


## MODERNITY AS A PSYCHOPOLITICAL MORAL PROJECT: THE CULT OF DEVELOPMENT AS REDEMPTION IN CAPITALISM

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### ABSTRACT

Modernity, with its ontological and epistemological bases, sought to create a solid moral basis to legitimize the primitive accumulation of capital, transforming practices that were previously reprehensible (usury, exploitation, colonial genocide) into virtues necessary for "progress". By analyzing the transition from feudal morality — which condemned accumulation — to capitalist morality, the article demonstrates how modernity operated an inversion of values, justifying violence as a civilizational stage. From Marx, Weber and decolonial thinkers, it is discussed how modern rationality has sacralized development, turning it into a religious totem (Benjamin) that redeems the guilt of exploitation. Modernity acted on the psychopolitical level to sustain capitalist exploitation, and should therefore be understood not only as a historical period marked by profound economic, political, and social transformations, but also by psychopolitical devices that allowed for the moralization of practices of dispossession, pauperization, extermination, and even genocide.

**Keywords:** Modernity. Psychopolitics. Critique of Development. Morality.

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## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between colonization, capitalism and modernity has been the subject of important discussions in Brazilian and Latin American Social Psychology, especially because it has shaped contemporary conceptions of development and progress. Modernity, which emerged as an ontological and epistemological project, not only redefined the nature of social and economic relations throughout the West, but also imposed a new morality that legitimized dynamics of exploitation and extermination of cultures and peoples considered "savage" or "primitive." This article proposes to discuss how these dynamics intertwine, establishing a social pact that perpetuates inequalities and justifies capitalist exploitation.

With this, we will seek, from a psychopolitical perspective, to problematize the role of modernity in the construction of an ethical narrative that sustains the myth of development as a moral imperative. To this end, the historical and theoretical foundations that support this relationship will be analyzed, highlighting the transformations in ethics and morality that were fundamental to the rise of capitalism and that continue to sustain it to this day. The analysis will focus on understanding how the psychological dimension was fundamental to legitimize a mode of production based on usury and exploitation, considered, until that historical moment, immoral practices.

The concept of development is presented in this article as a discursive construction that, centered on the idea of growth, improvement and improvement, not only promotes the superiority and hegemony of Western standards, but also inferiorizes, disqualifies and marginalizes practices that resist developmental impulses, considered to be obstacles or delays to the advances of civilization. "Humanity" as something homogeneous and universal, united by a common destiny, guided by progress, was based on an orthopedic perspective sustained by a dichotomy that classifies, hierarchizes and opposes "modern" to "primitive", "civilized" to "savage". The universality of the modern subject sustains not only the idea of a single valid trajectory for humanity, but also serves to hide the power relations that relativize Western moral taboos, justifying European expansionism and the capitalist mode of production. Thus, modernity is analyzed as a phenomenon that is not limited to a historical, cultural and political period, but that nails universal dogmatisms, modeling mentalities and subjectivities in accordance with the nascent capitalist, liberal and bourgeois ideals, reverberating ethical and moral imperatives that underlie contemporary political and economic relations.

From this, we understand that the cult of development, a fundamental promise of capitalism, ritualizes the social pact established by modernity and moralizes the abuse, dispossession and extermination of those considered as "homo sacer" (Agamben, 2004), who can be sacrificed in the name of the civilizing/developmental process.

## **WHAT WE CALL MODERNITY**

Modernity begins to take shape approximately at the beginning of the sixteenth century, in Europe. Progressively, it took on more defined contours, accelerating its pace and strengthening itself as a hegemonic model over other peoples and regions of the planet. The indications that broad and significant changes were taking place in the economy, politics, social organization, culture, subjectivities and other spheres ended up shaking the entire structure of the medieval European world to the point of practically bringing it down. The initial sensation of a small seismic shock, shaking the solid ground of the old regime, would become, with the advent of modernity, a sensation that "everything that is solid and stable melts into thin air, everything that was sacred is desecrated" (Marx; Engels, 1848/2005, p. 43). From a slight tremor, it turned into a great earthquake that would dismantle the medieval structures, under the promise of building a new world, namely, that would not be restricted only to the European world, but that intended to expand to other worlds existing on earth. The modern earthquake, with its epicenter in Europe, would strike as far away as the Americans, Africans, and parts of Asia.

