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**Invisible Immigrants: The Oral History as a paradigm in the fight against  
cultural colonialism**

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ABSTRACT

This paper is the investigation about the international migration phenomenon it is necessary to consider it a continuous movement of people dislocations based on needs, the curiosity about what lies beyond the horizon, and on exchanges and wars. At a time when spaces are shrinking, when local knowledge is permanently fed by global knowledge, the flow of people has been gaining a particular dynamism. Migrations have created the cities that nowadays manage the – real or imaginary for the globalization process. Oral history, in this way, acquired an epistemological potential, a radical contribution, upon the recognition of the fact that the sources, their veracity or their absence is not what counts. First of all, one needs to criticize the instrumental reason that has prevailed in the social sciences and the scientific justification of knowledge and social comprehension. Rivera states that it is not the method that ensures adequate or reliable knowledge, but what the scientist chooses to pick or discard for investigation. Oral history permitted native and mestizo intellectuals to work together in the recovery of social phenomena where ‘the others’ spoke. Invisible and excluded people started to orally record their ways of making their historical narratives before the evolutionist and scientificist logic of colonialism of knowledge.

I- Migrations: The Impossibility of the modern

To understand the international migration phenomenon it is necessary to consider it a continuous movement of people dislocations based on needs, the curiosity about what lies beyond the horizon, and on exchanges and wars. At a time when spaces are shrinking, when local knowledge is permanently fed by global knowledge, the flow of people has been gaining a particular dynamism.

Migrations have created the cities that nowadays manage the – real or imaginary for the globalization process[1]. Migrants disclose the limits of the operation of the social systems, the margins, the points of exclusion, its extreme social stigmatizing condition, shaping the image of what is rejected by the city. Migrations enable a detailed analysis of the urban order logic[2]. The paradox in it is that, although being part of the city, the migrant is considered an intruder, a stranger who belongs somewhere else. From this situation a question arises on who can and must be recognized as an outsider if the city is made exactly by the newcomers. But the metropolises are marked by differences, places where the prevailing speech – by politicians, the media and the academia - turn the migration phenomenon into a problem[3].

When they are individual, non-communal, the displaced ones seem to be the non-urban, the uncivilized, those who can become a stereotype due to carrying their cultural signs, mainly when they are in the labor’s lower sector. São Paulo, nowadays the largest Brazilian city, was formed in this process and reproduces, at present, the stigmas of immigrations. In this text, we will analyze the meaning of Latin American migrants coming to the city from Peru, Paraguay, Argentina and, mainly Bolivia. Men, women and youths represent the labor in the traditional industrial sewing shops – downtown and towards the north and east zones of the city.

To analyze the phenomenon, which is historical and involves traditional Latin American populations, it was necessary for me to resume the criticism of the political decolonization process which took place without an intellectual decolonization. This is due to the fact that the intention in the 19th century was not to overcome the colonial oppression, for it was real for the excluded but not for the local elites which benefited from partnerships, agreements or cooperation

with the city's interests. On defining the rupture of the old metropolis through the autonomous formation of National States, the levels of the process were not considered, since the economic-political independence should also lead to the intellectual decolonization. However, the models followed the same dynamics of the modern and, with them, the reproduction or regulation of the system. Stimulated by Thompson[4], I wonder which was the radicalness of the anti-colonial fights of the 19th century and of those that occurred in Africa over the 1960/1970s.

Over the latter period, the only alternative left for the political liberation fights was the negotiations between the two Cold War hegemonic blocs, with the main enemy being the European colonialism, paradoxically articulating with the United States' foreign policy, which prepared recolonization projects of different shapes. Also, one could not see the Soviet Bloc as another type of imperialism[5]. The liberation of the countries under its control, i.e., decolonization in Africa and Asia, was similar to the process occurred in the 19th century. As the process was based on similitude, the intellectual decolonization should have incorporated the Afro-Caribbean and native minorities, whose memories had been ignored by the Christian empire, by the liberals and Marxists. In this way, since the 19th century the anti-colonial movements have only been in the interests of the colonies' emerging elites and there was no rupture as regards the ways of the capitalist mercantile production. Even more, the colonial groups' intelligentsia accommodated to the previous exclusions and discarded the local cultural experiences for the sake of the Eurocentric fundaments related to modernity and the silence about what had been lived, not subjected to this logic. The political complexity of the period requires a more detailed reflection.

