

## New Book – Decolonizing Politics and Theories from the Abya Yala

Written by Aura Cumes

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# New Book – Decolonizing Politics and Theories from the Abya Yala

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AURA CUMES, APR 9 2022

**This is a pre-print excerpt from *Decolonizing Politics and Theories from the Abya Yala*. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.**

The colonizers in the sixteenth century brought with them epistemologies of domination, imposing capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism, which operated with similar and intertwined logics, like three harmful poisons that, when combined, turned much more lethal. The supremacy of class, sex, and race, operated as power resources to legitimize the domination of the strongest over the weakest, the rich over the poor, the urban over the rural, men over women, 'Man' over nature, Christians over the 'witches', Jews, Moors, 'heretics', then 'Blacks' and 'Indians'. In the sixteenth century, the territories that today make up Spain were places of war, persecution, death, famine, and pestilence. It is from this context that the invaders and colonizers of the territories now known as Latin America and the Caribbean surged.

The system of colonial domination has had a pretension of totality, which means that it has sought to colonize the entire life of these territories and their inhabitants. For this reason, colonization is at the same time ontological, epistemic, spiritual, political, economic, cultural, moral, etc. From a certain Marxist vision from the 1970s, recognizing the colonial oppression was an insult to the dominant left-wing ideology (Martínez, 1990), thus, coloniality was considered as an almost exclusively economic problem linked to the feudal heritage imposed by the colonizers. However, at that time and since the beginning of the colonial process, Indigenous Peoples understood it as an artifact that sought the integral destruction of their lives. Thus, when they observed the destruction of their history and their memory, with the murder of their wise men and women, the burning of their handwriting, the destruction of their temples, and the rape of their women, they rushed to leave records about their world, origin, wisdom, conflicts and how they were experiencing colonial violence. It is for this reason that we are fortunate to have writings by members of the Native Peoples, which should not be treated as museum pieces, but as places for the safeguarding of an ancient memory that still inhabits us and with which we can dialogue.

This book contains a range of chapters written by different authors from Abya Yala who each analyze colonial domination from different perspectives. It is an example that shows how coloniality has had the pretension of totality and, therefore, must be challenged via multiple pathways. Some insist on saying that colonizers never cared how the inhabitants of Indigenous Peoples thought about life and death, what languages they spoke, what deities they worshiped or how they dressed; what those pragmatic men cared about was how to find riches in the lands and bodies they invaded. But colonization ontologically reinvented the colonized when it provoked the destruction of memory via the annihilation of knowledge, and when it sought to impose identities of orphanhood and servitude.

The ontological and epistemological colonization seeks to destroy those peoples of ancient pasts and leave 'masses' of 'miserable' 'Indians without past', 'demon worshipers', 'barbarians', who shouldn't rebel against the colonial servitude and looting, but rather be grateful for been rescued by 'those good Christians'. This way, the bodies whose memories have been erased would be more useful for forced labor, for those who do not remember that they were once free did not seek their freedom. For this reason, the annihilation of memory is crucial to the perpetuation of colonial domination.

## **New Book – Decolonizing Politics and Theories from the Abya Yala**

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Despite the fact that colonization has had an aspiration to totality, it has not been able to be total, since the dignity and permanent resistance of the enslaved Native and African Peoples has set limits to its voracity. These resistances should not present themselves as recent, or as a product that foreign individuals came to awake. On the contrary, they began when Cristobal Colón and his followers set foot in these territories. The forms of resistance were different. Some preferred death in the face of slavery, others sought strategies to confuse the colonial power while trying to live and defend life for the peoples – just as the Kaqchikeles Mayans wrote in the first decades of the colonization, in the *Memorial de Sololá* or *Crónica Xajil*:

Then Tunatiuh [colonizer Pedro de Alvarado] came out of Xepau and began to harass us because the people would not humble themselves before him. Six months had passed in the second year of our escape from the city ... when Tunatiuh arrived there and burned it ... We did not submit to the Castilians and we were living in Holom Balam. Oh my children! (*Memorial de Sololá*, translation by Adrián Recinos, 1999: 105)

On the 1st Coak day [27 March 1527] our slaughter by the Castilians began. They were fought by the people and continued to wage a prolonged war. The death harmed us again, but none of the people paid the tribute (*Memorial de Sololá*, translation by Adrián Recinos, 1999: 105).