Berman (1986) divides modernity into three distinct phases. The first, which is located between the sixteenth and the end of the seventeenth centuries, corresponds to the initial sensations that, like a tsunami, profound and radical changes were beginning to be experienced; the second, which he calls modernism, chronologically covering the nineteenth century, would correspond to a revolutionary period, marked by great clashes against the structures of the *ancien régime*, with the French Revolution as its main landmark, and the third, from the beginning of the twentieth century, which he calls modernization, corresponding to a period of expansion and settlement of its civilizational project, practically everyone. At this moment, modernity plants its new solids in place of those old ones it had destroyed. Among them are capitalism and the bourgeoisie, in the economic sphere, the classic modern institutions, such as schools, hospitals, prisons, asylums, companies, factories, the bourgeois nuclear family, unions, groupizations and various organizations, functionalized within a disciplinary logic, very well identified by

Foucault (2005). On the level of subjectivity, Freud (1930/2010) was very skilled in identifying neurosis, especially obsessive neurosis, as a subjective or psychological cementation of two basic principles of this settlement of modernity: order and progress, as expressed in the motto of the Brazilian flag.

Throughout this period, from the sixteenth century to the present day, the project of modernity has taken on multiple forms, rehearsed various directions, reinvented itself in crises and contradictions, generating divergent interpretations to the point that some authors deny its existence as a pure category and cry out that "we have never been modern" (Latour, 2019), while others consider it as an unfinished project (Habermas, 2017), either declare its collapse in the face of postmodern fragmentation or decree its end or exhaustion (Harvey, 1998). Still others rejected the idea of modernity as a single or universal narrative, arguing for the existence of multiple modernities that would reveal how non-Western cultures would have reinterpreted the modern project, producing hybrid configurations with a view to subverting the Eurocentric project (Eisenstadt, 2001). We also have those who denounced it as a Eurocentric civilizational myth, sustained by coloniality and the center-periphery hierarchy, producer of *altericides* and inseparable from the capitalist mode of production (Dussel, 2005).

Among the heterogeneities that configured the conceptions of modernity in different times and places, it is worth highlighting the specificities that marked the imposition of modern ontological and epistemological bases on the colonies of America, Africa, South Asia and Oceania. Modernity is based on an identity project, which centers the modern European male subject in the hegemonic position of "I", whose other is marked as "difference" to be corrected or dominated. This ontological marking, sustained by the centrality of identity, gave an air of legitimacy to the European colonialist project, of invasion and domination of other peoples and continents, initially conducted under force and violence, which was prolonged and perpetuated under the imperative of modernization and progress.

## **MODERNIZATION, MYTH OF PROGRESS AND CULT OF DEVELOPMENT**

A deeper conceptual differentiation about "modernity" and "modernization" is in order. Norbert Lechner (1990) understands modernity as a normative rationality (democracy and human rights, for example), while modernization corresponds to a technical-instrumental rationality (cost/benefit calculations manifested in effectiveness, productivity,

competitiveness, etc.). One can only be understood from the other. For this reason, the concept of "modernity" is not sufficient to understand the specificities of this mode of sociability, even within Europe. According to Denis Castilho (2011, p. 129), "modernization is a project of modernity based on a developmentalist ideology, progress and rationality".

The moderns, enchanted by the productions of science and technology, deeply believed in the advent of a "promised land" capable of solving the great evils of humanity: scarcity, misery, hunger, incurable diseases, devastating epidemics, oppressions of tyrannical regimes, devastation produced by natural phenomena, among others. The human being discovers himself as a subject, that is, as one capable of transforming himself and his world. From being a creature (of God) he starts to represent himself as his own creator, with the power to control his destiny, act on time and be the great actor of history.

Foucault (2013) states that the great obsession from the sixteenth century onwards (we can say, of the moderns) was the control of time. It was about being able to guide time, to forge history, to build the future, to make humanity move towards the improvement of the world, idealized as a paradise. Whether through capitalism and liberalism or through socialism or communism, a progression in the timeline was presumed, straight and accurate, step by step, whose final finish line would be full happiness.

Progress and development were two interdependent notions that emerged embedded in the course of modern life and society. Adorno (1992) argues that the notion of progress arises, historically, embedded in social life, in the struggle of the human being in search of overcoming mishaps, difficulties and obstacles to the expansion, reproduction and prolongation of life. In short, a struggle against time lived as an inexorable destiny, imposed by nature or by the will of God. On the way to a prodigious future, all kinds of confrontation were justified, from confronting the adversities of nature, to confronting human beings themselves, societies and other cultures that could stand in the way of what was understood as achievements, advances towards improvements, that is, as progress, one of the main values cultivated by modernity.

The notion of progress is one of the great guides of modernity that serves as a rationalization of its violent destructive clashes. Nature was one of his great targets. Common sense was different. For the purposes of modernity, led by capitalism, it was necessary to exploit the resources of nature as much as possible, to extract from it the raw materials for industrial advancement and for the mass production of consumer goods, more to meet the voracity of capital than the demands of the people.

