

Not just Philosophy.
On the Publication of Philosophy of Liberation, an
Anthology of Enrique Dussel's Thought in Danish.

Julia Suárez-Krabbe*

Roskilde University
Copenhagen Business School

Reviewed text:

Enrique Dussel, 2008, *Frigørelsesfilosofi*. Ed. Asger Sørensen. Forlaget Politisk Revy

In this short text my intention is, to highlight some few elements of Enrique Dussel's work in order to elucidate in what ways he offers alternatives to critical theory and action, and in what ways he contributes to the social sciences and the humanities. In this sense, this text is not just a Review. Rather, it takes the publication of some of Dussel's writings into Danish as an excuse to present Dussel to European scholars.

Not just an option

Enrique Dussel is one of the most trenchant and inspiring contemporary philosophers. He is Doctor in Philosophy from Universidad Complutense de Madrid and Doctor in History from the Sorbonne of Paris. He has been awarded Doctorates Honoris Causa

* PhD Student, Intercultural Studies, Roskilde University and Center for the Study of the Americas, Copenhagen Business School.

from the University of Freiburg in Switzerland and the Universidad Mayor of San Andrés in Bolivia. He has lived in Mexico since 1975 when he left Argentina as an exile, and is today professor at the Department of Philosophy at Universidad Autónoma de México in Iztapala. Dussel stands as one of the founders and developers of Liberation Philosophy and has influenced critical political thought and action in Latin America since the 1960s – he is one of the sources of inspiration of the pioneering historical developments in the re-thinking of Bolivia’s state and its institutional structures.

In Europe, he is known in relation to the dialogues he has maintained with Karl-Otto Apel, Gianni Vattimo, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, Emmanuel Lévinas and Paul Ricoeur. Nevertheless, he remains a comparatively unknown scholar within the broader European context. Ironically, it is exactly this peripheral position that is one of the most important aspects of Dussel’s thought; it is a position that is always in the forefront of his dialogues with European thinkers. But his own peripheral status is not the only position to be taken into account. Dussel’s work is groundbreaking because its main characteristics include a robust geopolitical, ethical and existential stance – that is, an indefatigable insistence on thinking from what Walter Mignolo has called the colonial difference, and a strong political commitment to the excluded. Philosophy of liberation entails assuming:

responsibility for all possible sorts of alterity. And it does so with an ethical, “situated” consciousness, that of any human being with an ethical “sensitivity” and the capacity to become outraged when recognizing the injustice imposed on the other. (Dussel, Moraña & Jáuregui 2008, 342)

Central in Dussel’s work, then, are those people made invisible in history, in philosophy, in political thought, in law. Among these are gendered subjects, racialized subjects, the poor, and future generations. But they are not merely the focus of Dussel’s attention; they are the starting point from which Dussel develops his

ideas. In fact, one of the central demands brought forth by Dussel is transforming knowledge and political practice from their complicity with hegemony toward complicity with the excluded. Taking the premises of Dussel's thought into account entails engaging in the option Dussel sets forth, that is the option of working from indignation, from pain and outrage. An option for self-reflection, for throwing questions of complicity with power at ourselves, to recognize the struggles of the excluded and invisible and to take sides. In short, Dussel's thought calls for taking a decolonial option.

Not just a book

Frigørelsesfilosofi consists of a preamble and introduction, a selection of Dussel's texts, and a postscript. Asger Sørensen, who is the general editor of the anthology, has written the short preamble that centres on contextualizing the translation in time and place, as well as showing its relevance and political importance in a broad philosophical sense (Frigørelsesfilosofi, 7-9). The preamble is followed by a double-sided introduction. In the first text, Danish independent scholar Gitte Pedersen historicizes and contextualizes Liberation Philosophy within a Latin American philosophical debate (Ibid, 13-27). Dussel expert Eduardo Mendieta writes the other side of this introduction. Here, Mendieta contextualizes Dussel's thought globally – in relation to both the span of his work and in relation to Dussel's contribution to our conceptualization of globalization today. Mendieta additionally engages some of Dussel's existential and theoretical sources of inspiration by examining the transformations Dussel's thought has undergone, for example, in relation to Ricoeur, Levinas and Marx (Ibid, 28-52). As a complement to the dual-sided introduction, Asger Sørensen provides short abstracts to each text included in the anthology (Ibid, 53-62).

