

Colonial Categories and
the Exclusion of the Excluders by the Excluded
(Or, the Dialogue or Inversion of Power Relations in the
Processes of Political Change in Latin America)

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An important achievement of post-colonial, de-colonial and similar studies is the deconstruction of racial, ethnic and other categories that result from colonial economic, political and symbolic practices. Such deconstruction, however, obviously collides with these solidly rooted practices. Not only do these colonial practices continue – economically, politically and symbolically – as realized in most of Latin America, but they become the necessary and only possible point of departure for any process of change and reversion of the colonial situation and, ultimately, of their own elimination. This creates an *aporia*¹: the colonial categories and their consequences constitute a historical obstacle for emancipation, but they also constitute the inevitable point of departure (i.e. the current onto-epistemological situation) for social change.

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¹ In philosophical terms, an *aporia* is an impossible decision to take or a logical problem impossible to solve or settle, while a *paradox* is a statement or an act going against common sense or common logics.

The colonial categories are, like any other category, contingent and historically produced; they are constituted by and constitute relations of power and inequality. By placing the 'Other' (racially, ethnically, nationally or otherwise categorized) in a category that is allegedly 'natural', the relations of exploitation and power appear as objectified and dependent on natural forces and therefore not subject to any change. This essentialization of human categories tends to be internalized not only by the dominant groups, but also by the subalterns, who often end up accepting categories such as 'negro' or 'indio' as the mere essence of their individual and collective selves. While this acceptance of an imposed category partly corresponds to the 'hegemonic intention' – i.e. to the subjected's acceptance of the relationship of colonial domination – these same categories also become the point of departure for resistance and struggle. The dominated subject – 'indio', 'negro' etc. – becomes a subject that demands rights and recognition (collectively and individually), i.e., a subject that resists and struggles. This resistance and struggle, however, still rests upon the colonial categorization: the colonial category of 'indio' or 'negro', produced by and producing domination, has become the category that reclaims decolonization and emancipation.

A consequence of this relationship between colonial categorization and its outcomes is often that resistance and struggle are directed against power and power relations, but not against the categories as such. Resistance and emancipation struggles frequently are aimed at neutralizing or inverting the power structures inherent in the constitution of the categories, while accepting these categories as 'natural'. As a result, the 'obstacle' for emancipation is the 'Other' of the colonized 'Other', i.e. the 'white', 'Creole' or 'European'. The excluded 'Other' will exclude her/his 'Other' and thus continue to perpetuate the colonial categorization. This is the phenomenon that Manuel Castells (2003) calls the "exclusion of the excluders by the excluded".

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The problem is not purely theoretical, methodological or philosophical: it concerns political and economic praxis and has become particularly manifest in the current process of socio-economic and political change in Latin America, often denominated 'the left turn'. In current Latin America, Bolivia is probably the best example of how the nation-state's fundamental conflict runs along a basic boundary that has an ethnic, economic, political and even geographical character. The colonial power relations (and their continuation in the independent nation-state) have produced a relative coinciding overlap between ethnicity (being indigenous or white/mestizo) and economic, cultural and political (dis)empowerment. The country's current political conflict – to a great extent an expression of the necessity of economic, cultural and political emancipation – tends to perpetuate and aggravate, rather than diminish, the symbolic dimension of these boundaries: the empowerment of traditionally disempowered groups tends to reinforce narratives and 'feelings' of identity and mutual exclusion on both sides of the boundary. This phenomenon is, at present, probably an inevitable consequence of a necessary political process but, in the long run, if these narratives and practices of mutual exclusion continue, the consequences could be more violent confrontations and even a de facto division of the country and the failure of the political utopia of President Evo Morales and his movement, Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS). A number of theoretical, methodological, as well as ethical and political concerns arise as a consequence of these problems. Among these are how to:

- Respect and acknowledge subjective categories without essentializing them (a methodological question)
- Acknowledge that certain categories are historically produced as subaltern and as objects of repression and, at the same time, that they have become the point of departure for the production of identity, subjectivity and empowerment