During the Cold War, there were three possibilities for the anti-colonial fights: Neoliberalism, the Theology of Liberation and the Theory of Independence. The three of them silenced the traditional populations and reproduced the coloniality. The consciousness about these oversights led to the reconsideration of cultural ways that had been disparaged over the centuries, and a critical eye on the notions of totality – i.e., the human beings, the portion of the population not incorporated to the modern project, started to show the limits of modernity itself. Just as the French Revolution would not absorb the 'sans coullotes', crowds in all the continents are nowadays outside the modernity. In this way, the European/American model cannot produce solutions to poverty and labor in the Third World countries, keeping most of these people apart from the knowledge/power relationship. Migrations are largely part of this process of social unrest.

The first movement of knowledge dislocation was made by Frantz Fanon, in relation to Algeria. In his work *The Wretched Earth*[6], he questioned the way the Western world decided to psychoanalyze and represent the Algerian people, who spoke Arab or Berber, whose religion is Islam and whose history is from Mahgreb. Values, symbols and signs of a civilization cannot be transposed without changing the logic of the other, without the first becoming subjected to another code, distinct, without communication.

The coloniality of knowledge is, therefore, the dark side of modernity of knowledge. In the decolonization process the coloniality of knowledge gains emphasis under the umbrella of modernity, or the construction of knowledge starting from the colonial experiences. Phenomena like slavery, transposed from different times and places, as well the opposition between civilization and barbarianism are part of this process. In the second half of the 20th century, projects for knowledge decolonization appeared in both Africa and Latin America.

The South Asia group, Vietnam and Cambodia, brought the problem to the historical area, just like Fanon had done with psychoanalysis and Mignolo with philosophy[7].

It is interesting to proceed with this analysis by the course opened by the Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui[8], who points out three axes for understanding the critical thinking in the Andean region and Latin America. The first is the internal colonialism concept, which combines two national and knowledge genealogies (Pablo Gonzáles Casanova and Rodolfo Stavenhagen's sociology) and Argentina's economic historiography (Sergio Bacú, Enrique Tander and Juan Carlos) for analyzing the transition from feudalism to capitalism. On showing that the mentioned transition does not make sense in America - for Tawantinsuyu and Anahuac neither were feudal societies nor lived in the Middle Ages, between the classic antiquity and a presumed renaissance - the authors draw attention to the need of understanding the other and listening to reports as a whole. To watch the ways of life, breathe the local air, analyze the flat ground and the projections, and search the codices for secrets of an ancient culture that had been the object of desire and European conquests. Being as they were a different history and different spaces, the independence thesis conceived by the Creole elites was a form of internal colonialism that created the coloniality of power, principle and logic of the inequalities that are inseparable from modernity[9]. From this discussion there resulted criticism about F. Fukuyama, without the end of history and post-modernity. This dilemma was brought about by the one who denied it. Francis Fukuyama[10] started the discussion with the provocation about the end of history.

The post-colonialism and post-modernism concept is used here as a critical reflection on the modernity and the coloniality of power, mainly with the dialogue made possible with certain literature related to ex-British colonies and, by language derivation, to some thinkers in the United States. The consciousness of the reproduction of modern fundamentals in reform processes in colonial countries has shown the need to reconvene with the previous links of modernity in their peculiarities, since the 16th to the 18th century, in the Andean region and India. Rivera's search, on footpaths and old horses, in the Andean social sciences, showed the epistemological potential of oral history. Upon wondering about why the social scientists had not anticipated the emergence of the Sendero Luminoso organization and the reasons for the difficulties in understanding them, the sociologist found the root of internal colonialism due to the epistemic and ethnic blindness that had imposed itself on the method and the principles of self-construction of modernity and coloniality.

