

## Foreword

WALTER D. MIGNOLO

I

*Embers of the Past* confronts the blind spot of modernity: the myth of a better future that, detached from tradition, doesn't need to look back to go forward. Progress and development, coupled with concepts such as innovation, excellence, and efficiency, dethrone any other possibility of living and conceiving life and society. The hidden side of the triumphal rhetoric of the narrative is that in both its earlier and its current versions, European modernity relies on its own past, the past of Western civilization. The affirmation of the European past as universal allows for the sustained rhetoric of modernity that disavow any other tradition and any other past as sustainable.

Javier Sanjinés takes issue with this myth from the memories of colonial legacies, which are alien to the European experience. Western European states (monarchic and secular) were not colonized; they enacted imperial expansion and colonialism. He confronts the myths of modernity tracing the genealogy of two critical trajectories. One trajectory is found within Europe itself and Euro-America. Walter Benjamin and Charles Sanders Peirce are two examples that call our attention to the “embers of the Euro-American past.” The other trajectory is found in the local histories of European colonies. The points of origination of both trajectories are grounded in different local histories. The first trajectory offers critiques of modernity within modernity itself. The second trajectory advances critiques of modernity from its colonial underside. In the first trajectory, modernity itself, not coloniality, is a problem. In the second the problem is coloniality, the darker side of modernity. It is the compound of modernity / coloniality that calls for decoloniality. Sanjinés brilliantly connects both trajectories, offering clear analysis of the first and

exploring the second in sophisticated ways. Basing his analysis on the Bolivian and Andean past, he delinks from the discipline of history. Sanjinés opts to reinscribe the past in the present.

Published first in Spanish, the book was a clear intervention in the heated and creative political and epistemic debates that have flourished in Bolivia in the past twenty years. The English version has been substantially modified with an introductory chapter reflecting on the “essay” and a final chapter dwelling on what Sanjinés sees as two co-existing metaphors: the metaphor of progress and the metaphor of decolonization.

THE MAIN THRUST of the book remains in both versions. Taking sides with the arguments advanced by many Aymara and Quechua scholars and intellectuals, Sanjinés’s book confronts the current politics of the Bolivian state. “Decolonization” is a word that in today’s Bolivia has three different sources and is inscribed in three different projects. One is the project advanced and enacted, since colonial times, by Aymaras and Quechuas. Decolonization is not a novelty to them. They knew it before all of us who are neither Quechua nor Aymara. Second, the word is used in official discourse of the state. Decolonization as a discourse of the state hides what it means when used in indigenous projects: it hides the fact that the state itself is a product and consequence of coloniality. We encounter the third use of the concept within the project of modernity / coloniality, a project that emerged from a group of dissidents of European descent, mestizas / os and immigrants. Sanjinés’s book is squarely located in this third project, in conflictive dialogue with the state and in solidary dialogue with indigenous decolonial projects.

## II

Javier Sanjinés was born and raised in Bolivia. Educated in France and the United States, he obtained his PhD at the University of Minnesota and taught at the University of Maryland before returning to Bolivia in the early 1990s, when Bolivia elected a neoliberal president, Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada, who invited the Aymara scholar and politician, Victor Hugo Cárdenas, to run as vice president. The seeds of change were planted: neoliberalism is today in decay, while Indianism is on the move. *Embers of the Past* (first published in La Paz with the title of *Rescaldos del pasado*) was written not so much as a study of Bolivian past and present but as an intervention in the intellectual and political debates that have been mounting

in Bolivia since the surprising (for many) presidency of a wealthy neo-liberal president and an Aymara educator vice president. Obviously, the surprising combination did not emerge out of the blue but had been in the air, developing gradually, since the revolution of 1952 and perhaps even since Francisco Pizarro's execution of Atahualpa in 1533. *Embers of the Past* reflects on the present (and the future) by retrieving the silences of the past. Sanjinés returned to the United States in 1998 and joined the Department of Romances Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Certainly, this is not the first book to reflect on Bolivia's colonial past. What matters is the "way" Sanjinés addresses it. Several features highlight Sanjinés's reflections on the past in comparison with historical accounts of today's Bolivia. The nation-state territory of today is filled with millenarian memories of the former civilization of Tiwanaco and Tawantinsuyu. The first sentences of the book are questions. Beginning a book with questions rather than with affirmations engages the reader to take part in the conversation. Sanjinés is not affirming; he is questioning, and the questions will not be answered once and for all, but are left open. What counts, then, are the questions rather than the answers. Not, of course, that Sanjinés's answers should be dismissed, but they should be read as what they are: a series of "essays" dealing with pressing questions.