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- Accept the empowerment and production of political subjects and identities on the basis of colonial categories, without engaging in 'the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded', i.e. in the inversion (but not destruction or dissolution) of power relations on the levels of discourse/symbol and praxis

To address these matters comprehensively would be beyond the scope of this article. They will, however, be implicitly present in the following discussion of issues such as categorization, colonial categories of the New World and of the role of these categories and identities in the current situation of processes of change in Latin America. This essay utilizes different disciplines such as: anthropology and, in particular, Fredrik Barth's idea of the boundary; sociology, especially constructivist identity theory as represented by Richard Jenkins; semiotics, including Yuri Lotman's cultural semiotics and theory of boundary; post-structuralist theory, including narratology and discourse theory and, decolonial theory, as informed by Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar.

Categories and Boundaries

According to Jenkins categorization represents "a general social process" and is "a routine and a necessary contribution to how we make sense of [...] a complex world" (1994, 83). Although he acknowledges the question of power as an inherent dimension of categorization, this theory alone does not sufficiently account for the intrinsic relation between power and categorization as historically produced in colonial categories. A brief discussion of one such category, 'indio', is below.

Jenkins distinguishes between 'category' and 'group' in the sense that the category exists primarily 'in itself' while the group is understood as a group 'for itself' making, in this way, an explicit reference to the Marxian distinction between a

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class 'in itself' and a class 'for itself' (1994, 87-88). In other words, while a group corresponds to an idea of identity and collective self, the category does not necessarily imply a feeling of identity, as the category depends on external observation. However, a category can become a 'group' in Jenkins' sense, when categorization is imposed upon a collective with sufficient power and in this way forces the categorization to become identity.

When studying groups and categories, the concept of *boundary* becomes pivotal. As mentioned above, especially two theoretical tendencies are basic in this respect, namely the anthropologist Barth and the semiotician Lotman. According to Barth's 1969 classic work, it is the 'boundary', rather than the 'cultural stuff', that determines the ethnic group. Lotman follows a markedly similar trajectory in his semiotic approach to culture, when he states that the "boundary is a primary mechanism of semiotic individuation" and, that "[E]very culture begins by dividing the world into 'its own' internal space and 'their' external space" (1990, 131 ff.). The concrete manifestation of the cultural boundary can be of any kind, from boundaries in space and time to the phenotype, language or other attributes of an individual or collective subject. In other words, cultural identities, including groups and categories, are defined in the space of *meeting* and *difference*, which is simply another way of stating a relational approach to identity production. An important consequence of this is that the dialogue between mutual 'others' and the exclusion of the 'Other' are two closely related phenomena that take place in the same (physical and symbolic) space (cf. Gustafsson 2004 and 2006). This means that 'mestizaje' (miscegenation) and exclusion appear as converse sides of the same coin. Politically and ethically they are opposed, but in the daily practices they coexist and can be very difficult to separate.

A Genealogy of the Category, 'Indio'

This discussion takes as its point of departure the general and theoretical considerations of the above section. I propose to further examine the production of a specific cultural (ethnic) category that rapidly became naturalized, although it – according to the theoretical assumptions and historical analysis – could not have existed before 1492. From the viewpoint of the production of social/cultural identities the 'meeting of two worlds' (or 'discovery' or whichever necessarily inadequate term chosen) implied the production of new boundaries, new identities and new cultural categories. The most radically new category in this context is the one of the 'indio' and its later translations and transformations into 'Indian', 'Indigenous', 'Native American', 'First Nations', 'naciones originarias' among others. While there can be no doubt that the 'discovery', conquest and colonization of the 'New World' by Europeans is to be considered one of the – or *the* – defining event(s) of modernity – often wrongly considered a specific European phenomenon – (cf. Escobar 2003, Mignolo 2000 and 2005), it is also indisputable that the most completely new, and thus (radically) 'other', category produced in this context is the 'Indian'. Just as 'America' is produced and 'invented' (O'Gorman 1995), the category of the 'indio' was invented and produced, first to confirm and sustain a geographical illusion (that Columbus had arrived in 'India', i.e. Asia) and later as part of a process of reorganization, domination and – in some cases – physical or cultural extermination of thousands of ethnic groups, nations or peoples for whom the term, concept and category of 'Indian/indio' was irrelevant until imposed upon them and sustained through use.

