, were essential for mediating political relations among individuals and nations and for the success of Modernity's project.

Modernity's conditions for the notion of race

Modernity's epistemological and metaphysical concerns coincide in their intent to differentiate themselves from the pure intellectualism characterized in Aristotelianism³ and Scholasticism. While empiricism deployed a critique of metaphysics based on experience and observation, rationalism's program brought all aspects of human mental activity under the precepts of reason. The Enlightenment relied upon empirical conditions for perceiving things and for learning truths. What is most important is that, for the Enlightenment, the conditions for knowledge, which are subjective, are also the conditions for knowing the subject. In other words, empiricism is the source of knowledge of things, and only through empirical methods is knowledge possible. Rationality is oriented to the study of universal principles, with the only reliable source of knowledge as the "internal operations" of the understanding; in other words, the clear and distinct ideas of the mind. The eighteenth century was the time to be an enemy of the existing political system and philosophy the instrument "*par excellence*" to revolt against the "*ancien regime*" and its institutions. The value of philosophy rested upon its utility as a new light to contribute to the social and common good and to the happiness of the individual.

Although Descartes argued with certainty that knowledge is possible only if we abandon all opinions based on common sense, a *tabula rasa* could not construct knowledge without recognizing the source of knowledge, namely, observation and experience. I would like to argue that modernity made of European thought a universal system by negating non-rational forms of thought and those not inscribed within their logic while also subordinating other forms of knowledge and culture to its own standards. In this building process, Modernity used its own epistemological tools to reaffirm the standards of social inquiry while laying the intellectual foundations for both the generally scientific worldview and cultural ideals. In his book *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, Stephen Toulmin (1992) argues that at the end of the seventeenth century intellectual life in Europe began to have a new view on nature and society. During the 15th and 16th centuries, a practical conception of knowledge was prominent when discussing and addressing life problems by intertwining philosophical concerns with problems related to life experience in a social and political context. For thinkers like Montaigne, Erasmus, and Moro, moral

3 The subject of metaphysics, or first philosophy, is defined as the theoretical science of the causes and principles of what is most knowable—here Aristotle's distinction between what is better known to us and what is better known by nature. As portrayed by Descartes and Locke, the Scholastics accepted the view that among the components of a thing were the substantial form and accidental forms; such accidents correspond to perceptible properties of the thing—its color, shape.

and political ideas were developed as reaction to dogmatism and abstract theories. Rather than being concerned with general concerns about life, philosophy began to examine life in its empirical circumstances. According to Toulmin, a change of mentality was due to the new mathematical language and scientific knowledge, which became the only intellectual way to legitimize knowledge which translates into a specific epistemological configuration where knowledge about human life and the natural world began to unite two aspects symbolized in the Greek words *cosmos* and *polis*. From a scientific point of view, *cosmos* referred to the ordered nature ruled by eternal laws and understood by reason, while *polis* denoted the community where humans organize and live. With the use of science, legitimized by political ideologies, the new natural order would be reproduced in the social order. In other words, modernity formulated its project from the attempt to integrate a rational *cosmos* with an empirical *polis*. Modernity's civilizing project insisted upon the transgression of political boundaries by the development of notions and methods that could both define and differentiate new territories and their inhabitants. Modernity's point of view transformed tradition into norms for an increasingly hierarchical social system that could extend across cultural and political boundaries.

I have now arrived at a turning point in my argument. Values derived from the Enlightenment acquired different aims when severed from their humanistic roots only to become dogmatic producers of meaning. In this sense, categorizing and ordering the world based upon observation allowed Europe to position itself as the social and political standard for values and meanings that seem to fit in with its expansionist creed. By negating non-rational forms of thought, as those encountered during the 'discovery' as well as the conquest in America and Africa, Europe's systems of thought contrary to the standards established by the enlightenment constituted in epistemological terms, the motor of colonialist enterprise. According to Enrique Dussel, "...[Modernity] lacks awareness of its own ideological Euro-centrism (1995, p. 136), which translates into the justification of practices to serve its own interests, even if they contradict the principles and aims of attaining knowledge and truth. Modernity can simultaneously rely upon the precepts of rationality to go against its imperative of contributing to the social and common good. For Dussel, Modernity, as defined in Kant's 1774 essay, *What is Enlightenment?*, can think itself as the civilizing power and concurrently regard the suffering and sacrifices of "backwards and immature peoples, enslavable races, and the weaker sex as the inevitable costs of "modernization" (Dussel, 1995, p. 13). Modernity's epistemological method combined with its ideal rationality constituted the basis for the articulation and deployment of a civilizing project. With the assembling of the epistemological foundation and metaphysical support of an underlying natural essence, Modernity, out of necessity, gave rise to a burst of questions and answers about humanity. Questions about the ori-