Under the impetus of the industrial revolution and the force of technologies created at an accelerated pace, human action on nature deepens and expands considerably with engineering works literally capable of removing mountains, taming strong river currents, building dams, forming large lakes, prospecting for minerals in the depths of the ground, extracting oil in geological layers very far from the surface, and so on. To this end, the felling of forests, large-scale agricultural production, alterations in the courses and flows of river waters, gigantic excavations in the earth in search of precious minerals, among many extremely aggressive and destructive actions on nature, were justified.

Popular knowledge was elected as another enemy of progress, exalted by modernity. Scientific rationality, of a positivist nature, was in charge of disqualifying him and putting his truths in place. Diverse popular knowledge in the fields of agriculture, health, artisanal production, among others, were fiercely fought by science. Not only were practices and knowledge considered traditional disqualified, but also their producers came to be considered as being primitive or cognitively inferior, unable to access methods and use equipment considered indispensable for the production of credible and effective knowledge and technologies.

Berman (1986) takes Goethe's *Faust* (first part published in 1808 and the second in 1832) to illustrate the lust for power, the valorization of scientific knowledge in relation to popular knowledge and the destructive impetus of modernity towards the mirage of progress and the construction of a perfect world. In this well-known work by Goethe starring a character (*Faust*) thirsty for absolute and unlimited power and *Mephistopheles* (the figure of the devil who empowers *Faust* in exchange for his soul after death), Berman highlights a scene in which *Faust* does not stop at murdering an elderly couple who lived in an area where he intended to build a work that he considered necessary for the development of the place. In the name of progress, the use of violence to remove any kind of obstacle is justified.

The idea of progress did not arise in modernity, nor did it have a homogeneous meaning and a purely positive appreciation. However, it has become one of its main pillars, associated with others such as the idealization of the new, as opposed to the devaluation of the old, the belief in universals common to all and normalizing humanity, distributed among different peoples, societies and cultures spread across the planet, among others. The idea of revolution, of radical transformations, peacefully or by force of arms and war was another solid pillar of modernity (Pérez Llody, 2016) that was added to the extreme appreciation of

the new, to the incessant search for renewal, transformation and progress as a "universal good" capable of encompassing all of humanity. Transformations, renewals and revolutions that aimed at the creation of a new social, economic, subjective order and relations between peoples and nations. Order, discipline and purity also made up the ideals of modernity aimed at consecrating the belief in a promising future, through a process of development – another notion closely linked to that of progress.

Development and progress have gone hand in hand, in the modern mindset, as driving forces for teleologically oriented change. It was not a matter of changing things in any direction, but of doing it in a planned and oriented way towards a certain end, following a technical and instrumental rationality. The modern belief, especially through modernization, was that it was necessary to create, innovate, change or even revolutionize, but in an organized, planned way, with clearly programmed objectives and means with the due help of science and technology.

The notion of development, allied to that of progress and to the others that constituted the central nucleus of modernity, fostered the conviction that the path of society and humanity, towards the future, similar to religious messianisms, was destined to reach a final goal, which would be, a final stage characterized by the definitive solution of the hardships of the human being. Fostered by science, philosophy, religion with different versions and proposals to boost it, and embedded in the subjectivity of the common person, development was understood as a process that operated on the individual and collective level and on all levels of life: economic, social, cultural, cognitive, affective, sexual, emotional, and so on.

The notion of development, like that of progress, carried with it the mark of time, that is, it presupposed an action of the human being or of a subject, on time, on the rhythm and on the direction of teleologically oriented changes. For a certain period and is still present today, the understanding of time predominated, metaphorically represented by an arrow, launched ahead, or by a straight line destined to progressively follow a path until it reaches its target. Such a path could be understood as linear and progressive, although with variations in rhythm or speed, or it could be understood as being composed of segmentations or stages established by criteria of qualitative changes. In any case, however, the understanding prevailed that the processes of development produced evolution, the passage from a primitive or inferior state, to a state of advancement,



improvements, improvements and elevation to a level of superiority. Social Darwinism is an expression of this belief in evolutionism applied to societies.

