

Enrique Dussel (1934-2023): A Personal Reflection on the Legacy of a Giant Philosopher

NELSON MALDONADO-TORRES

University of Connecticut, USA & Frantz Fanon Foundation (France)
(nelson.maldonado_torres@uconn.edu)

Enrique Dussel was by any meaningful measure a giant representative of Latin American and world philosophy. This personal reflection sheds light on his intellectual trajectory and his contributions to liberation philosophy, world philosophy, South-South and South-North dialogues, and the decolonial turn.

Key words: Enrique Dussel; liberation philosophy; transmodernity; decoloniality; decolonial turn

The *Journal of World Philosophies* joins the world philosophical community in mourning the loss of philosopher Enrique D. Dussel, who passed away on Sunday November 5th, 2023. Dussel was one of the founders of and the principal contributor to Latin American liberation philosophy, a philosophical movement that continues to be vibrant after more than fifty years. With dozens of books, including voluminous tomes on the ethics and the politics of liberation as well as edited anthologies, and hundreds of academic articles, commentaries, and interviews, Dussel single-handedly made Latin American liberation philosophy known globally and inspired new generations of liberation philosophers. In the process, Dussel charted a path for a systematic critical engagement with the entire history of western philosophy, and for the continued exploration of South-South and South-North global philosophical dialogues.

Coupled with an exemplary and uncompromising global approach to philosophy, Dussel's works are characterized by a persistent attention to the philosophical relevance of the problems of domination and exclusion, on the one hand, and of the imperatives for liberation and decolonization, on the other. Often referred to as the "Hegel of Coyoacán," Dussel's work encompasses the areas of ethics, political philosophy, aesthetics, philosophy of religion, philosophical anthropology, the philosophy of production, historical materialism, and the philosophy of history, among various other fields.

In 1998, upon the publication of his massive *Ética de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y de la exclusión* [*Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion* (2012)], Dussel offered an overview of his intellectual development as part of a special issue on his work by the *Revista Anthropos* (180, sept-oct. 1998) that is worth reviewing now, as it offers a glimpse to one of the most extraordinary intellectual itineraries by a twentieth and twenty-first century world philosopher.

Born in Mendoza, Argentina on December 24th, 1934, Dussel studied philosophy and the arts while being active in the Catholic militancy for democracy and union struggles of the mid 1950s. Dussel obtained a fellowship to study in Spain, and he departed for Argentina in 1957 to pursue his PhD in Philosophy there. Dussel often commented on the importance of this period for his understanding of Latin America and what came to be called after the Second World War, the Third World. For, during the trip of twenty-four days from Buenos Aires to Barcelona, he got to have a sense of the diversity and richness of these places while stopping in various ports in Uruguay, Brazil, Senegal, and Morocco.

Dussel's direct contact with a plurality of cultures only increased once in Madrid, since he would come to live in a place where there were about two hundred other students from different parts of Latin America. Then, shortly after his arrival to Spain, he would hitchhike through multiple European countries, Syria, and Jordan until arriving at the "Arab Jerusalem," where he stayed for two months. On his way back, he met the Catholic theologian and worker Paul Gauthier (1914-2002) in Nazareth, who invited him to return after the completion of his PhD.

Dussel completed his PhD in Philosophy in two years (1959), concluding with the submission of a three-volume dissertation on *La problemática del bien común* [The Problem of the Common Good]. True to his democratic commitments and militancy, the dissertation supported the position of French philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), whose work had inspired students' and workers' struggles in Argentinian universities. Dussel also saw this work as an opposition to dominant tendencies in the Spain of the time, a Spain that was dominated by the Francoist dictatorship.

After completing his PhD, Dussel returned to Nazareth, where he worked with Gauthier and Palestinian workers building homes for the impoverished and displaced Arabic speaking Palestinian community there. It was in this context that Dussel's views underwent a significant transformation: more than just supporting democracy against dictatorships in the post WWII era, and more than starting to discover the richness and diversity of Latin America, Europe, and the Third World, he took to heart a commitment at looking at history with attention to the position of "the poor."

Dussel's decade outside of Argentina (1957-1967) provided a foundation for both, his global approach to philosophy, and his priority of an ethics, no longer simply of the "common good," but of liberation. Relevant in this context was his encounter with the work of Frantz Fanon and other intellectuals who supported the Algerian liberation struggle (1954-1962) while he lived in France between 1961-1965. In France, Dussel completed a second PhD, in History, which equipped him well to pursue his meticulous study of the history of the Catholic Church, and his vast explorations of the histories of ethical and political philosophy as well as of Latin America from a world historical point of view.

