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Readings of the coloniality of power in the COVID-19 global dynamics: A brief reflection on Global South’s socio-political locations

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1. Introduction: decoloniality and the colonial world order

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the adjective \textit{embedded} holds two basic meanings: “fixed into the surface of something”; or “[i]f an emotion, opinion, etc. is embedded in someone or something, it is a very strong or important part of him, her, or it”. The second definition fits perfectly into the concept portrayed by decolonial literature about the reminiscences of colonialism in nowadays society, as originally schematized by Aníbal Quijano. According to his formulation of coloniality of knowledge, being and power, the Western colonial mindset has remained \textit{embedded} in the imaginary of the contemporary global society, sustained by both knowledge production and socio-political organization structures (Quijano, 2000).

Post-colonial and decolonial studies were introduced to academia in the second half of the 20th century, aimed at questioning the presupposition of impartiality adopted by academic narratives and socio-political institutions when dictating normativity from the perspective of traditionally marginalized communities, namely those located in the Global South. Examining the int.\>the effects of colonialism in determining ethno-racial hierarchies, such readings prove as, per definition, neutrality attempts by non-critical narratives and scientific discourses reproduce entrenched discriminatory perspectives, and how the global South remains treated as the political “Other” in the products of dominant thought (Miglievich-Ribeiro, 2014). In other words, the theories elucidate on how the present global order directly reproduces and expands Eurocentric practices forcibly internationalized by European expansionism through work, sex, authority and subjectivity/inter subjectivity structures based on geographic and racial hierarchies (Miglievich-Ribeiro, 2014; Quijano, 2000).

The order - named modernity/coloniality - is maintained through the remaining concentration of all knowledge sources by dominant groups, resulting in the intentional constant reproduction of its subjectivity/inter-subjectivity as the sole reliable source of knowledge (Quijano, 2000). Similarly, the so-called coloniality of power is sustained through the continuing strict racial and ethnic hierarchy in the post-colonial world and subordination of other communities and cultures to standards of social behavior and organization from the global North (Gosfoguel, 2008; Quijano, 2000; Quijano, 2007).\textsuperscript{1}

During the current international crisis stimulated by the coronavirus pandemic (hereinafter “COVID-19”), the inequality between communities around the globe has been particularly evidenced. Observing national political arrangements concerning the disease, one may perceive, for example, the Brazilian government’s neglect towards indigenous groups (Mantelli & Neiva, 2020), the pandemic’s impacts on Immigrant communities in the U.S. (Clark, Fredricks, Woc-Colburn, Botazzi, & Weatherhead, 2020), or the refusal of treating Palestinian individuals by Bibi’s Israel (OHCHR, 2021) as direct impacts of coloniality in the access to health. In the macro transnational perspective, nonetheless, b

\textsuperscript{1} The concept includes the submissiveness of Global South communities to the European formulations of acceptable political and social organization structures both nationally and internationally.
from different nationalities. Further, on the present circumstances, to be cruel, and therefore a threat to the West (Lovell, 2014).

2. The spreading of COVID-19: the “China virus” narrative

The emergence of COVID-19 was undeniably accompanied by the international responsibility narrative, according to which health professionals across the globe sought to attribute the emergency of the SARS mutation which led to the resulting global pandemics to specific behaviors. What initially seemed to be a preventive scientific measure, nonetheless, soon became an attempt to blame predetermined cultures, nations, or ethnicities. The most notably affected nation was the People’s Republic of China, following Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and other far-right leaders’ “China Virus” narrative, according to which not only Chinese eating habits would have initiated human-to-human viral transmission, but the country’s government was named responsible for its spreading, amidst several other conspiracy theories (Chiu, 2020; de Lima & Domingos, 2020).

The behavior shows a direct continuation of the colonial and racializing processes concerning Asia and its communities since the 17th and 18th Centuries. The “far East” portrayal emerged during the period, when the European academics evaluated Chinese society as immutable and stuck in the past. Described as “inferior and barbarous, narrow-minded and xenophobic”, the Chinese became subjects of intellectual subordination and Western fear (Gu, 2012; Martinez-Robles, 2007). Amidst the Western/Eastern dichotomy which aligned with the Modern/Barbarous one, Western thinkers established the notion of the Yellow Peril. Once again conceiving the continent as homogenous according to the concept of race, the Asian individual was biologically determined to be cruel, and therefore a threat to the West (Lovell, 2014).

The negative attributions of the Asian stereotype not only continued existing but worsened through the 20th century. Especially during the 1929 financial crisis, Japanese and Chinese groups were portrayed by European and American politicians and media as oppressors to the low and medium-income White classes. The deplorable situation of common workers in Europe and the U.S. was blamed on Asian immigrants, which served as a scapegoat, accused of taking the true American’s job. This was considered even more unacceptable as their race was considered to be biologically inferior. Following the political trends, the mainstream media started to openly defend racial politics, leading individuals sharing traditionally Asian features to be broadly harassed as minorities in Western countries (Lovell, 2014).