Africans brought as slaves also resisted in multiple ways, such as through Quilombismo, as Maria do Carmo Reboucas dos Santos and Marina Bolfarine Caixeta show in this book. In Quilombos they protected and re-signified food, collective care, languages, knowledge, spiritualities, rebelliousness and the meaning of life. It is due to the resistance of the Native Peoples and enslaved African Peoples that today it is possible to speak of the permanence of the wisdom contained in each of their languages and ways of living.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, we cannot talk about the postcolonial, because the colonizers did not leave. They stayed and built states responding to their interests. The state is the apparatus that has allowed them to manage the accumulated wealth obtained through dispossession for more than 300 years. Furthermore, such states were configured in such a way that the perpetuation of the colonial dispossession upon a racist order would be possible. Thus, they institutionalized the colonial domination through racism rather than break with it. The independence movements of the nineteenth century, similar to what happened in the United States, allowed European colonizers and their descendants to use and possess the riches that allowed them to perpetuate the 'new' colonial and racist order.

After those independence movements, the European colonizers and their descendants throughout Latin America and the Caribbean brought in more white Europeans to whom they offered land in abundance, 'Indians of service' and tax benefits. As long as they did not feel themselves natives from these territories, because they were not, they created nationalisms based on symbols such as national anthems that later spread throughout each of the states they invented. The nineteenth century was also a time in which the mestizos emerged (a classification used to describe a person of combined European and Indigenous American ancestry). They entered local government and took on leadership positions, expanding the cruelty of the colonial racist power over the original inhabitants. Many states also attempted to hide the problem of racism by imposing ethnocide and genocidal miscegenation. This is a topic that is often not problematized in decolonial studies, when the analysis is posed as bipolar, Europe versus Latin America. An example is when the president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, demanded that the Pope and the King of Spain ask Mexico for forgiveness for the events committed during the 'conquest'. However, as mestizo, he does not seem to identify himself as part of the problem and therefore does not try to stop it. Countless other examples can be given here, such as the case of the Tren Maya, an intercity railway project that affects many Indigenous communities.

Colonial continuity is a global reality in all fields of life. Just as in its beginning there could be no capitalist accumulation without the enslavement of African inhabitants, genocide and the plundering of the territories of Mother Earth and the lives of the Indigenous Peoples. The current capitalist expansion continues to use racism as the basis of its accumulation, as it is clearly expressed in the chapter by Miguel Alejandro Saquimux Contreras. Indigenous Peoples' territories are invaded by mining, hydroelectricity projects and logging projects. Similarly, the forests are sought after by pharmaceutical and cosmetics industries and the villages folklorized for tourism. The Indigenous

## **New Book – Decolonizing Politics and Theories from the Abya Yala**

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Peoples also continue their resistance processes, which is why they are the ones who often face state persecution and death. However, it is still difficult for academics, intellectuals and politicians to recognize that racism as a colonial power device legitimizes looting against the Indigenous Peoples.

The works gathered in this book problematize the colonial and suggest ways of decolonization from different fields. Valeria Victoria Rodriguez Morales discusses Sumak Kawsay, translated as Buen Vivir, as a possible moral base for green policies – criticizing the concept of development. Iran Neves Ordonio, Carla Ladeira Pimentel Águas and Marcos Moraes Valenca also address the notion of development as modern and anthropocentric as opposed to the practice and thought of Buen Vivir of the Xukuru do Ororubá People (located in Brazil) who understand agriculture as sacred. The authors argue that this is a counter-hegemonic proposition to the western relationship of the human being with nature. Thus, to understand the meaning of life for Indigenous Peoples and their relationship with Mother Earth and everything that creates life, it is vital to understand its semantic content. This content is expressed in different languages, in the relationships established between people, between communities and with everything that generates life. This would prevent similar concepts of Buen Vivir from becoming standardized, reduced to intellectual creations or kidnapped by state power and losing their complex and transformative meaning.

