

# Representations of Emancipation: (Post-)Coloniality and the Zapatista Insurgency in Mexico

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## RESÜMEE

Die Fragen, ob und wie die unter der Bezeichnung „postcolonial studies“ zusammengefassten Analyseansätze auf lateinamerikanische Verhältnisse anwendbar sind, werden seit rund zwei Jahrzehnten kontrovers diskutiert. Ein Phänomen, das im Zusammenhang der Debatte über die Postkolonialität in Lateinamerika wiederholt angesprochen und erörtert worden ist, war der 1994 im mexikanischen Gliedstaat Chiapas ausgebrochene Aufstand des *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN). Der Artikel fragt im Fall dieses Ereignisses aus geschichtswissenschaftlicher Warte nach Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Einsicht von Analyseperspektiven des Postkolonialismus bzw. des mit Blick auf die historischen Besonderheiten der lateinamerikanischen Entwicklung im Anschluss daran formulierten Konzepts der Kolonialität. Exemplarisch im Mittelpunkt der Betrachtung steht die Analyse des *zapatismo* von Walter D. Mignolo.

“Somos producto de 500 años de luchas” (“We are a product of 500 years of struggle”).<sup>2</sup> This statement introduced the rebellion of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) to the Mexican and the international public. The first sentence of the *Declaración*

- 1 This research was funded by the Berghof Foundation for Conflict Studies in the framework of a 28-month research project on “The role of non-state actors in the transformation of the conflicts in Macedonia and in Kosovo”, which was located at the University of Munich and supervised by Prof. Dr. Marie-Janine Calic. Results of this research have been published in: Isabel Ströhle, The Politics of Reintegration and War Commemoration. The Case of the Kosovo Liberation Army, in: Südosteuropa (in print). Parts of section 2 are very similar to sections in that article, which is, however, more extensive and focuses on the ex-KLA-members’ reintegration and demilitarisation of post-war society. I warmly thank Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
- 2 Declaración de la Selva Lacandona [2º de enero], in: EZLN. Documentos y comunicados. 1º de enero/8 de agosto de 1994, México, D. F. 1994, pp. 33–35, here p. 33.

*de la Selva Lacandona*, promulgated one day after the beginning of the insurgence of the Mayan-dominated guerrilla army in the southeastern Mexican state of Chiapas on 1 January 1994, evoked a postcolonial setting of the Zapatista campaign. Such a condition of resistance implied, obviously, much more than the continuity of an anti-imperialist struggle against the succeeding antagonists of the Spanish, the French and, finally the US Empire. It opened, in fact, many overlapping, intersecting, and sometimes rather diffuse front-lines. The addressee of the *Declaración de la Selva Lacandona* was “el pueblo de México”, invoked to ally to the insurgent movement. The polysemous term *el pueblo* carried at least two meanings in this context: the people as the nation, in opposition to foreign powers, and the people in opposition to the national elites of the economically privileged and their political representatives. When the EZLN declared that it would re-establish the sovereignty of the people, the claim was directed against the 65-year-regime of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) as well as the plundering (“*el saqueo*”) of the fatherland by alien powers. The *guerrilleros* denounced the alliance of neo-liberal *vendepatrias* (those, who sell the fatherland) and foreign economic interests. Consequently, the EZLN chose to start its rebellion the same day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, Mexico and Canada came into force. By inscribing their rebellion in a tradition of a five hundred year old struggle, the Zapatistas marked, in their statement from the geographic and social margins of the global periphery, yet another center of discourse: their indigenous identity at least connoted a sense of historical depth – if not of pre-colonial originality – in an act of resistance that became readable as a part of power structures still shaped by colonial forms of dominance. Such an alliance of ethnicity, class and nation was by no means unique in twentieth century identity politics in Latin America. But, due to the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), these identities were more closely interwoven in discourses of emancipation in Mexico than elsewhere on the subcontinent. At the end of the century, the dazzling, subversive discourse of the EZLN, which soon became the main weapon of the hopelessly under-armed guerrilla, both built on traditional representations of emancipation – the project of a transition to democracy and socialism through the national liberation from a “neocolonial” dominance by the United States – and, at the same time, re-invented them in a genuine hybridisation of Marxism and indigenous narratives, as well as Mexican revolutionary and post-revolutionary nationalism.<sup>3</sup> The combination of Indian subalternity, a post-Cold War revolutionary project and the alliance of indigenous subjectivities that overtly challenged the conventional non-indigenous imagery about Indian “Otherness” with a discourse ideologically engrained in various layers and currents of the Marxist left made the EZLN appear, for many scholars, as a pertinent illustration of a (post)colonial condition in contemporary Latin America.<sup>4</sup>

3 See Subcomandante Marcos in: Y. Le Bot, *El sueño zapatista. Entrevistas con el Subcomandante Marcos, el mayor Moisés y el comandante Tacho del Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, Barcelona 1997, p. 128.

4 See: F. Coronil, *Elephants in the Americas? Latin American Postcolonial Studies and Global Decolonization*, in: M. Moraña/E. Dussel/C. A. Jáuregui (eds.), *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, Durham/London 2008, pp. 396–416, 416; W. D. Mignolo, *The Zapatistas's Theoretical Revolution: Its Historical,*

## 1.

Meanwhile, the idea of a Latin American postcoloniality has been the source of a controversial debate for about two decades.<sup>5</sup> There is no corpus of work commonly recognised as Latin American “postcolonial studies”, and the subcontinent has hardly featured on the map of postcolonial theory.<sup>6</sup> To simplify, the interventions that contoured the early discussion about postcolonialism in Latin America may be grouped into four currents.<sup>7</sup> As a form of postcolonial critique, the subaltern studies approach was introduced into the field of Latin American studies with the formation of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group in 1992. However, the Group situated its conceptualisation of subalternity programmatically within the general context of the then-emergent field of Latin American cultural studies rather than define it specifically as a historiographic constituent of postcolonialism.<sup>8</sup> The question of whether the approaches and categories of “postcolonial studies” could be meaningfully applied to Latin American contexts was discussed basically from three stances. Resistance to the adoption of postcolonial studies perspectives for analysing the subcontinent’s historical developments was spearheaded by the pronounced critique of J. Jorge Klor de Alva. The anthropologist stressed the differences between the cultural dimension of Spanish rule in America and of British or French rule in Asia and Africa in order to deny, not altogether convincingly, that the terms “colonialism”, “decolonisation” and “postcolonialism” “*as commonly understood today* [what meant: as inventions of the study of nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ colonial experiences], [were] particularly useful for making sense of the cultural processes that engendered post-contact and post-independence societies” in Latin America.<sup>9</sup> On the other side, various authors advocated for an inclusion of Latin America into the field of postcolonial studies – as Peter Hulme did explicitly in response to Klor de Alva’s