Whenever we discuss a 'radically new category', it is in the sense that whichever term that we choose to use for the category of 'all of the peoples of the continents that became known as the Americas' (or simply pre-Columbian populations), such a category would be irrelevant and non-existent until October

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1492. Its specific origin can be dated to around the 15th of October (1492), when Columbus (Casas/Colón 1989), in his diary, for the first time uses the expression 'indio' as the chosen term for the people inhabiting the newly 'discovered' islands. The reading of this text – the first (known) written account of the 'meeting' – leaves no doubt of the semiotic violence with which the term 'indios' was imposed: it is introduced without any explanation or justification and without giving the newly 'discovered' 'other' any chance of self-reference. This violence, at first, would seem to be part of a Columbus' strategy of confirming the success of his project and, thus, his geographical error, but very soon it became a fundamental part of a much more generalized and radical violence. All inhabitants of this 'new' and 'other' world were included in the category 'indios/Indians,' and the term and category justified a system of domination that would become the model for European modernity's colonial domination, encompassing an economic, political and epistemological system (Mignolo 2000, 2005, Escobar 2003).

The category 'indio' is *produced* in a literal sense; there were no 'indios/Indians' before Columbus coined the term. Although the material sign or signifier is recycled and reapplied (possibly without its author being conscious about it), the sign comes to work in a new context, where it precedes its object/signified and, in this way actually produces this referent (or object), i.e. a whole new category of 'limited' semiosis that produces and limits its object – the 'Other' – as an object of exclusion and exploitation (cf. Gustafsson, 2002). It is apt that this category – although 'translated' into other terms, but nevertheless referring to the 'native' or 'original' peoples of the Americas – has changed from being a category whose basic function was that of 'othering', exclusion and domination, into one of resistance and project (cf. Castells, 2003); in other words, the racial/ethnic/cultural term of 'indio/Indian/indigenous' has developed from being an object/sign of exclusion to a resource of resistance and empowerment and community building among many indigenous peoples of Latin America. With this in mind, we revisit the key questions

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raised earlier: is emancipation possible on the basis of political, economic and epistemological structures produced by domination? Will a movement of emancipation be able, or willing, to trespass and transgress cultural boundaries determined by the structures of domination? If not, will emancipation for one group be possible without some kind of exclusion of the 'other(s)', whether these are the dominant or not? Can a process of emancipation lead to the 'exclusion of the excluders by the excluded'?

Fuzzy Boundaries, Dialogue, Exclusion?

The questions raised here cannot, obviously, be answered with a 'yes' or 'no', nor solved within theory-based discussion. The answers must necessarily be inherently complex and embody contradictions. However, it is relevant to comment upon some aspects related to the question of the boundary as such, and specifically upon the boundary between the category of 'indio/Indian' and those of 'mestizo', 'criollo', 'white', 'black' and others. For this reason it is also relevant to recall Barth's (1969) point regarding the relation between the boundary and the 'cultural stuff'. If we translate this theoretical point to the category that has been discussed, it becomes readily apparent that for more than 500 years there has been a very distinct and clear boundary between the category of 'indio' and other categories, including the one of 'mestizo'. But it is equally obvious that the actual content – or 'cultural stuff' – that characterizes the different groups separated by the boundary has varied and that 'white', 'national' or 'Creole' ('criollo') popular and/or 'official' culture in many parts of Latin America has a syncretic character. The same can be observed about native American or indigenous culture: a number of elements considered characteristic and distinctive of different indigenous communities have a colonial, rather than pre-1492 origin. This does not mean that the categories are not meaningful or that the boundaries do not exist. It means – both on a theoretical and empirical

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level – that the boundary *as such* does not possess a material, cultural character, i.e. it is symbolic.