Dussel authorized the selection of the translated texts. The compilation reflects the chronology and the breadth of his work. It includes examples of his liberation philosophy, ethics, politics, political philosophy, history, interpretations of Marx, discussions with European critical theory, uses and elaborations of Levinas, ideas on intercultural dialogue, concepts of modernity and globalization, and his critique of Eurocentrism¹. Yet despite the range of ideas covered by the selected texts, they are clearly interlinked. According to Torben Albertsen, one of the translators and the writer of the book's postscript, the nexus is Dussel's liberation philosophy, hence the title of the collection, *Frigørelsesfilosofi*.

Albertsen's postscript is a superb exposition of some of the most central features in Dussel's thought (*Frigørelsesfilosofi*, 329-343). It provides the reader with an overview of Dussel's methodological categorizations. This text can be used as a reference for the reader if she finds herself lost in Dussel's texts – these are, as mentioned in Sørensen's preamble, difficult to read. The challenge in reading Dussel also involves his meticulous argumentation and his extensive use of intertextuality. Nevertheless, Dussel might be difficult to read for the uninitiated mind because, rather than reasoning, he shifts the geo- and body politics of reason and requires us to do the same. Thus, the act of translating and publishing *Frigørelsesfilosofi* is, as Asger Sørensen states in the preamble, a *political act* (Ibid, 7).

¹ In this anthology, examples of Dussel's liberation philosophy are 'Frigørelsesfilosofien overfor debatten om postmodernismen og de latinamerikanske studier' (161-180); of his ethics 'Principper, medieringer og det "gode" som syntese"' (89-113), 'Globaliseringen og udelukkelsens ofre' (114-160); of his politics 'Rio Cuarto Manifestet', 'Menneskerettigheder og frigørelsesetikken' (249-263), of his political philosophy 'Seks teser henimod en kritik af politisk fornuft' (67-88); of his elaborations on history 'Globaliseringen og udelukkelsens ofre' (114-160); of his interpretations of Marx 'Karl Marx' videnskabelige forskningsprogram' (264-292); of his discussions with European critical theory 'Den kritiske teori og frigørelsesfilosofien' (293-328); of his uses and elaborations of Levinas 'Det "politiske" hos Levinas' (224-248); of his ideas on intercultural dialogue 'Transmodernitet og interkulturalitet' (181-223); of his elaborations on the concepts of modernity and globalization 'Globaliseringen og udelukkelsens ofre' (114-160); and of his critique of Eurocentrism 'Frigørelsesfilosofien overfor debatten om postmodernismen og de latinamerikanske studier' (161-180) and 'Transmodernitet og interkulturalitet' (181-223).

Useful *for*

The epistemic option pivotal to Dussel's philosophy is, as mentioned, the complicity with the excluded. Intellectually, this is a political project in the sense that, whatever we as scholars produce, it must be produced in the context of fighting for the other. Fighting for the other is not simply a matter of studying her or him, and publishing their stories within our small academic enclaves (or indeed relating those stories to development and aid institutions). Fighting for the other cannot stop at raising awareness of her conditions, his cosmology, their livelihoods; it cannot stop at neither description, nor analysis. It means working from a consciousness of the conditions and struggles of the excluded, and producing outcomes that are useful to them.

In effect this means engaging actively in the struggles of the oppressed; working with people instead of undertaking studies of people. Dussel engages in providing knowledge that contributes to radical transformations of society; globally, regionally, nationally, locally, and particularly. He achieves this by providing realistic meta narratives that can grant perspective, nuance and legitimization to these struggles and serve as inputs in their ethical, philosophical and political fundamentals and methodologies. This is the task he undertakes in his reinterpretations of history and his elaborations and discussions on what kind of changes we should aim at developing – a utopia which he calls transmodernity. Dussel's work on transmodernity is realistic in that the suggestion of feasible, realizable and credible horizons is fundamental to his thinking.