Ethical, and Political Consequences, in: Review (Fernand Braudel Center), 30 (2002) 3, pp. 245–275; M. Moraña/E. Dussel/C. A. Jáuregui, Colonialism and its Replicants, in: M. Moraña/E. Dussel/C. A. Jáuregui (eds.), *Coloniality at Large*, p. 11; J. Rabasa, *Without History: Subaltern Studies, the Zapatista Insurgency, and the Specter of History*, Pittsburgh 2010; J. Saldaña-Portillo, *Lectura de un silencio: el “Indio” en la era del zapatismo*, in: S. Dube/I. B. Dube/W. D. Mignolo (eds.), *Modernidades coloniales*, México, D. F. 2004, pp. 49–77; R. J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Oxford et al. 2001, p. 193.

5 For a preliminary understanding about this debate, see: Patricia Seed, *Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse*, in: *Latin American Research Review*, 26 (1991) 3, pp. 181–200.

6 F. Coronil, *Elephants in the Americas?* (footnote 3), pp. 396; P. Hulme, *Postcolonial Theory and the Representation of Culture in the Americas*, in: M. Moraña/E. Dussel/C. A. Jáuregui (eds.), *Coloniality at Large* (footnote 3), pp. 388–395, here p. 389.

7 Terminologically this essay follows the differentiation proposed by Leila Gandhi: “The theory may be named ‘postcolonialism’, and the condition it addresses is best conveyed through the notion of ‘postcoloniality’”. Leila Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Oxford et al. 1998, p. 5. The hyphenated adjective “postcolonial” is used in this contribution exclusively as a temporal marker of the formal decolonising process.

8 Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, *Founding Statement* (1992), reprinted in: J. Beverly/M. Aronna/J. Oviedo (eds.), *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America*, Durham/London 1995, pp. 135–146, here p. 141.

9 J. J. Klor de Alva, *Colonialism and Postcolonialism as (Latin) American Mirages*, in: *Colonial Latin American Review*, 1 (1992) 1/2, pp. 3–23, here p. 3–4; id., *The Postcolonialisation of the (Latin) American Experience: A Reconsideration of “Colonialism”, “Postcolonialism”, and “Mestizaje”*, in: G. Prakash (ed.), *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, Princeton 1995, pp. 241–275.

objection.<sup>10</sup> Hulme, and later Bill Ashcroft, – both literary specialists – pointed out that such an inclusion would also implicate a major change for postcolonial theory.<sup>11</sup> While Hulme emphasised the prominent Caribbean tradition of postcolonial studies, Ashcroft argued for the expansion of postcolonial studies perspectives to Latin America not least by referring to the existence of critical analyses of the “colonial discourse” *avant la lettre* on the subcontinent, initiated in the late 1950s by the work of the Mexican historian Edmundo O’Gorman.<sup>12</sup> This argument was taken from Walter D. Mignolo.<sup>13</sup> Mignolo has been a major exponent of what can be identified as a third current, christened the Latin American Coloniality Group.<sup>14</sup> This informal group, loosely united by commonalities of theoretical assumptions, terminology and interpretational patterns of Latin America’s past and present, has actually adopted postcolonial theory for Latin America studies, but under the label of “coloniality”. The term designates the “epistemic nucleus”<sup>15</sup> of colonialism on which the group’s critical work has focused. The principal reason for this demarcation has been the critique that the notion of postcolonialism misleadingly suggests that colonialism is a phenomenon that has been left behind. The authors related to the group, in contrast, have placed emphasis on the continuity of colonial relations over five centuries of Latin American history.<sup>16</sup> As the pioneers and the most prominent representatives of the current, Enrique Dussel (philosophy), Aníbal Quijano (sociology) and Walter D. Mignolo (semiotics) have made numerous contributions to a critique of modernity’s Eurocentric totalising logic – or mythology respectively –, conceiving colonialism not as a derivative, but as a constituent of modernity: “There is no modernity without colonialism and no colonialism without modernity.”<sup>17</sup> The approaches of the Coloniality Group to the “epistemological violence” of modernity have established a Latin Americanist version of postcolonial studies that, at the same time, has been anxious to accentuate the specificity of the Latin American debate by contrasting it to postcolonial theory as it has been discussed elsewhere. Over the years, the ongoing discussion about the potentials

10 P. Hulme, Including America, in: *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 26 (1995)1, pp. 117–123.

11 B. Ashcroft, *Modernity’s First-Born: Latin America and Post-Colonial Transformation*, in: A. de Toro/F. de Toro (eds.), *El debate de la postcolonialidad en Latinoamérica. Una postmodernidad periférica o cambio de paradigma en el pensamiento latinoamericano*, Madrid/Frankfurt am Main 1999, pp. 13–29.

12 E. O’Gorman, *La invención de América*, México, D.F. 1958.

13 W. D. Mignolo, *Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse: Cultural Critique or Academic Colonialism?*, in: *Latin American Research Review*, 28 (1993) 3, pp. 120–134, here p.122.

14 S. Castro-Gómez: (Post)Coloniality for Dummies: Latin American Perspectives on Modernity, Coloniality, and the Geopolitics of Knowledge, in: M. Moraña/E. Dussel/C. A. Jáuregui (eds.), *Coloniality at Large* (footnote 3), pp. 259–285, 260. Also see: R. D. Salvatore, *The Postcolonial in Latin America and the Concept of Coloniality: A Historian’s Point of View*, in: *A Contracorriente*, 8 (2010) 1, pp. 332–348.