Must we always fixate on progress and "building the future," never stopping to consider why we are going through a crisis in the historical project of modernity?

The first sentence of *Embers of the Past* opens a fissure in the unquestioned dream of progress, development, and growth assumed as the necessary conditions to happiness, and the premise that being happy is more important than living in harmony and in plenitude. Modernity doesn't need to go back to the past except to glorify its own glories, because the idea of modernity is built on the *very modern idea* of its own past. But that past is regional, local; it is European, adopted and adapted by the United States—it is the past of perhaps 20 percent of the planet's population, not the past of the remaining 80 percent. And the magic trick of the idea of modernity is that it makes us believe that all pasts that are not European have to be superseded by the march of European modernity, sold as universal modernity. Sanjinés's argument dismantles that fairy tale, grounding itself in the local history of Bolivia and the Andes.

Questioning from the beginning is inherent to the "essay" as a genre.

Instead of the affirmation of the social sciences supported with statistics or that of the historian claiming the authority of the archives, Sanjinés returns to a powerful but derogated genre devalued by the myth of “scientificity” inherent to the idea and the fable of modernity. “The essays think”: that is, she or he who writes thinks through the essays. It is not that the social scientists basing their work on statistics or the historians hiding behind the authority of *the* archive do not think. They simply think differently. They think professionally, that is, disciplinarily. The essayist thinks on his or her own, like the poet or the storyteller. While the poet thinks through the articulation of words, sounds, rhythm, and cadence, the storyteller through characters and situations, the essayist thinks through and across ideas, situations, statistics, literature, poetry, metaphors, and other rhetorical figures.

The essay has a prestigious genealogy. Michel de Montaigne embraced and conceptualized it in the process of delinking it from grammar, rhetoric, and the rules of writing history that, in the European tradition, were handed down from the European Middle Ages to the European Renaissance. It spread through the world, reaching into Spain and into Latin America. In the colonies the form-essay, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century, was the genre in which history, sociology, philosophy, political theory, political economy, aesthetics, and psychology coalesced. From Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie* (1845) to Ezequiel Martínez Estrada’s *Radiografía de la pampa* (1933) and Octavio Paz’s *El laberinto de la soledad* (1955), the essay was and is an “undisciplin-ary” genre. Not every essay is decolonial, but Sanjinés makes the explicit connection between the essay and decolonial thinking.

A second important move made by Sanjinés is the parallel he builds between Latin American and Eastern European thinkers and intellectuals, such as the Rumanian Emil Cioran and the Hungarian Georg Lukács, to whom Sanjinés owes in part his own reconsideration of the form-essay. What distinguishes Sanjinés’s argument from many great studies of the past, of Bolivia and the Andes, is the “saying” rather than the “said.” Or, to be more explicit, it is the “said” through the form-essay that brings decolonial thinking to the foreground. Why? Because disciplinary thinking is entrenched and built into the very idea of modernity, from its Renaissance and theological-humanist versions (*les anciens et les modernes*) to its secular-humanist version (progress and the civilizing mission). In Latin America the social sciences “arrived” around 1960, together with the project of development and modernization launched by the United States. To

be modern meant to be scientific, and the form-essay was relegated to the past, to tradition, superseded by the excellence and objective truth promised in the discourse that justified the social sciences.

The last memorable essays in Latin America were written before the 1960s and were replaced by the alleged “scientificity” of the social sciences. Sanjinés breaks away and delinks from that myth and retrieves the past, bringing it into the present through a discursive form that was relegated to the past. That is, delinking not only critiques the content (the enunciated) by the means of the social sciences, but shifts from disciplinary norms (the enunciation) toward a personal way of understanding and knowing, where sensing and reason go hand in hand. Jewish thinkers such as Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, who, within Europe, struggled against the positivist and rationalist conceptions of history and the modern colonization of time (or, if you wish, the control of time within and by the colonial matrix of power), could be favorably compared, in Sanjinés’s argument, with thinkers and intellectuals in European colonies. Sanjinés clarifies that it is not a question of adopting and adapting Adorno or Benjamin, for the priorities they had in Europe are not the same priorities that move thinkers in the colonies. They are parallel histories, so to speak, that in their own unfolding deny the privilege and denounce the dangers of a single story and a single time.

