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Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures)

Enrique Dussel

Modernity is, for many (for Jürgen Habermas or Charles Taylor, for example),¹ an essentially or exclusively European phenomenon. In these lectures, I will argue that modernity is, in fact, a European phenomenon, but one constituted in a dialectical relation with a non-European alterity that is its ultimate content. Modernity appears when Europe affirms itself as the “center” of a *World History* that it inaugurates; the “periphery” that surrounds this center is consequently part of its self-definition. The occlusion of this periphery (and of the role of Spain and Portugal in the formation of the modern world system from the late fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries) leads the major contemporary thinkers of the “center” into a Eurocentric fallacy in their understanding of modernity. If their understanding of the genealogy of modernity is thus partial and provincial, their attempts at a critique or defense of it are likewise unilateral and, in part, false.

It is a question of uncovering the origin of what I call “the myth of

1. Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

modernity" itself. Modernity includes a rational "concept" of emancipation that we affirm and subsume. But, at the same time, it develops an irrational myth, a justification for genocidal violence. The postmodernists criticize modern reason as a reason of terror; we criticize modern reason because of the irrational myth that it conceals. The theme of these lectures will be the need for the "negation" and "transcendence" of modernity understood in this second sense.

According to my central thesis, 1492 is the date of the "birth" of modernity, although its gestation involves a preceding "intrauterine" process of growth. The possibility of modernity originated in the free cities of medieval Europe, which were centers of enormous creativity. But modernity as such was "born" when Europe was in a position to pose itself against an other, when, in other words, Europe could constitute itself as a unified ego exploring, conquering, colonizing an alterity that gave back its image of itself. This other, in other words, was not "dis-covered" (*descubierto*), or admitted, as such, but concealed, or "covered-up" (*encubierto*), as the same as what Europe assumed it had always been. So, if 1492 is the moment of the "birth" of modernity as a concept, the moment of origin of a very particular myth of sacrificial violence, it also marks the origin of a process of concealment or misrecognition of the non-European.

Since I am delivering these lectures in Frankfurt, at the invitation of the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, I will discuss some of the great thinkers associated with this city, from Hegel, who spent part of his early career here, to Habermas and the famous school that bears the city's name. I should mention in passing that it was a Jew from my country involved in the export trade in agricultural commodities between Argentina and Great Britain, who provided the initial subsidy for the Institute that Horkheimer and others founded in this city. That is, it was the value produced by the labor of the gauchos and peons of the pampa, objectivized in wheat or beef and appropriated by the great landowning and merchant families of Argentina, that, transferred to Germany, gave birth to the Frankfurt school. It is in the name, then, of those semi-Indians, peons, and gauchos of my country, demanding, in a way, an accounting of the uses to which the fruit of their lives and labor were put, that I undertake to deliver these lectures here and now. I need to add one more detail: In 1870, a poor carpenter, a socialist and Lutheran from the town of Schweinfurt am Main only a few kilometers from here, arrived in Buenos Aires looking for work, freedom from persecution, and peace. His name was Johannes Kaspar Dussel. He was welcomed in Argentina, given opportunities to make good, and he raised a family and

died in those lands. He was my great grandfather. Today, when so many foreigners come to Germany looking for the same things, by contrast, they are repudiated, expelled, treated . . . like Turks! Germany has forgotten the hospitality that was extended to *its* poor by other countries in the nineteenth century.

I have said that the concept of modernity occludes the role of Europe's own Iberian periphery, and in particular Spain, in its formation. At the end of the fifteenth century, Spain was the only European power with the capacity of external territorial conquest, as it demonstrated in the conquest of the Kingdom of Granada from Islamic rule in 1492, the last phase in the centuries-long "reconquest" and colonization of Andalusia. Until that moment, Europe had been itself the periphery of a more powerful and "developed" Islamic world (just as, until Columbus, the Atlantic was a secondary ocean). The Iberian Reconquest, with the extreme sectarian violence it unleashed in its final stages (broken treaties, elimination of local elites, endless massacres and tortures, the demand that the conquered betray their religion and culture under pain of death or expulsion, the confiscation and repartition in feudal form of lands, towns, and their inhabitants to the officers of the conquering army), was, in turn, the model for the colonization of the New World.