15 S. Castro-Gómez: (Post)Coloniality for Dummies (footnote 13), p. 269.

16 See, for example, Walter D. Mignolo’s “argument from Latin America”, which proposes “postoccidentalism” as an alternative term to “postcolonialism”. Mignolo conceives postoccidentalism as a “project to criticize and overcome occidentalism which was the pragmatic project of the colonizing enterprises in the Americas since the sixteenth century, from Spanish colonialism to the North American and Soviet one” (translation S. S.). W. D. Mignolo, *Postoccidentalismo: el argumento desde América Latina*, in: S. Castro-Gómez/E. Mendieta (eds.), *Teorías sin disciplina. Latinoamericanismo, poscolonialidad y globalización en debate*, México, D. F. 1998, pp. 31–58, here p. 41.

17 S. Castro-Gómez: (Post)Coloniality for Dummies (footnote 13), p. 272.

and limits of postcolonial studies perspectives in the analysis of Latin American societies has produced an array of essays and books, entailing an increasing differentiation of arguments, a blurring of the controversy's original boundaries and more nuanced assessments.<sup>18</sup> The Coloniality Group has thereby kept its shape and recently published a remarkable anthology both from and about its perspective on colonial persistence.<sup>19</sup> The present essay will focus on the analysis of the Zapatista insurgency proposed by an exponent of the Coloniality Group. The aim is a critical appraisal, from an historian's point of view, of some implications of studying contemporary Latin American history by using of the concepts of (post)coloniality.

## 2.

The Zapatista movement originated in the clandestine encounter of a small, armed Marxist underground organisation's cell with Mayan communities in the Chiapanecan Selva Lacandona in the mid-1980s. As a part, albeit a less significant one, of the far-reaching transformations of the Mexican left after the massacre of Tlatelolco in 1968,<sup>20</sup> several guerilla movements appeared in different regions of the country. One of them was the Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional, founded in the northern city of Monterrey in 1969. The last of originally three *frentes* of the Castroist-Guevarist guerilla organisation, which had survived the repression over the years, entered the forests of Chiapas in late 1983 –still guided strategically by the theory of the revolutionary *foco* – to become the EZLN.<sup>21</sup> In the decade leading up to the uprising on New Years Day in 1994, complex processes of interaction evolved between the rather orthodox Marxist *mestizos*, who formed the original cell of the EZLN, and the indigenous *comunidades*. The product of this “cultural shock”<sup>22</sup> was the hybrid discourse of *zapatismo*, characterised by the Subcomandante Marcos, the most visible and famously eloquent spokesman of the EZLN, as follows:

*Zapatismo was not Marxism-Leninism, but it was also Marxism-Leninism. It was not university Marxism, not Marxism of concrete analysis, not the history of Mexico, not*

18 For example, see: S. Castro-Gómez/E. Mendieta (eds.), *Teorías sin disciplina* (footnote 15); A. de Toro/F. de Toro (eds.), *El debate de la postcolonialidad en Latinoamérica* (footnote 10); R. Fiddian (ed.), *Postcolonial Perspectives on the Cultures of Latin America and Lusophone Africa*, Liverpool 2000; M. Thurner/A. Guerrero (eds.), *After Spanish Rule: Postcolonial Predicaments of the Americas*, Durham/London 2003.

19 M. Moraña/E. Dussel/C. A. Jáuregui (eds.), *Coloniality at Large* (footnote 3). A Spanish forerunner of the publication was C. A. Jáuregui/M. Moraña (eds.), *Colonialidad y crítica en América Latina. Bases para un debate*, Puebla 2007.

20 On 2 October 1968, a few days before the inauguration of the Olympic Summer Games in Mexico City, police and military units crushed the Mexican student movement with a massacre in the neighborhood of Tlatelolco. Between 150 and 300 people were killed, and thousands detained.

21 See: Y. Le Bot, *El sueño zapatista* (footnote 2), pp. 57–58; J. Womack, *Rebellion in Chiapas: An Historical Reader*, New York 1999, pp. 190–197; B. de la Grange/M. Rico, *Marcos, la genial impostura*, México, D. F. 1997, pp. 167–169.

22 Subcomandante Marcos in Y. Le Bot, *El sueño zapatista* (footnote 2), p. 145.

*fundamentalist or millenarist indigenous thinking, and it was not the indigenous resistance: it was a mixture of all of this.*<sup>23</sup>

In 2002, Walter D. Mignolo published an essay in the journal *Review of the Fernand Braudel Center* entitled *The Zapatistas's Theoretical Revolution: Its Historical, Ethical, and Political Consequences*. In this contribution, Mignolo interprets the Zapatista movement in the coloniality of power frame as a revolt to restore the human dignity of the indigenous people "taken away by the coloniality of power enacted in the making of the modern/colonial world, since about 1500 until today".<sup>24</sup> According to Mignolo, the mechanism that made the zapatismo an emancipatory movement, able to bring about an "epistemic break" into the "configuration of modernity/coloniality", was double translation.<sup>25</sup> This bidirectional movement played the key role in what Mignolo ranked as the Zapatistas' theoretical revolution to unmask enduring colonial power structures in the reproduction of cultural difference and to open up "the possibility of conceiving possible futures beyond the limits imposed by two hegemonic abstract universals, (neo) liberalism and (neo) Marxism".<sup>26</sup> The author takes up Marcos' own description of the process that the Marxist convictions of the EZLN *guerrilleros* were exposed to in the exchange with the Mayan communities, building up, out of a guerilla cell, a Liberation Army with an indigenous base.<sup>27</sup> What Mignolo perceives as the most important result of this transformation is the modality of production of new social representations. With Marcos as a translator, on the one hand, from the Mayan discourses to the national and international public and, on the other, from a Marxist-nationalist ideology to the *comunidades*, a connection was established that enabled

*[f]orms of knowledge that had been discredited from the beginning of modernity/coloniality [to] enter into a double movement of "getting in/letting in" that is allowed by the reversal of coloniality of power". This "makes it possible to imagine epistemic diversity (or pluriversity) and to understand the limits of the abstract-universals that have dominated the imaginary of the modern/colonial world from Christianity to liberalism and Marxism.*<sup>28</sup>