The boundary is made up of memories, stories, narratives, utopias, signs of selves and others and other kinds of semiotic 'stuff' that produces *meaning* (Castells, 2003) on which identity is constructed. This does not preclude the evidence that a number of material practices and resources can be, and actually are, divided by the same boundaries. The parameter that separates 'white' from 'indigenous' might also divide the more from the less empowered, exploiter from exploited, people of one color from people of another color, but due to the theoretical and empirical character of the boundary, these elements are not intrinsic, but part of an on-going, and therefore changing, historical process. Put differently, cultures and identities are two different phenomena, whose overlap is a result of essentialist or 'culturalist' thinking, but not naturally predetermined. The divide between cultures is a space constantly transgressed by a vast cultural, linguistic, material and even symbolic exchange and dialogue. This divide has occurred for more than 500 years in the case of the Americas, but at the same time the symbolic boundaries have been constructed and maintained as if they were natural frontiers.

From a theoretical point of view, these postulations may seem rather trivial after decades of anti-essentialist thinking within cultural studies, anthropology, sociology and other disciplines, however, if we holistically examine actual political practices the situation of the Americas is distinguishable and these postulations merit re-examination. In politics, commonsense experience, and in other spheres, the boundaries and categories tend to be seen as clear-cut, natural and pure, confusing the epistemological level (identity construction) with the ontological level (that is, with the material production of culture).

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A brief summary of the development of identities and identity politics in the US gives a basis for comparison. In relation to material practices and the production of identities race has provided a fundamental boundary in the US. Until the mid-twentieth century, this boundary constituted a clear division between dominating and dominated on a material, as well as, a symbolic level. But from the 1960s a number of new phenomena, such as civil rights movements, different black movements etc, led to important shifts in both the perception of 'race' and in the material conditions related to race. Without idealizing the situation or declaring the US a 'racial paradise', there is no doubt that the 'black' middle and upper classes have grown to an extent that it cannot be taken for granted today that the race boundary is also a class boundary (cf. Castells, 2003, 75-83). This, however, does not imply that the symbolic boundary has been deleted or even blurred. The 'one drop' ideology (according to which 'blackness' is defined by any genetic presence of African or Afro-American descent) seems still to be dominant as the boundary-defining principle in the production of racial identities in the US. This, of course, underlines Barth's basic idea of the boundary, and it also raises the question of whether the maintenance of this basic ideological boundary actually helps to solve the material and symbolic problems of the United States. Does the idea of a basic racial division help to empower poor blacks, Latinos or 'whites'? Empowerment on racial grounds has been and might still be an important instrument in the struggle against inequality and subalternity, but it might also divert attention from other (material) boundaries and divisions, that do not necessarily follow racial lines.

A key paradox in the United States is on the one hand, profound social, economic and political processes have changed racial conditions – the election of Barack Obama as the nation's president is one of the most radical signs of this. On the other, 'race' is persistently perceived as one of – or even *the* – basic identity boundary. The colonial categorization – the apprehension of the Afro-American as the 'Other' – has been one of the main elements of exclusion during the nineteenth

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and twentieth centuries and, at a certain moment, the 'Other' stops trying to escape the category and begins to use it as a resource for resistance, and subsequently for the creation of an identity project. If being 'black' constituted an element of exclusion and political, economic and cultural disempowerment, the same category should become the point of departure for a struggle for rights and empowerment and it did rather successfully for a proportion of Afro-Americans (cf. Castells, 2003). This process of empowerment took place through a revision and fortification of black identity – black is strength, black is beautiful – that partly accepted some positive values of traditional racial stereotyping (that in the 90s became an important marketing resource, for e.g. in Nike's advertising). A strong Afro-American identity became the – probably necessary – resource to ensure empowerment and a logical consequence of empowerment was the exclusion of the category 'white'. This 'exclusion of the excluder by the excluded' – the 'white' as the 'Other' of the Afro-American – is the result of a given identity strategy, but was it the only possible strategy and the only possible result? The circumstances of US society in the 1950s, 60s and 70s probably did not allow for a different and more utopian strategy, for instance, the one Martin Luther King envisioned. The emancipation struggle against the colonial categorization and boundaries became, thus, a struggle for empowerment of the category of the 'disempowered'. Such empowerment took place at different levels – economic, political, symbolic – but it did not fight the system of categorization as such, and failed therefore to address fundamental epistemological dimensions.