Dussel returned to Argentina when the global wave of the various protests and revolts in 1968 were about to take place. By that time, various sociologists, philosophers, and theologians in Latin America had started to pay attention to the problem of dependency and liberation, as opposed to modernization and positivism, which had dominated the concerns of previous generations of intellectuals in the region. In this context, Dussel became one of the founding figures and the most prolific and well known among an emerging generation of liberation philosophers. His work and militancy in Argentina came to a stop when his house was bombed in October of 1973, and he went into exile in Mexico where he lived for the rest of his life.

While in Mexico for five decades (1973-2023), Dussel engaged in one of the most productive, ambitious, and far-reaching philosophical projects to date. In 1973, he publishes the first volume of his *Para una ética de la liberación latinoamericana*, where he links the problem of exclusion and dependency in global capitalism and the creation of the Third World to an ethics of the “other” inspired by the work of Emmanuel Levinas. The question of the “other” would remain key in Dussel’s entire oeuvre, including his *Filosofía de la liberación*, published in 1977 and translated in multiple languages, up to his most recent volumes on the politics of liberation and his writings on aesthetics.

During the 1980s in Mexico, Dussel becomes an avid reader of Marx, an important figure among some circles in the Mexican philosophical scene. On the basis of reading Marx’s unpublished writings and various drafts of Marx’s *Capital*, Dussel introduces a reading of Marx’s work as an ethical philosophy. Dussel publishes three volumes on Marx’s writings between 1985 and 1990, including *Towards an Unknown Marx: A Commentary on the Manuscripts of 1861-63* (Routledge), which appeared in English in 2001, followed by a profound text on Marx’s theological metaphors in 1992, which is set to appear in English in 2024 as *The Theological Metaphors of Marx* (Duke University Press).

Dussel’s creative engagement with Marx during the 1980s positioned him well to challenge the dismissal of Marx’s contributions to philosophy and critical thinking in the context of the fall of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1992. This was far from a regressive move from Dussel, since he had already encountered what he took to be an unknown Marx, and one whose contributions were crucial to the understanding of ethics and liberation philosophy. Dussel’s liberation philosophy, including his appreciation for Marx, help to explain why his thinking was at odds with two popular philosophical movements in the early 1990s: postmodernism and the Habermasian ethics of discourse. He found these philosophical positions to be both, insufficiently attentive to the material dimension of human life, and considerably Eurocentric.

Dussel’s critique of Eurocentrism in mainstream western philosophy was powerful, multi-layered, and incessant. He was convinced that European modernity could be explained neither with reference to internal features of European societies alone, nor to an understanding of modernity that only characterizes the historical period associated with its name with what is commonly termed as the European Enlightenment. Dussel was thereby well-positioned to contribute to another major debate in the late 1980s and the early 1990s: the question about the meaning of the planned celebrations of the five-hundredth anniversary of the “discovery” of the Americas.

The impact of indigenous critiques, through Abya Yala (the Americas) and other parts of the world, of colonialism and the celebration of “discovery” in the late 1980s and early 1990s cannot be exaggerated. This is what arguably led Dussel to offer, not only a critique of modernity on the basis of relegated Christian European critics of colonization—particularly Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566)—, but also from the point of view of Indigenous peoples in what was later named Mexico.

Dussel explored these ideas in his Frankfurt lectures of 1992, published in the same year as *1492: El encubrimiento del otro*, and translated into English as *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of ‘the Other’ and the Myth of Modernity* (1995). In this text, Dussel simultaneously makes the case for (a) a critique of the hegemonic discourse of modernity as a myth, (b) a non-Eurocentric, world paradigm, for the

understanding of world history and of modernity, and (c) an account of the continued relevance of colonialism for the understanding of the present. These ideas make clear why Dussel's work became a crucial reference for a diverse array of intellectuals from multiple fields through Abya Yala, including Walter Mignolo, María Lugones, Catherine Walsh, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres, among others, who, gradually through the 1990s up to the present, have elaborated a self-conscious project of decolonial thinking and decolonial philosophy generally known as the decolonial turn (*giro decolonial*). Dussel was a participant and a major contributor to this project from the 1990s to the end of his life. His contributions to his area include the 2020 publication *Siete ensayos de filosofía de liberación: hacia una fundamentación del giro decolonial* (Seven Liberation Philosophy Essays: Towards a Foundation of the Decolonial Turn).

