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Trans-Modern Perspectives: On Imperialist and Anti-Imperialist Epistemological Visions

Abstract

This paper assumes that a critical visual theory and, accordingly, the critical perception of the world at large, make part of the critical theory of society. In what follows, I will discuss their relation to the imperialist and anti-imperialist (visual) epistemologies in order to bring forward the need to look at the world from the viewpoint(s) of the ‘South’ – the place from which our contestation and decolonization of sovereign epistemic power must begin through plural and radically counter-hegemonic (trans-modern) perspectives.

Keywords

visual epistemologies, anti-imperialism, counter-hegemony, trans-modernity, the global South

What is the reason that, in the last two centuries, a dominant epistemology has eliminated from the cultural and political context of the production and reproduction of knowledge our epistemological reflection? What are the consequences of such decontextualization? Are other epistemologies possible today?

--Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Maria Paula Meneses (2010: 7)

‘Democratic’ and Other (Visual) Regimes: An Introduction

During his conversation with Glaucon in the Fourth Book of Plato’s *Republic* (c. 380 BC), Socrates discusses the notion of ‘regime’ in relation to politics. He starts by saying that there are “five types of political regime with their own specific form” (Plato 2003: 143) and presents the first, which “might be called monarchy, if an exceptional individual emerges among the rulers, or aristocracy if several emerge” (Plato 2003: 143). While describing each of them he argues about their connection to the types of soul to which they pertain, since “for

individuals also there must necessarily be as many kinds of character as there are kinds of regime” (Plato 2003: 253-254). In the Eighth Book, Socrates adds to the earlier discussion:

There’s the one which is pretty generally approved, the Cretan or Spartan. Next –and next is the scale of general approval– is the one called oligarchy, a form of government filled with all sorts of evils. In contrast to oligarchy, and the form of government which arises next, is democracy. And then there is the wonderful institution of tyranny, standing head and shoulders above all the others, the fourth and last diseased state of the city. Can you think of any other kind of regime which forms a distinct category of its own? I take it that hereditary rules by families, kingships which go to the highest bidder, and other similar regimes, which you will find are no less common among the barbarians than among the Greeks, are all intermediate between the forms I have mentioned (Plato 2003: 253).

Socrates’ argument was crystallized in Athens at the dawn of the European democracy. If you ask people today to think about the notion of ‘regime’ the majority of them may immediately refer to another term – such as ‘governance’ – and associate it with some of its specific forms (*authoritarian*, for instance). Due to commonly misleading and predominantly negative tones applied to the popular understanding of the word ‘regime’, this association does not come as a huge surprise. Among those people there also might be a few who consider themselves knowledgeable enough about the European history: for them a ‘regime’ may denote the political system of *Ancien Régime* (i.e., the monarchic rule preceding the 1789 revolution in the French Kingdom). Many will simply think of numerous *totalitarian* regimes throughout history across the world: some of them were typical of the twentieth century, some of them are still in power.

One of them is called ‘democracy’. When requested to give his views about “our current democracy [as] ultimately the most human system possible”, Dutch sociologist Willem Schinkel responded that “democracy is basically authoritarian” and continued:

If democracy is the most humane way of human society, this means that it will never be completely done. Of course there are all sorts of problems concerning our democracy at this moment – we could talk about that too. But the first problem is that democracy is considered to be ‘realized already’. Whereas democracy should in fact maintain an attitude of ‘being

connected with the future', of a 'not-yet-character'. If democracy does not have that attitude, it quickly becomes a form of anti-democracy (Schinkel 2013).

What does Schinkel argue about? I assume that the question about 'our current democracy' relates to the system of so-called Western liberal democracies, presented as 'ultimately the most human system possible'. This implies its superior position in comparison to other possible systems, presumably less human. The notion of 'democracy' and the notion of '(ultimate) humanness' here correlate as even categories. Nonetheless, the relation between them remains essentially uneven, unequal or paradoxical in the following sense: for a democratic project to be ultimately humane it has to be complete; yet, once it is understood as 'complete' (or considered to be 'realized already', as Schinkel says) it stands no more for democracy. If democracy is *a priori* taken to be 'realized' it remains essentially incomplete (unrealized), because its potential realization denies its democratic character. Hence, it must have a *democratic attitude* instead of 'being democratic' in the present or, as Schinkel claims, it must be 'connected with the future' instead of 'being realized already'. Otherwise, the system only claims to be something (in this case - 'democratic') without *actually* being so. For a potential democracy to be realized in the future the system must admit its non-democratic nature (or not-yet-democratic nature) so it could continue to aspire *towards becoming* the most human system possible. Once this aspiration seems to be fulfilled, the possibility of being 'actually democratic' is lost. For Schinkel, it is the *actuality itself* that goes against the very ontology of democracy as it cannot be 'realized already'; rather it can only aspire towards such realization without claiming to be what it is not. If the system is claiming to be what it is not (democratic and most human, *here and now*) it means that it is neither democratic nor ultimately human. Accordingly, one can assume that every system that claims to be 'actually democratic' is not at all democratic or – if it persists in claiming to be what it is not – it becomes exactly the opposite: anti-democratic. Therefore, the reality of a 'democratic regime' which we are currently experiencing in the form of governance 'best of all' conceives of the following: it relates to the system of so-called Western liberal democracies, it includes the superior position in comparison to other possible systems (presumably less human) and it is essentially non-democratic if not even anti-democratic. Given this logic, Schinkel expands his argument – and rightfully so – to the extent where he can claim that 'democracy is basically authoritarian'.