The promises of modernity did not take long to show their limits and contradictions, despite the messianic developmentalist and progressive teleologies that signaled an evolution of humanity towards improvements, towards conquests of higher stages. The First World War brought to light the destructive potential of technologies and political conflicts intensified by power disputes. Economic inequalities between social classes and between peoples and countries have been accentuated. The degradation of the environment and the climatic crises, the fatigue, violence, indifference and hostility, present in the scenario of the metropolises (Simmel (1903/1973), considered as great symbols of progress and the greatness of human achievements, the recent collapse of modern institutions, especially those created for the governance of the universal human being and the globalized world, among so many other failures of the project of modernity, they allow us to deepen the criticisms and explore other possibilities of paths for humanity, not necessarily in the same direction. Strictly speaking, since its birth, modernity has not failed to have its critics and skeptics. Montaigne is considered one of the precursors of a critical look at phenomena and events that emerged in the midst of modernity, in its beginnings, when the bases of his project for humanity and its world were outlined. According to Gruner (2007, p. 43-44),

Montaigne was one of the first, and certainly one of the most virulent, critics of the colonization of America, and by extension, of properly modern racism (and "racism", [...] it is also a modern invention), which emerged as an effect of this "clash of cultures". And he was also one of the first to use "savage" societies as a deforming mirror for the many evils he perceived in the "civilized" ones.

Through such a deforming mirror, the European's gaze began not to recognize in itself the violence, the dehumanization, the devouring and destructive rage projected on the native peoples of the so-called America, seen as cannibals and savages. Even in the romanticized versions of the 'good savage', that is, of angelic, docile and naïve beings, living harmoniously in coexistence with nature, the idea of a non-human or that of a primitive, rude, backward or pagan being who needed to be tutored, protected or rescued for the "civilized world" ended up being preserved.



## THE CRISIS OF FEUDAL MORALITY

Before the advent of modernity, feudal morality established a structure of values that not only shaped everyday life but also influenced the productive models derived from this system. The theocentric view was the basis for both the conception of reality (ontology) and the search for and validation of knowledge (epistemology), creating a system in which religious authority and tradition played a central role in determining what was morally correct and true.

Political and economic relations were permeated by a moral conception that condemned usury—the practice of charging interest on loans—and discouraged the excessive accumulation of material goods. While the wealth of nobles and feudal lords was justified as "natural" or "divine will", for commoners, wealth and profit arising from trade or usury were seen as a threat to social and spiritual harmony, a sin against the divine order. To serfs and plebeians, salvation was only accessible through poverty and the renunciation of earthly goods, conditions that expressed virtue and spiritual elevation. These principles, which profoundly shaped feudal economic ethics, were drawn from the influence of thinkers such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas.

For Augustine (354–430), wealth and the accumulation of material goods diverted human beings from their true purpose: the search for salvation and spiritual goods (Brandão, 2024). In *The City of God*, Augustine (426/1996) argued that society was a battle between two cities: that of God, based on faith and charity, and that of men, of greed and selfishness. Thus, usury and profit sustained by the spoils and exploitation of some over others were vices, a manifestation of pride and sin, which prevented men from achieving true happiness and eternal life. On the other hand, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) developed a more systematic and philosophical approach to advocating charity and condemning the accumulation of material goods by the people. In volume VI of *Summa Theologica* (Aquinas, 1275/2012) he condemned usury because he believed that money, being a means of exchange and not an end in itself, should not generate wealth by itself. For him, the charging of interest or the profit from trade – which exceeded the fair remuneration for the work expended for the sale – was unnatural, as it involved extracting gain on something that has no intrinsic value, money itself. For him, this economic model would undermine the balance of social relations, as it would be based on the extortion and plundering of the weakest (Prado, 2024).

If, initially, the imposition of devotion to poverty and charity as a moral test was directed at serfs and plebeians, mendicant clerical orders such as Franciscans, Dominicans and Jesuits also began to emerge, which required their priests to profess the vows of poverty and chastity, through celibacy. Poverty, therefore, far from being a condition to be avoided or a cause of shame, was presented, especially to the popular classes, as a form of purity and spiritual elevation. Charity, on the other hand, was considered an essential quality for those who wished to be accepted into the Christian community, reinforcing the idea that salvation was more easily accessible to those who lived in simplicity and modesty.

As modernity advanced and productive models perfected, medieval morality became obsolete, being replaced by an ethic of property and labor, which glorified mass production and competition. In his writings, Marx (1867/2014) mentions how the capitalist logic of exploitation, which replaced feudalism, reversed these values, promoting the accumulation of capital and the glorification of labor, bringing with it new forms of exploitation. The inversion of moral values in modernity results in a distorted view of work, where work is exalted as a source of dignity, however, the exploitation of the worker is naturalized. In this way, modern morality, which offered a moral background to capitalism, transformed work into a test of character, an activity with a redemptive and sin-atoning function.

## **MODERNITY AS A MORAL PROJECT**

From the fifteenth century onwards, changes in productive models culminated in a process that Marx called primitive, or originary, accumulation, a "prior to capitalist accumulation, an accumulation that is not the result of the capitalist mode of production, but its starting point" (1867/2014, p. 514). This incipient model of capital concentration resulted from a set of practices and dynamics of wealth concentration based on dispossession, violence, and extermination: enclosure and expulsion of peasants from the land; trafficking and enslavement of persons; plundering and looting of mineral and natural resources from the colonies; exploitation of women's care and reproductive work based on the nuclearization of the modern family.