Oral history, in this way, acquired an epistemological potential, a radical contribution, upon the recognition of the fact that the sources, their veracity or their absence is not what counts. First of all, one needs to criticize the instrumental reason that has prevailed in the social sciences and the scientific justification of knowledge and social comprehension. Rivera states that it is not the method that ensures adequate or reliable knowledge, but what the scientist chooses to pick or discard for investigation. Oral history permitted native and mestizo intellectuals to work together in the recovery of social phenomena where 'the others' spoke. Invisible and excluded people started to orally record their ways of making their historical narratives before the evolutionist and scientificist logic of colonialism of knowledge. These narrations show other authorities, the epistemic fundamentals, sites, myths, disenchantment with the world, with nature and the way to extract from it means of living and survival[11].

La historia oral en este contexto es, por eso, much más que una metodología "participativa" o de "accion", es un ejercicio colectivo de desalienacion, tanto para el investigador como para su interlocutor. Si en este proceso se conjugan esfuerzos de interacción consciente entre distintos sectores, y se la base del ejercicio es el mutuo roconocimiento y la honestidad en cuanto al lugar que se ocupa en la "cadena colonial" LOS RESULTADOS SERÁN TANTO MÁS RICOS[12].

By recovering the human experience, the process of systemizing the narrative takes the shape of a dialectic synthesis between two or more active poles of reflection and conceptualization, no longer between the cognizant ego and a passive other, but between two subjects that reflect together about their respective experiences and the vision one has of the other. The history and the historical experience of subjects related by power structures and, in this case, by the coloniality of power, when they surpass the subject of knowledge dimension, constitute a new type of subject to be known and understood. Thus, oral tradition is not only the source: it is the production of knowledge in itself. The narrator is equivalent to the social scientist, the philosopher or the social critic.

Mignolo compares Rivera's proposal to what sub-commander Marcos did in the Zapatista revolutionary process. He made a two-way translation between the Marxist cosmology, which was incorporated into the native cosmology, in the same way the latter merged with Marxism. In this two-way translation the distinction between the cognizant subject and the subject to be known dissolved into thin air. Michel Lowy dealt with this process in Redemption and Utopia[13], trying to demonstrate how the Jewish messianism and the revolutionary mysticism merged themselves in the German romanticism and the libertarian fights in Latin America. By commanding while obeying or creeping like snails, we mark our territories in search of man/devir/utopia integrity, says Marcos.

Oral history is, therefore, an epistemology that tends to eliminate differences, as they have a colonial origin. By eliminating the differences, the coloniality of power is also disclosed. Finally, by disclosing the coloniality of power, the discussions on civil rights, liberal democracy and Ayllu democracy are recovered. Starting from these discussions, rights start to be saluted between their reach in liberal democracies and the permanence of coloniality. Civil rights, citizenship, racism and gender are differences opened in the post-modernity and identified from the other's speech – the same. Even more, narrations by the excluded open the route to secrets, fetishes, unfulfilled dreams and utopias in modern liberation. Let's take a look into the Andean immigrants coming to São Paulo.

## II : Oral History and the geopolitics of knowledge

“Estaban trabajando en Bolivia y el trabajo iba mal, como también tengo esposa y escuchamos en el radio que en el Brasil habia necesidad de una persona para trabajo, que se pagava bien, que nosotros ganaríamos como USD200 por mes. Cuando llegamos aqui no fue bien asi y nos quedamos confusos en aquel momento. ... Partimos de La Paz para Cochabamba y llegamos a Santa Cruz de la Sierra. Un primo nos ofreció un pasaje hasta Assunción del Paraguay por SD65,00. En Paraguay un hombre se ofreció para nos ayudar en la travesía de la frontera por USD150,00. Otra persona cobró USD120,00.

Habia especulación, nosotros servíamos para las redes de explotación de los pobres. Pero ali nos quedámos por una semana. La plata se acabando. Despues de 15 dias todos estaban sin fuerzas y sin dinero. En (sem el) Brasil, entramos

en una oficina de costura y no podíamos salir a la calle. Estuvimos cerrados y por miedo nada hicimos [14].