23 Ibid., p. 199 (translation S. S).

24 W. D. Mignolo, *The Zapatistas's Theoretical Revolution: Its Historical, Ethical and Political Consequences*, in: *Review of the Fernand Braudel Center*, 25 (2002) 3, pp. 245–275, here p. 245. The notion of "coloniality of power" was introduced by Aníbal Quijano and refers basically to a colonisation of the imaginary of dominated peoples, to the imposition of models of production of knowledge and meaning as a not coercive means of domination. A crucial aspect of the "coloniality of power" was, for example, the idea of the social classification of the population on the basis of racial categories. See: A. Quijano, *Colonialidad y Modernidad/Racionalidad*, in: R. Blackburn/H. Bonilla (eds.), *Los Conquistados: 1492 y la población indígena de las Américas*, Bogotá 1992, pp. 437–447, here p. 438.

25 W. D. Mignolo, *The Zapatistas's Theoretical Revolution* (footnote 23), p. 267.

26 Ibid., p. 249.

27 Subcomandante Marcos in Y. Le Bot, *El sueño zapatista* (footnote 2), pp. 142–155.

28 W. D. Mignolo, *The Zapatistas's Theoretical Revolution* (footnote 23), p. 250. Mignolo makes use of Édouard Glissant's concept of diversity in contrast to "universality" or "plurality" in which the alternatives are not actively integrated or interacting.

Significantly, Mignolo neglects to mention the group of politicised Indians who realised, in addition to Marcos, the same bidirectional translating function.<sup>29</sup> And his contrasting of Marcos' position as a double translator to the Spanish missionaries of the sixteenth century as the implanters of the colonial model of a unidirectional translation is incomplete as well. The argument fades out the role of the Indian translators whom the missionaries depended on and who were important agents in colonial knowledge production, highly asymmetrical power relations notwithstanding. Translations were also bidirectional in this context of early formal colonialism. To affirm, that "[t]he missionaries were the only translators, and they never changed their conceptual frames",<sup>30</sup> elides those cultural interactions between colonisers and colonised that also affected the missionaries' conceptual frames, with or without their intention.<sup>31</sup> This objection is not captious. It points to what appears to be a crucial difficulty in the approach of Mignolo and the Coloniality Group.

In the introductory lines to his essay, Mignolo clarifies once again the basic assumption of this approach: "In the world-making process we identify today as modernity / coloniality, the term modernity does not stand by itself, since it cannot exist without its darker side: coloniality".<sup>32</sup> As becomes evident in what follows, Mignolo does not so much conceive modernity just as interwoven with coloniality, but rather as inextricably colonial. This quality of the alliance implies that emancipation for the subalterns cannot emanate from modernity itself. In his analysis of *zapatismo*, this perspective imposes a twofold limitation on Mignolo's perception of the historical process. First, there is no sign, that he would be able to comprehend the emancipatory – or, in his diction, revolutionary – potential of the Zapatistas' discourse in its modernity. Mignolo does not negate the obvious: the indigenous communities of the end of the twentieth century were not what they had been before the conquest.<sup>33</sup> Yet, the examined sources of Mayan capacities to counteract their subalternity appear to be ultimately rooted in the pre-colonial past.<sup>34</sup> The homogenisation of all forms of heteronomy and "epistemic violence" in the continuum of coloniality from the sixteenth to the twentieth century constrains perception of the Indian as fixed in the quality of a colonised subject, rather than as a dynamic agent in cultural interactions with changing identities and correspondingly altering concepts of emancipation. Second, despite Mignolo's diagnosis of a double movement of "getting

29 Subcomandante Marcos in Y. Le Bot, *El sueño zapatista* (footnote 2), p. 145.

30 W. D. Mignolo, *The Zapatistas's Theoretical Revolution* (footnote 23), p. 247.

31 See: N. Farris, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule: The Collective Enterprise of Survival*, Princeton 1984; J. Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries*, Stanford 1992.

32 W. D. Mignolo, *The Zapatistas's Theoretical Revolution* (footnote 23), p. 245.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 258.

34 Reflecting about indigenous concepts of democracy, Mignolo relates the Zapatistas' theoretical revolution with the notion of *ayllu* democracy discussed in Bolivia and states: "Indeed, after 500 years of external (Spain) and internal colonialism (the Bolivian State), indigenous communities in Bolivia (in significant numbers) continue to base their social organization on principles inherited from the ancient Aymaras and Quechuas, rather than the ancient Greeks and the European enlightenment, which is the case for the Creole and (neo) liberal state of Bolivia". *Ibid.*, p. 259.

in/letting in”, Marxism’s contribution to the *zapatismo* remains completely undiscussed in the essay. From Mignolo’s standpoint, Marxist thought becomes emancipatory for the indigenous project only through its exposure to “infection” by Mayan worldviews.<sup>35</sup> As an ideology of (an alternative) modernity, Marxism appears to have, on its part, no infecting effects on the indigenous interpretations of social realities relevant for the understanding of the Zapatistas’ discourse as a revolutionary one (in Mignolo’s sense).

### 3.

Obviously, the “Indian” was and continues to be a colonial product.<sup>36</sup> The integration of the population of a “new world” into European imageries was based fundamentally on generalisation and abstraction – the Indian was defined by his otherness vis-à-vis the colonising Self. One implication of these basic representational mechanisms was the ahistorical character of the imagined Indian: he was situated in the space of nature and not in the space of culture. Another consequence was the lack of coherence of the imagined Indian: the colonial discourse did not establish a fixed structure of stereotyped prejudices about the non-European Other, but instead rather ambiguous images of the *indio*, open to diverse interpretations of the constitutive cultural difference, depending on the concrete historical contexts of the enunciation. Both characteristics facilitated the variability in the representation of the Indian that ensured the persistence of certain colonial elements in the construction of Indian Otherness, far beyond Spanish rule. After independence, the Liberal Creole elite<sup>37</sup> that dominated Mexican political life in the nineteenth century sought a complete break with the colonial legacy, eliminating, amongst other measures, the colony’s statutory inequality of the indigenous population. Mexican Congress even proscribed the term “indio” in official language – without much success, but supporting the establishment of the alternative, post-colonial term “indígena”. Nevertheless, basic colonial patterns were at hand and applied to represent indigenous backwardness, when Indians’ modes of life increasingly came to be perceived as a serious obstacle for the nation’s progress. The reproduction of these schemata of representation within the new historical contexts of liberal and later positivist thinking, formal equality of the indigenes as Mexican citizens, profound alterations in modern sciences and an increasing capitalist penetration of economic relations implied, at the same time, their transformation. The widespread view of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), consolidated by the post-revolutionary historiography, as a radical rupture with the oligarchic, repressive and exclusionary – some said even racist – regime of the porfiriato and with its modernising project, characterised as intellectually and economically dependent on foreign premises, concealed for decades the continuities existent in

