

CONSTITUTIVE CAUSES OF COLONIAL AND DECOLONIAL REASONING

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ABSTRACT

The work of both the philosophers of Western modernity and modern African(a) philosophers is premised on a fundamental reimagining of the foundations of the discipline. In both cases this has, and for African(a) philosophers continues to assume, the form of an appeal to First Philosophy. The shared interest in First Philosophy leaves the two canons irrevocably intertwined and invites the African(a) scholar to be creative when it comes to engaging Western theorists such as Hobbes whose reimagining of the social contract has been foundational to the contemporary world order: its universalist assumptions must be negated but not at the cost of dispensing with what is valuable about the particular, Western insight into the human condition. In this article I argue that the reasoning deployed by African(a) philosophers can ironically be represented in terms of the very “constitutive causes” introduced by Hobbes. First, I discuss Hobbes’s appeal to First Philosophy and how this yielded the notion of “constitutive causes”. I then show how decolonial theorists radicalized the appeal to First Philosophy in order to expose the universalist assumptions at work in Western philosophy before I outline what I consider to be “constitutive causes” of both colonial and decolonial reasoning.

KEYWORDS

Colonialism, Decolonial Reasoning, Western Modernity, African Philosophy, Hobbes

INTRODUCTION

Every discipline occasionally undergoes a reinvention of the way it understands itself. Sometimes this reimagining can be contained within the existing self-understanding of the discipline – as, for instance, when a new school of thought arises and assumes a place alongside existing schools of thought – while in other instances the reimagining challenges the very foundations of a discipline, its methodology, its purpose and how it understands itself in relation to history and other disciplines. In the *longue durée* of the human sciences such fundamental reimaginings are quite rare and when they do occur, consequences are seldom limited to one discipline. Instead, they draw into the vortex of doubt the very question of what it means to know: existing foundations of knowledge are interrogated, and new

proposals are advanced concerning the foundations upon which all sciences *should* be based.

This chapter pivots around two such fundamental reimaginings: the first is generally referred to as ‘Western Enlightenment’ and produced what is commonly referred to as modern Western philosophers or the philosophers of Western modernity such as Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley Hume, Kant, to name but a few; the second reimagining can be referred to as the decolonial turn¹ and has produced a number of philosophers we commonly refer to as modern African philosophers or the theorists of African(a) modernity such as Césaire, Du Bois, Fanon, Biko, Dussel, Maldonado-Torres, and, on at least one reading, Western theorists such as De Sousa Santos who do comparative work on epistemologies of the south. While the relationship between modern Western and modern African philosophy is complex, both amount(ed) to fundamentally reimagining the disciplinary foundations of philosophy and in both cases, we find at work a simple principle which I will use in this chapter to leverage an understanding of their respective reimagining of disciplinary structures in general and those of philosophy in particular. That principle is the notion of First Philosophy. My argument is broadly that just as modern Western theorists such as Hobbes invoked the principle of First Philosophy in order to reimagine the foundations of Western philosophy, theorists of the decolonial turn would much later appeal, some implicitly, others explicitly, to the same principle in order to question an assumption that even (perhaps particularly) modern Western philosophers left uninterrogated. That assumption has been that Western philosophy speaks to the human condition as such while other philosophical traditions such as Confucianism merely speaks to a particular, in this case Chinese, understanding of the human condition. In other words, that Western philosophy produces universal knowledge while other philosophical traditions merely produce particular knowledge.

The ways in which modern African(a) philosophers have gone about challenging this assumption are too varied even to list here. Suffice it to say that its identification leaves the African theorist in an ambivalent relationship vis-à-vis Western texts. The universalist assumption must be negated but not at the cost of dispensing with what is valuable about the particular, Western insight into the human condition. My engagement in this article with Hobbes is ambivalent in this sense and I shall work through this ambivalence by using Hobbes’s own methodology in order to reimagine a legacy that was a constitutive element of colonial discourse.

In this instance, working through Hobbes requires of me firstly to say something about the way he appealed to First Philosophy in order to (re)introduce the intriguing if rather peculiar notion of “constitutive causes”. After that, I will show

¹ For a useful overview of the emergence of this term see N. Maldonado-Torres, ‘Thinking through the Decolonial Turn: Post-continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique—An Introduction’, *Transmodernity* (Fall 2011).

how theorists of the decolonial turn similarly appealed to the principle of First Philosophy in order to negate the universalist assumption at work in the kind of Western philosophy produced by scholars such as Hobbes. Once that assumption has been exposed and suspended, I argue that the reasoning deployed by African(a) philosophers can be ironically, paradoxically, perhaps even deconstructively, represented in the very terms of “constitutive causes” introduced by Hobbes. To pre-empt the conclusion of this paper by way of explaining its title: while Hobbes’s notion of constitutive causes exemplifies the *acts of reasoning* associated with Western modernity and its correlate, colonialism, we can also deploy “constitutive causes” to map the acts of reasoning that have been fundamental to decolonial reasoning. The rest of this article is divided into five sections. In the first, I briefly discuss Hobbes’s appeal to First Philosophy; in the second, how this appeal yielded the notion of “constitutive causes”. The third section summarizes the way decolonial theorists radicalized the appeal to First Philosophy in order to expose the universalist assumption at work in Western philosophy while the fourth and fifth sections outline what I consider “constitutive causes” of both colonial and decolonial reasoning respectively.

