COVID-19, Democracies, and (De)Colonialities

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Abstract: Liberal democracies often include rights of participation, guarantees of protection, and policies that privilege model citizens within a bounded territory. Notwithstanding claims of universal equality for "humanity," they achieve these goals by epistemically elevating certain traits of identity above "others," sustaining colonial biases that continue to favor whoever is regarded more "human." The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these fault lines, unveiling once more the often-hidden prevalence of inequalities that are based on race, gender, class, ethnicity, and other axes of power and their overlaps. Decolonial theories and practices analyze these othering tendencies and inequalities while also highlighting how sites of suffering sometimes become locations of solidarity and agency, which uncover often-erased alternatives and lessons.

Keywords: colonial, coronavirus, covid, decolonial, democracy, inequality, othering

As the specter of COVID-19 haunts the world, another specter—that of colonialism—has made a spectacular (re)appearance. Colonial continuities, as evidenced in myriad forms of inequality, discrimination, and violence, are prevalent throughout the countries of the world irrespective of global power positions, economic wealth, development indicators, or governance structures. The exclusionary responses of states and societies mirror the colonial vilification of natives characterized as "treacherous," "filthy," and "unsanitary" during the global health outbreaks of the 18th and 19th centuries, notwithstanding the historical irony that the colonizers repeatedly brought with them viruses that decimated subjugated populations. Although people of Asian and, in particular, Chinese descent have borne the brunt of racist outbreaks in the United States and elsewhere, migrants, asylum seekers, and Muslims (in the specific case of India), have also been blamed for spreading the contagion.

Such binary boundaries between "us" and "them," and their associated forms of othering, stigmatization, and erasure are not limited to

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discursive practices, but are also rooted in material inequities and the disproportionate sufferings of disadvantaged social groups. Higher mortality rates among racial and ethnic minorities, indigenous communities, the poor, and the elderly, have exposed the deeply embedded and intersectional nature of inequality among many of the world's oldest democracies. Indeed, the pandemic has unveiled egregious and ongoing material injustices linked to coloniality[1] often hidden beneath long-cherished modern notions of progress, equality, reason, liberty, and democracy.

Although the exclusionary epistemic foundations of liberal democracy have been reinforced by global responses to COVID-19, a decolonial lens brings democratic vistas beyond these legacies into focus. In this brief article, we sketch some of liberalism's exclusions, indicating how ideal subjectivities (such as citizens) are constructed against racialized, gendered, and geographically distant "others." We then show how such tendencies are exacerbated by neoliberal governance and are now being further compounded by the present crisis. Making the marginalizing nature of liberal democracy visible opens space for more substantive consideration of how these equalities and inequities cut across the axes of race, gender, class, and other constructed categories coimbricated within the legacies of coloniality. Subsequently, we explore logics of exclusion have shaped responses at the international level by reinforcing long-standing colonial binaries between East and West. We end the article by describing a number of alternatives brought to the fore by decolonial thought and practice.

Epistemic Foundations, (In)Equality, and Liberal Democracy

Critiques of liberal democracy are well-rehearsed and widespread. Feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial writers have analyzed how, even though liberal democracy often claims universality and equality for all, it includes epistemic notions that lead to marginalization and forms of othering (Hartz 1955; Rivera 1990; Mills 1997; Mehta 1999; Weber 2016). For the purpose of this article, we focus primarily on liberal democracy's Lockean inheritances, arguably one of the main sources of contemporary liberal democratic theory and practice. This kind of liberalism is rooted in the principles of private property, individual freedom, and government by consent, all of which have their basis in the idea of a God-given, reasoning human nature (Jahn 2013: 43–53).

Despite its seemingly broad respect for all those "human" beings whose exercise of reason grants them theoretical equality, this particular form of Western, liberal identity upholds characteristics that create a marginalizing boundary against those considered outside its validated commonality, historically including women, indigenous peoples, and the dispossessed. The oppressive hierarchy and division of labor constructed through such boundaries would be impossible without their epistemic commitments (Mehta 1999: 18). Namely, the universalization of a particular racialized, gendered, and territorialized European subjectivity provides the epistemic conditions of possibility to elevate one way of being over others framed oppositionally as barbaric, uncivilized, traditional, or irrational. These characteristics, often described as colonial wounds (Mignolo 2000), are the bases for platforms of citizenship that delineate possibilities for inclusion and exclusion within the body politic, and create the boundary of participation and privilege in liberal democracies.