The question we raise is the fact that these practices, which could have been repressed and condemned as sins by the prevailing morality, instead triggered a crisis that gradually rendered obsolete the ontological and epistemological bases that underpinned the social and economic practices of feudal societies. The institution of a social pact with

psychopolitical effects offered permission and moral redemption so that, under specific conditions, certain people practiced plunder, usury and murder.

Thus, what would once have been condemned as violence or immorality became the bedrock of a new economic order, justified by a narrative that turned historical crimes into "progressive necessity." In this context, Marx ironically compared primitive accumulation to the original sin of theology: if the biblical account explains the fall of man to justify the human condition, the capitalist narrative naturalizes violent expropriation as an inevitable stage of "development." As he put it: "primitive accumulation played in political economy approximately the same role as original sin in theology" (Marx, 1867/2014, p. 514).

Marx also pointed out that the capitalist mentality was transformed as the mode of production matured. The initial violence (primitive accumulation) has been "forgotten" and justified, while capitalists begin to adopt an apparently more "civilized" and "virtuous" posture – exploitation is clothed with an aura of benevolence, as if concentrating wealth were a charity or benefit to society, not its plunder. This new posture is ironized by Marx through the reference to the 'bourgeois Adam' — a supposed "innocent" and "virtuous" figure whose wealth would be the result of personal merit or the "sacrifice of the benefactor" who accumulates wealth as if it were a social and moral duty. Thus, continuous exploitation is masked by discourses of philanthropy and development, under the fable of a legitimate civilizational progress. This narrative, as Marx shows, is as fictional as the biblical Adam, since capitalism did not emerge from a "state of innocence" but from colonial theft and expropriation.

Max Weber (1904/2004), in the work "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", argued that the Protestant Reformation, which rose up against medieval Catholic ethics, enabled moral legitimation for capital accumulation activities based on usury and profit, redeeming "modern men" from sin. For the author, the new morality, presented by Protestantism, explains the greater success, advancement and consolidation of the incipient practices of industrialization and capitalism in Protestant societies, such as England and Germany.

From the psychopolitical perspective, both Marx's and Weber's theses point to a moral obstacle that had to be overcome for capitalism to consolidate itself based on behaviors and practices that had been reprehensible until then. To sustain the new mode of production, it was necessary, gradually, to constitute an efficient ontological and epistemological repertoire for a new social pact that would legitimize the advance of

capitalist productive forces, based on systematic exploitation, usury, and theft. Walter Benjamin also argued that "capitalism should be seen as a religion, that is, capitalism is essentially at the service of resolving the same concerns, afflictions and concerns to which the so-called religions once wanted to respond" (Benjamin, 1921/2012, p. 21).

However, the true religion – which seeks to present substitutive answers – is not exactly capitalism as Benjamin (1921/2012) thought, but modernity, with its permanent developmentalist cult, on which the capitalist mode of production is based. The redemption of capitalism is ontological and epistemological, therefore, it can only be recognized when one thinks beyond the foundations of the modern world-system. In line with the moral and religious foundations of modernity, progress is presented as a fundamental belief and as a promise of paradise. According to Horacio Machado Araújo (2020, p. 47):

Basically, more than an economic or political phenomenon, development is a religious act. It is a faith, a cult, a religion. Not just any one, but the modern religion itself: the religion of modernity-coloniality. Progress is the creed it professes.

To the extent that it has the function of redeeming guilt, more than a phenomenon that is used or influenced by religious aspects, the modern world-system – itself – is essentially a religious phenomenon. While Benjamin analyzed capitalism as a religion, Adam Smith, in turn, to justify the violence that he himself recognized in the capitalist system and in the ends of the market, uses religious morality to affirm virtuous intentions and deny structuring vices. In "The Theory of Moral Sentiments" (Smith, 1759/1999) he defended the moral superiority of modern businessmen, something unattainable to those who depended on work to survive. For the author, moral feelings and virtue of character were spontaneously impossible for workers or slaves, because operational and repetitive activity caused stupidity and ignorance. The degrading and primitive routine led to self-destruction and the loss of control over one's own efforts and one's own time, consequently, to the spiritual and moral death of "man".

The capitalists (businessmen), on the other hand, freed from the necessity of work, were able to cultivate their virtues and wisdom, and were able to act with spontaneous sympathy and compassion for the helpless and failed, carrying out the "divine system of government" over the world. For Smith (1759/1999), this moral superiority of businessmen, benefactors – sustained by a feeling of universal benevolence – would determine the destinies of capital, moving the market with its own hand, invisible and virtuous. The author (Smith, 1759/2013) associates the spontaneous virtue of the owners of the means of

production with a certain religious morality in which *capital investment* represents an offering in the name of the common good, a sacrifice against their inferior interests. The act of *investing*, therefore, works as a proof of good intention and deserving of atonement and moral purification.