gin of humanity and for the meaning of life rendered explicit the basis for a project in which the specification of a nature or an essence of the self was framed metaphysically while proceeding to translate it into a social and political questions. The Enlightenment belief in human rationality defined human beings in virtue of their common rationality to the extent that their actions are free if carried out through reason. The need for an emphasis on a concept of ‘universal nature’ as well as on the ‘natural feelings’ of mankind that included a historical account of the origin of differences among human beings, produced methodological shifts of authority. Actions prompted by traditional religious authority are therefore not free, and it is the Enlightenment’s movement who awakens and overthrows such authority. The works on political hegemony and geopolitics during colonialism, of Edward Said⁴ and Walter Mignolo⁵, are two examples that show how authority not only had a material apparatus but it also had an abstract value equally effective when defining subjectivities. “Orientalism” for Said as well as “Westernism” for Mignolo were perceived by colonized people as disciplinary apparatus that produced Modernity’s subjectivity. However, it is the work of Dussel which further their claims by arguing that modernity’s identity was constructed upon the “an ethnic distinction in the face of the other”. A distinction that not only represented an ethnic difference but also an epistemic superiority. Such epistemological style introduced the basis for what Postmodernism calls “to question the questioner” (Madison, 1998, p. 150). In other words, that the one who asks—in the context of this essay, Europe—questions about the other’s existence opens possibilities for epistemological and metaphysical speculation that view that “other” as the object of knowledge, thereby making the question “What is the other?”, legitimate and pertinent. Although it is obvious that such a manner of questioning and explaining differences among human beings contradicts the Enlightenment’s humanistic project, this method inserted “the other” in the realm of inquiry solely as the object of analysis in the complexity of modern genealogical concerns. This methodological approach propelled the conditions for making the notion of race one of the epicenters of modern philosophical inquiry.

Modernity’s first and most relevant invention was a theoretic-epistemological paradigm that formulated truth as an a priori criterion while limiting the understanding of the cultural context where humanity was manifold. Although I don’t argue that modernity invented the notion of race as such, it is evident that its use and misuse was clearly a task demanded by modernity’s epistemic logic. The concept of race limited the context from where it was possible to attain knowledge of the “other” as a subject of knowledge. The concept of race was employed in accordance with

4 Orientalism.

5 Walter Mignolo begins his on the restitution of colonial difference by Westernism.

modernity's distinctive approach to empirical observation and rational categorization of knowledge, which in turn accepted "knowledge as an accurate representation" and "truth as corresponding to reality". This new relationship between knowledge and truth shows that the knowledge gathered about "the other" from observation was accepted as the basis for developing theories about "the other" without regard to the already existing truths of that the other had of himself/herself. While imposing *a-posteriori* observations of "the other" only to define him/her in relation to its own standards of truth, race, as produced by modernity, became a concept used for its own methodology and the center of modernity's epistemological and metaphysical project.

There has been a great deal of scholarly discussion about where and when the concept of race was first used (Shoemaker, 1997; Roediger, 1998). Although there has been an increasing interest in finding the roots of the concept, it is undeniable that its meaning rests upon an attempt to divide and categorize humanity with a distinctive emphasis on physical traits which were believed to be transmitted through descent. Such emphasis on physical traits suggests an increasing trust of modernity on empirical methods that could provide the bases for truth while confirming the infallibility of scientific observation when searching for new knowledge. The concept of race developed as a notion that could both extend across political limits and distinguish individuals and nations while promoting Europe's centrality through what I would like to argue was the most fertile condition to position the concept of race in modernity's discourse: namely, the development of an explanatory system fueled by binary oppositions⁶. It was precisely in the contrasting of pairs of notions and categories where modernity found its force to put forward an explanatory system that could accommodate and reconcile the natural and the human sciences, which in turn produced a methodological difference between epistemological and ontological considerations for implementing the use of worldviews as the standard for its new political project.