Every pretension of a system that tends to be overtly ‘democratic’ (on the grounds that it literally epitomizes the idea of democracy that has been ‘realized already’ as the ‘most human system possible’) exposes itself to the *negation of democracy* and risks to be converted into the opposite, i.e. the authoritarian regime. The *superior* position of ‘democracy’ among other possible regimes is inherent to such risks as it is *self-legitimized*. However, a regime that tends to be superior, self-legitimized and ‘democratic’ at the same time is nothing but equivocal. On the one hand, as Schinkel argues, it is non-democratic and/or anti-democratic as it maintains an attitude of ‘being connected with the present’ while it should maintain an attitude of ‘being connected with the future’. On the other hand, as I argue, it remains ‘democratic’ insofar as it discloses the *darker side* of democracy. The ‘darker side’ of democracy – its officially invisible or less visible side – consists in its basically authoritarian nature whenever the “politics of universalism” and its “rhetoric of power” (Wallerstein 2006) prevail on its visible or ‘brighter side’.

This brings me to the next argument: there is no ‘democracy’ (as we experience it today) without its authoritarian, invisible and darker side. In other words, no regime that tends to be democratic could escape a dichotomy between the visibility and the invisibility of ‘democracy’. If for a ‘democratic’ regime, to be considered as ‘best of all’, it means to be superior in relation to other regimes, this also indicates its global aspirations towards the conditions of a ruling political authority. Consequently, its superiority is properly *imperialist* insofar as the regime of visibility to which it pertains accounts for the *hegemonic visual regime* par excellence. I assume that the visible or brighter side of the hegemonic visual regime reveals the characteristics of ‘the most human system possible’, but I also comply with Schinkel’s suspicious objection to such an assumption. The arising question is: what makes the invisible or darker side of the hegemonic visual regime, so our suspicion could be sustained? Additionally, given our awareness about its darker side, which options can we open to other, alternative prospects within the potential multitude of visual regimes that are properly *counter-hegemonic*? By ‘counter-hegemonic visual regimes’ I refer to the systems of power – or the lack of power thereof, in both political and visual terms – that do not or cannot pretend to be ‘democratic’ insofar as the hegemonic regime claims its own privileged position in the ‘universe’ of perspectives as ‘ultimately the most human system possible’, the ‘best of all’. If, following Schinkel, the hegemonic ‘democratic’ regime is basically authoritarian, does this indicate that counter-hegemonic regimes are more or less authoritarian – or not authoritarian at all? In this paper, I approach the ‘authoritarian regime of democracy’ as being

in charge of imperialist epistemological visions (al-Masserri 2010), against which the many and varied anti-imperialist options wait to be uncovered from the death-worlds of knowledge.

Every ruling power makes laws for its own good

The power of ‘democracy’ and its authoritarian, darker side – as I expose it here in line with Schinkel – relate to the notion of (‘democratic’) justice-as-intervention. This relation resonates with quite a polemical idea that brings me back to another chapter in Plato’s *Republic* that I want to recall at this point. The idea consists in the possibility of approaching justice as that “what is good for the ruling authority” or “what is good for the stronger” (Plato 2003: 16) as it was crystalized by Thrasymachus in his conversation with Socrates in the First Book of *The Republic*. Says Thrasymachus:

You must be aware that some cities are tyrannies, some are democracies, and others aristocracies? [...] And what is in control in each city is the ruling power. [...] *Every ruling power makes laws for its own good*. A democracy makes democratic laws, a tyranny tyrannical laws, and so on. In making these laws, they make it clear that *what is good for them, the rulers, is what is just for their subjects*. If anyone disobeys, they punish him for breaking the law and acting unjustly. That’s what I mean, ‘my friend’, when I say that *in all cities the same thing is just, namely what is good for the ruling authority*. This, I take, is where the power lies, and the result is, for anyone who looks at it in the right way, that the same thing is just everywhere – *what is good for the stronger* (Plato 2003: 16; my emphasis).