But what does fighting for the other mean? What about the problems that are followed by the whole predicament of representation? In my view, Dussel's philosophy implies producing knowledge that more than speaks for, can be used by - and serves the interests of - the excluded. And although it makes sense to scrutinize the extent to which the excluded can actually speak (or, rather, be heard by those

dominant) the role of the intellectual can be likened to joining the excluded, as a topographer, a legal consultant, a strategic consultant, a spy, an engineer. Because this is war in the sense that people are dying daily from hunger, marginalization, repression, environmental depredation, etc. In Dussel's words:

We are at war — a cold war for those who wage it, a hot war for those who suffer it, a peaceful coexistence for those who manufacture arms, a bloody existence for those obliged to buy and use them. Space as a battlefield, as a geography studied to destroy an enemy, as a territory with fixed frontiers, is very different from the abstract idealization of empty space of Newton's physics or the existential space of phenomenology (1985, 1).

The commitment to engage alongside the excluded implies that the scholar assuming this position can no longer be detached from the battle – she becomes part of it and, in that sense, she speaks for herself, and fights for herself and for the others on her side².

Universality is a good *idea*

Gandhi is known to have said that western civilization would be a good idea, meaning that it does not exist in practice. Dussel does something similar with the idea of universality. It is, to him, a good *idea*. So he sets forth to examine how it can actually be achieved. This is, for example, related to his revisions of history and the attempt to build a world history that seeks to encompass the whole world; a *universal* history. It relates to the basic principle of universality, that of including all. Universality is not an end, but a continuous process against exclusion that implies constant revision and, above all, intercultural dialogue. To Dussel:

² For a thorough investigation into European Modernity as a paradigm of war, i.e. “a way of conceiving humanity, knowledge, and social relations that privileges conflict or *polemos*” see Maldonado-Torres, 2008)

An intercultural dialogue must be transversal, that is to say, it needs to set out from a place other than a mere dialogue between the learned experts of the academic or institutionally-dominant worlds. It must be a multicultural dialogue that does not presuppose the illusion of a non-existent symmetry between cultures (Dussel n.d, 19).

There are stages to be experienced in the move towards critical intercultural dialogue or, more precisely, transmodern dialogue;

In the first place, [...] the self-valorization of one's own negated or merely devalued cultural moments which are found in the exteriority of Modernity, those still remaining outside of the destructive consideration of that ostensibly universal modern culture. Secondly, those traditional values ignored by Modernity should be a point of departure for an internal critique, from within the culture's own hermeneutical possibilities. Thirdly, the critics, in order to be critics, should be those who, living in the biculturality of the "borders", can create critical thought. Fourthly, this means a long period of resistance, of maturation, and of the accumulation of forces. It is a period of the creative and accelerated cultivation and development of one's own cultural tradition, which is now on the path toward a trans-modern utopia. This represents a strategy for the growth and creativity of a renovated culture, which is not merely decolonized, but is moreover entirely new (Ibid, 25).

While I do not have the space to enter into discussion of all the stages here³; nevertheless, I intend to highlight the first step, the affirmation of exteriority, because it allows an idea of Dussel's conceptualization of subjectivity, culture and identity. It is, furthermore, a step, which can only be conceptualized in accordance with the excluded, that is, with those peoples, who have been negated through the practices of past and present colonial powers.

³ These steps are described in *Transmodernitet og interkulturalitet* in *Frigørelsesfilosofi* 181-223, and in Dussel n.d.

The move towards transmodern dialogue requires then, first, affirmation of identity –more specifically the identity of the excluded. Affirmation of exteriority is to be based on the historical consciousness of one’s own cultural tradition. Like Gramsci, Dussel conceives of culture as a system of types of labour, where the physical outcomes of work (i.e. the material) and the symbolic creations are cultural productions⁴. In brief, this means that the ways in which we produce what we need in order to live is what makes us subjects. Subjectivity is corporeal and lived, and the intersubjective, and hence also the cultural, is made as much of somatic and material parts as it is of the symbolic. When speaking of intercultural dialogues, cultures have to be seen as distinct from each other, and the asymmetries between them have to be acknowledged. This is due to the fact that there are differences in the ways and possibilities people have available to them in order to produce what they need. Culture and identity, in short, are central elements of social struggle for the excluded. This, of course, does not negate interaction between cultures, but highlights the importance of being and of time in place. In order to aspire towards intercultural dialogue, cultures must then be understood in a concrete sense, that is, taking into account their history and materiality. In a similar vein, then, universality must be understood not as an endless abstraction, but as a process whose basic requirement is critical intercultural –transmodern– dialogue.

