

From Tropicalism to Development: Coloniality and the Global Formation of Western Modernity

Modernity has long been portrayed in the social sciences as an internal European process that subsequently expanded to the rest of the world. Within this diffusionist narrative, Europe appears as the primary agent of historical transformation, while Africa, Asia, and the Americas enter modernity as passive recipients of institutions, technologies, and ideas already constituted in Europe. This paper challenges that narrative by arguing that modernity did not become global because it possessed an intrinsic universality, but because Western modernity universalized its own epistemic framework through colonial domination. By distinguishing between modernity as an abstract normative horizon and Western modernity as its historical materialization, the paper examines how coloniality enabled the global expansion of a historically specific form of modernity while presenting it as universally valid.

The paper therefore distinguishes between modernity as an abstract normative horizon, conventionally associated with ideas such as freedom and equality, and Western modernity as its historical materialization, forged through the entanglement of capitalism, colonialism, and European pretention of epistemic universalism. While the ideals associated with modernity may possess emancipatory potential, their global consolidation occurred within structures of colonial domination and racial capitalism. Western modernity thus represents the specific configuration through which these ideals became institutionalized within global hierarchies of power, knowledge, and being.

The first section of the paper reconceptualizes modernity as a dialectical global process rather than an internal European development. Drawing on world-historical and decolonial scholarship, including Anievas and Nişancioğlu (2015), Dussel (2005, 2007), and Quijano (2000, 2005), and historical evidence on colonial extraction, slavery, and global commodity circulation, the paper demonstrates that Europe's transformation cannot be understood independently of its colonial entanglements with some collectivities inside Europe and with Oceania, Africa, the Americas, and Asia. The emergence of capitalism, the consolidation of Europe as the core of the modern World-System (Wallerstein, 1974), and the expansion of modern institutions were materially and historically dependent on colonial extraction, slavery, and the global circulation of labor and commodities. From this perspective, modernity did not originate in Europe and subsequently spread outward, but rather emerged through asymmetrical interactions between metropole and colony.

This perspective also reveals that the universal subject of modernity was constructed through colonial exclusion. As Fanon (2001) and Césaire (1972) showed, European humanism emerged in contrast to populations racialized as non-modern or primitive, positioning colonized subjects within what Fanon (2009) later described as the "zone of non-being."

Building on Quijano's concept of coloniality of power (2000), the paper argues that Western modernity rests on a durable matrix linking capitalism, racial classification, and epistemic hierarchy. At the economic level, coloniality organizes the global division of labor through racialized hierarchies that structure production and accumulation. At the epistemic level, Western knowledge claims universality while relegating alternative epistemologies to the status of folklore, superstition, or tradition. At the ontological level, coloniality produces hierarchies of humanity in which European subjectivity becomes the normative measure of the human. These dimensions of coloniality reveal that Western modernity is not merely a historical stage but a structure of global ordering that continues to shape contemporary inequalities.

The third section examines tropicalism as one of the earliest epistemic articulations of colonial difference within Western modernity. Inspired in the notion of *Orientalism* (Said, 2003), Gustavo Lins Ribeiro (2004) developed the concept of tropicalism to understand the European racialized representations of colonial territories as spaces of excess—excessive nature, sensuality, and disorder. Territories, races, and cultures were fused into an environmental determinism that positioned tropical societies as naturally backward (Bateman, 2022).

Tropicalism therefore functioned as a racialized ontology of difference. It stabilized Western modernity's universal claims by locating certain populations outside the normative horizon of civilization and history. European identity as rational and disciplined was defined in opposition to tropical alterity.

The fourth section traces the transformation of this discourse in the mid-twentieth century through the emergence of developmentalism. Rather than representing a rupture with colonial thinking, development rearticulated colonial difference in economic and technocratic terms. Where colonial discourse spoke of racial inferiority and climatic determinism, development discourse spoke of poverty, underdevelopment, and lack of modernization (Bateman, 2022).

Drawing on Arturo Escobar's (2005) critique of development, the paper argues that the discursive practice of developmentalism transformed historically produced inequalities into measurable economic deficits or insufficiencies (Bateman, 2022). Colonial histories of exploitation were obscured by modernization narratives that placed societies along a linear trajectory of progress with the European living experience as its implicit endpoint. Developmentalism thus economized colonial difference while preserving Western modernity as the normative model of progress.

Since the end of the Second World War, developmentalism has institutionalized a global apparatus of technocrats—economists, planners, and development experts—who claim neutral authority to diagnose and remedy underdevelopment. Through statistical indicators, rankings, and policy frameworks, development discourse embedded colonial hierarchies within seemingly objective measures of progress. The colonial governor was replaced by the development consultant, but the asymmetrical relation between center and periphery remained intact (Rahnema, 2010).

Ultimately, the genealogy traced in this paper demonstrates that modernity did not become universal because it was universally shared. Rather, it became universal because, by persuasion or by force, it universalized its own epistemic conditions while continuously rearticulating colonial difference within the structures of the modern world-system (Wallerstein, 1974).

By tracing the genealogy from tropicalism to developmentalism, this paper contributes to historical social science debates on the global formation of modernity and the persistence of colonial hierarchies within modern institutions and epistemologies. Rather than treating colonialism and developmentalist discursive practices as historically distinct paradigms, the paper demonstrates their structural continuity within the broader trajectory of Western modernity. In doing so, it connects insights from decolonial theory with historical sociology and global history, showing how epistemic universalism operates as a durable mechanism through which modernity reorganizes colonial difference across time. This perspective helps illuminate how historically produced hierarchies become embedded within changing regimes of knowledge and governance, thereby offering a historically grounded framework for understanding the long-term reproduction of global inequalities.

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