Still from the perspective of the development promised by capital, another very efficient redemption mechanism is the conception of local or community investment, associated with the implementation of enterprises in locations of capitalist interest. This atonement is restricted to a few, since the investment is conceived as a renunciation of a profit to which the shareholder would be entitled, to be offered as a sacrifice or offering, aiming at the supposed progress and development of a "locality".

If, on the one hand, Smith (1759/1999) argues that capitalists are morally superior because they are free from the need for work, with capital investment being their form of sacrifice and "renunciation", on the other hand, to the popular classes that have not reached the select circle of investors, there is no redemption except through work, to which the promise of secondary access to the promised land is conditioned, to forgiveness or moral atonement. It is up to the workers to redeem themselves by renouncing idleness and dedication to work as a form of sacrifice, moral justification and purification of moral vices. Work, derived from the Latin *tripalium* that alludes to punishment or torture, becomes morally dignifying and purifying as expressed by the Nazis at the entrance to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Complex: "*work dignifies man*". The proposal of moral redemption through work was reinforced through the extreme condemnation of non-work or vagrancy. Unlike workers, who are willing to "develop" morally and progress, vagabonds are, in modern morality, the incarnation of moral vices, which are therefore extremely persecuted, despised, vilified and even punished.

Among so many other marks of demoralization and dehumanization, imposed by Europeans on the original peoples of the territories they invaded and colonized, it was to associate them with idleness and laziness, as it persists to this day in Brazil in relation to the indigenous people or the Brazilian "people", as a result of miscegenation. The internalization of work as a moralizing practice is accompanied by the blaming of vagrancy or unproductivity. The worker himself starts to take responsibility and condemn himself for an eventual lack of motivation or interest in work, unemployment, low production and profitability. Thus, when we are convinced by modernity that it is through work that we morally affirm ourselves and can achieve virtue – typical of businessmen (Smith,

1759/1999) – leisure and leisure end up being considered secondary and reduced to a minimum time, in addition to being increasingly loaded with guilt. Without the internalization of work in the system of moral values, *superego*, and egoic idealizations and without the internalization of the depreciation and strong censorship of vagabondage and idleness, there would be no way for the subject to condone its exploitation and subordination in and through work, enabling the expropriation of surplus value and the accumulation of capital.

Although Marx (1867/2014) describes moral change as a product of capitalist development, he does not associate it with a critique of modernity as a broader historical and cultural category. It thus remains faithful to a progressive and developmentalist perspective, in which capitalism, despite its contradictions, is understood as a necessary stage for the historical overcoming towards a classless society. Marxian thought focused on the structural critique of the system, without listing modern morality as a problem in itself, this concern began to be outlined in later European thinkers — such as Horkheimer and Adorno (1985) with the dialectic of instrumental reason, Habermas (2012a; 2012b) with the colonization of the world of life, and Foucault (1978; 1979) with the microphysics of power in modernity and the critique of disciplinary society.

In Latin American philosophical thought, we find authors who also problematized the relationship between modernity and capitalism, but emphasizing the role of colonization in the rise of both. Aníbal Quijano, based on the concept of "coloniality of power", demonstrated that primitive accumulation was not only an "original sin" internal to Europe, but a process inseparable from the racialization and colonial exploitation of the Americas, Africa and Asia. "Modernity", therefore, is not simply a civilizational advance, but a world system founded on the hierarchization of races and knowledge (Quijano, 2005). Enrique Dussel, in turn, radicalized the criticism by showing that the very notion of "progress" was built on the enslavement and genocide of native peoples of the colonies, elements that Marx did not delve into, although he did mention in *Capital*:

The discovery of gold and argentiferous lands in America, the extermination, enslavement and burial of the native population in the mines, the beginning of the conquest and plunder of the East Indies, the transformation of Africa into a reserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production (Marx, 1867/2014, p. 533).

For Dussel, "modernity" is the ideological justification of colonial violence, a "myth" that masks the Dialectic of Alterity — the denial of the Other as a condition for accumulation (Dussel, 1993). Thus, while Marx describes the moral contradictions and hypocrisy of the



modern capitalist, Quijano and Dussel understand that this hypocrisy is structurally colonial: the "humanization" of the European capitalist was only possible because the "bourgeois Adam" built his humanization (through supposed morality and virtue) on the dehumanization (through association with immorality and vices) of colonized peoples.