In contradistinction with Adorno, Benjamin, and Lukàcs, Sanjinés claims the form-essay for a global process of decoloniality, located in the singular time of Bolivia and the Andes: a particular entanglement of imperial modernity / coloniality. The response to this entanglement was, from its very inception in the sixteenth century, decolonial thinking and doing, as Guamán Poma de Ayala did in the Andes. Sanjinés sees in his essay a current option to advance processes of decolonization of knowledge and being: “I propose”—he writes in the introduction—“that the essay be considered an aesthetic transgression linked to decolonization. Having observed modernity ‘from the outside,’ I can vouch for the fact that Western historical time shatters when it meets the life of our peoples.”

Sanjinés’s argument does not, of course, “represent” all Bolivian citizens, scholars, or intellectuals. His argument intervenes in current debates in Bolivia. And although he is not addressing issues in Ecuador, his arguments resonate with similar issues in the neighboring country. The reason is simple: what is today Ecuador was the extreme North of the Incanate. Atahualpa was the Inca ruling in Quito located in Chinchaysuyu, while his brother Huascar was the Inca ruling in Cuzco (today

Peru), the center of the Incanate. What is today Bolivia, as I mentioned before, was the Collasuyu. This may sound like a digression, since these issues are not explicitly addressed in Sanjinés's argument. However, they are "embers of the past" very much alive in the memories, the theoretical and political thinking, of Aymara and Quechuas in Bolivia and Peru as well as among Quechuas in Ecuador.

Sanjinés addresses issues related to the memories of the Incanate in chapter 1, when he discusses José María Arguedas, and in chapter 2 when he takes on Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as an imagined community. Anderson's work was celebrated in Latin America shortly after its publication because his narrative suggested that the emergence of a national consciousness and the formation of the nation-state preceded Europe's. It did not take long until less satisfied readers confronted Anderson's thesis. Sanjinés disregards the celebration of the modern myth of newness and who came first and focuses, instead, on why the *nation* became the *nation-state* and why it worked in Europe (and in the United States) but it was more problematic in the Spanish American colonies after independence. National consciousness may have emerged in the Spanish colonies after independence (which were not yet "Latin America"), but the state is no doubt a European institution that became the model for the Spanish American Creole elite in building their own dependent and colonial nation-state.

The emerging bourgeoisie that created the nation-state in Europe did not have to deal with the challenge of a diversity of indigenous and African populations facing the Creole elite of European descent, in the Americas from North to Central and South America. How do you fit them into the "state" if they belong to another "nation"? "Nation," it should be remembered, comes from the Latin *natio*, translated into English in the family of "birth and born." That is, "nation" is a community of birth and therefore an ethno-community. But it so happened that in the colonies the "nations" of Europeans, Indians, and Africans did not belong. The solution was either to subsume local ethnicities under the nation-state constructed by the Creole elite or to marginalize them from the nation-state.

The history and destiny of each nation-state in the Americas vary according to local history. In the Andes, particularly in Bolivia and Ecuador, their local history brought the principle of "plurinational state" into their respective constitutions. The idea of a "plurinational state," Sanjinés argues, radically questions the nation as an "imagined community." In Europe, the "imagined community" was possible because of the

homogeneous national composition of each state. Today, increasing immigration suggests that at some time in the future the idea of plurinational states could also reach Europe. In many of the colonies, and certainly in Bolivia and Ecuador, the plurinationality of each state was an unavoidable consequence of postcolonial nation building. Furthermore, by bringing this issue to the foreground, Sanjinés unveils another weakness of Anderson’s analysis: the need to uncouple nation from state. Nations are ethno-class communities; states are legal and administrative machines. After the concept of a plurinational state was introduced in the Andes, the original European nation-state should be properly called a “mono national state.”

Questioning the modern state that served well the purposes of the emerging European bourgeoisie goes hand in hand with calling into question the secularization and disenchantment of society. It worked well in Europe because the institutionalization of Christianity had already done a good job in disenchanting the world. The formation of the secular state that marginalized the Christian church paved the way to the triumphal promotion of secular reason and reasoning, together with its civilizing mission and with the idea of progress. However, when the secular nation-state was exported to the rest of the globe, to South America and the Spanish, French, British, and Dutch Caribbean colonies, the non-European enchanted world met with suspicion the disenchanting idea embedded in the secular state. The Andes is a region where the enchanted world never receded and now, more than ever, is gaining ground. Ideas such as the right of Pachamama, the right to live in harmony (some would say “to live well”), and the plurinational state are all ideas no longer coming from the European legacy but from legacies of the great Andean civilizations.