As a consequence of the ethno-racial violence, Asian groups became geographically excluded from the society, forced to create and inhabit ghettos, the so-called Chinatowns. Due to the lack of social integration and poor sanitary conditions, they became known as dirty, a stereotype that prevails until nowadays (Shim, 1998), and has been reinforced with the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, their image was attributed to food stigma not only derived from particular cultural habits - these being homogenized as belonging to the whole continent by the dominant imaginary - but to the habits resulting from living in extreme poverty, leading to the imagery of consumption of dishes considered exotic and weird (Shim, 1998): rats, mice, cats, or even bats. While highly criticized by post-colonial academia, sinologism, stereotyping, racism and xenophobia continued to be widely spread in the West, achieving its peak in the current crisis.

As for past epidemics, the origin of COVID-19 was internationally attributed to elements of “dirtiness” and “exotism” of the artificially homogenized Chinese culture, in specific reference to the existence of the wet markets in the region. Wet markets are central elements of food commercialization and consumption in Asia. They are spread in several countries around the continent and specialize in fresh products. In fact they do not differ much from European or Latin American open markets both in their characteristics and social function. However, these similarities are questioned by Western observers (Westcott & Wang, 2020). When confronted by these questions, the conventional Western answer defends that Chinese commercialization of living organisms is the issue, even for meat-eaters. However, a first response is to point to the commercialization of living animals in any French, American, Brazilian or Luxembourgish countryside – cows, hens, goats, either for consumption or recreation – and fish market. This does not make “Chinese/Asian culture” peculiar, as similar practices exist around the world, with their associated sanitary problems, consistent all around the world (Shim, 1998).

Further, the commercialization and consumption of exotic species are rare not only in China but throughout Asia, especially in big cities (Westcott & Wang, 2020). Their commerce is limited to certain regions and has been addressed by the Chinese government since the SARS epidemics of the early 2000s, similarly to other countries (Westcott & Wang, 2020). Food is a social expression and a common metonymy for an entire culture. By labeling Asian food as exotic, gross or weird, European culture is reaffirmed as the standard culture, discrediting the preservation and expression of other cultures.

The narrative has now, in the run for solutions, achieved extreme levels, further revealing bigoted rather than precautionary tone. Although China has set an example for dealing with the pandemic, developing a high-efficiency vaccine (Tian, 2021) and being particularly productive in implementing preventive measures (Aliakbari, 2020), the world was burst with fake news spreading fear towards the vaccine’s components and China’s supposed attempt to control the global population through it (Mudge & Weber, 2020), in a smooth continuity to 17th and 18th Centuries stereotyping tales.

Adding to the nation-blaming narratives, the treatment of Chinese cultures has been having immediate impact to individuals somehow related to the country in the eyes of the external and discriminatory

2 In order to avoid committing the same mistake of addressing academia as a neutral and universal knowledge, one must consider the presented arguments represent the perspectives of a Brazilian author inserted in specific racial, gender and class backgrounds, not representing in any way a totalizing truth or the Global South’s homogenous position towards the issue, being such thing read as impossible concerning such a heterogeneous group.

3 Ming Dong Du defines sinologism as “an implicit system of ideas, notions, theories, approaches, and paradigms, first conceived and employed by the West in the encounter with China do deal with all things Chinese and to make sense of the bewildering complexity of Chinese civilization” (The New York Times, 2021).
of catastrophes appear to not have become reality. The advocacy agency No White Saviors and Liberian influencer ZuleKaa assertively denounced the New York Times’ article entitled “A Continent Where the Dead Are Not Counted” (No White Saviors, 2020), in which the newspaper stated the low rates of COVID-19 in African countries – which it did not care to individualize – were not attributable to any positive actions, but rather their inability to count our unwillingness to announce reliable data (The New York Times, 2021).