Understanding this, I believe, allows Latin America to also rediscover its "place" in the history of modernity. We were the *first periphery* of modern Europe; that is, we suffered globally from our moment of origin on a constitutive process of modernization (although the term as such wouldn't have been in use at the time) that afterward would be applied in Africa and Asia. Although our continent was already known to Europe—as the 1489 world map of Henricus Martellus in Rome demonstrates—only Spain, thanks to the political ability of the Catholic kings and the daring of Columbus, attempted formally and openly, with the corresponding assumption of rights and privileges (and in open competition with Portugal), to launch itself toward the Atlantic in search of a route to India. This process of discovery and conquest, whose quincentenary is commemorated this year, is not simply of anecdotal or historical interest: It is part of the process of the constitution of modern subjectivity itself.

The myth of origin that is hidden in the emancipatory "concept" of modernity, and that continues to underlie philosophical reflection and many other theoretical positions in European and North American thought, has to do above all with the connection of Eurocentrism with the concomitant "fallacy of developmentalism." The fallacy of developmentalism consists

in thinking that the path of Europe's modern development must be followed unilaterally by every other culture. Development is taken here as an ontological, and not simply a sociological or economic, category. It is the "necessary movement" of Being for Hegel, its inevitable "development."²

Kant's answer to the question posed by the title of his essay "What is Enlightenment?" is now more than two centuries old. "Enlightenment is the exodus of humanity by its own effort from the state of guilty immaturity," he wrote. "Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why the greater part of humanity remains pleasurably in this state of immaturity." For Kant, immaturity, or adolescence, is a culpable state, laziness and cowardice its existential ethos: the *unmündig*. Today, we would ask him: An African in Africa or as a slave in the United States in the eighteenth century; an Indian in Mexico or a Latin American *mestizo*: Should all of these subjects be considered to reside in a state of guilty immaturity?

Hegel answered this question in the following way. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, he showed how World History is the self-realization of God (a *theodicy*), Reason, and Freedom. It is the process toward enlightenment:

Universal History represents . . . the *development* of the consciousness that the Spirit has of its freedom and also the evolution of the understanding that the Spirit obtains through such consciousness. This *development* implies a *series of stages*, a series of determinations of freedom, which are born from its self-concept, that is, from the nature of freedom to become conscious of itself. . . . This necessity and the necessary series of the pure abstract determinations of the concept are the province of Logic.³

In Hegelian ontology, "development" (*Entwicklung*) is what determines the very movement of the "concept" (*Begriff*) until its culmination in the "Idea" (from indeterminate Being to the Absolute Knowledge of the *Logic*). De-

2. From Hegel, the category of "development" passed to Marx, and from there to its usage in current sociology and economic theory. If I insist here on its original "philosophic" content, it is to recall that an "underdeveloped" country is, for Hegel, "not-modern," *pre-Aufklärung*.

3. I use here the text of the *Lectures* in G. W. F. Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. J. Hoffmeister (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1955), 167, my italics. This work is hereafter cited as *Lectures*. I am indebted to Martin Bernal's discussion of Hegel's philosophy of Universal History in *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, vol. 2 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

velopment is dialectically linear: It is a primordially ontological category, particularly in the case of World History. It has, moreover, a direction in space: "The movement of Universal History goes from the East to the West. Europe is the absolute end of Universal History. Asia is its beginning" (*Lectures*, 243).

This idea of a "necessary" movement of history from East to West, one can readily appreciate, must first have had to eliminate Latin America and Africa from the movement of World History, situating them like Asia in a state of "immaturity" or "childhood" (*Kindheit*). In effect,

The world is divided into the Old World and the New World. The name of the New World comes from the fact that America . . . has only recently come to be known by Europeans. But it should not be thought for that reason that the distinction is purely external. It is essential. This world is new not only relatively but also absolutely; it is so in all of its aspects, physical and political. . . . The sea of islands that extends between Latin America and Asia reveals also a certain immaturity with respect to its origin. . . . No less so New Holland offers the characteristics of a young geography, for if, departing from the English colonies, we enter into its territory we discover enormous rivers that have not yet found their course. . . . We have evidence of the development of America and its level of civilization, especially in Mexico and Peru, but as an entirely particular culture, which expires the moment in which the Absolute Spirit approaches it. . . . The inferiority of these individuals in all respects is manifest. (*Lectures*, 199–200)

This "immaturity" (*Unreife*) is total, physical (even the vegetation and animals are more primitive, brutal, monstrous, or simply weaker or degenerate). It is the sign of (Latin) America.⁴ Hegel writes:

In respect to the elements that compose it, America has not yet completed its formation. . . . America is, consequently, the land of the future. Only in future ages will its historical importance become evident. . . . But as a land of the future Latin America has no interest for us, because the philosopher does not make prophesies. (*Lectures*, 209–10)

4. On European and, in particular, Hegel's views of American flora and fauna, see Antonello Gerbi, *La naturaleza de las Indias Nuevas* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1978).