HOBBS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY

The upheaval or Enlightenment which Hobbes is associate with amounted to a rational reconstruction of knowledge that would no longer appeal to tradition or religion for validation, an upheaval succinctly captured by Kant’s famous declaration in *What is Enlightenment?* [1784], *sapere aude*, often loosely translated as “dare to think for yourself”. For Hobbes this meant a return to First Philosophy as an attempt once again to excavate the most fundamental or basic concepts and principles that philosophy should depart from. In *Anti-White* [1643] he writes -

Now, philosophy is the science of all general and universal theorems, concerning any subject the truth of which can be demonstrated by natural reason. Its first part, and the basis of all the other parts, is the science where theorems concerning the attributes of being at large are demonstrated, and this science is called *First Philosophy*. It therefore deals with being, essence, matter, form ... and all the other notions which Aristotle discusses partly in the eight books of his *Lectures on physics* ... (in Zarka, 1996 62-3).

As stated somewhat later in *De corpore* [1655], First Philosophy, for Hobbes, will provide a foundation for all the other sciences, ranging from physics to ethics and politics. How did he arrive at these “most fundamental building blocks” of what it means to know; building blocks so fundamental that they could be thought of as informing the thinking underlying *all* sciences?

CONSTITUTIVE CAUSES

There is some dispute about how Hobbes arrived at his methodology. Some scholars describe it as an example of the classic philosophical method of analysis-synthesis (the former preparatory to the latter) dating back to Aristotle,² while others discern in his particular use of that method the influence of contemporary scientists such as Galileo, while yet others claim that his specific use of the method reveals the influence of the School of Padua, notably its most well-known exponent Jacopo Zabarella [1532-89] who produced a variant of the analysis-synthesis method called “resolution-composition” (See Jesseph 1996 esp. *ff* 19, p106). For the purpose of this chapter the nuances of this debate do not matter as much as what can be summarized as the four central features of the method as used by Hobbes. Firstly, that

the best way to understand a *system, process, or event* is to resolve it into its components, analyze these components, and then recompose them via a theory that explains their interrelationships and interactions (Hampton 1999:7; emphasis added).

Secondly, that we can analyze both concrete and abstract entities in this way – not just, say, a mechanical clock but also the State (or Commonwealth), as well as ongoing *processes*; thirdly, that the application of the method to abstract entities calls for the use of a thought-experiment or methodological fiction while in the fourth and last instance, that which allows for this very general application of the method is the fact that knowledge of all phenomena can and must be grounded on the general principles of First Philosophy.

The basic building blocks or components arrived at through this particular form of deduction are referred to by Hobbes as “constitutive causes”. As he notes in *De Cive* with regard to his analysis of one particular such abstract entity, namely civil government:

Concerning my method, I thought it sufficient to use a plain and evident style in what I have to deliver, except I took my beginning from the very matter of civil government, and thence proceeded to its generation and form, and the first beginning of justice. For everything is best understood by its constitutive causes (in Hampton 1999: 7).

It should be clear then that for Hobbes the answer to the question ‘What is [civil government, the State et cetera]?’ is never historical. He is not interested in historical explanations of the emergence of the state over time. Rather, he is interested in the logic of the thing; how it works, that is, its constitutive causes – which is just a

² ‘Aristotle also accepts a resolute-compositive method of analysis in political matters ... but for him the constituents of the state are not isolated asocial individuals, but individuals in certain fundamental social relationships with others; namely, master and slave, husband and wife, father and children’ (Hampton 1999 8).

particular way of denoting the elements that constitute a thing and which cause it to function the way it does. In *Leviathan* [1651] the thing under investigation is the Commonwealth (what we would call the state), and his question is not the historical, what are the origins of the state? but rather the rational, “Given a collection of men without government, *how might we imagine that they would rationally have decided to construct such a thing?*” (Minogue 1973: xii; emphasis added). The phrase *how might we imagine* refers to the use of a thought-experiment or methodological fiction through which the state is first dismantled into its most basic constituent elements or constitutive causes before it is reassembled again in order to demonstrate (which is the point of synthesis) how a specific understanding of, say, justice necessarily follows as a demonstrable truth from the way the state or civil society is constituted. In *Leviathan* the methodological fiction is of course the social contract. We live in an imagined community such as the nation-state *as if* somewhere along the line we entered into a contractual agreement according to which we agreed to sacrifice certain natural rights for a guarantee of the remainder. For example, we handed over to the state our natural right to violence in return for which we obtained the guarantee that the state will use its accumulated monopoly on violence to protect the remainder of our rights. But through what kind of rational process or *acts of reasoning* did this happen? As point of departure Hobbes asks us to imagine the absence of such a contractual state of affairs and refers to that condition as the “state of nature” in which life is nasty, brutish, and short because everyone is at liberty to pursue their self-interest at the expense of others. Then he poses the question, since we no longer live in such a state of nature *how might we imagine* that men³ would rationally have decided to enter into a social contract? Through what acts of reasoning? In short, what are the constitutive causes of the social contract? Hobbes’s name for these *acts of reasoning* is “Articles of Peace” or Laws of nature – nineteen of which are discussed in Book I, chapters 14-16 of *Leviathan* where they are also defined as a “Precept, or General Rule, found out by Reason by which a man is forbidden to do, that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same ...” (*Leviathan* [1651] 1973: 66). The first three of these Precepts are usually considered foundational to the rest. According to the First Rule, since peace is something we desire even in the state of nature, it is only rational that man will strive for its realization, even if that requires war. According to the Second Rule man would at some point realize that one way of avoiding war in the pursuit of peace consists in forfeiting the claim to all rights and being content only with so much liberty as one would permit others. We in effect promise not to exercise certain of our natural rights if others would promise the same. The Third Rule requires that we consider our promises binding, not just *in foro interno* (an obligation by intent) but *in foro externo* (as an obligation to