A pretty unfavorable figure among the characters of *The Republic*, Thrasymachus (the second half of the 5th century BC) is known as a rhetorician whose name best explains not only his temperament but, consequently, his role and position among the ancient Athenians described by Plato. In *The Commentary of Marsilio Ficino to Plato’s Republic* (recently published for the first time in English) we can find that his name translates into the “fierce fighter [who] acts harshly”. When Ficino, the humanist of the Florentine Renaissance, analyses the conversation between Thrasymachus and Socrates from a historical distance of many centuries after Plato, he notices the following – among “many reasons why Socrates is always in the habit of asking questions rather than giving instruction” figures also one through which to make clear that “human knowledge consists in negating what is false rather than in

affirming what is true” (Farndell 2009:6). Thrasymachus’ position is, therefore, not only ‘negative’ towards Socrates’ negations but also *reversely critical* towards the ‘just’ rhetoric around the idea of sovereignty itself. Being aware of Socrates’ habit, Thrasymachus brings forward a rather polemical statement “that what is just is what is advantageous to the more powerful” and continues: “For those who are more powerful always *exercise sovereignty*, bring in laws that are advantageous to themselves, and rule over those that are subject to them; indeed, their subjects act justly when they obey those laws which have been established for the advantage of the rulers” (Farndell 2009:6; my emphasis). ‘Just’ is the one who has the power to impose the idea of ‘justice’ onto the powerless. For the governed, to be ‘just’ means to pursue the laws imposed by the governing and, thus, to pursue “the interests of the dominant strata of the modern world-system” (Wallerstein 2006: xiv).

Similarly, Immanuel Wallerstein examines the issues of ‘political universalism’ and ‘rhetoric of power’ when he refers to “the universalism of the powerful [...] a partial and distorted universalism” that he calls ‘European universalism’ “because it has been put forward by pan-European leaders and intellectuals *in their quest to pursue the interests of the dominant strata of the modern world-system*” (Wallerstein 2006: xiv). Accordingly:

The rhetoric of the leaders of the pan-European world – in particular, but not only, the United States and Great Britain – and the mainstream media and Establishment intellectuals is filled with appeals to universalism as the basic justification of their policies. This is especially so when they talk about their policies relating to the ‘others’ – the countries of the non-European world, the populations of the poorer and ‘less developed’ nations. The tone is often righteous, hectoring, and arrogant, but the policies are always presented as reflecting universal values and truths (Wallerstein 2006: xiii).

If this ‘universalist’ attitude must remain undisturbed, it is for the sake of a ‘civilizing’ mission that the imperial sovereignty has taken upon itself under the guise of ‘democracy’. In order to be spread among the ‘barbarians’, the idea of democracy is intertwined with the neoliberal logic of commercial interest (the trigger of a worldwide expansion) through which ‘democratic politics of universalism’ *intervenes* – most notably in the name of ‘global justice’ and ‘human rights’:

The concepts of human rights and democracy, the superiority of Western civilization because it is based on universal values and truths, and the inescapability of submission to the ‘market’ are all offered to us as self-evident ideas. But they are not at all self-evident. They are complex ideas that need to be analyzed carefully, and stripped of their noxious and nonessential parameters, in order to be evaluated soberly and put at the service of everyone rather than a few (Wallerstein 2006: xv).

Wallerstein devotes a large part of his study to the issue of interventionism. It is rooted in the discussion that came to be known as ‘Las Casas-Sepúlveda debate’, where Sepúlveda’s doctrine on “the duty of the civilized to suppress barbarism” (Wallerstein 2006: 16) was confronted by Bartolomé de Las Casas’ counter-arguments. The debate is based upon the religious arguments weighed between these two sixteenth-century theologians *pro et contra* the right of intervention regarding the Spanish conquistadores and the indigenous populations of the Americas. The debate revolves around the differing interpretations of ‘civilization’ and “the presumed barbarity of the other against whom one is intervening” (Wallerstein 2006: 20), the duty to punish the indigenous by the Europeans (especially for their idolatry and rituals of human sacrifice, among other reasons), the justification of Christian evangelization and acceptance of God by means of coercion, and so on. Though these issues might seem no more relevant as they belong to a very old historical epoch, Wallerstein clarifies why he insists upon them – “because nothing that has been said since has added anything essential to the debate” (Wallerstein 2006: 11). Its ramifications continue to haunt the present state of ‘democracy’ in the sense that “in the nineteenth century, the European powers proclaimed that they have a civilizing mission in the colonial world” (Wallerstein 2006: 11), while in the twentieth century this expanded onto another terrain: defense of ‘human rights’ and ‘undoing the dictatorial regimes’ across the world, most notably in the global South (i.e., the supposedly non-democratic Other of the democratic global North) – or wherever the interventions could have encountered *the justification from the interveners’ point of view*. He continues:

The point is that the interveners argued and believed that they were *acting in ways that maximized justice*, and therefore were *morally justified* in natural laws, if not legally justified in international law [...] on the grounds that only the *violent means* used could have

eradicated the patent evil that they asserted was occurring (Wallerstein 2006: 15; my emphasis).

The point where Thrasymachus' *views on justice* intersect with Schinkel's *views on democracy* and Wallerstein's *views on interventionism* is the same point where the darker (violent) side of 'the most human system possible' resides. With regard to "the challenge now facing a critical theory of society" – as Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez (2002: 269-270) would say – their common aim is "precisely to *reveal* what the crisis of the modern project consist of and to indicate the new configurations of global power". As this paper assumes that a critical visual theory makes part of the critical theory of society, it brings forward the way that Thrasymachus speaks to us nowadays through the words of Schinkel, Wallerstein and Castro-Gómez (among other critical thinkers of the times). The Greek 'fierce fighter' does so to the extent that he invites us to reconsider the crisis of the *modern* project on the grounds of its hegemonic (global, interventionist, 'democratic', 'humane', Eurocentric, capitalist, colonial, racist and sexist) epistemic powers: the same type of epistemic sovereignty that is becoming all the more recognized as the *epistemologies of the global imperialist North* (Santos 2007).

Towards anti-imperialist (visual) epistemologies of the global South

What are the limits of the imperialist epistemological horizons? How their ongoing expansion influences the ways we think today about the global (visual) histories, regimes, and knowledges? Is thinking about the world in general and its visual properties in particular destined to rest upon some 'universal' principles of knowledge and interpretation? Are our perspectives supposed to remain inseparable from the canonic inception of the 'modern', 'civilizing', and 'democratic' project so its 'universal rationality' should always be taken for granted? I find this situation problematic and ripe for critical counter-proposals that are, essentially, counter-hegemonic. What we need, I argue, is a constructive *revision of our perspectives* onto global histories, regimes, and knowledges. This endeavor encompasses the concepts of 'visual history', 'visual regimes' and 'visual knowledge' at large (and so-called visual studies, too). For the revision to be feasible one needs to take a clear (viewing) position onto the knowledge-worlds: my suggestion goes in favor of *anti-imperialist visual epistemologies of the global South*. Close to Mirzoeff's understanding of countervisuality

(2011) and Santos' understanding of the epistemologies of the South (2014), this is what I propose as a counter-force strategy against the hegemonic visual regimes pertaining to the global imperialist North. It is motivated by the need to have our epistemic horizons expanded beyond the canonic readings of the world, its history and its properties exclusively through the imperialist ('democratic', 'just', 'universal') preserve of knowledge. Hence, I position the idea of plural visual knowledges between the singular, dominant visual episteme and its epistemologically colonized 'others' while making an appeal towards the *decolonization of global visual epistemologies*. This, I argue, could gradually and eventually pave the way towards the decolonization of our viewpoints onto the world (if not the decolonization of the world as such), most notably in terms of liberating our 'politics of looking' while decontaminating our epistemologically contested visions. If "global social justice is not possible without global cognitive justice" (Santos 2014), then global visual justice is impossible without anti-imperialist visual epistemologies of the global South. The issue of 'universal (visual) rationality', being constitutive for 'universal (visual) epistemology', is but the starting point in dealing with such a contestation. Boaventura de Sousa Santos explains how our misunderstanding of the supposedly 'universal reason' relates to the cognitive power formations precisely because "they are not necessarily universally valid, even when they purport to be general theories. If the epistemological diversity of the world is to be accounted for, other theories must be developed and anchored in other epistemologies – *the epistemologies of the South* that adequately account for the realities of the global South" (Santos 2012; my emphasis). One of the possible counter-options in response to it may be what Santos calls 'the emergent subjectivity (of the South)':