35 Ibid., p. 250.

36 Mignolo is, of course, right in asserting that there were no “Indians” in the Americas until the arrival of the Spaniards. Ibid., p. 245.

37 The term “criollo” designates in this context people of Spanish descent born in America.

the socio-cultural relationships of the state with the indigenous population well into the twentieth century. Only in the 1970s did severe cracks begin to show in the common non-indigenous representation of the Indian as the antithesis to modernity. The *indio* represented tradition, the modern *indio* was an oxymoron. In 1964, Alfonso Caso, director of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, defined the policy of Mexico's integrationist *indigenismo*: "The indigene, who leaves his village permanently, who speaks Spanish, who works in a factory or lives in a city, is no longer of interest for indigenism".<sup>38</sup> In the eyes of the social engineers of Mexico's post-revolutionary progress, this *indígena* was not an *indígena* anymore, he was on the way to becoming a *mestizo*. But the project of *mestizaje* proposed by post-revolutionary intellectuals, scientists and politicians was not the same as the one envisioned by the nineteenth century liberal elites. Most of the nineteenth century, *mestizaje* was thought of as an agent of the *blanqueamiento* (the "whitening") of the national population to close Mexico's gap on the European and US-American societies, which provided the models of modernity. The *mestizo* should be, in this sense, a temporary phenomenon of the country's transition to a – more culturally than biologically understood – "white" modern society. With the nationalist revolution Mexican stances on the North-Atlantic modernity changed. And the post-revolutionary cultural nationalism had new needs for alterity: the nationalist project found its sources of distinctiveness within a universal modernity in the nation's indigenous cultures. The *mestizo* now acknowledged both of his parents and should no longer be an agent of the society's transformation to modernity, but represent Mexico's modernity itself – bearing the tension between tradition as a resource of identity and the (post)revolutionary project of an accelerated modernisation.

There was continuity in the dominant idea of Mexico's reading and writing elites from independence (1821) to at least the 1970s to deny a self-determined future for the *indígena* as a culturally different subject in a modern national society. Nevertheless, the above outlined shifts in the conceptions of the colonial and later the nation-state's relationship with the Indian evidently transformed the conditions in which indigenous and non-indigenous imaginaries interacted as well as the ways identities were negotiated. Conventions of colonial origin persisted because they were re-signified in changing colonial and national contexts. They cannot be understood adequately without looking at their innovations and at their interrelations with altering intellectual and ideological premises. Striking continuities of the colonial discourse about the indigenous peoples indeed existed until the end of the twentieth century and the Zapatista rebellion. The widespread refusal to recognise the EZLN as a genuine indigenous movement and the argument time and again repeated that the insurgent Indians were manipulated by external forces was just one case in point: for too many politicians and observers in Mexico it was simply

38 A. Caso, Los ideales de la acción indigenista, in: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, Memorias. Realidades y proyectos. 16 años de trabajo, México, D.F. 1964, pp. 11–13, here p. 11 (translation S. S.). The term "indigenism" subsumes in the Mexican context administrative, political, scientific and artistic forms of non-indigenous involvement with the indigenous population. The premise of this involvement was the project of *mestizaje*.

unthinkable that *indios* should be able to mastermind such a campaign that intervened incisively in the sphere of national politics and even provoked notable international reverberations. This logic guided also the governmental disclosure of the civil identity of Subcomandante Marcos in February 1995, when President Ernesto Zedillo in a televised address presented the *mestizo* university lecturer Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente from Tampico in the northern state of Tamaulipas as the man behind the most prominent mask of the Zapatista movement.<sup>39</sup> The authorities consequently portrayed Marcos as a ringleader and ignored the numerous statements of indigenous representatives of the EZLN that stressed the subordinate position of the Subcomandante in the organisational structure of the movement headed politico-militarily by the Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena – Comandancia General. The idea that Marcos did not use the *indigenas*, but that the *indigenas* used Marcos – a plausible point of view, proposed also by Mignolo – seemed unconceivable.<sup>40</sup> The repeated infantilisation of Zapatista delegations in the rounds of negotiations with the government not only reflected the firmly rooted paternalism in the Mexican elites' posture towards their indigenous fellow citizens. It referred directly to the deepest strata of the colonial discourse about the American natives, the colonisers' conceptions of the *indios* as minors and wards of the Crown.

Along such lines of persistence, Mignolo is interested in "Amerindian wisdom among the Zapatistas that is both engrained in the intersubjective structure of their language and in their corresponding conception of social relations".<sup>41</sup> He discusses the disputed concepts of democracy through the mode of contrast: the Zapatista notion of "mandar obedeciendo" ("governing through obeying", referring to the obedience of legitimate leaders to the consensually found will of the communal assembly<sup>42</sup>) is opposed in a pre-colonial originality to a Western idea of democracy, which, in turn, is presented not only as a product of European Enlightenment, but linearly traced down to ancient Greece.<sup>43</sup> Modern aspects in the Zapatista indigenous communities' "conception of social relations", on the other hand, are not made the subject of discussion. The question: "How can we imagine democracy from a Tojolabal perspective, a perspective that has been and continues to be enacted by the Zapatistas?"<sup>44</sup> is beyond doubt, crucial to comprehend the agenda of the EZLN. The Zapatista discourse, however, was of many voices. Also linguistically, since the EZLN unified communities of four ethnic groups: Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Ch'ol and Tojolabal. The *comunidades* that actually formed the social base of the EZLN can be characterised as products of relatively recent modernising processes in Chiap-

39 Zedillo declared on this occasion: "The origin, the composition of the leadership and the ends of this organization are neither popular, nor indigenous, nor Chiapanecan. We are dealing with a guerilla movement that emerged from a group created in 1969 outside Chiapas, the Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional. Its goal is the seizure of power by force of arms" (translation, S. S.), 9 Feb. 1995, cited in: B. de la Grange/M. Rico, Marcos (footnote 20), p. 29.

