

# War, Modernity, Critical Theory

RICH DANIELS

Nelson Maldonado-Torres. *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity*. Duke University Press, 2008. 360 pp.

Initially this book seems very promising, for at least three reasons: 1) in our time of small, nasty imperial wars and other efforts by the West to police the global south and periphery, analysis of and argument against such war from a new or unusual perspective is most welcome; 2) to bring together the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, Frantz Fanon, and Enrique Dussel promises updating of serious ethical arguments and new application of aspects of critical theory and perhaps even of Marxist analysis of the present stage of global capitalism; 3) and from these three thinkers developing an emphasis on the role of the global south, especially indigenous, insurgent, and resistance movements in Latin America can help us see the directions of social change, not to mention helping it along.

Maldonado-Torres writes that there is a Eurocentric “master morality of dominion and control that can be found at the core of racial policies, imperial projects, and wars of invasion” (2-3). His aim is “to provide here a philosophical and historical account of modernity as a paradigm of war, as well as a counter-paradigm based on the reflections of three twentieth-century philosophers who critically engage Western thought, particularly phenomenology, from three different but related experiences and geopolitical sites” (4-5). He argues that a new “critical theory” forms when and where the works of Levinas, Fanon, and Dussel intersect. There has been, he says, a “decolonial turn” which “includes the definitive entry of enslaved and colonized subjectivities into the realm of thought at previously unknown institutional levels. It introduces questions about the effects of colonization in modern subjectivities and modern forms of life as well as contributions of racialized and colonized subjectivities to the production of knowledge and critical thinking” (8). Elaboration of this claim, which surely has much truth to it, is a major purpose of the book, which also has a strong, consistent ethical strain that argues from peripheral perspectives for love over conflict and difference over (forced) identity. Nor is the book’s underlying theological emphasis surprising, given the influence of Levinas and Dussel. Indeed, the problems presented globally by the intersections of critical theory, Marxism, and religion, especially in the global south, are very much in need of being addressed.

Reading on in this book, however, one grows increasingly distracted by an argument that often doesn't appear to know its own limitations and is too often characterized by an apparently weak grasp of field of thought and the thinkers with which the author should be at least familiar—Gramsci, Adorno, and Marx, among many others—given his claims to be performing a critique of dominant modes of Western thought. What is at issue here is not wholly a critique of Eurocentrism or of dominant Western thought—not even, alas, a critique of war itself in any clear way—but rather a circuitous argument (the book needs a firm editorial hand) within the realm of phenomenology, especially the thought and influence of Husserl and Heidegger; in other words, an in-house debate within a specific segment of Western thought which does not amount to “dominant Western conceptions” (5). The author has, indeed, some very interesting things to say about Husserl's thought, especially, and this would be a better book had it focused more on that philosophical thread and its continuing influence in modern thought. He wants his book to be or at least call for “the transgressive praxis needed to effectively oppose the forces that sustain an imperial world” (101), but an argument rooted in phenomenology is too complicit in that world and too passive to do this, try though it might.

“The decolonial reduction,” Maldonado-Torres says, “makes explicit the challenges posed by the colonial condition to theories that assume a unified world where humans live and coexist” (101). But what exactly are these theories? The best answer he can give is modern liberalism, both secular and religious, the world view of Western elites, as represented, for example, in the works of Hannah Arendt, Jurgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Richard Rorty. Maldonado-Torres also identifies European thought with the French revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity (one could do worse, of course), but doesn't acknowledge in any way that the dominant self-critical thought of the West (again, those names of Gramsci, Adorno, and Marx) promulgates far more radical goals, and international ones to boot. Still, the author's treatment of the thought of Levinas (Part I, 23-89) is often very interesting in terms of its ethical arguments, although Levinas's Zionism, including his justifications of the Sabra and Chatila massacres of 1982, should give one pause, at least, in this regard. It's hard to square a pro-Zionist position and Israeli state policies towards the Palestinian people with concern for the wretched of the earth. Still, Levinas as concentration camp survivor and Jewish ethical and religious thinker clearly has great appeal to many people.

The treatment of Frantz Fanon in Part II (90-159) is also often compelling and worth reading; it's titled “Of Masters and Slaves, Or Frantz Fanon and the Ethico-Political Struggle for Non-Sexist Human Fraternity,” which gives a fair general sense of the argument. Here, Maldonado-Torres focuses on Fanon's 1961 book *Les Damnés de la Terre* (in English usually *The Wretched of the Earth*), a passionately argued work

that over the decades has lost none of its force. Maldonado-Torres uses Fanon's title term *damnés* (often as "the damned" or "condemned") in various forms throughout the rest of his book to refer to the poor and indigenous peoples of the global south, which makes good sense, except that never once in the entire book does he show that he knows the origin of Fanon's title: from the opening line of *The Internationale*, the hymn of the international communist movement (recently sung in its entirety at a large open-air rally in Kathmandu). Is it possible that he does not know the source of Fanon's title? Or does this silence (there are others) betray an anti-Marxist bias in the book? I suspect that both are true.

Part III of the book (163-236) treats the compelling thought and work of Argentine-Mexican ethical and political philosopher Enrique Dussel, the notable thinker of liberation theology. Dussel's work has had a major impact on Maldonado-Torres' thinking about philosophy and the global south, but it also leaves him somewhat uncomfortable. He sees Dussel's continuing importance as a philosopher and critical theorist of the global south and critic of international capitalism (a term our author seldom uses, preferring "modernity" instead). This section of the book is also accomplished, not least because it enacts the author's struggle with Dussel's philosophical thought, a struggle that I think Maldonado-Torres loses in large part because he's simply not a critical philosopher, not schooled enough in what philosophy is and means in our time. This is certainly not true of Dussel, who has written extensively on Marx's work, among other things, and who clearly considers himself to be, in his own way, a continuer of the work and thought of the Frankfurt School and the critical theory they developed. As far as I can tell from this book, our author is not conversant with the major works of, say, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer. In 2008 at the World Congress of Philosophy in Seoul, Korea, Dussel presented a paper titled "A New Age in the History of Philosophy: The World Dialogue Between Philosophical Traditions" in which he argued that philosophy today, to be itself, must "assume the responsibility for addressing the ethical and political problems associated with the poverty, domination, and exclusion of large sectors of the population, especially in the global South (in Africa, Asia, or Latin America). A critical philosophical dialogue presupposes critical philosophers, in the sense of the 'critical theory', while we in Latin America name our own tradition of critical theory as 'philosophy of liberation'." I am wholly, but by no means uncritically, in sympathy with this claim and feel compelled to engage with it.

I find myself in sympathy, too, with much of Maldonado-Torres' project in the book *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity*, but it also has the shortcomings I've tried to indicate; and it needs much more of the knowledge and philosophical and critical spirit indicated in the quotation above from Enrique Dussel.

## Work cited

Dussel, Enrique. "A New Age in the History of Philosophy: The World Dialogue Between Philosophical Traditions." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 35 (2009): 514. Print.

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Rich Daniels works in Corvallis, Oregon as an independent scholar of philosophy and critical theory, especially the continuing influence of Theodor Adorno's work and thought.