Emergent subjectivity is a subjectivity of the South and flourishes in the South. Given the asymmetries of the world system, however, the constitution of a subjectivity of the South varies according to the regions of the world system in which it occurs. Thus, in core countries, it involves the defamiliarization vis-à-vis the imperial North. This process of defamiliarization is a very difficult one because the North has no memory of itself as other than imperial. Let me illustrate this difficulty with the example of Jürgen Habermas. When he was asked if his theory could be of any use to the socialist forces in the Third World and if, on the other hand, such forces could in turn be of any use to democratic socialist struggles in advanced countries, Habermas replied: 'I am tempted to say 'no' in both cases. I am aware of the fact that this is a Eurocentric limited view. I would rather pass the question'. What this reply means is that

Habermas' communicative rationality, in spite of its pretense of universality, starts out by excluding about 4/5 of the world population from participation in discourse (Santos 1995: 579-580).

Accordingly, the conditions pertaining to the core capitalist regions – in terms of their interventionist logic (as earlier described by Wallerstein) and the superiority of their epistemological visions, as proposed by al-Masseri (2010) – define my ideas around the global imperialist North and its proper visual regime which I preferably see as the *imperialist epistemological vision of the global North*. Opposite to that, I associate the anti-imperialist visual regime with the notion of countervisuality or the *anti-imperialist epistemological vision of the global South*. The counter-hegemonic visuality of the global anti-imperialist South is positioned on the other side of the division line between the 'democratic' and 'non-democratic' worlds whereas the body of knowledge accumulated therein includes manifold perspectives (both theoretical and empirical) associated with the counter-perspectives that do not necessarily overlap with those perspectives imposed by the global imperialist North. Being the 'other' of the North conceives of the positions that are essentially *counter-positions* – they are running counter to the center of the power-dynamics, which is why I insist on the concepts such as anti-imperialism, counter-hegemony, countervisuality, the 'South', and so on. Therefore, the South – as I use it in this and related papers – does not necessarily denote the conditions of the globe's Southern hemisphere; instead, it denotes the global conditions that claim to be counter-hegemonic and anti-imperialist in relation to the ruling authority of the global imperialist North and its hegemonic system of values (supposedly 'just', 'universal' and 'democratic'). In turn, the global imperialist North is hereby understood as a power dominion of epistemic sovereignty, enforced by the ongoing matrix of U.S./Eurocentric power and its modernist (colonial, capitalist, racist, sexist, and so on) enforcement of the 'universal reason' (Grosfoguel and Cervantes-Rodriguez 2002).

To look at the world from the 'South' and to take a viewpoint epitomized by the emergent subjectivity of the South means to understand the epistemic matrix of the world's (visual) knowledges from a different perspective, which uncovers not only 'what the crisis of the modern project consist of' (in terms of Castro-Gómez) but also the manifold alternative histories that emerge from the *experience of the South*. If the processes of defamiliarization vis-à-vis the imperial North remain difficult both inside and outside the limits of northern epistemologies, the emergent subjectivity invites us to familiarize ourselves vis-à-vis the anti-

imperial South. This is to say: to engage in the processes of epistemological decolonization by re-directing our ‘singular’ perspective from the ruling northern epistemologies towards other possible directions. This demands a continuous working towards always more profound attempts to make visible what has slipped from our view over the course of history as a given (including the ‘official’ visual knowledge about the world). By the notion of *history* I mean the timeline of human evolution, demarcated by strategic goals (in terms of both material and immaterial expansion and occupation of the world) on behalf of the imperial regimes in the global North. These goals have not only been pertinent to traditional European aspirations towards the global hegemony (nowadays coupled with all the more pervasive aspirations of the United States); rather, they have been determined and perpetuated by an ongoing colonial matrix of power, centralized primarily (though not exclusively) around the Anglo-Saxon linguistic axis of world-domination. According to numerous contemporary decolonial thinkers (many of them being of Latin American, African, Near Eastern and Asian origin) this matrix of power has been ongoing at least since the colonial ‘discovery’ of the Americas. As Abdul Wahab al-Masserri remarks with what he calls the “imperialist epistemological visions”:

There is a view that imperialism, as a historical practice, constitutes a deviation from western civilization and its conception of the universe, and that the adoption of the imperialist solution, which involves exporting problems to the rest of the world and hegemony over other nations, is inconsistent with being a liberal, humane, and enlightened civilization that has accepted democracy as philosophy of government, laissez-faire as its economic order, and rationalism and humanism as universal philosophy. It is our contention, however, that these varied philosophies do not stand in contradiction to the imperialist epistemological vision. Rather, there is a close link between these philosophies and the imperialist vision, which will be fully understood once we turn to the epistemological level (al-Masserri 2010: 149).