³ In keeping with Hobbes’s own style and the language of his time, I retain the use of masculine pronouns in discussing his argument.

perform when it is safe to do so). Given Hobbes's pessimistic view of human nature the transition from promises made *in foro interno* to the execution of what we promised *in foro externo* is by no means guaranteed just because we can see the sense of it, and so the contractual agreement coincides with the creation of an Authority invested with the power to make sure that we honour our promises *in foro externo*. In this way, by resolving and recomposing the state through the use of a thought-experiment that explains the inner workings of its constitutive causes as *acts of reason*, Hobbes demonstrates that the state is a rational construct.

Earlier I explained why such a rather peculiar way of going about explaining things may still be relevant to us who practice philosophy in a vastly different time and context. We have an ambivalent relationship with a thinker such as Hobbes precisely because, while there is some truth to the claim that we are driven by the pursuit of self-interest, universalizing that insight to claim that *all* human beings are *essentially* driven by self-interest, reveals more about the context in which the claim was made than about human nature as such. So, the challenge is to think through Hobbes in order to retain those insights which are particularly useful and not those which are assumed to be universally true. But there is a second, related reason why we have to work through our ambivalence with regard to Hobbes, and this is because, as Arendt argues in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), of all the theorists of Western modernity it was Hobbes who provided the conceptual foundations for nineteenth-century racial doctrines.

In her view Hobbes announced to the modern world that human beings were free to do what they will with those who live outside the realm of known agreements and understandings of *civis*. The monsters, the brutes, the beasts, and all those who live in apolitical voids (*physis*) will be treated according to self-interest ... The barbarian, the heathen ethnic, and those existing in a prepolitical state of nature were no longer considered as part of an existing order of things, as described in Aristotle's *Politics*, or as part of the spiritual body of the faithful in Christ, as described by Augustine. In Hobbes those unprotected by an existing commonwealth were fit for conquest (Hannaford 1996: 192-3).

Of course, the relationship between what would emerge as a global order of coloniality and Hobbes's thought is not direct or causal. In a sense, Hobbes's thought merely amplified a geography of un/reason that had been in the process of emerging since 1492, first through the Spanish-Portuguese divisional lines or *rayas* [1526] which were followed by the French-English *amity* (friendship) lines [1559], agreements which quite literally drew a visible line between what Hobbes would articulate as the prepolitical "state of nature" and the political realm of the *civis*. In the words of Schmitt (2003: 94-5),

[e]verything that occurred 'beyond the line' remained outside the legal, moral and political values recognized on this side of the line ... For Hobbes, the state of nature is a domain of werewolves, in which man is nothing but a wolf among other men, just as 'beyond the line' man confronts other men as a wild animal.

Arendt's valuation of the impact that Hobbes's thinking had on the world is an invitation to engage the question of what it means to work through our ambivalence in order to produce theory from the global south. It is not for philosophers working in the global south to reinvent a philosophy that will somehow be uncontaminated by Western categories of thought or free from the stain of racism, conquest and humiliation ironically premised on appeals to universality. The task is much more challenging: *sapere aude*; to think for ourselves, not simply/only *because* of the Western tradition but (also) *despite* of it, against it – which sometimes may well mean deploying its very own categories of thought in our attempts to think through and back at that tradition. The following section offers an example of precisely that.