Not just philosophy

Dussel’s oeuvre reflects the importance of moving transdisciplinarily and creatively in the academy. He offers ideas that not only provide novel perspectives on social life, history and utopia, but also inspire new ways of thinking. His work is impressive in its breadth and depth. He has published more than 50 books, addressing concerns across the disciplines of theology, history, anthropology, geography, political theory and philosophy. Dussel’s historical studies comprise a number of accounts of the

⁴ Production here refers to the etymological sense of bringing forth.

church in Latin America (ex. 1988a, 1992a), an examination of Latin America's role in world history, and several texts on the Eurocentric character of universal history (ex. 1966, 1992b, 1995, 2007). As with his ethics of Liberation (ex. 1973, 2006), Dussel has several revised versions of Philosophy of Liberation (ex. 1979, 1994a), and his reinterpretation of Karl Marx's writing is thorough and innovative; for example, it takes into account the Semitic nature of many of the categories, which Marx used in his thought⁵.

As mentioned previously, Dussel's thought calls for taking an existential, political, and ethical decolonial option. The importance of his work is reflected in its translation into English, Portuguese, French, German, and now Danish, confirming that the de-colonial option is a pertinent option today, and not whatsoever an outdated issue in new guises. In fact, the accusation of 'outdatedness' is one of the most alarming symptoms of the problems of naturalized difference and hierarchy in race and gender relationships today, and continues to be one of the main obstacles to north-south academic dialogue.

⁵ One of Dussel's earliest works is an investigation into Semitic thought (1969). Some of Dussel's reinterpretations of Marx are: *Hacia un Marx desconocido* (1988), and *Las metáforas teológicas de Marx*, (1994b).

References

- Dussel, Enrique (n.d.). Transmodernity and Interculturality.
<http://www.enriquedussel.org>.
- _____ (1966). *Hipótesis para el estudio de Latinoamérica en la historia universal*. Universidad del Nordeste, Resistencia: Universal.
- _____ (1969). *El humanismo semita*. Buenos Aires: Eudeba.
- _____ (1973). *Para una ética de la liberación latinoamericana*. Vols. I, II, III, IV and V, Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI.
- _____ (1979). *Filosofía de la liberación*. Bogotá: Nueva América.
- _____ (1985). *Philosophy of Liberation*. Transl. Aquilina Martinez & Christine Morkovsky. New York: Orbis Books.
- _____ (1988a). *Historia general de la iglesia en América Latina*. Salamanca: Sehila, Ediciones Sígueme.
- _____ (1988b). *Hacia un Marx desconocido*. México: Siglo XX & UAM-I.
- _____ (1992a). *Historia de la iglesia en América Latina*. Madrid: Mundo Negro.
- _____ (1992b). *1492. El encubrimiento del otro*. La Paz: Plural Editores. Transl. into English: *The Invention of the Americas*. 1995. New York: Continuum,.
- _____ (1994a). *Historia de la filosofía y filosofía de la liberación*. Bogotá: Nueva América.
- _____ (1994b). *Las metáforas teológicas de Marx*. Pamplona: Editorial Verbo Divino.
- _____ (2006). *Ética de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y la exclusión*. Madrid: Trotta.
- _____ (2007). *Política de la liberación. Historia mundial y crítica*. Madrid: Trotta.
- Dussel, Enrique, Moraña, M. and C. A. Jáuregui (eds.) (2008). *Coloniality at Large. Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*. Duke University Press.
- Maldonado-Torres, Nelson (2008). *Against War. Views from the Underside of Modernity*. Duke University Press.

A great part of Dussel's work (biographies, articles and books) can be found at www.enriquedussel.org