Boundary, Dialogue and Emancipation in Latin America Today

The aim of the brief digression into Afro-American identity above is to corroborate the idea that the logic of colonial material relations (and the logic of colonial epistemology) point towards a political, socio-economic and symbolic process of

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empowerment on the basis of existing categories, rather than to a struggle against colonial categorization as such. This raises the poignant question, do the current political processes in Latin America constitute a similar tendency. Due to the complexity of these processes, the answer will always remain inexplicable. National, regional and local as well as ethnic, racial and other identity dimensions contribute to a political and symbolic geography that cannot be encompassed in one analysis or within a few categories. In this context, Bolivia constitutes a particularly interesting case. Political, economic and symbolic divisions tend to follow the same borderlines. Probably for the first time in Latin America's contemporary history, a political project addresses socio-economic, political and cultural, as well as, identity problems as part of a whole process. This is what characterizes the current political process in Bolivia as radical. The basic socio-economic and political boundary to a great extent coincides with the colonial boundary that constitutes and excludes the category of the 'indio' (translated, as mentioned above, into other more contemporary terms), and this, of course, is also far-reaching. Therefore, although other current political projects in Latin America might seem as radical as the Bolivian project (or even more so), this process has a particular status and importance that reaches beyond the national frontiers to embrace the entire continent, including countries and regions in which ethnic, racial and demographic circumstances would point to other basic boundaries.

To be indigenous today in Bolivia is, consequently, at least potentially, to be part of a project and a process of change – much more specific than the one announced by Barak Obama in the US (and the comparison is important) – that relates to the material and the symbolic dimensions of the collective and individual subject. As such, the project of MAS contains the seed of a general project of emancipation, understood as the possibility of a dialogue that eventually could dissolve boundaries of exclusion and attack colonial epistemology as such. President Morales' indigenusness broadens perspective in a way that permits that Bolivia, as a

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nation, to come to terms with its excluded majority. Currently Bolivia is the scene of a political conflict in which the basic boundary dividing between races, classes, ethnic and cultural identities (and geographical space) seems to be getting deeper and more difficult to cross, rather than being a space of meeting and dialogue. There are a number of reasons for this situation, one of which (and maybe the most important) is the resistance opposed to the current process by the groups and classes that will lose power and privileges. While this is, of course, an almost inevitable part of a process of change, it also points at the disjuncture of necessary process discussed in this article. The social, economic and political process that is taking place now in Bolivia is, without doubt, a necessity for the country and for Latin America. At the same time, however, one can ask if the persistence of the colonial border constitutes an obstacle for emancipation in the sense of preventing a dialogue that points towards the dissolution of the colonial categories and a reversion of colonial epistemology. If the current process continues and is successful, it can and will empower the poor and indigenous population in opposition to the white and mestizo middle class. But what will it take to blur the boundary that separates the 'two Bolivias'?

As proposed above, dialogue is the reversal of exclusion, but exclusion, as well as, its reversal takes place at the boundary. This is obviously a theoretical statement, but its translation into possible practices is a political must. From the outlook of current politics, there is an urgent need for changing power relations throughout Latin America. To empower the poor, the indigenous and a number of other groups, forms part of an immediate agenda. However if this agenda fails to acknowledge that emancipation is not the simple empowerment of one (collective and/or individual) subject to the detriment of an-'Other', then it fails to acknowledge the emancipatory potential of a movement and rebellion whose ultimate horizon would be emancipation from, and not of, colonial (and other repressive) categories and, thus epistemology. In this sense, we are talking of something very similar to the Marxian perspective for *communism*, i.e. the societal form in which the formerly