RETHINKING FIRST PHILOSOPHY

Although his emphasis on the pursuit of self-interest and the distinction between the pre-political and political destroyed much of the Aristotelian legacy in Western philosophical thought, there is one important respect in which Hobbes's thinking also marked the continuation of Aristotelian thought. All the attributes of being that constitute Hobbes's understanding of First Philosophy – being, essence, matter, form, quality, cause, effect, motion, space, time, place, vacuum, unity, and number – derive from Aristotle's *Lectures on physics*. This long arc of philosophical theorising which conceived of First Philosophy in epistemological terms would only come to an end with Heidegger who “wanted to oppose the modern tradition of *philosophy as epistemology* with his own fundamental ontology” (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 252; emphasis added), that is, by positing ontology as First Philosophy – which, for Heidegger, meant analysing existence in terms of existential categories (what he called ‘existentialia’) such as care, fear, dread, anguish, and authenticity. But the way his existentialia pivoted around authenticity would come to haunt Heidegger's project and open the way for a further radicalisation of First Philosophy. Heidegger argued that it is only in facing death, in living with conscious awareness of one's mortality, that one faces one's individuality and the possibility of authentic existence. But we are also social creatures and therefore the quest for authenticity necessarily also has a collective dimension and to articulate the meaning of our authentic collective identity we need a visionary leader. And so, Heidegger's (brief) alliance with Nazi ideology became a philosophical stance in a sense not unfamiliar to anyone who has ever invoked patriotism to give meaning to individual life, for whom “the wars of the *volk* (people) in the name of their leader provide the context for a confrontation with death, and thus, to individual authenticity” (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 250). For Lévinas (in Maldonado-Torres 2007: 258), “[a] dark cloud encompassed... Heidegger's ontological project' because it revealed ontology as essentially a philosophy of power”. “Ontology as *first philosophy* is for

Lévinas ultimately complicit with violence” writes Maldonado-Torres (2007: 241) because it

is a discourse that, when taken as foundation or ultimate end ... gives priority to an anonymous Being over and beyond the self-Other relation ... [It] gives priority to the ontological rather than to the trans-ontological, and to authenticity rather than to radical responsibility.

This is why Lévinas would argue that *ethics* (responsibility) and not ontology (authenticity) is First Philosophy: “instead of the act of thinking or the encounter between human beings and nature, it was ethics and the face-to-face (the subject-Other) encounter which became the starting point for his philosophy” (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 241). This radicalisation of what First Philosophy should be understood to mean would influence a number of scholars representing what would later become known as the decolonial turn. Lévinas’s recognition of the politics of ontology

stood behind the emergence of liberation philosophy in Latin America with Enrique Dussel and Juan Carlos Scannone, among other young Argentinians. Lévinas also woke up Dussel from his ontological slumber and inspired him to articulate a critical philosophy of Being as Totality that not only considered the experience of anti-Semitism and the Jewish Holocaust, but also that of colonized peoples in other parts of the world, particularly Latin America. If Lévinas made the link between ontology and power, Dussel made the connection between Being and the history of colonial enterprises, thus leading to the door of the coloniality of Being (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 241-2).

For theorists such as Torres and Dussel it was Lévinas who first drew attention to the politics of ontology and who paved the way for a radicalisation of Lévinas’s own thought and the elaboration on, what in the language of Heidegger, could be described as the existentialia of the colonised subject. I will stop short of following these authors down the path of exploring the analysis of the coloniality of being and instead complete the journey of an implied further radicalisation of the question of First Philosophy. In my reading, what these authors have effectively been arguing is that, not the ethical, but the *political* should be considered first philosophy. This is how I interpret the shift alluded to by Maldonado-Torres (2007 243) when he writes,

[a]nd if Lévinas’s point of departure is the anarchic moment of the constitution of subjectivity in its encounter with the Other, Fanon concentrates his attention in the trauma of the encounter with the imperial and racist Other. ‘Look a Negro!’ *That is the point of departure for Fanon to begin to elaborate what might be referred to as the existentialia of the ‘subject’ of the coloniality of Being*.

What we learn from this radicalisation of Lévinas’s thought is that there is no thinking about thinking, thinking about knowing and/or being that is not a function of context and time – which is just another way of saying that all thinking is political

and all philosophy is, in an important sense of the word, ethnophilosophy, that is, the philosophy of an *ethnos* (people) who live and think in a particular time and context. It is the recognition of the political as First Philosophy which finally subverts the claim to universality that historically provided the epistemic foundation for the project of colonialism.

In the following two sections I turn to the main concern of this article, namely a very brief analysis of some of the most fundamental constitutive causes of colonial and decolonial reasoning. It is only once we recognise and embrace the politics of thinking that the purely political nature of acts of reason become truly visible. I am interested in pursuing what are essentially two variations of Hobbes's question. Whereas he asked, 'Given a collection of men without government, *how might we imagine that they would rationally have decided to construct such a thing?*', I am interested in answering two related questions: firstly, given a world without colonialism how, or *through what acts of reason*, could men rationally have conceived of its possibility? and secondly, given that condition of unfreedom we call colonialism, how, or *through what acts of reason*, did the colonized rationally construct the possibility of (future) emancipation?

THE CONSTITUTIVE CAUSES OF COLONIALISM

In a sense there are two very simple questions at work here. When we think of colonisers, what were they thinking? *How* were they thinking? And when we think of the colonised who set out to free themselves from the yolk of colonialism, what were they thinking? *How* were they thinking? In this section I address the acts of reasoning that constituted the former and in the following section, the acts of reasoning that constituted the latter.