Pedro's narrative is common among displaced Latin Americans that have crossed the border in search of better living conditions, moved by dreams created with a base on the logic of modernity. This narration, however, is not related to the failure of people who cannot live with the modern comfort and progress. Instead, migrations disclose the imperial meaning of modernity and the permanence of coloniality in the social relations that still prevails in this historical moment.

On December 18, 2006 the 'International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers and Their Family Members' was approved. Several American countries celebrate the Migrant Workers' Day. However, more than celebrations, mobilizations show that there is a lot to be done to make good on the promotion and respect for migrant workers' human rights and universal citizenship. An example of the tough and sad migration reality took place on the eve of this happening, when 102 people that had left from Africa on 'cayucos' (kayaks) toward the Canary Islands, Spain, died after having sailed more than 1,200 km to reach the Islands. During the last six years, since the migration flows from Africa to Europe started to grow, it is estimated that over 6 thousand migrants drowned in the Atlantic Ocean, while some 200 thousand were sent back to Africa.

The search for a better life by the Africans coming massively from Morocco, sub-Saharan Africa – Mali, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Senegal started some 10 years ago and was recorded by Sebastião Salgado for the Exodus project. In the beginning they crossed the Mediterranean Sea on 'pateras' (boats) leaving from their countries and arrived in Spain. Little by little, surveillance cameras were installed in Ceuta and Melilla, North Morocco, and radars and patrols started to guard the Mediterranean Sea. But none of this has stopped the migration flow, which grew over the last two decades as a consequence of deep changes in the production processes and the growth in the so-called population excesses.

Just like Pedro, these migrants show the other face of neoliberal globalization. On one side, the distribution of production flows in different cities of the Planet and, on the other, the myth of a possibly comfortable life for peripheral populations in central countries. Migrants aspire to protection by international agencies such as the United Nations for the recognition of global citizenship, but by migrating in search of wages and survival, they express the logic of social exclusion, parting with the fetishes of capitalism. Wealth and power, in the logic of the global empire, are for just a few.

Being a migrant is still seen as a problem for the national security, is to be disqualified from an ethnic and moral point of view, as in most cases the migrants come from poor populations. In the case of the Bolivians who come to São Paulo, narratives indicate that, in a given region of the city, layers of production processes and moving populations are the key for an analysis of the globalization and exclusion phenomenon. Newcomers live in the city's old industrial region and are placed in sewing shops in Barra Funda, Brás, Bom Retiro or Pari. They are the third ethnic group to be subjected to invisibility and forced labor in some neighborhoods, as they are the result of human traffic conducted by the coyote, or labor predators.

It is a network associated to smuggling and drug dealers, as well as to the clothing business, which was initially occupied by Syrian-Lebanese salesmen who would go from door to door offering clothing items produced by the Jews who inhabited that region of the city since the '30s. These salesmen were replaced by the Koreans in the '70s-'80s, who, thanks to the sector's expansion or tax evasion, have in most cases become owners of the sewing shops and turned to recruiting Bolivians for forced labor. Nowadays, Bolivians explore their fellow-countrymen by taking hold of their personal documents, charging large amounts for them to cross the border and maintaining them as hostages under threats of denouncement to the Brazilian Federal Policy.

The situation described by Pedro brings about the questioning on who can and who should be recognized as migrant in the urban space, considering that this place is marked by mobility, the unstable and what is constantly being structured. The migration phenomena are the indispensable food for the city's development<sup>16</sup>; therefore, the migrant cannot be considered a problem, for he is the solution to ensure the city's survival. Instead, the coloniality of knowledge shows migrants as responsible for the deterioration of spaces - outsiders, intruders, and strangers. They are associated to problems to be resolved and are disqualified through racist demonstrations when there is no race involved. Being seen as race or ethnic group, migrants only gain negative visibility when their disqualification is convenient as a justification for urban deterioration.

In this perspective, foreigner is the migrant that holds command positions as opposed to the migrant worker, who is seen as uncivilized. The social differences, however, do not conceal the signs of prejudice. A narrator declares:

..." I am going to marry an African woman, but she is a journalist, she is educated, bright and a hard worker. My family is somewhat racist and did

not like the idea at first, but is accepting it now in view of her being a Negro of a different kind.”