Christina Soto's chapter proposes an innovative topic. According to the author, the form of thought that emerges from the Latin American region, due to its political and epistemological circumstances, can be characterized as anti-philosophical nature. In my opinion, this analysis could dialogue with those who claim a Latin American philosophy, partially as a response to the denial of the existence of a philosophy of its own or one that was created in this region. A consideration from Indigenous Peoples thinkers could also be added to the problematization of the 'Latin American' generalization, since it generalizes an experience that is not common. Those who insist on claiming a Latin American thought, science or philosophy are often those thinkers subalternated by academia and by European and North American intellectuals. Even being white or mestizo, they are treated as inhabitants of the 'Third World', a space seen from eurocentrism as a consumer of their theories – a situation that to a great extent has been the case. However, Indigenous Peoples do not begin from European knowledge to create life. That is to say, by the mere fact of being Latin American, Indigenous Peoples do not necessarily agree with white or mestizo intellectuals, especially if they have a colonial, denialist or extractivist positions of indigenous knowledge.

In the region so-called Latin America, and vindicated as Abya Yala by Indigenous Peoples, there is no single way of thinking. Quite the opposite. There exists a plurality of thoughts, experiences and creations that have been, and can continue to be, denied under the umbrella of 'Latin American thought' as protected by politicians, academics and intellectuals, whose racial, gender and class privileges do not allow them to recognize their powerful positions. Thus, it exists as an immense area within which to understand the framework of colonial power, giving shape to a thought that arises in these territories, local and at the same time universal, that seeks to be decolonized.

Latin America, as a region, has been a space of contestation due to its origin, structure and colonial organization. As said before, the Latin American states were built by Europeans, their descendants and mestizos to manage the accumulation of colonial wealth and guarantee the perpetuation of dispossession against Indigenous Peoples and peasants. Deisy Sorzano and Etienne Oderhwa, explain that the armed conflicts, such as those that happened in Colombia for fifty years, show the state functioning as the machinery of powerful economic, political and military groups. As the guardian of capitalist interests against the threat of armed groups like the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas (FARC), inspired in the socialist narrative, the Colombian state was incapable of understanding other actors such as natives, Afro-descendants, peasants and women who were all involved and affected by the conflict. Far from admitting the conditions that pushed these armed and unarmed actors to get involved in the conflict, the Colombian state named and treated all as insurgents. Thus, the colonial state was sectarian, and it was an agent of the capitalist system – showing ignorance of the conflict.

The resistance and political action of the different movements and communities face the colonial problem that is nested in everything – but so often denied by academia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and certain international organizations that have placed its precepts as dominant. Brazil's Landless Movement is explored by Ellen Monielle do Vale Silva and Guilherme de Limo Sousa. A movement that had class solidarity and internationalism as central elements today discusses its actions focusing on the colonial as a unifying element of

## **New Book – Decolonizing Politics and Theories from the Abya Yala**

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struggles to challenge extractivism and decomposition of peasant economies. As Christian Ferreira Crevels discusses in his chapter the colonial labels imposed on the Madihadeni People, which range between 'meek' or 'brave'. This lexicon, in addition to being animalistic, takes away their condition as complex societies that have used multiple and sinuous strategies of resistance in the midst of colonial enclosure.

The Zapatista Movement located in Chiapas, Mexico, gives us many epistemic inspirations of political practice and of autonomy – as Sebastián Granda Henao's chapter details. A large resistance and collective rebelliousness have made other societies possible, where autonomy is central, where there has been the conviction of not being subordinate to the state apparatus. To say 'the people order and the government obeys' is a principle opposite to colonial democracy. Zapatismo is one of the movements with more integrity that challenges capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism.

Alina Ribeiro and Marina Scotelaro's chapter proposes that the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) can be understood as a project against hegemonic and colonial thinking since it not only admitted the existence of the colonial problem, but also sought ways to break with it by including historically excluded perspectives. ALBA was counter-hegemonic with a clearly anti-imperialist discourse that understands the colonial as the relationship of dependency created between countries. However, it is necessary to reflect on how the different states that made up ALBA problematized the colonial within their societies. You can see here two ways of understanding the colonial – one based on the relationship between 'First World' and 'Third World' as the geopolitics of power, and the other understood as a racial order where Indigenous and Black Peoples continue to be the dispossessed subjects. How the governments of the states that make up ALBA related to Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendants is crucial for understanding how ALBA pursued an anti-colonial and decolonial project.