If our views on “imperialism as a historical practice” are inseparable from those on the dominance of Western modernity, I approach the imperialist (visual) epistemologies of the global North from a counter-perspective: it is close to aforementioned anti-imperialist positions in philosophy and social theory as they attempt at producing the “critique of ideology from the South” (Sørensen 2009).¹ Hence, to talk about the visual epistemologies of the world is to talk about imperialism/globality/coloniality/modernity or the matrix of global/colonial power that Walter Mignolo calls “the darker side of modernity” as the “other

face” of coloniality (Mignolo 2011), or the darker side of democracy, as I would add.

Although my references to Mignolo are prevalent in discussing the issues of coloniality, it is worth noting that it was not him who coined the concept itself. Mignolo makes explicit his own reference to the origins of the term *coloniality* while recalling the groundbreaking work of the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano whose text “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America” stands for a seminal piece of contemporary scholarship around the subject (Quijano 2000).

Quijano’s major argument revolves around the concepts of global hegemony, power and coloniality. He analyzes them from a perspective that centers on the idea of a “new global power” (at the bottom level of what we experience today as the process of globalization) – the idea conceived and enforced by two parallel, historical and still ongoing processes, “the constitution of America and colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism” (Quijano 2000: 533). What he particularly points out in this context is situated around the idea of racism or, more precisely, the *racial axis of power*. He understands such an axis to have been born by the *colonial matrix of power*, the segregation processes inherent to it and the particular, dominant or ruling form of its ratio (i.e. *Eurocentric ratio-nality*). The colonial matrix of power has been conceived upon the Eurocentric, modern, capitalist and racial rationality of ruling authority (in Americas, in this case) or the global colonial matrix of power around which the U.S.-Eurocentric model of power continuously operates in the globalized world as we know it today. Quijano explains this in the following sense: “The social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race [equals] a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism” (Quijano 2000: 533). Hence, his main argument – and for the discussion in this paper the most important – concerns what he explains as “the model of power that is globally hegemonic today [and] presupposes an element of coloniality”.

Mignolo further explains the same concept in his own words while introducing another important element - the counter-hegemonic notion of ‘de-coloniality’:

The basic thesis is the following: ‘modernity’ is a European narrative that hides its darker side, ‘coloniality’. Coloniality, in other words, is constitutive of modernity – there is no modernity without coloniality. Hence, today the common expression ‘global modernities’ imply ‘global colonialities’ in the precise sense that the *colonial matrix of power* (*coloniality*,

for short) is being disputed by many contenders: if there cannot be modernity without coloniality, there cannot be either global modernities without global colonialities. That is the logic of the polycentric capitalist world of today. Consequently, de-colonial thinking and doing emerged, from the sixteenth century on, as responses to the oppressive and imperial bent of modern European ideals projected to, and enacted in, the non-European world (Mignolo 2009: 39).

For Mignolo, the notion of coloniality is doubtlessly intertwined with modernity: it makes part of a triple structure that delineates the actual critique of modernity. He describes this structure as follows:

One type is internal to the history of Europe itself and in that sense these premises are a *Eurocentered* critique of modernity (for example, psychoanalysis, Marxism, poststructuralism, postmodernity), and the other two types emerged from non-European histories entangled with Western modernity. One of them focuses on the idea of *Western civilization* (for example, dewesternization, Occidentosis), and the other on *coloniality* (such as postcoloniality, decoloniality). The three types of critiques are analyzed in relation to their point of origination and their routes of dispersion. Postmodernity originated in Europe but dispersed around the world. *Decoloniality originated among Third World countries after the Bandung Conference in 1955, and also dispersed all over the world.* Dewesternization originated in East Asia, but the dewesternizing argument can be found in other parts of the world (Mignolo 2011, xi-xii).

Decolonial thinking is constituted as a critical position that is, first and foremost, *critical vis-à-vis modernity*. Its origin is in the so-called *Third World*, hence it is *external to the center of power*, both colonial (Europe) and global power (U.S.-European axis, i.e. the global imperialist North).² As the critique of modernity it does not exist by itself, isolated from other critical positions, but *within the network* of other critical positions toward modernity (having the shortest distance from the position of dewesternization, in Mignolo's view). As *a way of looking at the world and through the world*, decoloniality embodies a critical position not only as a historically *intro-spective* and *retro-spective* position (looking back toward modernity since the beginning of globalization alongside the European colonial expansion); rather, it appropriates both intro- and retro-spective views so it could propose another

perspective towards modernity: ‘trans-perspective’ or the *trans-modern* perspective. The trans-modern perspective is directed towards *re-visioning of the international society*.³ Hence, the trans-modern perspective – drafted on the occasion of the 1955 Bandung Conference, the germ of the forthcoming Non-Aligned Movement of developing countries (that is, of the so-called Third World) – makes the formal embryo of the idea of de-coloniality according to Mignolo, and situates it within a long, anti-imperial *scenario of the transformation*: from the postcolonial South (in its historical and administrative sense) towards the global *decolonial* South (in its geopolitical and epistemological sense).