Naturalizing the inequalities and denying the right to the city, the speeches on migrants living in the main cities reconfirm and make many victims by means of racism without race. This process was narrated by Dom Carlos, an electrical technician who came to Brazil as a political refugee. Like many migrants in the ‘80s, these professionals were able to enter the industrial labor market which was still active by that time. To alleviate homesickness, he joined other Bolivians who met on Praça Padre Bento, around the imposing Santo Antônio do Pari church, every Sunday afternoon. But, as the flow of Latin Americans increased, problems with the neighbors started soon: treated as invaders, they started to be seen as dirty, drunkards, vagrants, thieves. A movement was started in the neighborhood to restore the lost order and peace.

Even with the region having been formed by migrants who had arrived in similar conditions, the disdain, the negation of the past and the colonizing sense made relationships unbearable and Dom Carlos turned to trying to obtain from the public power a space for their meetings. In June 2002 they moved to a small corner nearby, which they call Praça Kantuta, after a small flower native of high lands, a symbol of their country due to showing the same colors of the Bolivian flag: red, yellow and green. Being a precarious place, the meetings involve typical food and music, and typical goods are sold Saturdays afternoon, amid debates and dance. This place receives the low layers, workers who were able to escape from the sewing shops that held them in slavery, by running away or marrying a Brazilian woman or having benefited from the amnesty given to those without documents in 2002.

Those belonging in the owners or professional sectors are fostered by the Serviço Pastoral dos Migrantes (Migrants’ Pastoral Service) and meet at the Nossa Senhora da Paz church. There, presentations are made by folk groups that reinvent their traditions, with a view to creating links of belonging with those who are close or a way to locate those who stayed behind. None of this is new in the migrants’ history except for one characteristic: rural Latin Americans are organized with a base on communal relations and respect for the other in making good on their word. Thus, even being cheated on by coyotes, they subject themselves to meeting their labor commitments, trying to settle their debts or paying back with work whatever they have received: even a plate of food in an unhealthy place inside the sewing shops, most times working for six months without any pay. This sense of recognition of the other and need for respect is a recurrence from the village communities and the Andean mystic, for the patchamama (Mother Earth) and the Sun – the fertility – belong to all those whose right to life is the safeguard of life itself. The sacred sense of living comes from the past, from immemorial times<sup>17</sup>. Outside the colonial logic, the disclosure of this process is made possible only by the Oral History, talks permeated by long reminiscences, where speaking and describing the signs and symbols of past cultures are moments of strong emotion, of codices that presume another way of narrating that writing cannot reflect.

Learning about these processes enables the recognition of the huge chasm opened by cultural colonialism in isolating and separating human beings. Culturally disqualified, they are part of the production chain that exhausts them as tools for producing wealth in different countries. If they are not allowed to speak, nothing will be known about the real limits of modernity. In this way, the oral history paradigm becomes a tool for the construction of another time, for it is now established that it is utopia to think that another world is possible.

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### Descrição:

This paper is the investigation about the international migration phenomenon it is necessary to consider it a continuous movement of people dislocations based on needs, the curiosity about what lies beyond the horizon, and on exchanges and wars. At a time when spaces are shrinking, when local knowledge is permanently fed by global knowledge, the flow of people has been gaining a particular dynamism. Migrations have created the cities that nowadays manage the – real or imaginary fo the globalization process. Oral history, in this way, acquired an epistemological potential, a radical contribution, upon the recognition of the fact that the sources, their veracity or their absence is not what counts. First of all, one needs to criticize the instrumental reason that has prevailed in the social sciences and the scientific justification of knowledge and social comprehension. Rivera states that it is not the method that ensures adequate or reliable knowledge, but what the scientist chooses to pick or discard for investigation. Oral history permitted native and mestizo intellectuals to work together in the recovery of social phenomena where ‘the others’ spoke. Invisible and excluded people started to orally record their ways of making their historical narratives before the evolutionist and scientificist logic of colonialism of knowledge.