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antagonistic collective subjects cease to exist and give way to new forms. In this case, the collective subjects, however, are not *classes*, defined in purely economic terms, but categories/groups defined by ethnic, racial, socio-economic *and* symbolic (epistemological) criteria and they are, furthermore, the result of a 'colonial modernity' (Escobar 2003, Mignolo 2005). In the same sense the proletariat's highest aspiration (according to Marx) is its own disappearance (through the disappearance of the socio-economic and political structures that produce and dominate it), I suggest that the highest emancipatory aspiration of the colonized subaltern subjects consists in their potential capacity for destroying the social, economic, political and epistemological structures of domination that produce them and their dominant 'Others'.

There is no doubt that the Marxian idea of communism – as opposed to the still repressive socialism – is utopian in the best (and possibly worst) sense of the term: it is not, and cannot be, part of an immediate, or even long-term political program. It can only be a horizon and a means of critical assessment of existing social forms, whether they are considered 'socialist' or not. The failure to recognize this basic difference between utopia as horizon (and as critical tool) and between the sometimes modest achievements of utopian-revolutionary governments has been one of the fundamental errors of most socialist revolutions. Mistaking achieved realities and immediate political programs for ultimate and utopian goals have contributed to turn utopian hopes into dystopian deceptions. Similarly, the national-popular and revolutionary regimes of Latin America today must distinguish clearly between an ultimate horizon and current and actual processes. To claim utopia as a fulfilled reality leaves little place for a dialogue – including critique – giving space to all the subjectivities existing in the social space. On the other hand, if the emancipatory struggle of the subaltern fails to recognize and acknowledge its own potential, it will be reduced to a combat for the inversion of power relations – the "exclusion of the excluders by the excluded" – and will thus fail to address the basic epistemological

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structures that are part of the domination. Therefore, utopia is necessary as a horizon for the current struggles in Latin America. According to Aínsa (2006), a main function of the political utopia is the capacity for detection of corrections that a certain social formation will need, i.e. a horizon for critique and emancipatory thinking that inevitably will be 'intercultural' and 'mestizo'. To be "intercultural" and "mestizo" implies the dialogue, which can, and should, be with opponents and with the ones who 'fall in between'. Translated into more specific terms, this means that struggle for the originary peoples of Bolivia or the Andes or 'Abya Yala' is also the struggle for the emancipation of the Other, whoever (s)he is – white, afro, mestizo, criollo etc. – if not, there is no emancipation, only a change in power relations based on the same old colonial categories, boundaries and epistemology.

Conclusion

The 'solution' proposed for the paradox and aporia presented at the beginning of this essay², can seem like another paradox: Utopia, especially in Aínsa's contemporary vision, is not a model nor a political program, but something to hope and struggle for, which is, however, also an impossibility – hence my use of the terms boundary and horizon. Although formulated here in abstract terms, utopia is a solution that is a 'non-solution'. The very origin of the term points at this: utopia is a not-place and as a concept it is a 'social fiction'. But at the same time it is a basic and necessary vehicle for real social change. To dream of a radically different and better social formation – as activists and voters all over Latin America do – gives space for change, even if this change is still far from fulfilling the ultimate utopian dreams. Emancipation depends on a utopian idea, a circumstance that has been particularly

² I.e. that it can seem *paradoxical* to question the categories taken for granted, but that it is also an *aporia* to decide to fight against discrimination on the basis of categories that are, in themselves, discriminatory.

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important in Latin America (Gustafsson 2008), but utopia is, and should be, a principle and a horizon to struggle for and a resource for critique.

In this sense, the two paradoxes represent a certain symmetry: the subaltern colonial categories are existing realities of oppression that need to be empowered in order to deliver their own emancipatory potential, including their eventual self-elimination via intercultural dialogue. This utopia is, like any utopia, a sort of non-category that needs to be imagined as a constant praxis of critique and self-reflection in order to deliver the emancipatory potential of actual political processes.

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