The affirmation of the European continent as a universal center was the founding condition of the modern world-system, referenced in the heliocentric model, recently proposed by Copernicus (Dussel, 2005). This self-centered conception attributed to Europe the position of an "evolved world" and to Europeans that of "civilized beings", driven by the encounter with the "other", the "stranger", which imposed itself as a challenge or political obstacle to be "solved" in order to make the plundering of the colonies and the enslavement of people viable. Epistemologically, the conception of development as a moral attribute is inaugurated, associated with the idea of the future towards the "good", as opposed to the past considered "evil", "primitive". According to Dussel (1993), by attributing to themselves a representation of the "future" and the "ideal of the self", Europeans positioned the rest of the world on the periphery, establishing a moral axis in which the "other" is a project to be transformed, or corrected, to become an extension of themselves.

In the name of the right of political, economic and symbolic domination over the peripheral rest of the planet, the white-European man proclaims himself as "universal", a totalized and redundant ontological subject, based on the Cartesian maxim of "cogito, ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am), from which the consciousness of the "I" is a precondition for the existence of all "others", relativizing them as marginal, subaltern and peripheral (Lévinas, 1980). The effectiveness of modernity in offering moral legitimacy to the model of concentration of wealth based on exploitation and domination was based on the ontology of the concealment of the "other" by the "I". Behind the idea of "discovery" there is the legitimation of the appropriation and dispossession of the "other". In this way, the existence of America, as an "other", is conditioned and validated by the existence of Europe, "I", which legitimizes its hegemonic position of power over the knowledge and being of the colonized.

The advent of the conception of "discovery" of worlds inhabited by "empty", "savage" and "naïve" beings – like "blank slates" waiting to be filled – outlined the idea of modern man based on the figure of the explorer of opportunities. It did not take long for the "business" of appropriating and plundering the wealth of "non-modern" and "savage" peoples – whether through extractivism, trafficking or piracy – to intensify the economic and



power disputes between Latin Europe and Anglo-Saxon Europe, extending the center-periphery colonial logic also to the ancient and already known world, Africa and Asia.

[...] Columbus, as we have said, is the first "modern" man, or rather, it is the beginning of his history. He is the first to officially "leave" (with "powers", no longer a clandestine traveler like many of his predecessors) from Latin Europe – anti-Muslim – to begin the "constitution" of the existential experience of a Western, Atlantic Europe, the "center" of history. This "centrality" will then be projected to the origins: in a certain way, in the world of everyday life (Lebenswelt) of the European: Europe has been the "center" of history since Adam and Eve, who are also considered Europeans, or at least it is considered as an original myth of "Europeanness", to the exclusion of other cultures (Dussel, 1993, p. 32).

Symbolically, modern man – inaugurated by the figure of Columbus – is a conqueror, who starts from the center of the world towards the periphery to correct "wild" worlds and implement his moral project, as an offer of redemption to primitive, sub-human beings. The arrival in America, therefore, was not a meeting between worlds with legitimate and equivalent existences, as geopolitical relations had hitherto occurred in the known world circumscribed between Europe-Asia-Africa. According to Dussel (1993), modernity inaugurates a relationship with an "emptied other", whose existence is not legitimate in itself, but conditioned to the existence of an "absolute self" that has the power to validate it in an act of "benevolence" or "pity". Modernity has transformed into a moral value – into a "good" – the expropriation of the other, from which the modern has an absolute right over the primitive, a relationship in which the existence of the "colony" and the "colonized" is only legitimate, as "entities of law", as they orbit in a peripheral and dependent way, satiating the needs of the "metropolis".

Wilhelm Wundt (1916/2013), in his work *Psychology of Peoples* — one of the founding landmarks of Social Psychology — by categorizing the "evolution" of higher psychological processes (art, culture, religion, language, politics) into phases, positioned modern European thought as the final stage of "Humanity", defending a psychological evolutionary hierarchy that attributed supposed superiority to the European model. According to Wundt, the phase of Humanity would be characterized by the self-perception of the species as a unique, universal and homogeneous identity, legitimized by a moralizing mission: to correct the psychological and cultural "delays" of peoples who were less evolved phases – primitive or natural phase, totemic or tribal phase, national phase or of heroes and gods. The conception of a linear psychological evolution on all of humanity legitimized the imposition of a single pattern of development on all peoples of the planet. In other words, only after the assimilation of the European psychological model throughout the planet,

would it be possible for humanity to advance linearly towards "progress", to move on to the next phase of psychological evolution.