The neoliberal turn, notwithstanding its contradictions, contestations, and temporal and geographical variation, unifies many of these tendencies, as evident in the responses mounted by liberal democratic states to the current crisis. As an increasingly globalized mode of governance and form of reason, neoliberalism affects all spheres of human activity as well as human subjectivities themselves (Brown 2015: 48–49). It reads them through economic criteria such as value, competitiveness, and rank, and justifies conditions of othering with long colonial antecedents. Despite historical associations between socioeconomic equality and democracy, neoliberal promises of common prosperity through seemingly limitless economic growth have resulted in world-historic levels of inequality against which the pandemic is playing out. The neoliberalization of the global economy has likewise hollowed out the capacities of post-war democratic welfare states, shifting to neoliberal, regulatory, and networked governance that proves:

> [better] at creating the illusion of activity than actually delivering concrete public goods and services. This has left political elites scrambling for an emergency response, in which controlling the population substitutes for providing for them. (McCormack and Jones 2020)

Within this framework, historical inequalities appear as a natural, necessary, or temporary problem that will eventually be solved by the magic of trickle-down benefits.

To mask these marginalizing tendencies, neoliberalism elevates the individualistic pursuit of happiness as a key aspect of "humanity" (Linera 2015; Peet and Hartwick 2015). This explains why the needs of corporations, banks, and other "key" actors are often located above those of the majority of the population, even in times of crisis. For example, many state policies deployed to address the fallout of COVID-19 portray them as core drivers of development, job creation, freedom, and other neoliberal euphemisms linked to the pursuit of happiness. Alongside this hierarchically elevated set of actors, other strategies privilege a home-owning middle class that has the economic means to work remotely, stay at home, take time off, and/or stockpile resources (Shani 2020). Such policies inherently devalue those who have not successfully satisfied their own pursuit of happiness, and who appear less rational, developed, and free as a result—a direct continuance of the foundational, exclusionary logics of liberal democracy.In the United States, the layering of neoliberal governmentality atop enduring colonial legacies manifests through the disproportionate risks, disadvantages, and suffering of indigenous communities and other people of color. Economic inequality has long been associated with ethnic and racial differences in this country (Darity, Dietrich, and Guilkey 1997), but recent research also shows that income and access to internet inequality are correlated to higher risks of infection and lower possibilities of self-isolation (Chiou and Tucker 2020). The story is not much different in India, the world's largest democracy and former British colony, where the pandemic has deepened already existing class divides and religious fault lines. The Indian prime minister's decision to impose an obligatory nation-wide lockdown with little forewarning or state assistance has had a devastating impact on the country's 470 million-strong informal labor force. Overnight, it left millions of internal migrants and daily wage laborers jobless, hungry, and homeless. Similar conditions, frequently compounded by the structural legacies of colonial rule, have played out to varying degrees across much of the global South. In Brazil, home to one of the largest outbreaks, the virus has disproportionately affected already marginalized indigenous and Afro-descendent communities, especially in the Amazon, given the deadly mix of ineffective government response and active hostility to these communities by Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro.

In addition to their racial legacies, these colonial logics carry implications for other intersecting and mutually reinforcing forms of discrimination and oppression. Eurocentric categorizations of gender historically frame women in opposition to the ideal, rational subject described above (Tickner 1992; Tickner and Sjoberg 2013; Collins and Bilge 2016), a dynamic only compounded through colonial encounters (Rivera 2015; Méndez 2018). In the midst of COVID-19, gendered hierarchies often exacerbate material inequalities and create disproportionate impacts upon women around issues of employment, food security, risks of domestic violence, and so on. A class-based reading similarly highlights social deprivation that is shared by the working poor and economically marginalized both in the global South and the North. As the "essential" service-providers, many of the most vulnerable members of society must remain functional to serve and protect the life requirements of the middle classes and capital owners, even at the risk to their own lives. The experience of people living in the slums with poor access to food or clean water and soap to wash their hands reveals social distancing itself to be a privilege (Ayuub 2020; Mosbergen 2020). An intersectional optics shows that these racial, gender, and class analyses cannot be neatly disaggregated from one another in order to grasp their combined effects in terms of discrimination, exclusion, and suffering; nor can they be properly understood apart from the imperial duress underlying their conditions of possibility.

A more comprehensive picture would require more space than afforded here. But attention to patterns of racial, gender, and class disparities in national responses to COVID-19 help to expose some of the latent colonial fault lines in many allegedly democratic countries, as women, people of color, the working poor, ethnic minorities, indigenous communities, and many others have found themselves in precarious positions aggravated by colonial continuities (Stoler 2016).