Conflating geography with reason

Schmitt notes that 1492 marks the moment when international law for the first time divided the earth as a whole according to a new global conception of the earth; a conception that would give birth to the notion of a "New World" which at first was not conceived as enemy, but rather as a free space available for expansion and occupation. The first concrete sign of this division came in 1494 with the creation of *rayas* (Spanish for "lines") soon followed in 1559 by the *amity* (friendship) lines with its slogan, common at the time,⁴ "no peace beyond the line". Hobbes's *Leviathan* was published in 1651 and represented the philosophical abstraction of the geography of reason, a distinction between the "other side of the line" as "state of nature" and "this side of the line" as orderly, "civil" mode of existence.

⁴ Exactly how common is a matter of dispute. On this, see Mattingly (1963).

In this respect, Hobbes obviously was influenced not only by the creedal civil wars in Europe, but also by the New World. He speaks of the ‘state of nature,’ but not at all in the sense of a spaceless utopia. His state of nature is a *no man’s land*, but this does not mean it exists *nowhere*. It can be located, and Hobbes locates it, among other places, in the New World (Schmitt 2003: 96).

Much has been made of the role *amity* lines played in creating the geography of un/reason that informed and legitimised colonialism (see Ramose 2002a; 2002b; De Sousa Santos 2014) and it is often treated as important historical event which, of course, it was. But if we want to consider *amity* lines as *act of reasoning* then it is not the lines themselves we should pay attention to as much as the difference between *rayas* and *amity* lines because it is in the difference between them that the constitutive act of reasoning we are interested in becomes visible. What, then, was the difference between *rayas* and *amity* lines?

For a *raya* to obtain, two princes, both recognizing the same spiritual authority and the same international law, had to agree on the acquisition of land belonging to princes and peoples of another faith. Even if it was a contractual agreement that led to establishment of the line, in the background these princes still shared the authority of a common *ordo* and a common arbitrational authority ... [the pope, who] ... did not allocate ownership of lands, but only freedom of missions ...’ (Schmitt 2003: 91).

Whereas the *raya* expressed a *religious difference* between believer and non-believer and allocated territories to Western powers for the purpose of missionary work against the shared background of papal authority, *amity* lines represented a purely *contractual agreement* between powers engaged in trade wars:

The characteristic feature of amity lines consisted in that, different from *rayas*, they defined a sphere of conflict between contractual parties seeking to appropriate land, precisely because they lacked any common presupposition and authority. In part, however, these parties still shared the memory of a common unity in Christian Europe. But the only matter they could agree on was the *freedom* of the open spaces that began ‘beyond the line’ (Schmitt 2003: 94).

Whereas *rayas* were a function of faith, *amity* lines were a function of trade; whereas *rayas* still conceived of the colonised as belonging to a universal (catholic) human community, *amity* lines assumed that “those existing in a prepolitical state of nature were no longer considered part of an existing order of things, as described in Aristotle’s *Politics*, or as part of the spiritual body of the faithful in Christ, as described in Augustine” (Hannaford 1996 193); whereas *rayas* derived their meaning from the shared depth of a transcendent, common authority, *amity* lines had no depth of meaning; their meaning was wholly immanent in the sense that it derived from the line itself or, at best, derived over time from the abstracted meaning they would assume in the philosophical work of theorists such as Hobbes where the line and its self-referential meaning were naturalised through a sweeping and wholly immanent historicism. It is this movement away from a transcendental

to an immanent legitimation of difference considered an *act of reasoning* that centred around how to think about the non-Western other that marks geography of reason as constitutive cause of colonialism in the sense intended here. Closely tied to it is a second constitutive cause that legitimised that difference.

Historicism

In Arendt's view, "Hobbes announced to the modern world that human beings were free to do what they will with those who live outside the realm of known agreements and understandings of *civis* ... [the] monsters, the brutes, the beasts, and all those who live in apolitical voids (*physis*) ..." (Hannaford 1996: 192). Crucial here is the phrase "and all those who live in a-political voids," which should really read, "and all those who *still* live in apolitical voids" because, unlike *rayas* which assumed that "they," too, were Gods' children and part of the human community, *amitylines* implied that "they" were at best potentially human and potential political subjects, subject to the patronizing tutelage of the coloniser. The "still" is key to understanding the meaning of historicism as discussed by Berlin in his somewhat meandering lecture, *Historical Inevitability* (2004).

Not all historical projects are historicist but all historicist project are of necessity historical in the sense that they are concerned with history.⁵ As the title of Berlin's essay indicates, a synonym for historicism is "historical inevitability" while an antonym would be any concept or idea according to which history is considered no more than a random series of events lacking any discernible logic or pattern. We can summarize the important elements of historicism according to Berlin as follows. The assumed *pattern* or Law at work in history can be teleological/salvific (in a Christian or Marxist variant), optimistic (in the Judeo-Christian sense) or cyclical/fatalistically pessimistic (Spengler), while the *movement* of history can assume the form of a straight line (Christian theology; a mechanistic as opposed to organistic reading of Marxism), a zig-zag (the Hegelian dialectic), or cyclical (the endless Rise and Fall of civilizations or superpowers). While historical inevitability seems to be a belief as old as human civilization itself, the status it acquired as (quasi) scientific fact in Western sciences over the past three hundred years has contributed much to the contemporary belief that "to explain why each ingredient is as, and where, and when it is, and does what it does, is *eo ipso* to say what its goal is" (Berlin 2004: 104). A great number of political and economic scientists have suggested that, just as science can discover the laws of nature, we can discover the laws that regulate social and political life and that the application of scientific methods devised for the study of natural phenomenon are also applicable to the study of socio-political