40 W. D. Mignolo, The Zapatistas's Theoretical Revolution (footnote 23), p. 260.

41 Ibid., p. 256.

42 Mignolo translates, "mandar obedeciendo" as "To rule and obey at the same time". Ibid.

43 Ibid., pp. 256–259. Also see: footnote 33.

44 Ibid., p. 256.

anecan society. These *indígenas* had arrived at the Selva Lacandona only since the 1930s and continuing into the 1960s and 1970s, as a part of internal migrations mainly from other regions of the state. The zapatismo did not mobilise traditional communities, but indigenous sectors that, in the course of economic, religious and social transformations, had often opposed traditionalist groups and structures and therefore frequently had broken with their ancestral communities. Such dissident groups had formed, in many cases, their own *comunidades*, and they created new identities that were not necessarily based on language or on generations of shared customs, but not least on the experiences of participation in political organisations of peasants or rural workers as well as in the mobilising projects of the Catholic diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas.<sup>45</sup> It is certainly plausible to argue that these recent experiences, which brought together varying cultural imaginaries and different practices of political decision-making, influenced the central Zapatista postulate of a “plural democracy” – which should be inspired by the principle of “mandar obedeciendo” and recognise, in particular, communitarian mechanisms of election and representation<sup>46</sup> – at least as much as did long-lasting ethnic traditions or the structure of the Tojolabal language. Besides the relatively novel multiethnic situation in the area, the politicisation of significant sectors of the indigenous population of the Selva Lacandona in their struggles of the 1970s – for land, better salaries and prices, against owners of large estates, state institutions and companies that exploited the natural resources of the region – was a decisive precondition of the *zapatismo*. These struggles were mainly fought within class organisations. The political forces that organised the indigenous peasants and rural workers and thereby substantially helped to prepare the terrain for the EZLN were of a highly orthodox Marxist provenance, such as the *Maoist Política Popular – Línea Proletaria* or the Communist Central *Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos*.

#### 4.

Together with poststructuralism and postmodernism respectively Marxism has marked the intellectual history of postcolonial theory.<sup>47</sup> Its relationship with postcolonialism, however, is obviously an ambiguous one: Marxism’s anti-imperialist critique was a source of postcolonialism, at the same time its claim of universality has been part of the Eurocentric power structures postcolonialism criticises. Authors in postcolonial studies have chosen different, although basically related ways to deal with this ambivalence. Mignolo’s approach reduces the tension drastically, aligning the successive “abstract-universals that have dominated the imaginary of the modern / colonial world from Christianity to

45 See: Y. Le Bot, *El sueño zapatista* (footnote 2), pp. 33–43; L. Stephen, *¡Zapata Lives! Histories and Cultural Politics in Southern Mexico*, Berkeley et al. 2002, p. 88.

46 Y. Le Bot, *El sueño zapatista* (footnote 2), p. 86.

47 See: L. Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory* (footnote 6), p. viii.

liberalism and Marxism”.<sup>48</sup> This conception reproduces the old-established argument that Marxism actually has to become un-Marxist to be able to theoretically conceive questions of ethnicity:

*it was the tyranny of a logic grounded in abstract universals that misguided Che Guevara in Bolivia and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in interactions with indigenous populations, and in their blindness to the theoretical, ethical, and political potential in Amerindian communities.*<sup>49</sup>

What made the “epistemic break” possible in the case of the EZLN’s encounter of Marxism-Leninism and indigenous worldviews remains unanalysed by Mignolo. And the verdict about the Sandinista politics vis-à-vis the indigenous communities keeps quiet about the interactions that actually took place in the conflict between the government of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* and the indigenous communities, changed the attitudes on both sides and finally led to a pioneering autonomy solution for the Atlantic coast. Such schematising, historically underinformed treatment of Marxism is in no way unique among postcolonial studies perspectives on Latin America, as the example of Robert J. C. Young’s meritorious comprehensive historical introduction to postcolonialism shows. In contrast to Mignolo, Young puts great emphasis on Marxism’s centrality for postcolonialism.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, he separates a Western from a non-Western Marxism, implicitly associating the former with orthodoxy – and with Eurocentrism – the latter with the ideological de-centering – and correspondingly with the de-colonisation – of Marxist perspectives on Latin America. It goes without saying that the EZLN is presented as a major protagonist of the second tendency.

Eurocentrism was indeed a characteristic trait of the Marxists’ positions in Mexico towards the “indigenous question” across the twentieth century.<sup>51</sup> A widespread disregard for the situation of the indigenous population in its cultural specificity was a main effect of this perspectivity. When the Mexican radical left addressed the discrimination and exploitation of the society’s indigenous sectors in its cultural dimension, advocacy for a unilateral incorporation of the *indígenas* into a modernity modeled by the teleology of Marxist philosophy of history accounted for most of its program. The revolutionary left in Mexico, correspondingly, not only shared ground with official integrationist *indigenismo*, its discourses also participated prominently in the perpetuation of colonial legacies in the representation of the ethnic Other. Historical materialism, for example, actualised the pattern, known since the sixteenth century and re-signified inter alia through evolutionism in the nineteenth century, of normalising cultural difference by conceiving the Indian Other as a manifestation of the non-Indian Self in an earlier historical stage. Participating in the historically established mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion – the

48 W. D. Mignolo, *The Zapatistas’s Theoretical Revolution* (footnote 23), p. 250. Also see: footnote 15.

49 Ibid.

50 R. J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism* (footnote 3).

51 On the Marxist left and the indigenous question in twentieth-century Mexico, see: S. Scheuzger, *Der Andere in der ideologischen Vorstellungskraft. Die Linke und die indigene Frage in Mexiko*, Frankfurt am Main 2009.