Modernity, then, constitutes itself as a founding myth, providing the rationality that made it possible to moralize the practices of primitive accumulation, improving them and giving them the character of virtue. This rationality has a psychopolitical function, since it acts as a psychic defense against the potential guilt arising from the awareness of the crimes – or sins – that should systematically be practiced to guarantee primitive accumulation. By expanding modern ideals around the world through colonization, Europeans offered the myth of modernity as a new moral agreement to non-Western cultures in order to relativize taboos and reprehensible practices such as the serpent that offers justification for instinctual satisfaction, leading Adam and Eve to original sin and the need for redemption. such is Marx's analysis (1867/2014) that we discussed earlier.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the sacrifice or penance is an offering by the sinner in payment for absolution from an acknowledged guilt. The association of the idea of investment with a sacrifice/offering of profits by shareholders demonstrates an attempt to justify the search for high profitability to the capital virtues of religious morality, denying any relationship between capital vices such as greed, greed, pride, avarice, lust.

In Totem and Taboo, Freud (1913/2012) argued that the root of the social pact is guilt for a crime in which everyone participates, which everyone desired. According to the myth, after killing their father and tormented by guilt, the children of the horde enter into an alliance seeking to offer moral redemption to each other and thus moralize under what conditions it is allowed to love and kill. Taboos are created, disallowed manifestations of libido and aggressiveness, roots of the binary division between good and evil, sacred and profane. The cult of the shared symbolic element (totem) is what guarantees the complicity of the group in defending itself from moral accusation and punishment. Modernity, therefore, has instituted itself as a totemic cult, whose rationality fulfills a function of moral defense. The totem of modernity is "development".

In view of this, the normative rationality of modernity strategically uses the deepening of dualistic and binary oppositions, dichotomies, contradictions: modern/traditional, evolved/primitive, center/periphery, good/evil, civilized/savage, culture/nature, and so on. Thus, the colonizer reduces the possibilities of explaining reality, leading to the naturalization of combat, transforming bodies, territories and epistemes into perpetual war zones under continuous violence and under a "Manichean dualism" that institutionalizes the

war of good (colonizer) against evil (colonized). Modernity, therefore, is a metaphysical catastrophe (Maldonado-Torres, 2019), whose warlike conception is based on the division of the world into sacred and profane (Freud, 1913/2012). If social conflict is seen as a struggle between Good and Evil, there is no possible compromise that allows the reestablishment of order other than the extermination of the heretic (Lechner, 1990).

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Modernity, far from being a neutral or universal project of planetary evolution or development, was constituted as a structure for the moralization of the crimes that the accumulation of capital demanded, especially in the relationship with the colonies and the peoples who inhabited them. As demonstrated, modern morality was built on the inversion of feudal values – where previously reprehensible practices, such as usury and accumulation, became virtues – and sustained by a psychopolitical pact that naturalized dispossession as a form of redemption justified by the promise of progress, as a "promised land". Marx's analysis of primitive accumulation and the moral contradictions of capitalism, complemented by Quijano and Dussel's decolonial critiques, exposes how the narrative of development served to conceal genocide and enslavement, while the Protestant ethic (Weber, 1904/2004) and bourgeois morality (Smith, 1759/1999) transformed exploitation into a sacred duty, an act of benevolence. The myth of modernity, therefore, not only reorganized economic relations, but redefined the very concept of humanity, excluding colonized peoples from its universal category and imposing, through coloniality, Europeanization as a condition of secondary access to the promise of progress and development.

The psychopolitical analysis of modernity, articulating the theses of Freud and Wundt, showed how this rationality operated on the subjective plane, on the one hand, classifying non-European cultures as "primitive" and, on the other, exalting work as moral redemption. In this way, a moralizing machine of blame and control was created. The ideal of "development", elevated to the condition of a religious totem (Benjamin, 1921/2012), became the final justification for the destruction of subjectivities and alternative ways of life, reinforcing the logic of extermination and altericide. Even today, this logic persists in the naturalization of labor exploitation, in the stigmatization of idleness, and in the fetishization of economic development, which continues to demand human and environmental sacrifices. Modernity, therefore, is not a surpassed historical period, but a device of

economically-oriented psychopower, which shapes institutions, subjectivities and even the resistances that contest it – as evidenced by the notions of "backwardness" and "lack of productivity" attributed to indigenous peoples and traditional communities.

There remains, then, the urgency of decolonizing the social imaginary and building epistemological alternatives that break with modern dualism (civilized/savage, center/periphery). If modernity has been able to transform crimes into virtues, the task of critical thinking today is to reverse this movement: to unveil the violence behind its promises and to recover marginalized knowledge that offers non-predatory models of sociability and morality. As the countercolonial authors point out, the overcoming of modernity requires not only the denunciation of its contradictions, but the affirmation of other possible modernities – pluralities that resist Eurocentric homogenization and reinvent the notion of the future beyond the cult of progress.

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