Europe's challenge of reconciling monogenesis, as shown in the Bible, with the diversity of human types propelled a body of new scientific techniques for investigating and developing a history that could rest upon natural differences combined with that diversity while clarifying any methodological contradictions. Although polygenesis was advocated as the answer for explaining human diversity and the distinction between race and species, it was Francois Bernier who first used the word race, on the basis of physical differences blended with cultural characteristics, to argue that

6 I am borrowing the term 'binary opposition' from the tradition of poststructuralism in order to indicate what I consider to be the most favorable condition for modernity's use of the concept of race.

there are four or five species or races of men in particular whose difference is so remarkable that it may be properly made use of as the foundation for a new division of earth. (Bernier, 2000, p. 1)

For Bernier, the combination of physical, social, and cultural differences among individuals became a novel technique to explain differences on living conditions and natural differences. However, it was also clear that physical differences relied on a “seed which must be peculiar to certain races and species” (Bernier, 2000, p. 1). Although for Bernier, race does not explain the existence of human species, the racial seed as the basis for explaining difference suggests an ordering and division of individuals.

Reconciliation between monogenesis and polygenesis was reached when, in 1777, Kant insisted that racial characteristics remain across generations. According to Kant all humans belong to the same natural genus while race deviations that are constantly preserved over many generations are a consequence of migration or a result of interbreeding which always produced half-breeds (Kant, 2000/1777, p. 8). For Kant, natural disposition [?] is the result of migration or interbreeding and functions as the starting point from which it is justifiable to classify individuals’ physical appearances. This natural disposition although explained using pure empirical evidence and observation, gained a higher level of significance when it became the rationale for classifying the individual’s predisposition for belonging to a specific region and having specific intellectual abilities. In his essay *On National Characteristics* (cfr. Eze, 1997, pp. 38-ss.), Kant argues that the features belonging to each race are an expression of the feeling of the sublime and the beautiful, which are in direct proportion to the ability to reflect the qualities of aesthetic and moral feeling. Kant’s criteria for ascribing to each race such “features” rested upon the ability of each race to value and therefore ascend to the “aesthetic experience”. Although for Kant every human being is capable of experiencing pleasure, only a refined intellect is capable of valuing aesthetic experience and ascending to moral delight. Such capacity belongs to specific regions of the world and its development depends upon the combination of natural conditions and circumstances as well as physical characteristics resulting in a collective or national character. In Kant’s words,

The mental character of peoples is most discernible by whatever in them is moral, on which account we will yet take under consideration their different feelings in respect to the sublime and the beautiful from this point of view. (cfr. Eze, 1997, p. 51)

One of the inevitable consequences of Kant's criteria for defining each national character with certain attributes was the development of a system of classification based not only on natural attributes but also on political qualities. In Kant's words,

the Italian appears to have a feeling mixed from that of a Spaniard and that of a Frenchman, more feeling for the beautiful than the former and more for the sublime than the latter. In this way, as I think, the remaining traits of his moral character can be explained. (cfr. Eze, 1997, p. 54)

Furthermore, and I quote Kant again,

if we cast a fleeting glance over the other parts of the world, we find the Arab the noblest man in the Orient, yet of a feeling that degenerates very much into the adventurous. He is hospitable, generous, and truthful; yet his narrative and history and on the whole his feeling are always interwoven with some wonderful thing. His inflamed imagination presents things to him in unnatural and distorted images... If the Arabs are, so to speak, the Spaniards of the Orient, similarly the Persians are the French of Asia. They are good poets, courteous and of fairly fine taste. [...] The Japanese could in a way be regarded as the Englishmen of this part of the world, but hardly in any other quality than their resoluteness—which degenerates into the utmost stubbornness—their valor, and disdain of death [...] The Indians have a dominating taste of the grotesque, of the sort that falls into the adventurous. Their religion consists of grotesqueries. Idols of monstrous form [...] What trifling grotesqueries do the verbose and studied compliments of the Chinese contain! Even their paintings are grotesque and portray strange and unnatural figures... The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling [...] Among all savages there is no nation that displays so sublime a mental character as those of North America [...] The remaining natives of this part of the world show few traces of a mental character disposed to the finer feelings, and an extraordinary apathy constitutes the mark of this type of race. (cfr. Eze, 1997, p. 55)

