



Double Critique Revisited, Or Does It Matter Who is the Most Legitimate Victim?

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Abstract

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has accentuated the parallel existence of discordant and impervious narratives – the global anticolonial and the more local anti-Soviet/Russian. Caught up in their victimhood rivalry, both narratives demonstrate their inability to engage in pluriversal thinking and be ready to sacrifice their privileges, real or symbolic. The invasion has also shown the poverty of the global theory that continues to flounder in the swamp of emasculated universalism or to grab on to the provincial and ignorant “stand pointism” unable to practice solidarity with anyone and for anything. These are disturbing signs of a surrender to modern/colonial futureless agonistics that seeks to spite the enemy rather than to generate anything constructive. In its early years decolonial option stressed the importance of double critique. Today the double critique often shrinks to a one-sided rejection of the straw-manned collective west, while decolonial thinkers too easily pardon dictators and rogue states who manipulatively use their anti-Western rhetoric. Paradoxically, this bias reproduces the same modern/colonial paradigm which decoloniality claims to delink from while dismissing Ukrainians as mere victims or dispensable lives. The essay analyzes the reasons for this current dangerous binarization in decolonial thinking and reflects on possible ways for revamping the complexity of the double critique and hopefully, for reimagining decoloniality in the 21st century.

In previous works I have already commented on complex and controversial historical, ideological, and political and geopolitical contexts that have shaped academic decoloniality and to some extent,

predetermined its subsequent limitations and blind spots (Tlostanova 2022, 2023a, 2023b). Today these mostly unperceived negative tendencies are leading to an increasing inaptness to interpret contemporaneity in all its complexity or much less deal with reimagining the future. This makes me more hesitant in subscribing to current decolonial beliefs. It is sad to witness that decoloniality is becoming one of those academic discourses that emerge every decade and then gradually shift from promising radical critique equipped with a set of fruitful concepts to an arrangement of predetermined platitudes. The original decolonial lexicon included several important notions that were subsequently overshadowed due to their complexity and indeterminacy and therefore, their inability to fit into the increasingly rigid decolonial frames. Additionally, academic decoloniality has gradually become more and more essentialist and binary, while dangerously balancing on the verge of idealizing the constructed premodern past and homogenizing the West as a straw-manned absolute enemy. I believe that taking decoloniality to merely restoring the forgotten and erased indigenous ways is limiting and divisive at best, not to mention that it is easily hijacked by conservative extreme-right propaganda populistically selling the “going back to the glorious past” idea to confused populations often marked by learned helplessness and in some cases, imperial resentment. What could save decoloniality in this situation is revisiting and reflecting upon the forgotten concepts such as double translation (Mignolo and Schiwy 2003), transculturation (Coronil 1995; Ortiz 1995), impurity (Lugones 1994) and especially double critique (Khatibi 1983; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006). It is this latter idea that I would like to dwell on in this text. The topic is prompted by a lack of adequate reactions to the full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine on the part of decolonial thinkers or several questionable reactions which are also traceable in the CFP of this special issue.

Thus, the editors claim that “the liberation of Ukraine became a North Atlantic rhetoric to contain Russia and China” and are indignant about the EU proposition to decolonize Russia. I agree that the EU is not a legitimate agent of decolonization, and any decolonial moves in Russia should be initiated by the numerous non-Russian internal minorities and colonial populations and selected critically

minded Russians who are ready to dismantle their own imperial canon and question their own privilege thus performing decolonization as deimperialization of their own minds and deeds. Yet, taking the Russian occupation and Ukrainian resistance solely to the issue of Western dominance seems problematic at best and dangerous at worst. It makes me wonder why decolonial thinkers were perfectly able to come up with the term “imperial difference” (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2011; Tlostanova 2015) and endlessly discuss the infamous inter-imperial squabbles grounded in the common “black legend” tactic in the 16th-19th centuries (Greer et al. 2007), yet when it comes to the current use of exactly the same tactic by both Russia and the imagined collective West most decolonialists for some reason remain blind to the manipulateness of one (Russian) side and concentrate their critique exclusively on the West? Obviously, these are two sides of the same coin or, if you wish, it is the West looking at itself in a funhouse mirror and seeing Russia as its own distorted reflection, and the chronically imitative Russia once again using its habitual tactic of borrowing western ideas to later claim that it understands and implements them better than the erring West. If we only look at one agent in this entanglement, we will never understand what is going on, much less what can be done to get out of this dead-end.