Sanjinés devotes the last chapters to exploring in detail both the processes of disenchantment in the formation of the colonial states (the triumphal rhetoric of modernity and the repressive logic of coloniality) and the processes of re-enchantment (decolonization) that are under way in Andean countries nowadays. In this regard, and following the thoughts of Walter Benjamin and Charles Sanders Peirce, Sanjinés shows in chapter 3 how within Europe and the United States, the disenchantment of the world encountered its radical critics. His analysis follows, although indirectly, the philosophical and epistemological battle fought by the Argentinian philosopher Rodolfo Kusch between 1960 and 1979. Kusch’s immersion in the Aymara world, his critique of development and what he called “el patio de los objetos,” refers to a world in which the multiplication of

objects repressed spirituality while at the same time showed that the enchanted world never vanished from the Aymara consciousness.

In chapter 4 Sanjinés explores one of the most enduring myths of modernity: the assumption that the modern structure of government, the nation-state, is of global currency and the guarantee of democratic processes. Sanjinés begins his discussion with two basic European ideas of the nation: the civic and the ethnic. The civic brings forward the idea of the state; the ethnic the idea of the nation (from Latin *natio*, communities of birth). The confusion of nation with state allowed the European ethno-class, the bourgeoisie, to build states of homogeneous nations by disavowing and hiding national minorities. In the histories of European colonies, however, the myth that states were configured by homogeneous nations did not work. In Latin America, the foundation of modern / colonial states in the nineteenth century was founded in an oxymoron: that the homogeneity of the nation was composed of “mestizos / as”: mixed in blood but of European mentality. “First nations” fall outside or at the margin of the “mestizo” state. After almost two centuries of tense relations between colonial legacies—the nation and the state—the recent Constitution of Bolivia dealt with the issue by stating that Bolivia is indeed a “plurinational” state. This was indeed a revolutionary constitutional change. However, constitutions are not necessarily followed *ad pedem litterae* by their governments. And indeed, Sanjinés closes the chapter reflecting on the march of the TIPNIS, in which “first nations” were legally enacting the constitution that the state was violating when they repressed the march and attempted to implement economic developmental decisions contrary to the constitution and to the rights of first nations to participate in the decisions of the state. The book thus closes bringing forward the force and visibility of a major actor in global political transformation: the emerging global political society of which Bolivia has been at the forefront. By connecting Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda’s conceptualization of porous, “amphibian” societies, with Bolivian sociologist René Zavaleta Mercado’s notion of the form-multitude, Sanjinés demonstrates that specific social movements such as the March for Territory and Dignity, in 2000, and the present March in Defense of TIPNIS, are not only fighting for the rights of Amazonian first peoples, as well as for those of nature, but also marching toward a radical transformation of governmentality, not only showing that the nation-state has run its course, but that the plurinational state is also in need of radical mutations.

The force of the political society is to reinvest the “embers of the past”

into the present in search of more humane global futures no longer regulated by the state in complicity with foreign or nationalized corporations, striving for one only global future sustained by the myth of development created by Western modernity.

### III

Sanjinés's work and this book in particular carries the traces of his active participation in important politically oriented research collective projects. He was closely associated with the formation of the Latin American Subaltern Studies project, collaborating with Ileana Rodríguez, John Beverley, and José Rabasa. Later he joined the Modernity / Coloniality / Decoloniality project. The first was a follow-up to the groundbreaking work of the well-known South Asian Subaltern Studies Group. This project was initiated by Spanish American scholars based in the United States (Ileana Rodríguez, José Rabasa, and Javier Sanjinés himself, among others) and U.S. Latinamericanists (such as John Beverley). The second was initiated by Spanish American scholars based in the South, in Peru, México, and Venezuela (Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, and Edgardo Lander) and South American scholars based in the United States (Arturo Escobar, Fernando Coronil, and Walter D. Mignolo). The second project, based in South America, unfolded after the introduction of two key concepts in political, intellectual, and scholarly debate in the subcontinent: "coloniality," introduced by Aníbal Quijano, and "transmodernity," introduced by Enrique Dussel. Sanjinés blends these two theoretical strands. The "Otherwise" in the name of the book series "Latin America Otherwise" was intended to signal a shift in the geography of reasoning that is by now globally irreversible. *Embers of the Past* makes a significant contribution to this book series, which has grown and consolidated through the years.

Walter D. Mignolo  
Durham, May 2013