I find Kant's description of the races in relation to the sublime and beautiful particularly helpful for identifying the epistemic status and political role of the relation between character and nationalism, thus enabling a criterion for not only categorizing but also evaluating the world. When Kant refers to "the other" parts of the world in the above quote, he relies upon a "fleeting glance" to the other which implies a gene-

ral and inferred abstraction of the other's concrete existence, while, on the contrary, when referring to Europe, his assertions depend upon facts of particular instances and specific events. This distinct methodology when describing Europe and other parts of the world reflects modernity's ambiguity when producing the standards for assessing levels of truth. It also becomes the foundation for an ideological system that would determine and legitimize the political and cultural relations between Europe and the rest of the world. Kant's writings on national character produced the underlying ground for a shift from natural dispositions to political depravation through the constant and insistent use of the word "degenerate" when referring to the other, suggesting a decaying sense of aesthetic perception and an inability for moral ascent. Moreover, Kant's essay *On the Different Races of Man* puts forward a partial method for determining individual's natural dispositions:

we shall review the entire human genus through the world, and, wherever the natural causes are not perhaps discernible, we shall adduce suitable ones for its deviations; but whenever we cannot ascertain the purpose we shall adduce natural causes. (cfr. Eze, 1997, p. 45)

The implications of this seemingly arbitrary distinction are various. Since natural deviations are ascribed to national characteristics, preempting any possibility for neutrality when categorizing individuals, Kant makes of natural causes the conditions for moral development which in turn are necessary for political development and self-pronouncement. In Kant's version of difference, natural deviations are spelled out in terms of the incapacity for rationality, abstract thought, and cultural development. These assumptions based mainly upon natural superiority were widespread and not always explained in scientific terms, but were justified by unsubstantiated attempts at "norming" what was not quantifiable nor subject to evaluation. Finally, with classification and ordering of the other came a well-defined rational subjectivity, which this time was subsumed not to natural order but to political subjectivity.



Modernity's move from the concept of race to the practice of racism

Modernity's development of an explanatory system informed by binary oppositions became a campaign fueled by the scientific force of the Enlightenment to stigmatize human beings in the interest of racially-dominant hegemonic power. Racism was inscribed in popular culture, institutions and reinforced through the political and social statuses. The sting of this indictment was felt among modern philosophers who wondered how Europe got so far afield of its moral and political values of liberty, equality, and justice for all. Du Bois's famous book, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935, first edition), exposed the uses of racial resentment, fueled by racist ideologies, to circulate science, religion or political theory that aligned democratic principles with the uncontrollable forces of capitalism. For Du Bois modern reconstruction failed mainly because of the racist interpretations of history that impeded civil rights movements from granting full citizenship to black Americans. North America's failure to take into account the "problem of race," which, for Du Bois, was at the center of modern democracy both politically and economically, resulted in the ill-fated history of Reconstruction in North American political life.

I think we can extend Du Bois' evaluation and reinterpretation of the Enlightenment in North America to Europe's commitments to social democracy elsewhere in the world, revealing their betrayal through racism and marginalization. Most importantly, modernity's project of imposing and organizing the promises of the social contract—with all its institutional force and violence—became the center of the nation-state. In that sense, power gained two new structures: on the one hand, power is constituted according to the already existing social forces which belong to other relations of power, i. e., production, family, knowledge, etc. On the other hand, in those socially and politically-constituted states, power is expressed as hegemonic and unchanging. In other words, all the institutional nuclei—including slavery and colonialism—of modernity have spread from the center of political power to the periphery, displacing those individuals that modernity's social and political order have considered incapable of political subjectivity, and prescribing social and political policies committed to a universal citizenship that simultaneously excluded nonwhite races and women. I am not suggesting that modernity's work was merely the creation of a theoretical model of exclusion and domination, but rather that an attempt to locate the relationship between citizenship and race in modernity, while demonstrating where that relationship departs from the aim of including "all" in the

humanistic enlightenment project, hints at how the concept of race became a systematic form of racism.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of political theory in modernity was the production of grand narratives of legitimation that announces the consolidation of the project of the Enlightenment. These insisted upon the fact that individuals are all equal and that, consequently, the institutions, political systems, and social agreements representing their subjectivity must be developed and implemented to preserve equality. For modernity, equality between individuals was an imperative that ought to supersede any inequality in the state of nature, making civil society that which must ensure that social agreements and contracts are developed for maintaining equality.