“coloniality of power” in Quijano’s terms – which simultaneously acknowledged and negated difference, Marxists operated with regimes of truth that had organised since colonial times the appropriation of the Other within structures of dominance.<sup>52</sup> The Mexican revolutionary left clearly took part in the denial of indigenes’ capacities for a self-determined cultural and economic development. After a post-revolutionary intermezzo of moderately higher levels of attentiveness in the 1930s, interest on the left in the indigenous groups decreased once again and the Indian lost significance for Marxist-inspired projects of social transformation. In the era of the *milagro mexicano*, the Mexican economic miracle, from the 1940s to the 1960s – with its accelerated economic growth, first signs of a Mexican consumer society, and promise of transcending Third World status – the perception of the Indian as antithetical to modernity was reinforced also within the left. The tendency to neglect ethnic identities in the revolutionary projects of the Marxist left was even accentuated in the 1970s. The boom of Marxism in the political as well as the academic field in Mexico in this decade brought the materialist interpretation of the indigenous question to its apogee, minimising the significance of cultural difference to the degree that the *indígena* disappeared behind the *campesino* (the peasant) or the *jornalero* (the day-labourer). Nevertheless, Marxist orthodoxy was also responsible for propositions that opened spaces, however limited, for indigenous self-determination. Theorising the situation of the Latin American nation-states as “semi-colonial”, the Communist International decided in 1929 – more as a consequence of a Stalinist alignment than as a result of an in-depth reflection of the concrete implications – to interpret the indigenous question on the subcontinent strategically in the framework of the so-called national question. This meant that the Communist Parties had to demand for the indigenous groups the right of self-determination including the right of territorial secession. The Partido Comunista Mexicano (PCM) adopted the postulate, with a telling time-lag, in 1932. It was, in the first place, an act of ideological discipline. The transfer of this Marxist-Leninist theorisation of the so-called “race question” in Latin America had to meet with a certain resistance from the revolutionary left’s nationalism and anti-imperialism.<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, when the popular-front policy of the Third International required in 1935 the closing of ranks with the government of Lázaro Cárdenas – which gave the *indigenista* policy of integration of the indigenous population into the Mexican *mestizo* society not only a new face, but also a new political importance – the postulate of the indigenous right of self-determination silently disappeared from the discourse of the PCM. But it left traces. In the following decades, the general trend described above notwithstanding, the positions of the Mexican communists and other representatives of

52 See: footnote 23.

53 The nationalism of the revolutionary left resisted the idea of a violation of Mexico’s territorial integrity as well as the vision of a possible loss of a part of the population basic to the national identity. And it inhibited the perception of the Mexican nation-state engaged in an anti-imperialist struggle as an oppressor of national minorities – no Mexican Marxist was actually willing to equate post-revolutionary Mexico with czarist Russia. Furthermore, the deficient understanding of Marxism-Leninism in general impeded the comprehension of the dialectical and instrumental character of the postulate of the right to self-determination.

the Marxist left vis-à-vis the indigenous question never fell back into an exclusive class-approach, not even in the 1970s. Although less prominent and sometimes marginal, demands for special rights for the indigenous groups on the grounds of their cultural difference were permanently present in Marxist programmatic objectives in the postwar decades, as well as open critiques of the official indigenism's integrationist project.<sup>54</sup> This discourse, which has to be read as the intent to bring forward the creation of basic conditions for a limited self-determination of the indigenous communities, was not only an important condition for the introduction of the concept of internal colonialism into the Mexican discussion by Pablo González Casanova in the 1960s.<sup>55</sup> It was also a factor – not sufficiently appreciated in the literature – that prepared the ground for the discussions about indigenous rights and autonomy in the 1980s, with a prominent participation of indigenous movements and intellectuals. Also in this way, Marxist positions formed part of the intellectual bases of the Zapatista project.

## 5.

In the negotiations with the Mexican government about the subject area of *Cultura y derechos indígenas* (“indigenous culture and rights”) in 1995, the EZLN demanded a communal (not a regional) autonomy in Chiapas. What appeared to many observers as an expression of “native” knowledge of social organization – the focus on the *comunidad* as the basic political entity of indigenous life and as main reference of indigenous identity constructions – was, of course, a conception implanted by a colonial strategy of “divide and rule”.<sup>56</sup> This aspect of the Zapatista agenda – which Mignolo does not address – illustrates once again the importance of the colonial legacy in Mexico's post-colonial imaginaries. At the same time, it underscores the necessity of historicising these imaginaries. And this is exactly, what is missing in Mignolo's approach to the Zapatistas' “theoretical revolution”. His essay illustrates the risk of essentialising historical formations – bodies of knowledge, patterns of representation, epistemologies – that is involved in the idea of (post)coloniality. Mignolo is definitely correct to portray zapatismo as the significant historical event when Marxism in Mexico entered into a serious dialogue with indigenous worldviews instead of only speaking about or to the *indígenas*.<sup>57</sup> The Zap-

54 The demands concerned, for example, the valorization of the cultural development of indigenous groups, the respect for their forms of organization and expression or the establishment of autonomous administrative units on community level.

55 P. González Casanova, *La democracia en México*, México, D. F. 1965.

56 During the 16th and 17th centuries the Spanish Crown implemented a series of measures (*encomienda, congregaciones, reducciones*) to fragment indigenous life down to the community-level in order to make political control more effective and to rationalise economic exploitation. From this policy originated not only local indigenous councils, but also distinctive “typical” dresses of different communities or particular religious rites.