Othering and Inequality in the "International"

The abovementioned hierarchies have also been reiterated in the international sphere as a result of the pandemic, usually between democracies and non-democracies, and the West and non-West, confirming Young's (1990: 14) observation that democracy at home is largely maintained through (neo)colonial oppression abroad. For example, several democratic countries have created policies that intensify the securitization of those regarded as enemies of the "civilized" world, including the deportation and exclusion of undocumented and documented migrants deemed to threaten the "body politic" due to potential disease and the decrease of employment in the midst of emerging economic recession. The securitizing construction of "others" is also reflected in isolationist policies that have led to the defunding of the World Health Organization (Klein and Hansler 2020) and a broader decline in international cooperation (Stein and Eran 2020; Busby 2020).

Enduring colonial logics also drive dominant discourses concerning Asia. While China continues to epitomize a politically inadequate "other," wet markets—the alleged source of the outbreak—denote an exotic, superstitious, and primitive way of life that typifies Orientalist views of Asia more broadly. Even relatively high rates of mask wearing have been represented negatively as evidence of a kind of "herd mentality" framed in contrast to Western democratic individualism. As such, the pandemic and responses to it reveal faded colonial boundaries. Even

Trump's outrageous labelling of COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" is nothing new, but mirrors a long Western history of representing infectious diseases such as smallpox and leprosy as originating in China (Craddock 2000; Mawani 2003; Watters 2012).

Imperial remnants are also the main spring of continued epistemic violence, which, among other things, refuses to recognize the colonial "other" as a source of reliable knowledge in the fight against the virus. The initial focus of much Western media on China's authoritarian system and questions about its ability to self-govern are reminiscent of the colonial wisdom that Oriental polities cannot govern themselves. Even China's apparent efficiency and success in containing the outbreak has been taken to further reinforce the point because this was achieved through authoritarianism or the country's underlying Confucian ethos (Escobar 2020), both of which rely on presumed relations of conformity and collectivism that liberal theorists consider obstructive of individual freedom and agency. Current marginalization and stigmatization of China parallels previous Asian learning experiences with SARS and MERS, in which Western recognition of their potential value was both delayed and partial.

That the roots of the colonial presence run deep is also apparent in Taiwan's "Orientalist" handling of the pandemic. The government offered charter flights to its residents in Wuhan as a ploy to insinuate Taiwanese independent statehood, but this gesture was rejected by China. While parents who held a Taiwanese passport were allowed back in, children with only resident status were denied entry. As a result, many parents had to stay in China with their offspring. Even after Wuhan's reopening, entry into Taiwan has been restricted for these populations. In contrast, returnees fleeing from much graver pandemic conditions in the United States and Europe have been allowed entry on the grounds that the human rights of passengers from these countries must be respected. Ultimately, Taiwan has stigmatized its own citizens as a means of proving its Westernness and devaluing its Chineseness. Such self-othering is a distinct kind of colonial wound resulting from the need to adopt the standard of civilization acquired from former colonizers.

Contrary to Taiwan's strategy of equating China to the virus, Japan has taken a different route characterized by relational rapprochement. In addition to official donations of medical supplies and equipment, civil society actors have been active in building bridges of solidarity with their Chinese counterparts. One such gesture entailed attaching an ancient poem to the boxes shipped to the Hubei province that said: "different river, mountains, areas but wind and moon on the same sky." This poem was originally sent to China from an ancient Japanese prince, Nagayao, to invite a Chinese Buddhist monk, Jianzhen/Ganjin to participate in spreading Buddhism in Japan in the eighth century. Tellingly, this gesture garnered massive applause in China and when COVID-19 subsequently broke out in Japan, a group of Chinese citizens, including the co-founder of Chinese conglomerate Alibaba, sent a million masks along with another ancient poem saying: "like mountains stretching before you and me, let's withstand the hardship together." Despite deep-seated tension and animosity between Japan and China, the exchange of small kindnesses between societal actors traced an alternative route. Namely, instead of shutting down physical and symbolic boundaries by othering their historical opponent, civil society organizations and private companies avoided adopting a Western Orientalist lens (like the one embraced by Taiwan) and thus allowed people to subvert prevailing colonial logics.

Decolonial Alternatives

A decolonial analysis of continuities in othering, marginalization, inequality, and epistemic violence, among others, sheds light on how COVID-19 and responses to it are infused with coloniality. But despite a grim picture of worsening inequalities and violence, this approach also highlights the ways in which experiences of marginalization, oppression, and injustice may offer alternative imaginaries, and ways of being and doing.