However, modernity's epistemic ambiguity produced a moral ambivalence. Knowledge became an instrument of power and modernity believed all the grand narratives that it produced. The notion of race served modernity to produce political and ethical narratives to legitimize Europe's autonomy and foster a sentiment towards the other that went further than simply identifying the differences. The superiority of the white race as announced by scientific discourses not only demonstrated the purity of Europe, but it also confirmed how tainted "the other" was. The concept of race gained discriminatory value when the other was placed outside of Enlightenment humanism and the subject of the other was produced by the performative scientific declarations, which necessarily determined what the other is and should continue to be, namely, an inferior being. In other words, the notion of race as a category for expressing and showing difference also produced dislike and hatred towards the other. Throughout the tradition of modern philosophy, it is not difficult to trace this common 'racist' thread through Locke's empirical evidence on the incapacities of primitive minds; Hume's claims that only white races could have created worthwhile civilization; and Hegel's conclusion that mental or spiritual superiority of one race over another not only could be explained, but that some races can and ought to be colonized and dominated like animals.

Frantz Fanon's book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), is a critique and explanation of how modernity's binary system, in which black is bad and white is good, produced "racist" attitudes. It is also a reflection on the legacy of slavery and colonialism on both sides of the Atlantic. Jean-Paul Sartre's introduction to Fanon's book is helpful for understanding the mechanics of producing and applying modernity's explanatory system to expand its colonial project—built on both gender and racial exclusion—as a profound hypocrisy and betrayal of its most valued principles. As Sartre observes,

[*Colonialism*] came to an end; the mouths opened by themselves; the yellow and black voices still spoke of our humanism but only to reproach us with our inhumanity. We listened without displeasure to these polite statements of resentment, at first with proud amazement. What? They are able to talk by themselves? Just look at what we have made of them! (*Preface*, in Fanon, 1963, p. 8)

Sartre asserts that racial exclusion is not simply an inconsistency in modernity's ideology, rather racism is inseparable from the epistemic and ontological framework produced by modernity. Both the epistemological principles and the metaphysical claims that standardized the equation of whiteness with superior political subjectivity have deep roots in Enlightenment thought. The emergence of and positioning of natural history as the basis for inquiry into legitimate forms of government—the emphasis placed by Kant on the temperament and character of races as the measure of political subjectivity—rather than an interest in political narratives and the vices and virtues of already existing states in other parts of the world made of race the antonym of politics. Sartre explains:

A new generation came on the scene, which changed the issue. [...*the issue for Sartre is to answer exactly when modernity's notion of race became politically racist...*] With unbelievable patience, its writers and poets tried to explain to us [*Europeans*] that our values and the true facts of their lives did not hang together, and that they could neither reject them completely nor yet assimilate them. By and large, what they were saying was this: "You are making us into monstrosities; your humanism claims we are at one with the rest of humanity but your racist methods set us apart". Very much at our ease, we listened to them all; colonial administrators are not paid to read Hegel, and for that matter they do not read much of him, but they do need a philosopher to tell them that uneasy consciousnesses are caught up in their own contradictions. (*Preface*, in Fanon, 1963, p. 8)

It is from this perspective and with this critique of the Enlightenment that Sartre introduces Fanon's work to both sides of the Atlantic. And it is Fanon who further elaborates on the history of racism and the need for decolonizing the social and political structures, which would in turn change the order of the world. In Fanon's words, as a historical process, decolonization "[...] cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content. (Fanon, 1963, p. 36)