Semiotician Yuri Lotman hiding from the Soviet repressions and antisemitism in Estonia back in the 1980s traced this specific Russian tendency historically, including the adoption of the Eastern form of Christianity from the Byzantine Empire, the reception of the French Enlightenment, and the modernist movements in the turn of the century art (Lotman 2002). A crude version of the same tendency is evident in the current Putin`s speechwriters` creations selectively appropriating anticolonial rhetoric to denounce the West while presenting Russia as the savior of humanity. Behind this manipulateness lies a chronic Russia`s inferiority complex periodically exploding into attempts to escape modernity regardless of sacrificing thousands of lives. It begs for double critique as Russia is unable to exist without the west, has nothing to go back to and cannot not be an empire. Yet, double critique is long forgotten while decolonial thinkers have gradually drifted towards binary either/or solutions that are becoming increasingly common.

Another problematic feature of this discourse exemplified in the CFP is a refusal to acknowledge the subjectivity of Ukrainians and their political will and determination. Ready to discuss on hundreds of pages the nuances of the emerging political identities of indigenous “nationalities” when, in reality, their participation in decision making sadly remains negligible, decolonial thinkers immediately, become bored when the same discussion refers to Ukraine which is consolidating into a political nation right now as a result of the heroic collective defense of its sovereignty. Instead, Ukrainians are perceived as silent faceless victims manipulated by the West and passively waiting for liberation from the outside, victims who are also way too White and Europeanized to be allowed into the rigid decolonial indigeneity/colorist scheme. This betrays the sad fact that transculturation with its nebula of specific ideas and sensibilities focusing on reciprocal mutual influences and stressing the agency and subjectivation of the colonized groups (Ortiz 1995; Tlostanova 2012), has fallen out of fashion in decolonial discourse and that this discourse itself is gradually shrinking to the old logic of the colonizer/colonized or in the current edition – the global North and its allies and sycophants, and the dewesternizers (Mignolo and Mattison 2012) or former “losers” who dream of recutting the world in their favor. Thus, decolonial thinkers themselves become easy victims of Putin’s version of the black legend.

In the current almost unanimous decolonial support of Palestine (which falls squarely into the classical anticolonial narrative and is also strongly anti-American and rightly critical of European hypocrisy) and equally unanimous and shocking refusal to back Ukrainian resistance one detects the echoes of the Cold War allegiances and rigid divisions myopically missing the fact that Putin’s Russia is not the USSR but a dirty lining of global neoliberalism with inflamed imperial ambitions. More importantly, it is an ethically erroneous move measuring the value of human lives and the measure of solidarity based on their incidental political allegiances or, to put it bluntly, on the notorious division into us and them. In this immoral logic Ukrainians are less worthy of pity than Palestinians because they selected a Western way. And if the homogenized West is seen as an ultimate enemy the situations when it may support

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some anticolonial struggles such as the Ukrainian one, for whatever selfish reason, are simply to be ignored. When such divisive ideas started to emerge in public decolonial interventions (Mignolo 2023; Decolonial International Network 2022) my attitude to decoloniality has become even more critical than in the last several years because disagreement with several conceptual decolonial assumptions and undelivered promises has now spilled into the real political struggles with many lives at stake. In fact, conceptual disagreements and actual political events are now extremely entangled. Abandoning the double critique not only leads to a paradoxical decolonial pardoning of any dictators and rogue states just because they are using the anti-US rhetoric in their propaganda. More importantly, this bias reproduces the same modern/colonial paradigm which decoloniality claims to delink from while easily dismissing Ukrainians as dispensable lives or ultimately, Russians as cancelled hostages with no future.

In several recent disputes with decolonial and global South thinkers on the full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine, attempting to grasp the reasons for their silence or even open support for the Russian invasion, whenever I urged them to notice the local levels of coloniality and stop identifying it

only with the homogenized West, I got an answer that if the neo-imperial Russia loses, the Americans will take over. This statement is apparently seen by avowed decolonialists as a kind of a last argument which does not require any proof. In my view, it is a deeply problematic position completely devoid of empathy, responsibility, or genuine interest in other people's lives, and preoccupied exclusively with defending its own abstract righteousness. Meanwhile for the attacked and annihilated people it is difficult to say what is the difference in who would lie to them, exploit them, or destroy their lives – a Russian dictator, a western administration or a proxy local leader, if the result is the same lack of rights, dignity and future. The actual terms of their dependence are in any case more important than meaningless speculations on which power is less guilty.