57 The indigenous movements that had adopted a Marxist discourse for the promotion of their political interests before on local levels should, however, not go unmentioned, like the *Coalición Obrera Campesina Estudiantil del Istmo* in Juchitán, Oaxaca, the *Unión de Comuneros Emiliano Zapata* in the state of Michoacán or the *Organización Independiente de Pueblos Unidos de las Huastecas* in the region of the Huasteca.

atista discourse emerging from this interchange overtly showed its capacities to overcome ethnocentrism, exhibited in its programmatic call for “a world where many worlds fit”.<sup>58</sup> However, the notion of a persistent coloniality promotes a view on this “revolutionary” encounter that tends on the one side to focus on centuries-old traditions of indigenous modes to produce meaning of the social world and on the other side to deal with Marxism as an ideology contained in a Eurocentric orthodoxy and therefore not considerable as a source of “decolonising” concepts for the indigenous population. To formulate it trenchantly against the backdrop of postcolonial studies’ general claim to represent an intellectual “movement beyond a relatively binaristic, fixed and stable mapping of power relations between ‘colonizer / colonized’ and ‘center / periphery’” – quoted by Mignolo<sup>59</sup> – and their declaration to “fight against essentialism”<sup>60</sup>: the idea of coloniality orientates in Mignolo’s analysis of *zapatismo* a perspective that privileges precisely the binary logic of an original mutual translation between a homogenous and self-contained “Occidental” ideological system and Amerindian ways of knowing and representing, preserved in traditions over the centuries, instead of a thorough examination of the complex historical conditions that actually led to this liaison and were the result of long-term permanent interactions between indigenous and non-indigenous social and cultural spheres. As a consequence, Mignolo completely glosses over the “modern”, post-colonial (hyphenated<sup>61</sup>) elements in the culture and the thinking of the Mayan communities that joined the EZLN. Among these decisive prerequisites for the emergence of *zapatismo*, orthodox Marxism played an influential role. *Zapatismo* was a hybrid political formation with multiple levels of meaning. It was in the 1990s a movement that intertwined in the representation of its emancipatory project closely indigenous imaginaries with Marxist ideology, liberation theology and nationalist narratives of modern Mexican history. At a certain point in his essay, Mignolo remarks critically against a statement made by Yvon Le Bot<sup>62</sup> that a definition of democracy by Subcomandante Marcos – quoted in the text – has to remain basically meaningless for the interpreter who does not know the previous discourse of the EZLN and of its Tojolabal Major Ana María.<sup>63</sup> The same is true for the Zapatista discourse as well: without a comprehension of the historicity of its elements, the understanding of *zapatismo* is severely limited. And such a comprehension implies above all the arduous task to scrutinise historical interactions of the concerned entities and their transformations. Mignolo applies his concept of “border thinking” to the Za-

58 “El mundo que queremos es uno donde quepan muchos mundos”. Cuarta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona, 1° de enero de 1996, in: EZLN, Documentos y comunicados, v. 3, 2 de octubre 1995/24 de enero de 1997, México, D.F. 1997, pp. 79–89, here p. 89.

59 E. Shohat, Notes on the “Post-Colonial”, in: *Social Text*, 31 (1992) 32, pp. 99–113, here p. 108. Mignolo quotes the statement in: *La razón postcolonial: herencias coloniales y teorías postcoloniales*, in: A. de Toro (ed.), *Postmodernidad y postcolonialidad. Breves reflexiones sobre Latinoamérica*, Frankfurt am Main 1997, pp. 51–70, here p. 56.

60 F. de Toro, *The Postcolonial Question: Alterity, Identity and the Other(s)*, in: A. de Toro / F. de Toro (eds.), *El debate de la postcolonialidad en Latinoamérica* (footnote 10), pp. 101–136, here p. 105.

61 See: footnote 6.

62 The author of *El sueño Zapatista* (footnote 2).

63 W. D. Mignolo, *The Zapatistas’s Theoretical Revolution* (footnote 23), p. 262.

patistas' theoretical revolution: "border thinking emerges from the double translation across the colonial difference".<sup>64</sup> Apparently, he underestimates the permeability of these borders.

As a reaction to the myth of decolonisation of social and cultural relations with the achievement of political independence, studies on coloniality and postcoloniality promise insights into the enduring efficaciousness of colonial discourses and patterns of thinking to the present day. Since academic knowledge participates in the cultural power structures between a post-colonial "we" and a "Western" – European and US – "they", a main argument against the adoption of postcolonial theory by Latin American Studies has been its "Metropolitan" origin and the danger of another form of "intellectual colonisation", a reasoning shared by Mignolo.<sup>65</sup> In terms of content, the Latin American critique has emphasised above all the different temporalities of the colonial experiences in the Americas on the one side and in Asia and Africa on the other side with the corresponding variety of the historical forms of colonialism. Nevertheless, attention has to be paid as well to the different temporalities of the post-colonial experiences. To subsume two hundred years of national histories in Latin America together with three hundred years of colonial history under the one long view of coloniality can hardly be considered historically valid. In correspondence with serious misconceptions of modernity – failure to recognise self-reflexivity as a basic constituent of modernity (of which theories about (post)coloniality are a product), disregard of the notion of change as a fundamental feature of the modern, and perpetuation of the idea of modernity descending to Latin America from without – the approach fails to differentiate adequately between continuity and change, and to explore the ambiguities in representations of projects of dominance and emancipation as well as in their epistemic preconditions. It is of indubitable importance to study how the post-colonial came into existence and developed connected with and permeated by the colonial. The name over the gate to such studies in the Latin American context does not have to "inevitably" be "postcolonial studies" as Peter Hulme suggested some years ago.<sup>66</sup> Maybe this is not even desirable. There are certain risks of essentialisations immanent in approaches that are committed to detect persistence of aesthetics, epistemologies and ethics of colonial violence from the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries to contemporary history. These risks are tangible where analytical perspectives are coupled with a political program to overcome Eurocentric systems of knowledge production, as Walter D. Mignolo's essay demonstrates. Nevertheless, they are not necessarily absent where such a political agenda does not exist, as Robert J. C. Young's view on Latin American Marxism shows.

64 Ibid.

65 W. D. Mignolo, *Colonial and Postcolonial Discourses: Cultural Critique or Academic Colonialism?*, in: *Latin American Research Review*, 28 (1993) 3, pp. 120–134, here p. 130.

66 P. Hulme, *Including America* (footnote 9), p. 123.