⁵ *Leviathan*, while remaining true to its intention not to offer a historical account of the origin of the state, nonetheless auto-deconstructs at the exact point where Hobbes introduces a form of historicism which became an intellectual cornerstone of colonialism.

phenomena (Hobbes being a classic example). The assumption that historicism is based on is at once onto-epistemological (the world is rational; human beings are rational and therefore we can understand the rationality of the world), and metaphysical (not an empirical truth but a metaphysical assumption regarding the very nature of things). But it is the *implications* of certain forms of historicism that are relevant to us because they legitimised colonialism. To argue that to understand is to perceive patterns, that to offer historical explanations is not merely to describe a succession of events but to make it intelligible by revealing the pattern they express, this form of reasoning impacts not just on the way we observe and describe human actions but further provides us with a framework within which to evaluate our moral, political and religious attitudes to those actions. After all, if our values are determined and conditioned by the place we occupy in the pattern then these will be “correct” to the degree that they demonstrate apprehension of the law or pattern of which we are a function, and “incorrect” to the extent that they demonstrate a lack of apprehending it.

At this point it is necessary to distinguish between two forms of historicism, teleological and non-teleological. As for the latter, we intuitively recognise the truth of statements that claim to discern that pattern which is familiar to us as “the rise and fall of Empires” or “global patterns in the shift of the geo-political centre of power” – patterns we can discern and perhaps describe in the language of contemporary sciences as chaotic or reproductive of strange attractors. Such non-teleological forms of historicisms are unproblematic because, unlike teleological grand-narratives, they do not assume that in addition to a discernible pattern, the pattern derives its intrinsic meaning from having a Beginning and an End. Colonialism was underpinned by a rich fabric of teleological forms of historicism – from the Judeo-Christian grand-narrative of Judgment Day to its quasi-secularised reincarnation in the Hegelian theory of history in which Africa did not even feature as a weak moment in the dialectic, to more scientific versions propounded by both capitalists (Modernisation Theory) and staunch Marxists who in their debate with African Socialists in the 1960s and 70s were adamant that the values associated with African forms of communitarianism were “really human qualities which find expression when a community is [still] at a certain level of productive capacity” (Babu in Praeg 2014: 07).

In all these teleological forms of historicism one marker that was constantly invoked as an End towards which “traditional” African societies should aspire was “modernity”, or more precisely, the place “modernity” occupied in a linear, teleological narrative of Progress that posited as necessary and inescapable the evolution of societies from traditional to modern; a grand-narrative in which the meaning of its stages derived entirely from the Western experience of what they meant. As I argue in the next section these teleological forms of historicism considered as acts of reasoning were premised on a prior or more fundamental act

of reasoning that implicated the West in a reduction of the phenomenon of “modernity” to its name; an act of reasoning that colonized the very notion of modernity in order to bootstrap the West into the kind of exceptionalism that would legitimise expansionism.

Colonizing modernity

Rightly interpreted the phenomenon we have come to refer to as “modernity” forms part of a discernible pattern in a non-teleological historicism that can also be described as the recurring phenomenon of modernities. A large part of the conceptual architecture of colonialism consisted in portraying Western modernity as a singular event, as something that occurred for the first time in human history. As a result, comments Gordon, “we have come to treat this modernity as the phenomenon itself” (Gordon 2014: 11). However, when we look past the event of Western modernity we notice that modernity preceded its baptismal moment and that there have in fact been many modernities. In these, Gordon (2014:12) identifies a common “script of modernity” of which the following are constant, recurring elements: one group, society or civilization enforces its portrait of reality on others by presenting itself as the face of the future and the latter as the face of the past (“civilised” versus “barbarian”; “modern” versus “traditional”; “advanced” versus “backward”, “developed’ versus “less developed” et cetera), as a result of which an antagonistic relationship between the two societies develops that is dialectic in nature (for example, the West promotes a very individualist reading of rights while African scholars interpret [certain] rights through the lens of communitarian values, of which the locus classicus is the enriched meaning “dignity” has acquired in African jurisprudence). In this nexus of asymmetrical power relations the dominated are often left with one of three options: physical eradication through genocide or symbolic eradication through confinement in zones of non-being knowns as Bantustans or Reserves; hybridisation, or an excessive imbalance in the dialectic referred to above, or self-essentialising (for instance the notion that Ubuntu represents the essence of African identity and qua communitarianism is of world-historical singularity).