Once again, what is lacking here is the forgotten double critique. Perhaps it is worth reminding that the idea was first formulated by Moroccan thinker and fiction writer Abdelkebir Khatibi (1983) and targeted both Eurocentric or Orientalist discourses and ethnocentric local narratives complexifying and nuancing the positionality and agendas of those who attempt to practice the double critique. In case of decolonial thinking, a double critical stance requires the awareness of many intersecting factors and agents of oppression, not just one homogenized West, and does not simply pardon or idealize anyone who is criticizing this imagined West, including petty dictators and autocratic regimes. Double critique takes into account the local sources and circumstances of inequality and unfreedom, which need to be scrutinized in relation to the larger forces of oppression. For instance, internal conservative religious patriarchal regimes are regarded in decolonial Muslim feminism as equally important targets of critique just as Western orientalist colonialist and neocolonialist discourses that are marked by White savior syndrome and superiority complex (Mernissi 2000). Axiomatically, it is impossible to fully understand the complexity of intersectional oppression if we are only able to see one of its aspects.

Therefore, double critique can be also fruitful for conceptualizing Ukrainian oppression, resistance, division, occupation, and emancipation. A doubly or multiply critical decolonial analysis is able to both acknowledge the dismay and poverty of

Russian imperial narrative attempting for many centuries to deny the very right to existence for Ukraine as a separate nation, the hypocrisy of European and North American official narratives, with no interest in the fate of Ukrainians and the only concern with avoiding a larger war while continuing to profit on the ongoing war, and the potential pitfalls of postcolonial nationalism in the next independence stage that require constant checking and balancing.

Ultimately, the double-edged critical charge of double critique balances the extremes of binary thinking leading to a third way that Sylvia Wynter refers to in her reflection on what it means to be human (1995). The third way is not simple turning the tables or switching polarities. It is going beyond, overcoming the current binary system rather than joining one of the sides. Wynter's approach seeks to dismantle the dualistic either-or logic dividing the world into us and them, and questions the very framework grounded in fixed, always correct stand points. It strives to maintain multiplicity, complexity, and Lugonesian "impure" (Lugones 1994) entanglements instead, each of which remains a subject of critique. This is not a new or particularly original approach, in fact, it is an example of feminist intersectional optic (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collings 2000) described long ago. Yet, as we know, high disciplinary fences and heteropatriarchal mansplaining easily seep even into the most democratic anti- and decolonial discourses and citation politics which is another reason why double and multiple critique is a necessity for decoloniality to survive and thrive.

Indeed, double critique does not divide humanity into clear-cut victims and perpetrators or oppressors following a dynamic intersectional approach instead. If in Muslim societies that Khatibi and Mernissi wrote about, double critique entailed a scaling of the Western dictate and local forms of control, in societies that went through the Soviet and often earlier Russian domination this approach stands for a critical conceptualizing of at least two but, in fact, many more forms and levels of imperial control (Tlostanova 2010), such as the global Euromodernity as a set of onto-epistemic, economic and political frames, which gets entangled with specific, often contradictory and insecure local imperial histories of less successful modern empires and their internal and external

colonial others, and importantly, their current involvement in different forms of nationalism and neo-colonial oppression.

Thus, independently from this forgotten history of double critique in early decolonial thinking contemporary Polish scholars Łukasz Bukowiecki, Joanna Wawrzyniak and Magdalena Wróblewska came up with the term “dual decolonial option” to claim that artists who work with contested urban memories “not only directly address the legacies of foreign dependencies, but in addition, and with an eye on the future, seek to destabilize nation-oriented essentialist interpretations of those dependencies...working through the national myths that have emerged in the aftermath of the period of foreign dependencies” (Bukowiecki et al. 2020, p. 33). Double critique then is targeted at both historical trajectories and current traces of various foreign influences and at the often-contested developments of the post-dependence national(ist) imaginaries that prefer a one-sided victimhood stance.

“Competitive victimhood” (Demirel 2023) grounded in uncontested modern/colonial agonistics that María Lugones criticized many years ago in her classical text on traveling to other people’s worlds with a “loving perception” (Lugones 2003, p. 96) is a global phenomenon which prevents various others from forming transversal coalitions dooming them to narrow and provincial standpoints with no future. This phenomenon is common among the radical protesting groups including decolonial ones as well as among the more traditional nationalist forms of identification. Thus, Jie-Huyn Lim addresses transnational trend of “victimhood nationalism” in his analysis of the dynamics of under- and over-contextualization in national victimhood constructions resulting in political biases: “If the over-contextualization inherent in historical contextualism gives rise to historical conformism of whatever happened in history, the de-contextualization results in a form of a-historical justification of the historical aftermath. Indeed, the spectres of de-contextualization and over-contextualization hovering over the victimhood controversy make historical reconciliation vulnerable to politicization” (Lim 2010, p. 158).

