

## From History to Objects - Decolonization Practice and Future

Decolonization is twofold: self-reflective on the one side and liberating on the other. Both sides are interconnected like two sides of a coin. As early as 1937, Julius Lips attacked the colonial view of the Europeans on the "primitives" by reversing this gaze and trying to show how the Others artistically portrayed the Europeans - the colonial masters - e.g. ships with which they came. Ships full of slaves, diseases, plants and mercantile products outward bound and natural products, native artefacts melted to gold, plants and fantasies about the New World homewards. And thus, the ships are symbolic of the white man's world, including the whole material world, which was accompanied by the "annihilation of native civilization" (Lips 1937: 72). The fairy tale of the 'world without history' except Europe, was already attacked. What was left was history written by the flows of goods and the political and cultural consequences of this one-sided view of the world (Wolf 1982). In this sense „[i]t is by diagnosing the obvious, namely that there is no knowledge of the Other which is not also a temporal, historical, a political act. (...) [and] How has anthropology been defining or construing its object- the Other? Search for an answer has been guided by a thesis: Anthropology emerged and established itself as an allochronic discourse; it is a science of other men in another Time“ (Fabian 1983: 1, 143). In this respect, conquest, colonization and science go hand in hand with a certain sense.

Therefore, the question still arises how anthropology -in general- deals with it and what the anthropology of the colonized (the 'native anthropologists', the 'indigenous anthropologists') in particular contributes to it. For there are still inconsistencies when, for instance, historians speak of „Indians" [„Indianer“ in the German original] instead of Indigenous or the other (Reinhard 2016: 293). But perhaps this also has to do with the fact that for many historians decolonization is an epoch that has come to an end with the 20th century once the formerly colonized emancipated themselves by forming new states (example India), so that from the former political hegemony of the Europeans to speak again with Reinhard only the phenomenon of westernization remains.

Certainly, the gaze into a decolonized world is still very distant, not only because concepts and ideas are blocking it. Rather, the whole material world is still untouched by it. Physical objects, taken away and removed, which now fill and adorn the display cases, drawers and walls of museums all over the world as museum objects, are no exception. It is not relevant whether the objects come directly from a colonial context or not, since

[t]he museums also have to realize that colonial situations rarely ended with formal decolonization and can have a lasting effect to the present day. (...) a colonial context can even be assigned to objects made or acquired after decolonization or to objects from those countries that were themselves never subjected to formal colonial rule.

(Deutscher Museumsbund 2018: 6)

But herein lies the problem: how to deal with it? And it is not just about the objects in the museums and collections, but also about the much larger number of objects circulating outside these institutions. And here, a great deal of effort is still needed to find mechanisms to preserve and return these vast quantities of 'material world'. Yet, still, „[t]he ethics of restitution and reparation (...) implies the recognition of what could be called the share of the other, who is not mine and whose guarantor I am nevertheless (...)“ (Mbembe 2017: 331, translation by author).

More than that, the physical objects, those in museums and collections and those still circulating freely (on the art market, among private individuals, etc.) speak for themselves. From the point of view of the former conquerors and colonial masters, they are 'things', 'objects' that have either

material, ideal, historical or functional value. For the de-colonized, the Others, they embody a completely different ontological world (Severi 2015). This – in many instances radical - view of things is what makes decolonization difficult for a long time. It requires a common language and concept. However, this reveals exactly what Fabian has already hinted at: decolonization, just like colonization before it, is always a temporary historical and political act. And thus, world views cannot be more different.

The indigenous world does not conceive of history as linear; the past-future is contained in the present. The regression or progression, the repetition or overcoming of the past is at play in each conjuncture and is dependent more on our acts than on our words. The project of indigenous modernity can emerge from the present in a spiral whose movement is a continuous feedback from the past to the future – a 'principle of hope or anticipatory consciousness' – that both discerns and realizes decolonization at the same time. (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012: 96)

From my point of perspective, decolonization requires the overcoming of endocolonialism, because after the end of an epoch that historians call decolonization, the conditions in the newly created spaces are by no means free of colonial internal context. It is not surprising that the struggle for decolonization continues within officially 'decolonized spaces'. As for example in Mexico,

[t]he government of the so called '4T' (see Endnote 1) does not understand that native peoples have different concepts of development and progress, which have nothing to do with capitalist progress and development, profiting, buying and selling everything in its path (...).

says Sebastián Jiménez Clara, member of the Rural Association of Collective Interest (cited by Mandujano 2020, translation from Spanish original by author).

In the past many historians learned from anthropologists after World War II that decolonization had not come to an end with the founding of national states, neither in early 19th century in Latin America nor in the 20th century in Africa or Asia (Osterhammel 2016: 467). Hence, decolonization seems to be an ongoing process which never may have an end because history cannot be reversed. The recent protests against racism in the United States of America fueled by the brutal death of a black male person at the hands of American authorities underlines this when the New York Times reported on June 17, 2020 that „From Virginia to New Mexico, protests over police brutality have brought hundreds of years of American history bubbling to the surface.“ This may be a turning point as even the statue of Christopher Columbus - an object calling to mind colonialism par excellence - „was spray-painted, set on fire and thrown into a lake“ as the article also outlines. Hence one structural problem (racism) is based itself on another structural problem which is colonialism. And it is this remembrance on the one side and the frustrating accumulation of unacceptable deeds and words on the other side, which now speed up a process of cultural liberation. This releases forces much faster on the individual level, something that a couple of years ago, Felwine Sarr, one of the most recognized voices from Africa on decolonization demanded already (2016: 4):

What we need is a psychological and mental decolonization process, and this takes time. Here in Senegal, colonization lasted a little over a century. I differentiate between the slave trade, which was a process of removal of people and wealth, and colonization, which imposed the mental frameworks from which our thought process is derived today. For more than a century therefore, we have been using mental frameworks from France and Europe.

As in the United States of America, a cumulative set of unacceptable deeds and words (or none-words) have set fire on both structural problems, the big question is if Latin America will follow. This, however, depends more on the level of economic autonomy people have. For the moment, most are combating the effects of the pandemic which will last and turn many countries into much more structural violence than before. And those who remember and reclaim protests against perduring colonial structure in their country must turn first to those who represent them to be protected from those who seed

violence everywhere in society. Decolonialization processes in Latin America is complicated and will continue on a rather small flame, so to guess here.

Nevertheless, as history does not end and the remembrance is set on fire every day, Latin America will still wait for its great moment of decolonization. Hence this decade may be lost, but the next may be more promising if things are going not that bad. But one must also say that Latin America has seen many lost decades (political, economic, social ones) so that instead of ‚revolutions‘ revelations seem more the ongoing practice even in the future.

In the United States of the Americas parts of the society believed that the practice of living together was grounded in real democracy. But this may have been a myth - now challenged by a perhaps dying democracy as even the highest representatives are spreading questionable information dividing a society in a manner of a *coup d'état* which occurred so many times around the world in different moments of history (Levitsky / Ziblatt 2018). Here too, the question arises as to when Latin America will follow.

The window to a decolonized world in particular in Latin America is far from open, let alone a window of understanding on how to achieve it. Anthropology is therefore much more than it thinks a political discourse about world-being, even if it believes that it is only concerned with cultural issues.

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## Endnote

- (1) “4T” refers to the current president López Obrador and the launched fourth transformation after (1) independence, (2) reform of Benito Juárez, (3) revolution, and now (4) elimination of government abuses.

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