Mignolo’s ‘darker side’ of modernity brings us back to Thrasymachus, Castro-Gómez, and Schinkel, because talking about the ‘coloniality of power’ means to talk about the ‘project of governmentability’ – including its visual dimensions, I would add. This encompasses the issues inherent to discourses around the global epistemologies under the colonial matrix of power (such as sovereignty and power, governance and governmentability, coloniality and modernity, rationality and universality, imperialism and anti-imperialism, hegemony and counter-hegemony, globalization and anti-globalization social movements, and – last but not least – visibility and invisibility). To read the effects of the invisibility imposed to the global South is to understand them as results of epistemic violence: its main goal consists in excluding the ‘unfavorable’ regimes of visibility from the global perspective with the aim of preserving the ruling authority of the ‘one and only’ sovereign visual regime. By advocating these *exclusionist principles* in the construction of sovereign knowledge, the governance of imperialist policies does not only eradicate some abstract categories of so-called *visual regimes*; instead, it establishes measures of control over the global populations’ worldviews and thus contributes to the overall project of global sovereignty and its *totalizing* (authoritarian) vision of the world.

This kind of violent epistemic conditioning imposes the measures of *visual austerity*. In the context of contemporary neoliberal ‘democracies’ and the ruling authority of their imperialist visual regime, the actual situation of visual austerity is the result of a misbalanced dynamics of power: the *imperialist visual regime* remains bright, safe and secure while the *violent* control over the subjugated forms of knowledge (and the viewpoints therein) is exercised behind the shadow of epistemic power. This encompasses anti-imperialist knowledges, rationalities, visual histories and visual epistemologies that urge us to look into the very darkness of the imperialist knowledge-world. To look into its darkness means to develop a relationship with the very idea of death: to understand the logic according to which the

sovereignty of an imperialist matrix of power resides precisely in its potency of exposing and overexposing to 'death' not only the humans (in terms of their subjugated experience of living under conditions pertinent to the global anti-imperialist South) but also the 'rival knowledges' of the South.

This is due to the fact that what the ruling regime of visibility aims at revealing eclipses everything else; thus what remains invisible on behalf of other regimes of visibility, subjected to the ruling one, is either buried in the 'death-worlds' of knowledge or awaits to be unearthed so that the *epistemic justice* could be satisfied. In comparison to the visibility of the singular knowledge, enforced and maintained by the ruling authority of the dominant epistemology and its regime of visibility, the fact is that the very invisibility of many knowledges has been victim of epistemic violence or the so-called epistemicide (Santos 1995). A curious mind may add: if it is necessary to think of vision through the paradigm of regimes (or 'visual regimes') than there must be a reason for such an endeavor. For the sake of bringing justice (*some kind* of justice or some kind of compensation for epistemic crimes committed by the sovereign visual regime against other possible visual regimes), the point of departure in such a trial cannot be of merely visual (or aesthetic) nature – it must be elsewhere. I would agree with the 'curious mind' bringing up such conclusions. Not only that I would agree, but I would add the following: first, there is a reason explaining why 'a dominant epistemology has eliminated the cultural and political context of the production and reproduction of knowledge from our epistemological reflection'; second, the consequence of such a reasoning is epistemicide; and third, this epistemic violence is understood as a form of injustice that encompasses our knowledge of vision and visibility (or, rather, our ignorance about what must have been buried by the ruling visual regime). If the main political objective of the ruling visual regimes is to keep its imperialist prominence above every other possible world of visual knowledge, then this is enforced by its own (imperialist, 'universal', 'democratic, interventionist) logic of 'visual justice' which is "what is good for the ruling authority" or "what is good for the stronger", as Thrasymachus would say.