Double or multiple critique is the way to challenge victimhood nationalisms and other exclusivist

forms of rivalries to avoid seeing only one enemy and erasing other factors and levels of coloniality. Such an approach can potentially trigger transversal dialogues among often extremely distant others, whose decolonial trajectories might be more convoluted and indirect than the model versions of decoloniality represent. This is the case with various no longer post-Soviet subjects/nations looking in different directions and allying with often completely different power vectors. For these agents it becomes challenging to navigate the neo-imperial Russian advances, the intricacies and limitations of the European choice or its impossibility and constant postponement, the reality of yet another reproduction of racialization and orientalization both by Russians, by Europeans and sadly, at times, by the former fellow sufferers from the Soviet regime who claim to be European.

I am, by no means, calling for restoring the fake Soviet people’s friendship or asking those who selected a European way to join those who are leaning more towards China or Turkey. I am, however, saying that an inability to practice double critique or, in feminist terms and to quote Mari Matsuda, to “ask the other question” (Matsuda 1991) while not rejecting but rather critically engaging one’s own stance, prevents from building transversal Lugonesian “deep coalitions that never reduce multiplicity spanning across differences, and being aware of oppression, are not fixed on it, but strive beyond into the world [...]towards a shared struggle of interrelated others” (Lugones 2003, p. 98). Such deep coalitions are indispensable for refuturing. As a result, increasingly, we face simplified narratives focusing on just one aspect of inequality or injustice and built exclusively around the West/East or North/South axis. They are easier to represent and chronically unable and unwilling to hear each other.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Third Karabakh war largely unnoticed by the world, and the horrendous Hamas attack and subsequent genocidal Israeli blockade and assault of Gaza have brought forward once again the parallel existence of discordant and deaf to each other (though deeply related) narratives – the anticolonial and that of the victims of the Soviet occupation, or the former countries of the so-called state socialism. Certainly, both terms are quite vague and deserve criticism but let us accept them for the sake of

brevity now. The long-established anticolonial narrative is a core element of a whole spectre of political and intellectual discourses covering not just the Global South but also the Global Left, both historically and currently.

Paradoxically, critiquing Euromodernity from the viewpoint of colonial difference, the anticolonial narrative, consciously or not, shares the epistemic frameworks of the Global North and centres the world exclusively around the narrative of Western modernity, albeit in a negative form, while uncritically accepting the way it erases the former second world with its own much less global anti-Soviet narrative. The West then becomes the only enemy whereas all other agents are assessed according to their relation to the West. Such a critique turns into a paradoxical legitimization of one main narrative and the erasure of all others. This dangerous simplification excludes millions of people from any possibility of having a voice and expressing an opinion since this would be complicating the simple narrative of one homogenized enemy (the Global North) and one main victim (the Global South).

The former Eastern bloc is increasingly expressing dissatisfaction with its systematic erasure and dismissal of its problems in anticolonial discourses, particularly those coming from the Global North, claiming that they generate new forms of discrimination and silencing (Hendl 2022; Hendl et al. 2023; Koobak et al. 2021). This does not mean that East European positions, and no longer post-Soviet ones, are always complex and nuanced enough as they also tend to dismiss the problems of the Global South as something beyond their immediate interest, thus entering once again the agonistic modern/colonial competition for the status of the main victim. Yet to be fair, there are many more voices and positions in this group that are able to understand intersections and entanglements between the anticolonial and the anti-Soviet. Still, caught up in their victimhood rivalry, the anticolonial and the anti-Soviet narratives demonstrate their inability to engage pluriversal thinking and make concessions by sacrificing one's privilege, real or symbolic. Sadly, most critical thinkers in this situation, including the decolonial ones, continue to flounder miserably in the swamp of emasculated universalisms or to grab on to provincial and often equally ignorant

"stand pointisms", unable to practice solidarity with anyone and for anything. Ironically, it is ultimately a sign of a complete surrender to modern/colonial agonistics, a rivalry for real and symbolic resources, media attention, reparations, that acts to spite the enemy rather than to generate anything constructive for survival of life on the planet.