As a land in childhood, then, Latin America remains outside World History.⁵ The same happens with Africa. Hegel still shares the medieval, premodern conception of the world as a trinity composed of Europe, Asia, and Africa, but it is a trinity in which the axis of history has been displaced toward Europe. Thus:

The three parts of the world maintain between themselves, therefore, an essential relation and constitute a totality (*Totalität*). . . . [But] The Mediterranean sea is the element of union between them, and this converts it into the *center* of all Universal History. . . . The Mediterranean is the axis of Universal History. (*Lectures*, 210)

Hegel has a number of pages on Africa that deserve to be read, although one needs to approach the task with a sense of humor, since they are a kind of fantastic apotheosis of racist ideology, full of superficial prejudices and received opinions and a seemingly infinite sense of superiority that illustrate well the European state of mind at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For example:

Africa is in general a closed land, and this maintains its fundamental character. (*Lectures*, 212)

Among negroes it is the case that consciousness has not attained even the intuition of any sort of objectivity, such as, for example, God or the law, in which man is in relation with his will and has the intuition of his essence. . . . [The negro] is the man as beast. (*Lectures*, 218)

This mode of being of the Africans explains why it is extraordinarily easy to turn them into fanatics. The realm of the Absolute Spirit is so impoverished among them and the natural Spirit so intense that any representation which they are inculcated with suffices to impel them to respect nothing, to destroy everything. . . . Africa . . . does not have history as such. Consequently we abandon Africa, to never mention it again. It is not part of the historical world; it does not evidence historical movement or development. . . . What we understand properly as Africa is something isolated and without history, still mired in the

5. For Hegel, the child represents only the "real potential" of reason. The "immediacy" of the child's consciousness allows it to be, therefore, only the periphery (or possibility) of experience but not its center. "Only the adult has intelligence . . . and is the center of everything" (*Lectures*, 16).

natural Spirit, and therefore can only be located here at the entrance gate of Universal History. (*Lectures*, 231–34)

European racial pride—the Hegelian “immoderateness” Kierkegaard was so fond of ironizing—is nowhere more evident than in these remarks. As “South,” both Latin America and Africa lie outside the East-West movement of World History. But Hegel also consigns Asia to a preparatory, introductory role:

Asia is the part of the world where one can verify origin as such. . . . But Europe is absolutely the Center and the End (*das Zentrum und das Ende*) of the ancient world and of the West as such, Asia the absolute East. (*Lectures*, 235)

Asia is the Spirit only in its infancy. Oriental despotism allows only the One (the emperor) to be free. It is thus the dawn, but in no sense the culmination of World History. The “beginning” and “end” of History is Europe.⁶ But there are various Europes. There is Southern Europe: Portugal, Spain, southern France, and Italy. There the Spirit dwelt in antiquity, when the North was still “uncultivated” (*unkultiviert*). But Southern Europe “is not marked with a nucleus (*Kern*) of development in itself” (*Lectures*, 240); destiny is to be found, rather, in Northern Europe. (With this, Hegel discards, in a fashion followed by most contemporary European and North American thinkers, as I suggested earlier, the importance of Spain and Portugal in the period between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries—that is, the age of mercantilism—in the development of modernity.)

But there are also two distinct Northern Europes. One is Eastern Europe, consisting of Poland and Russia, which have always existed in relation to Asia. The one that needs to be spoken of, however, is Western Europe: “Germany, France, Denmark, the Scandinavian countries are the heart of Europe” (*Lectures*, 240). In relation to this idea, Hegel’s writing takes on something of the sonority of Wagner’s trumpets:

The Germanic Spirit is the Spirit of the New World (*neuen Welt*), its end is the realization of absolute truth, as the infinite self-

6. Francis Fukuyama’s much discussed thesis—in the essay “The End of History,” *The National Interest* (Summer 1989)—derives directly from this remark of Hegel’s. Fukuyama maintains, to be precise, that the United States and the capitalist free market are, with the collapse of communism in the “North” after 1989, the only possible model of society and polity, with no other alternative, and thus are the “end” of history.

determination of freedom, which has as its content its own absolute form. The principle of the German Empire must be adjusted to the Christian religion. The destiny of the Germanic peoples is to provide the missionaries of the Christian Principle.⁷

Expressing a thesis that is the exact contrary of the one I want to develop in these lectures, Hegel continues:

There arises via the reestablishment of Christian freedom the consciousness of the self-justification of the Spirit. The Christian principle has passed through the formidable discipline of culture; the Reformation gives it its exterior dimension *with the discovery of America*. . . . The principle of the free Spirit makes itself here the banner of the whole world, and from it develop the universal principles of reason. . . . Custom and tradition no longer have validity; the different forms of right need to legitimize themselves as founded on rational principles. Thus is the Spirit's freedom realized. (*Werke*, 12:413–14; my italics)

For Hegel, in other words, modern Christian Europe has nothing to learn from other worlds, other cultures. It has its principle in itself and is, at the same time, the full "realization" of that principle: "The principle has been achieved, and because of this the Last Days have arrived: the idea of Christianity has achieved its full realization" (*Werke*, 12:414).