The horrific toll that the pandemic is taking on communities such as the Navajo and Pueblo Zuni in the United States, and the indigenous peoples of the Amazon and elsewhere in Latin America has been attributed to entrenched structural violence. Moreover, considerations of the virus' impact on these peoples, and of its broader implications for decolonization, must grapple with the enduring effects of epistemic and ontological erasure on ancestral economic, social, cultural, and political practices. For many indigenous communities, the current crisis must be understood as the continuation of centuries-old, interlinked processes of genocide and epistemicide, the systematic eradication of non-Western peoples and their knowledges that was key to the project of modernity (Grosfoguel 2015).

Despite such continuities, indigenous voices also construct other ways of knowing and being that provide important lessons and alternatives. For example, the existence of self-described indigenous democratic practices demonstrates democracy's capacity for resignification and suggests that the violent history of its globalization does not exhaust its potentialities (Quijano 2002). Diverse examples of indigenous democracy reflect both the existence of and possibilities for democratizing decolonial projects emerging from non-Western ways of knowing and being in the world, as these communities self-consciously reappropriate and recast the concept of democracy to describe their practices of self-government (Rivera 1990; Crawford 1994; Mignolo 2011; Grosfoguel 2012).

Indigenous forms of governance are not offered as universal blueprints meant to compete alongside (neo)liberalism as ideological frameworks for democracy, but to enact practices of “epistemic decolonial democratization” by refusing to impose either their own new universals or to “leave the word *democracy* only in liberal or neo-liberal hands” (Mignolo 2011: 92). In other words, democratic possibilities do not emerge from exclusionary understandings of identity and citizenship, but instead foster respectful and heterogeneous forms of dialogue and solidarity between different ways of knowing and being. Through such multiplicity, indigenous reappropriations of democracy move beyond state-centric understandings of politics, enacting paths to cooperation that traverse borders and isolationist boundaries — lessons of vital importance during a pandemic that has proven so adept at crossing these same lines. By decoupling democracy from the Eurocentric epistemic commitments outlined above, these communities “[create] the space to reflect on what might be more just forms of governance, not only for Native peoples, but for the rest of the world” (Smith 2005, 311) and point to alternatives for broader practices of democratization and decolonization (Santos 2005; Mignolo 2011: 89).

Conclusion

The crisis of COVID-19 has revealed and accelerated deeply entrenched problematics, many of which are rooted in coloniality. The continuity, diversity, depth, and scope of the colonial wounds described only superficially in this article, point to the urgency of continued analysis and debate in ways that avoid erasing the agency that sometimes emerges from distinct sites of struggle. Learning to take the deeply diverse, if not divergent, lived realities of people across the globe as a scholarly touchstone for theorizing, rather than universalizing certain abstract categories of “humanity” or unreflexively validating specific characteristics of “democracy” to explain the successes or failures of state regimes (especially outside the West), constitutes an important first step. This diversity of lived experiences — gendered, racialized, sexualized, classed, and so on — confronts any sedimented and solidified singularity in the analysis of the epistemic and ontological assumptions underlying the present crisis by bringing into the debate radically different experiences of colonialisms and decolonialities, including the possibility of re-imagining democracy beyond its colonial legacies.

Debates about democracy and the pandemic must also go beyond the boundaries delineated by Eurocentric assumptions about democracy's form and content to focus on substantive issues of equity, analyzing which social forces are exercising power in particular contexts, for whose benefits, and at whose expense. This entails a deeper engagement with the political character of the state, the boundaries of citizenship, the biases of specific policies, and the power arrangements and dynamics implicated therein. It also requires analysis of multiple forms of cooperation and solidarity that may not take the state as their primary referent.

Finally, and although beyond the scope of this brief article, the pandemic also provides an opportunity to expand the *demoi* by including all human and non-human bodies—potentially even the coronavirus itself—as part of a vibrant ecology indicated by many strains of indigenous (and more recently, post-humanist) thought. Several countries, such as Ecuador and Bolivia, have already expanded notions of citizenship to include "nature" as an equal subject of rights. This form of ecological analysis poses perhaps one of the most difficult challenges to those who conceive democracy solely through a Eurocentric lens, while also underwriting a reanalysis of COVID-19. In the longer run, practices of quarantine will ultimately have to yield to antibody/vaccine, through which both humans and the virus can restore a more balanced form of coexistence. However, the othering of nature itself silences decolonial struggles and alternatives that offer key lessons in deeper forms of cohabitation and environmental respect.

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NOTE

1. Echoing Quijano (2000) and Stoler (2016), we use terms such as "coloniality," "colonial presence," and "imperial duress" to underscore the continuities of colonialism beyond the eradication of formal colonial administrations.

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