María do Carmo Rebouças dos Santos and Marina Bolfarine Caixeta's chapter proposes the decolonization of South-South Cooperation (SSC) from an analytical framework based on post-development. They understand SSC as a social and political opportunity to practice cooperation in a new and more coherent way – in solidary, horizontal and collective relations based in social groups and not in states, neither in the logic of the North-South. It can even be seen as cooperation between those doing their own anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial struggles around the planet. It is essential to reflect on how solidarity is understood in the decolonization of South-South Cooperation. Many impoverished peoples are not in such a situation because they are incapable of building 'development', but rather because they have been constantly looted and exploited. Hence, cooperation with these peoples cannot be understood as charity but rather as the possibility of returning to them something that has been taken from them. Thinking about reciprocity seems to be crucial because it could work as a way for people to contain and sustain each other and hence sustain the importance of the commons.

Francisco Javier Castellón and Rocío Nirari Arredondo Botello's chapter discusses labor from the perspectives of Latin American critical thinking and decolonial theory. They expect to make a call toward the formulation of a theory to contribute to the design of policies able to attack these problems. The regions and countries that surge from colonial history carry a reality rooted in the racial division of labor that is intertwined with the social and sexual division of labor. Thus, being born 'Indigenous', 'Black' or a woman implies being forced into a form of servitude. Jobs considered prestigious – such as those conducted with intellect, with weapons or with words – were well-paid and destined for racialized individuals considered as 'superior'. On the other hand, those jobs done with manual labor were imposed on racialized individuals considered 'inferior'. The latter were unpaid or underpaid and undervalued in the colonial world. Racism steals human vitality and capacities when it violently conditions large groups to exclusively carry out a certain activity in conditions of slavery and servitude. Given this, 'thinking about informal work' in terms of backwardness, compared to industrialization, is deeply problematic. Such an approach deserves to be analyzed in greater detail as proposed by the authors.

This book has important contributions due to the studies presented and the analyses that accompany them. But it has a greater virtue, which is to generate concerns of various topics from decolonial thought of great relevance at this time for the social sciences and for the political intelligentsia that has embraced it. She, who writes this preface, does not consider herself to be part of decolonial thought, which, as can be seen in the writings, marks its beginnings in the 1990s. Undoubtedly, having been asked to write this introduction is due to the fact that there is a coincidence

## **New Book – Decolonizing Politics and Theories from the Abya Yala**

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between my thinking and decolonial thinking, but I must emphasize that my analytical trajectory goes back to the vindication of this old problematization of the colonial, and the struggle to rebel against this system has been unstoppable. Those who did so left their mark in writings where they denounced the atrocities that they were objects 'for being Indians', 'for being natural', 'for being Black'. Others did not leave their mark in writing, but they inherited the possibility to detect this problem even though it was preached that such a problem no longer existed.

It is healthy to reflect on the racialization of knowledge consumption that is occurring in the problematization of the colonial issue. It is curious how the analysis of the colonial was, with exceptions, rejected by the social sciences for almost five centuries. Analysts of Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendants or Blacks were often ridiculed. However, when Latin Americans from European descent or mestizos, privileged as whites in their countries, settled in the US and Europe and were treated as inferior, they opened up to an understanding of racism and the colonial problem that they once rejected or of which they were sceptical. Ironically, when they return their theories from the North to the Latin American territories, they have greater possibilities of being heard due to the fact that in racialized societies, their words achieve greater legitimacy than that of Indigenous and Black Peoples. This process reaches its most serious implications when it begins to generate a mono- culture of decolonial thinking, where the multiple paths and understandings are no longer recognized.

In these lines, I have made an effort to recognize the multiple trajectories of the analysis of the colonial, thus rejecting the racialization of knowledge from the social sciences. This book constitutes a sample of pluralities that opens up a horizon of possibilities.

*This chapter has been translated from Spanish. You can read the original [here](#).*

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### **About the author:**

**Aura Cumes** is an Indigenous Mayan Kaqchiquel woman from Guatemala. She has a PhD in Anthropology from CIESAS (Center for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology) Mexico, a Master's in Social Sciences from FLACSO Guatemala, a degree in Social Work from the Rafael Landivar University and is a member of the Autonomous Collective of Saberes Mayas Ixb'alamkyej Junajpu Wunaq.