This ‘script’ or pattern describes not just colonialism as we know it but the history of modernities before the West colonised the term to limit its meaning to one particular iteration of the script despite earlier iterations in, for example, Egypt’s colonisation by the Greeks, Judae’s colonisation by the Roman Empire or the dominance of Islam over backward Europe in a time aptly referred to as Europe’s Dark Ages. We can therefore conclude that one of the constitutive causes of the West’s colonisation of Africa consisted in a prior act of colonisation, an act of reasoning that effectively colonized the term “modernity” by presenting Western modernity as the phenomenon itself.

With this brief overview of three of the fundamental constitutive causes of colonialism we can now go on to consider some of the main constitutive causes of decolonial reasoning.

THE CONSTITUTIVE CAUSES OF DECOLONIAL REASONING

Arguably the two main differences between colonial and decolonial constitutive causes of reasoning is that while for centuries Western philosophers by and large maintained that their thinking is universal and not contextual and that they theorized the human condition and not simply a Western perspective of the human condition, that is, while they assumed that their acts of reasoning were not political, decolonial acts of reasoning are overtly political in the sense that thinking is explicitly rooted in experience and context in order, not to argue as much as to demonstrate, the contextual and therefore political nature of all thinking. The “coloniality of being,” for instance, is a mode of theorizing that departs from the need “to thematize the question of the effects of coloniality in lived experience and not only in the mind” (Mignolo, in Maldonado-Torres 2007: 242). Secondly and following on this, decolonial acts of reason are by definition relational, meta-acts of reasoning; relational because they always arise in relation to an originary differentiation from whiteness and the West and meta- because to some extent they always entail a meta-critique of Western acts of reasoning aimed at demonstrating the errors of that reasoning in order to clear a space for a different valuation of the meaning of blackness and its associated values. Combined, these two characteristics are clear instantiations of the claim that the political is First Philosophy.

Double-consciousness

Much has been written about the emergence of contemporary, scientific racism and one important moment in that history, namely Du Bois’ reinvention of the phrase “double consciousness.” Praeg (2019) argues that the emergence of the modern black subject can be understood in terms of four constituent moments among which double-consciousness has the status of *arché* or originary cause. Gordon (2008. 158) writes,

historically speaking black people had no reason to think of themselves as ‘black’; blackness and the acceptance of race as a significant characteristic of the self is wholly a function of the modern moment when the black subject looked at itself through the eyes of the white racialised and racialising subject, in order to perceive itself as black.

In ‘African modes of self-writing’ (2002: 245) Mbembe criticised this self-identification with race at the precise moment when the colonised subject needed to emancipate itself from race-based oppression. He writes that “both the teleological and nativist meta-narratives draw their fundamental categories from the

myths they claim to oppose and ... the very conviction that race exists and is at the foundation of morality and nationality". To this, Dirlik (2002 613) responded that Mbembe missed the point in as much as the self-identification with blackness had an important performative quality. *At the time* of mobilising against colonialism, to *not* have embraced race in general and blackness in particular

would have been impossible to entertain . . . [because] a unified national entity [premised on the 'myth' of race and Africanness] was the only conceivable agent capable of overthrowing colonialism and withstanding its ravages.

This performative quality of black self-identification points to the second of the four moments in the formation of modern black subjectivity, namely the creation of an imagined community of oppressed black subjects, the formation of an African "We-subject" which, from a black perspective was the most important phenomenon of the twentieth century (Mudimbe 1988: 60). On the back of this second moment, a third can be distinguished which is characterised by a strong emphasis on history and a new anthropology as a means for better understanding both African tradition and identity (Mudimbe 1988: 60). Here, the black subject consciously sets out to counter the negative attributes associated with blackness and contests those with positive values through movements such as ethnophilosophy and Black Consciousness. The third moment is in turn a condition for the possibility of the fourth, which consist of an invocation of blackness and its associated positive values in critiques of whiteness and Western-centrism while at the same time positing emancipatory alternatives for postcolonial Africa and the rest of the world premised on African conceptions of what being and belonging mean.

As overt, self-conscious and strategic political acts of reasoning there is a sense in which all four constituent elements of modern black subjectivity can be considered constitutive causes of decolonial reasoning. My point is simply that in an important sense the latter three are premised on the axiomatic of (potentiated) double consciousness as condition for the possibility of thinking and reasoning back at white racism through an engagement, not only with the errors of reasoning that made colonialism possible, but also with the political conditions for the possibility of those errors.

Manichean misanthropic skepticism

Maldonado-Torres's notion of a Manichaen misanthropic scepticism usefully enables us to unlock the political at work in the background, against and as a function of which, the "founding" of modern Western philosophy can and must be understood. Making this politics visible demonstrates that Western modernity, "usually considered to be a product of the European Renaissance of the European Enlightenment, has a darker side, which is constitutive of it" (Maldonado-Torres

2007: 244). How do we get to that “dark side” in order to bring to it the light of understanding? Firstly, by bearing in mind as I argued earlier that modernity is never an event but an ever-evolving set of asymmetrical relationships which, secondly, requires of us to interpret what is/was specific about every modernity. In the case of Western colonialism we can, following Dussel and Maldonado-Torres, articulate that specificity by saying that the conquest of the Americas expressed a notion of subjectivity that can be defined as *ego conquiro*, or *I conquer* which captures “[t]he certainty of the self as a conqueror, of its tasks and missions, [which] preceded Descartes’s certainty about the self as a thinking substance (*res cogitans*) and [which] provides a way to interpret it” (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 245). Such an interpretation suggests that indigenous people could be conquered because the *ego conquiro* was in a very real sense premised on a suspicion about their humanity. Read in conjunction with Descartes’s cogito, we can then say of this founding moment of what would become a condition of geo-political coloniality that ‘the “certainty” of the project of colonization and the foundation of the *ego conquiro* stand, just like Descartes’s certainty about the cogito, on doubt or skepticism’ (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 245).