If this logic plays such a crucial part in our visual worlds of knowledge, then there must be a way to respond to *the question of visual injustice* from the anti-imperialist perspective, that is, from the viewpoint of the global anti-imperialist South. *This* question, and no other, must be dealt with behind the mask of the authority ruling over the visual world of knowledge (the imperialist visual regime of the global North) that we were taught to be the singular and the only possible one, in charge of 'universal' knowledge. In this context, to act in a properly

counter-hegemonic/decolonial way means to take the legitimate anti-imperialist perspective and confront ourselves with the questions of imperialist ‘justice’ and injustice, the questions of epistemic crimes against the many and varied worlds of knowledge and the visual knowledge(s) in particular. For a confrontation of that kind, I would argue, there is no better way than to embrace the matters of vision, visibility and ‘visual studies’ as the matters of injustice committed over our knowledge-worlds. Hence, starting from the ‘crime situation’ against knowledge(s), including those of visual kind, it becomes possible to argue about the visual epistemologies of the world as inseparable from *the ruling (imperialist) regime of vision*. Yet, for such arguments to be questioned anew, visual studies are not enough: they must rely upon the discursive and theoretical axis involving disciplines pertinent to the matters of justice, authority and epistemic violence. Political philosophy is but a suggestion to be taken in that direction, so that the ‘democratic visual politics’ could be scrutinized through what Thrasymachus, among others, still has to teach us.

Conclusion

This paper takes part in a movement that looks at ‘democracy’ from a perspective of counter-hegemonic rhetoric and its (visual) epistemologies, and brings them together to the surface of ‘our current democracy as ultimately the most human system possible’ so its darker side could come out of shadow and be put to light, as it deserves. Therefore, the main message I want to transfer here is as follows: if visual studies are to be understood as an academic discipline they also need to be approached as the subject of visual epistemologies. This, in turn, puts into focus the need to involve political philosophy into discussions about the ontology and epistemology of our global visual histories and knowledges in order to question the current state of epistemic regimes governing our perspectives onto the world. Given that the idea of regime still figures out as one of the oldest and most important ideas of the discipline of political philosophy itself, I have taken it into account as one of the possible yet fundamental ideas through which to interrogate vision – the sense of sight, the privileging of the perceptual, and the sovereignty of the visual in contemporary global cultures. In conclusion to this brief yet polemical meditation on democracy and its darker side, I repeat – with earlier arguments in mind – that we live in the world dominated by the political regime of non-democracy, anti-democracy or, as Schinkel says, in the world of democracy that is basically authoritarian. If the question is ‘what constitutes the brighter side of democracy?’, then I

would conclude by the following: on the one hand, the brighter side of democracy is the zone of visibility that overshadows another, invisible zone - the marginalized forms of knowledges waiting *with* death “in a zone of social [and epistemic] abandonment” (Biehl 2001: 131); on the other hand, it is also the space where a resistance to the politics of universalism emerges, breaking the walls of forced invisibility. To break those walls means to mobilize the counter-hegemonic rhetoric that could reiterate “very old themes, which have constituted the basic rhetoric of the powerful throughout the history of the modern world-system, since at least the sixteenth century” (Wallerstein 2006: xiv), because if “there is a history to this rhetoric”, Wallerstein adds, there is “a history of opposition to this rhetoric”. If there is an imperialist (hegemonic) visual rhetoric, there is a history of opposition to this rhetoric and it belongs to anti-imperialist (counter-hegemonic) visual epistemologies of the global South.

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¹ Enrique Dussel speaks of the imperialist narrative and ideology as deformed for several main reasons. One of them has been heavily dependent on an explanation of European ‘superiority’ from a “Eurocentric point of view [that] assumes Modernity as exclusively European [...] and only as a result of inter-European phenomena.” Among these phenomena Dussel explicitly names Enlightenment, the ideology of the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution. See Dussel 2006: 494.

² In that sense, it is also worth noticing the importance that Mignolo, among many others before and after him, gives to the historical event held in 1955 in Indonesia. See, for instance, See Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya, eds., *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-african Conference for International Order* (Singapore: The National University of Singapore Press, 2008) and Mark T. Berger, *The Battle for Asia: From Decolonization to Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2004).

³ The ambition toward such a re-visioning has its roots in the South, namely, in the Asian South and Southeast, with bridges towards Africa. This primarily relates to five countries (Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia and Pakistan) then newly liberated from the colonial powers that “in December 1954 [...] announced a plan for a conference of Asian, African and Middle Eastern states [...] for a sustained campaign to end colonial rule in the non-European world and its corollary of white supremacy. It was the first major conference of non-European states and led to the creation of the nonaligned movement”. See Cary Fraser, “An American Dilemma. Race and Realpolitik in the American Response to the Bandung Conference, 1955”, in *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1988*, ed. Brenda Gayle Plummer (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 115–116.