The three stages of the "Germanic world" are the "development" of this same Spirit. They are the kingdoms of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The Germanic Empire is "the kingdom of the Totality, in which we see a repetition of past ages" (*Werke*, 12:417). These are the First Age, the migrations of the Germanic tribes in the times of the Roman Empire, and the Second Age, the feudal Middle Ages. This Second Age comes to an end with three events: the Renaissance, the discovery of America, and the discovery of the passage to India via Cape Horn. These events signal the end of the terrible night of the Middle Ages, but they do not constitute in themselves the new, or Third, Age. This Age, the age of modernity, begins with a properly German event: the Lutheran Reformation, whose principle is, in turn, "developed" fully in the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.⁸

7. I cite here from G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke*, vol. 12 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 413, italics mine. This work is hereafter cited as *Werke*.

8. As the passages cited above indicate, Hegel projects onto the German past—onto the Reformation, to be specific—the radical effects that the discovery of the New World pro-

This embodiment of World History in Europe endows Europe with a kind of universal right, as Hegel explains in a passage from his *Encyclopedia*:

History is the configuration of the Spirit in the form of becoming. . . . The people that receives such an element as a natural principle . . . is the dominant people at this moment of World History. . . . Against the absolute right that such a people possesses by virtue of being the bearer of the development of the world Spirit, the spirit of other peoples *has no rights (rechtlos)*.⁹

This people, the North, Europe (and, for Hegel, Germany and England in particular), has, in other words, an "absolute right" because it is the "bearer" (*Träger*) of the Spirit in its "moment of development" (*Entwicklungsstufe*). In the face of this, no other people can be said to have any rights proper to it, and certainly none that it could pose *against* Europe. This is one of the clearest definitions not only of Eurocentrism but of the sacralization of the imperial power of the North or the Center over the South, the Periphery, the colonial and dependent world of antiquity. Further commentary is unnecessary. The texts speak in their frightening cruelty of a limitless cynicism that masks itself as the "development" of "reason" itself, *Aufklärung*.

In addition—and this is something that has passed unnoticed by many commentators and critics of Hegel, including Marx—it is worth noting that for Hegel, the contradictory character of European "civil society" is transcended in the "state" in part thanks to the constitution of "colonies":

Through a dialectical impulse to transcend itself that is proper to it, such a society is, in the first place, driven to seek outside itself new consumers. For this reason it seeks to find ways to move about among other peoples that are inferior to it with respect to the resources that it has in abundance, or, in general, its industry. . . .

This development of relations offers also the means of colonization towards which, in either an accidental or systematic way, a completed civil society is impelled. Colonization allows a portion of its

duced in Europe at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries. If Latin America is excluded as such from World History, then North, or Anglo-Saxon, America is the West at a second level for Hegel, and thus has a place in World History.

9. G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften: im Grundrisse*, ed. F. Nicolin and O. Pöggler (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1969), 430, sections 346 and 347, my italics.

population to return to the principle of family property in the new territory, and, at the same time, it acquires for itself a new possibility and field of labor.¹⁰

Europe thus "occupies" foreign lands. Hegel does not seem to realize that this means they must be seized from other peoples. The periphery of Europe is a "free space" that allows the poor, produced by the contradictions of capitalist development, to become capitalists or property owners themselves in the colonies.¹¹

Habermas is still essentially in this Hegelian mode when he writes that "the historical events that are decisive for the implantation of the principle of [modern] subjectivity are the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution."¹² For Habermas, as for Hegel, the discovery of America is not a constitutive fact of modernity.¹³ Habermas also follows Hegel's example in discounting the role of Spain in the origins of modernity.¹⁴ My intention in these lectures is to give an account of modernity that shows the contrary: that the experience not only of "discovery" but especially of "conquest" is essential in the constitution of the modern ego, not only as subjectivity per se but as a subjectivity that is the "center" and "end" of history. Latin America is thus the "other-face" (*teixtli*, in Aztec), the essential alterity of modernity. The immature European ego, or subject, in the Middle Ages itself peripheral to and dependent on the Islamic world, "develops" until it arrives, with Cortés and the Conquest of Mexico (the first extra-European space in which it can carry out a prototypic "development"), at the point of becoming the "master-of-the-world"—a Will to Power specific to its self-consciousness. This sense of the relation between the conquest

10. G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1957), sections 246 and 248.

11. When, in Hegel's day and after, as I have noted already, Europe had a "surplus" or chronically poor population, it sent this population to the Third World. Today, Europe closes its frontiers to similar populations from the Third World.

12. Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs*, 27.

13. Habermas mentions the discovery, but gives it no particular importance (see *Der philosophische Diskurs*, 15).

14. Hegel writes, for example: "Now we come upon the lands of Morocco, Fez, Algeria, Tunis, Tripoli. It can be said that this region does not belong properly to Africa but to Spain, with which it forms a geographical basin. The polymath de Pradt claims on these grounds that Spain is part of Africa. . . . [Spain] is a country that has limited itself to sharing the destiny of the great nations, a destiny that is decided elsewhere; it is not called upon to acquire its own individuality [as a historical agent]" (*Lectures*, 213).

of America and the formation of modern Europe permits a new definition, a new global vision of modernity, which shows not only its emancipatory but also its destructive and genocidal side.

We are now in a position to summarize the elements of the myth of modernity. (1) Modern (European) civilization understands itself as the most developed, the superior, civilization. (2) This sense of superiority obliges it, in the form of a categorical imperative, as it were, to "develop" (civilize, uplift, educate) the more primitive, barbarous, underdeveloped civilizations. (3) The path of such development should be that followed by Europe in its own development out of antiquity and the Middle Ages. (4) Where the barbarian or the primitive opposes the civilizing process, the praxis of modernity must, in the last instance, have recourse to the violence necessary to remove the obstacles to modernization. (5) This violence, which produces, in many different ways, victims, takes on an almost ritualistic character: the civilizing hero invests his victims (the colonized, the slave, the woman, the ecological destruction of the earth, etc.) with the character of being participants in a process of redemptive sacrifice. (6) From the point of view of modernity, the barbarian or primitive is in a state of guilt (for, among other things, opposing the civilizing process). This allows modernity to present itself not only as innocent but also as a force that will emancipate or redeem its victims from their guilt. (7) Given this "civilizing" and redemptive character of modernity, the suffering and sacrifices (the costs) of modernization imposed on "immature" peoples, enslaved races, the "weaker" sex, et cetera, are inevitable and necessary.

This understanding of the myth of modernity has a different sense for us than for Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, or for the postmodernists such as Lyotard, Rorty, and Vattimo. Unlike the postmodernists, we do not propose a critique of reason as such; but we do accept their critique of a violent, coercive, genocidal reason. We do not deny the rational kernel of the universalist rationalism of the Enlightenment, only its irrational moment as sacrificial myth. We do not negate reason, in other words, but the irrationality of the violence generated by the myth of modernity. Against postmodernist irrationalism, we affirm the "reason of the Other."¹⁵

15. In Tzvetan Todorov's *Nous et les autres* (Seuil: Paris, 1989), for example, the "we" are the Europeans, the "others" us, the peoples of the periphery. Similarly, when Rorty argues for the desirability of "conversation" in place of a rationalist epistemology, he does not take seriously the asymmetrical situation of the other, the concrete empirical impos-

The "realization" of modernity no longer lies in the passage from its abstract potential to its "real," European, embodiment. It lies today, rather, in a process that will transcend modernity as such, a trans-modernity, in which both modernity and its negated alterity (the victims) co-realize themselves in a process of mutual creative fertilization. Trans-modernity (as a project of political, economic, ecological, erotic, pedagogical, and religious liberation) is the co-realization of that which it is impossible for modernity to accomplish by itself: that is, of an *incorporative* solidarity, which I have called analectic, between center/periphery, man/woman, different races, different ethnic groups, different classes, civilization/nature, Western culture/Third World cultures, et cetera. For this to happen, however, the negated and victimized "other-face" of modernity—the colonial periphery, the Indian, the slave, the woman, the child, the subalternized popular cultures—must, in the first place, discover itself as innocent, as the "innocent victim" of a ritual sacrifice, who, in the process of discovering itself as innocent may now judge modernity as guilty of an originary, constitutive, and irrational violence.

sibility that the "excluded," "dominated," or "compelled" can intervene *effectively* in such a discussion. He takes as his starting point "we liberal Americans," not "we Aztecs in relation to Cortés," or "we Latin Americans in relation to a North American in 1992." In such cases, *not even conversation* is possible.