[B]efore Cartesian methodic scepticism ... became central for modern understandings of self and the world, there was another kind of skepticism in modernity which became constitutive of it. Instead of the methodical attitude that leads to the ego cogito, this form of scepticism defines the attitude that sustains the *ego conquiro*’ (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 245).

Maldonado-Torres refers to the sceptical attitude of the *ego conquiro* as racist/imperial Manichaen misanthropic scepticism, an imperial attitude that would go on to group non-Westerners together as “problem people” through an act of reasoning implicitly derived from Christian theology.

Secularised theodicy

Theodicy or “god’s justice” derives from the Greek *theo* [god] and *dikē* [justice] and refers to any act or work primarily concerned with clarifying the tension that arises from claiming that a deity such as the Christian God is benevolent, omniscient and omnipotent while also acknowledging the reality of evil, pain and suffering in the world. If God is all powerful why is there suffering in the world? Why doesn’t God just make it go away? Historically this tension has given rise to three different acts of reasoning: one, if it is God’s will that there should be suffering in the world then he is not a God worth worshipping; two, the existence of suffering in the world proves that an omnipotent and omniscient God does not exist; three, given the fact that humans are not omniscient we simply cannot understand God’s plan and consequently what merely *appears* to be suffering and evil. The latter considered an act of reasoning is of particular interest to us, not only because in Christian

theology it has proven to be the most enduring explanation for the coterminous existence of evil and an omnipotent God but because of the way in which it effectively externalises an inherent contradiction. The system (here, Christian theology) cannot resolve the theodicean paradox. Instead, it externalises or expunges the paradox from the system by claiming that, not the contradiction, but *human beings are the problem* because we lack the capacity to understand why there is no contradiction. What Gordon (2013: 726), following Wynter, refers to as a “theodicean grammar or form,” I am calling an *act of reasoning*. To resolve the paradox that theodicy is concerned with by claiming that *there is no paradox and that human beings are just not clever enough to understand why there is not*, effectively shifts the problem away from an incoherent theology onto the human. Gordon (2013: 726) notes that a number of authors including Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche, Du Bois and Fanon have traced the manner in which this act of reasoning migrated from Christian theology into an existential problematic,

the continued presence of this kind of argumentation even where there is the absence of an avowed deity. Even secular societies may have a theodicean mode of rationalization, where the society itself or some system of treasured knowledge or values occupies the deific role ... Its rationalization depends on rendering its contradictions external (Gordon 2013: 726).

The logic of “coloniality” or “Western modernity” can be decoded along these lines as a “system of thought” constituted by acts of reason which, like most systems do, generated tensions of paradoxes which it then externalised in order to construct and sustain the edifice of whiteness and the superiority of Western modernity as End in itself; an externalisation of tensions that consigned all signs of blackness to what Fanon describes as a zone of non-being. Writes Gordon:

The deification of an epistemic or social order has similar results, in the sense that the integrity of the system depends on externalising its contradictions. Thus, proponents of the imposed order regard poverty, disease, high mortality and social misery as intrinsic to the condition of conquered peoples, instead of as afflictions imposed on them. The result is an anthropology of ‘problem people’. The modernity marked by this process differs from prior modernities precisely in the manner in which its philosophical anthropology did not only place whole groups of people outside of ongoing time, but also transformed the idea of the dominating group into a geographical reach that was genuinely global, *while* locating the dominated group outside of that terrain in what Frantz Fanon called the ‘zone of nonbeing’ (2014: 14-15).

To challenge the misanthropic scepticism and theodicean grammar through which black subjects became “problem people,” the black subject first had to constitute itself as black subject through an act of reasoning which, in retrospect, has acquired the status of an *archē* or originary act of decolonial reasoning.

CONCLUSION

Constitutive causes are only analytically distinct from historical causes – as is clearly demonstrated by the way Hobbes’s ahistorical geometry of the state ends up premised on an incipient form of historicism. But isolating them analytically can be a useful exercise in understanding because once we have taken them apart and considered them in relative isolation from one another we can weave them together again, starting in a different place and picking up the thread in a variety of different ways. Even though much decolonial reasoning is parasitic on Western acts of reasoning – because the former arose as meta-critique of the latter – we can also, at least at a conceptual level, invert this asymmetrical relation of conceptual power by telling a different story; one that begins with the *ego conquiro* and ends with that strange Englishman for whom an aversion to death was fundamental to human nature and who liked to comment about his own birth, “Fear and I were twins”.

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