At present, critical positions remain trapped in their respective narrow stances and curdling in their bitter rivalries. Active discussion of possible paths out of this current dead-end is what is needed and what decolonial thinking could work on but does not. The refusal to formulate an idea or better many ideas of the future and to conceptualize the ways to get there was a conscious decolonial choice, linked perhaps to its post-constructivist origins. This refusal to refer to any political and social future imaginaries was quite logical in the specific context of the early 1990s but is increasingly unproductive today. Moreover, having promised a radical "delinking" and a questioning of "the terms of the conversation" (Mignolo 2009, p. 4), academic decoloniality is unable to deliver on its promise, and slides into a descriptiveness for criticizing other anticolonial discourses. Unable to make sense of the complexity of the current global crisis, decolonialists mostly take a wait-and-see observer attitude which, once again, used to be acceptable thirty years ago but no longer is.

In this respect I have more hope for decolonial social movements outside academia, although their very nature is understandably situated, contextual, and local, and most of these movements have no tools for or intentions to fully understand the global crisis or how to deal with it. This of course does not mean that we should dismiss decoloniality as an academic discourse or decolonial movements as grass-roots forms of activism. It just means that most of these efforts, arguably important for satisfying our personal and collective dignity and sense of responsibility, would always be partial, limited, unsuccessful and unable to drastically change the current, accelerating defuturing and entropic tendencies. If we hope to really slow down the destructive processes rapidly eroding different forms of life on earth, including our own, we should perhaps do something entirely different: stop repeating the same decolonial ideas formulated thirty years ago again and again, while ignoring phenomena that do not fit within these quickly

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This shift would require moving away from empty signifiers and false oppositions of yesterday's theory and turning back to the long forgotten double critique opposed to both global coloniality and the local repressive neocolonial and neo-imperial regimes, to a horizontal multipolarity that needs to be envisioned and launched.

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becoming outdated frames. We should, at the very least, attempt to launch projects which could lead to a slowing down of our descent into a global multifaceted disaster or, somehow, prevent its most dangerous consequences from becoming a reality. Such projects are already emerging in different parts of the world and are often generated in and by activist and social movements, many of them decolonial, and not by a typical academic 'beating the air' which continues to describe the world from a limited perspective and/or from a privileged bubble (Esimde 2014; Mujeres Creando 2020; RCMC 2025).

One of the important global projects in this respect should be delegitimizing the university as a colonial institution and building alternative relearning and remaking spaces and events outside the university. They should be uncontrolled by the state or corporations as these are powerful hindrances for the development of the new political imagination (Fry and Tlostanova 2020). Such initiatives obviously need both intellectual and financial support and a strong will. But in the last thirty years, none of the decolonial groups were able to implement it, except sporadically in specific contexts such as Amawtay Wasy Pluriversity (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2011) or in the form of

numerous decolonial summer schools that are still off-springs of the modern/colonial academic and cultural institutions, such as universities and museums and, therefore, are doomed to be forever shoot themselves in the foot by attempting to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house (Lorde 2007). I still wish to believe that such relearning and remaking spaces would emerge soon on a larger scale before decoloniality finally turns into a simplified, depoliticized metaphorical discourse and also, before some larger catastrophe makes it irrelevant to learn by forcing us all to concentrate on mere survival.

Instead of falling into a trap of binary thinking, such decolonial spaces could pay attention to various alter-global pluritopical visions of solidarity and "deep coalitions" whose grounds are open for collective formulation and discussion by the people themselves. Deep coalitions cannot be grounded in victimhood rivalry as they urge us to relearn how to hear each other and analyze our collective situations and predicaments in relation to each other and other others. This shift would require moving away from empty signifiers and false oppositions of yesterday's theory and turning back to the long forgotten double critique opposed to both global coloniality and the local repressive neocolonial and neo-imperial regimes, to a horizontal multipolarity that needs to be envisioned and launched. This dynamic stance will be delinked from the failed utopias of the past and based on the resurrected solidarity of the people, and on transversality and the will to life and not to power. This would require us to engage in a complex relational worlding (Tlostanova 2023c), a balancing act to overcome the immobilizing locality of continental and national ontologies and the modern/colonial predicament, the bleakness of the looming world of permanent wars and conflicts and total surveillance and the hubris of thoughtless growth. Transversal decolonial communities of change could then attempt to make pervasive unsettlement and the complex colonial and socialist "duress" (Stoler 2016) into a positive ontological design (Fry 2017) and a flexible way of worlding, letting us relearn how to live in the immense and boundless, scarred and injured world that humans, in our current new stoical stance matching the air of the times, must still try to refuture.

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