I want to develop further the implications of Fanon's critique of modernity by arguing that the most detrimental, and yet successful, accomplishment of modernity's binary explanatory system was to force 'the other' to believe that the superior race could shape a better fate for other races. To proclaim this meant challenging not only popular belief, like those that permitted the human zoos, but also to redefine the "the other's" self-image. To become civilized under the standards of the superior race meant for "the other" the negation of his/her own subjectivity and in the process to be forced to relinquish the possibility for political agency; the ontological residue was transformed by modernity's metanarratives into accounts that did not allow "the other" a return to the origin of his/her own system of beliefs. The historical void produced was twofold: on the one hand, "the other's" history could be rewritten by the colonizer, and on the other hand, the possibilities for the other for truly knowing who he/she was were almost null. This civilizing process ensured that the other would depend upon the superior race to know who s/he was and who s/he would become.

Race and racism, two discourses that increasingly came to be identified with political agency, challenged the notions of citizenship and nation, bedrocks for modern political thought. The shift from natural character to citizenship demanded of 'the other' a remarkable degree of dependency for self-possession. Hegel's writings on the New World (Hegel, cfr. Eze, 1997, p. 115) refer to the native populace in South America as a product of their geographical climate, which in most cases had not permitted the necessary spiritual development for self-awareness, autonomy and independence. According to Hegel, these characteristics established the political tone necessary for creating states. Although surprised by the amount of violence that natives of South America had endured, Hegel argues that their passivity of spirit was a justification for domination, and colonization was the only way "to awaken their needs, which are the spring of all human activities (Hegel, cfr. Eze, 1997, p. 116). Enslavement by Europe confirmed the lack of reasoned, dispassionate judgment while condemning the native and savage to a life of dependence:

it will be a long time before the Europeans can succeed in instilling any feelings of independence into them. Some of them have visited Europe, but they are obviously unintelligent individuals with little capacity for education. (Hegel, cfr. Eze, 1997, p. 115)

Under such a predicament, no native could either break the bondage of the Enlightenment project or find freedom from within its own history or geographical situation.

Finally, “the other” was also in bondage to the intellectual project that legitimized modern knowledge, the Encyclopedia. The 1798 Encyclopedia Britannica edition includes the following definition of the word *Negro*:

a name given to a variety of human species, who are entirely black, and are found in the torrid zone especially in that part of Africa which lies within the tropics. ...the negro women have the loins greatly depressed, and very large buttocks, which give the back the shape of a saddle. Vices the most notorious seem to be the portion of this unhappy race: idleness, treachery, impudence, profanity, nastiness and intemperance, are said to have extinguished the principle of natural law, and to have silenced the reproofs of conscience.

Modernity successfully developed an understanding of nature with which to redefine the limits of its laws and principles, only to produce standards by which other beings could be made to fit into an order dedicated to global hegemonic strategies that would dominate institutions, laws, modes of production and truth according to western principles.

I conclude by returning to the issue with which I began, the issue of Modernity’s project. My argument for the ontological and epistemological conditions produced by Modernity’s project and the Enlightenment’s aim is really an attempt to get to the root of Emmanuel Eze’s concern as expressed in his book *Race and the Enlightenment*: how to gain a greater contemporary understanding of the complexities of eighteenth-century European thought.

Because modernity learned to look at “the other” in order to understand itself, the image in which “the other” was cast only allowed a limited understanding and therefore an insufficient comprehension of itself. “The other” for modernity can no longer be the object of inquiry nor does Modernity continue to spread its ideological legacy; although it is not easy to displace the binary explanatory system of modernism, the role of knowledge must change. If modernity produced epistemological practices and methods that clearly demarcated the cognitive and political boundaries—a demarcation that occurred with the hegemony of western values to evaluate other people—, the same modernity must allow Postmodernism to dissolve the boundaries. For Jean-François Lyotard, the postmodern condition is one that re-thinks the conditions for knowledge and in its process postulates an alteration to the status of knowledge. Postmodernism is the incredulity toward meta-narratives. Knowledge, according to Lyotard, is no longer exempt of technological advances transforming

how we use research and value knowledge. Knowledge is a commodity and as such is sold and bought in the market and therefore the new bases for power. As power, knowledge transforms the nature of societies and human experience. And it is precisely this political transformation, which affects the public and private powers while producing reciprocal effects that oblige modernity to reconsider its social and political relationships.

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