Both the described situations contribute to the painting of a long-established portrayal of the African continent: firstly, medical experimentation with Black and African individuals is a historical practice proposed by colonial ideologies. Secondly, alleged humanitarian motivation to interfere in African countries’ internal affairs suggests an appropriation and objectification of the subjects and their narratives. It downplays the humanity of African citizens and submits its interests to Western attitudes and goals through reinforcing the notion of Africans as vulnerable individuals without capacity to control its countries’ respective internal policies who, for that reason, are left drift to Western “charity” actions (Pogge, 2010). Several critiques to such stereotype have been previously theorized by critical race theory, anti-colonial and African authors in analysis of the subalternized groups’ lack of agency. Nonetheless, resistance to it exists since way earlier, when the first colonial occupations of the Americas and Africa, and hence race and ethnic global division, emerged as the dominant global systems (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

The current order is a direct product of the first colonial processes, which sought to exploit natural resources from occupied lands, then named Latin-American and African territories, as if they had no owners or purpose other than serving colonizer peoples (Young, 2016). Such presupposition was based on the evolutionary theories of civilization developed by the precursors of international law, according to which the Western communities represented the epitome of social evolution, and hence entitled to the concept of humanity (Quijano, 2000). As a conclusion, they would hold both the burden to educate colonized communities – barbarous ethnicities - and the privilege to lawfully treat them as irrational animals in an anthropocentric society - their exploitation was made morally accepted and slavery was justified (Quijano, 2000).

While ethnicity legitimized colonization, race and phenotype became the identification of social and political classes resulting from it, being the Black Africans and native Americans located in the lowest state of the hierarchy, a truly subhuman estate (Ortégal, 2018). Racism specifically towards Black and native people turned structural, Africa and America becoming the metonymy for hundreds of diasporic generations to come. Hence, despite the formal decolonization and abolition acts, mostly during the 19th century, the estates remained entrenched in social relations, as part of collective consciousness and subconsciousness and socio-political institutions’ organization, being expanded to all global territory, directly or indirectly controlled by Western nations (Quijano, 2000; Quijano, 2007). Moreover, they were endorsed by the second wave of colonization in Africa, where the “scramble for Africa” was consolidated, re-victimizing its peoples (Zeleza, 2006).

The first problem presented in Mira’s speech, under the light of this context, is hence not exclusive to him, but a small representation of the problematic mindset existent in societal intersubjectivity and,
consequently, academia, especially when academia itself is mostly concentrated in the West (Quijano, 2000). Scientific racism persisted for years in medical research, being defined as researchers’ attempt to prove intrinsic hierarchical differences between races, as did the literal use of Black people and African nationals and territory for experimental trials, this lasting until less than a century ago (Tilley, 2011). One of the biggest examples of such phenomenon outside of eugenic dictatorships contexts is the Tuskegee case, where Black individuals were found to be used for medical experimentation on syphilis effects done by the United States for four decades, until 1972 (Rothman, 2017). Legally, it was only with the Nuremberg trials rulings that international medical ethics demanded consent from the subjects before testing, in a revealing decision on scientific atrocities and dehumanization of racialized bodies (Tilley, 2011).

Concerning the second presented issue, needless to say, there is above all a complete ignorance considering the African reality: the continent is formed by fifty-four countries, six of which are part of the ten fastest-growing economies in the world, each one a collection of different cultural identities, races, ethnicities, and socio-economic situations and political capacities. Reaffirming the disadvantaged geographical and ethno-racial position of African individuals – especially Black Africans - in the international order and homogenizing all of their conditions and interests in order to reassure Western saviorism brings back the Lacanian concept of infantilization. González (2020) summarizes the concept in reference to black women as the appropriation of a subject’s authority over their own narrative, as is often done with children when adults address them in the third person: the individual is “excluded, ignored, and considered absent despite its presence” (González, 2020). Western voices externally observe non-Western conditions and transform them into a homogenous truth without effective dialogue with the persons under observation.

In the present context, Western voices reject several national data in order to reaffirm the subaltern position of the continent’s communities, and suggest unsolicited interference based on the presupposition of such subalterity. It is in that context that Escobar argues the “Third World (sic.) reality is inscribed with precision and persistence by the discourses and practices of economists, planners, nutritionists, demographers and the like, making it difficult for people to define their own interests in their own terms—in many cases actually disabling them to do so” (Escobar, 1992). Thus, the relativizing process of internal wills and narratives reveals misleading conductions of humanitarian actions, that either on purpose or through embedded concepts enhance colonial attitudes.

4. Conclusion

The complexity of the current international situation and the damaging effects of the social implication of it to subalternized groups demonstrate the need for questioning the practices of marginalization of the current global order. The context of despair in international relations outlines the existent colonial stratification in terms of race, ethnicity and geography. COVID-19 stressed the conditions under which thousands of different ethnicities, homogenized into specific groups, live under such order, through either revealing the unspoken but common bigotry towards the Asian and Chinese communities in Western societies or reproducing the socially accepted subalternization of Black and African groups.

The roles and stereotypes enforced by the measures taken during the crisis reveal the constant unsustainability of the Western epistemological perspective. The analysis categories by decolonial scholars have proved effective in revealing its effects on the current situation. As a worldwide phenomenon, COVID-19 reinforces the international structure of power not only in economic terms, but also socially, culturally and within academia.

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6 Translated from Portuguese.
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