In the early 1990s, Dussel pursued another set of dialogues and collaborations as his visit to Frankfurt opened up new possibilities for engagements with philosophers from the North, and he started a series of conversations with the German philosopher Karl-Otto Apel (1922-2017). Dussel saw his exchanges with Apel as an effort to further philosophical North-South philosophical dialogues. The fruits were many, including an edited book on Latin American engagements with Apel's discourse ethics published in 1994, and a book on the foundation of ethics and the philosophy of liberation by Apel, Dussel, and the Cuban-German philosopher Raúl Fornet Betancourt in 1992. Dussel did not limit his efforts to advance South-North philosophical dialogues to his direct meetings and exchanges with Apel. In 1993 he published *Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, y la filosofía de la liberación*, which appeared in English as *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, and the Philosophy of Liberation* in 1996.

That Dussel was focused on a critical engagement with European and US-American philosophers does not mean that he was only concerned at the time with advancing the North-South dialogue. In a way, an important South-South dialogue was already part of this North-South dialogue, which becomes evinced in how some of Dussel's responses to Apel are heavily informed by the views of the Costa Rica-based philosopher Franz Hinkelammert (1931-2023). These dialogues also played an important role in the intellectual formation of participants, such as the late Bolivian philosopher Juan José Bautista (1958-2021), who became a renowned philosopher of liberation and a major scholar of both Hinkelammert's and Dussel's works.

Dussel's definitive response to Apel's discourse ethics arguably appears in his *Ética de la liberación en la edad de la exclusión y la globalización* of 1998. This massive and incredibly rich and profound text starts with a global history of ethical systems, which serves as a framework to understand the significance of liberation ethics from a world-historical point of view. Dussel then deploys a complex philosophical system with two major components: Ethics 1 and Ethics 2. The former refers to the foundation of ethics and the second to the critical and liberatory function of ethics. The ethics of discourse represent one of the three elements in Ethics 1, which Dussel then links to other major components of his ethics, namely, the material component, which is heavily informed by his reading of what he referred to as the Semitic ethos and of Marx's ethics, and the moment or component of feasibility, which refers to the practical considerations that emerge in relation to the application of ethics. As rich as Ethics 1 is, Dussel makes clear that the substance and heart of liberation philosophy appear in Ethics 2, which starts with the intentional and non-intentional victims under any given socio-economic project or ethical system. Here we find Dussel's intuition about the centrality of the "poor" for the question of ethics.

Dussel's 1998 *Ética de la liberación* provided the basic terms that he would continue to develop in his volumes on the politics of liberation and in other writings in the twenty-first century. The project of advancing South-South dialogues takes an important role in this context too, as it is clear in articles such as "A New Age in the History of Philosophy: The World Dialogue Between Philosophical Traditions" (2008), and "Agenda for a South-South Philosophical Dialogue" (2013), as well as in books such as *Filosofía del sur y descolonización* (2014; Philosophy of the South and Decolonization), and *Filosofías del sur: descolonización y transmodernidad* (2015; Philosophies of the South: Decolonization and Transmodernity).

I first encountered Dussel's work while in college at the University of Puerto Rico, where I completed a BA in Philosophy. My philosophy training was excellent in some respects, but quite Eurocentric, which meant that I had to find someone outside the Department of Philosophy with whom to explore Latin American philosophy. I was fortunate to find the support of liberation theologian Luis N. Rivera Pagán. Then, while in graduate school, I encountered Dussel's work again, now in the context of studying the similarities, tensions, and differences between poststructuralism and liberation thought with philosopher Lewis R. Gordon. Dussel's recently translated *The Underside of Modernity* (trans. and ed. Eduardo Mendieta), opened a window into his critical engagements with an important number of major contemporary Western philosophers. By then I was also studying the work of Emmanuel Levinas. The latter influenced Dussel and the work of other liberation philosophers in Argentina, now about fifty years ago. These opportunities to study Dussel's work, along with my interest in studying the crisis of modernity, and to seriously take into consideration "non-Western" philosophical views and critics of modernity, played a role in my wanting to try to study and learn directly from *el maestro*.

I met Dussel twenty-five years ago (1998) in a conference at Duke University, where he was a visiting scholar. I went to the conference with the purpose of meeting him and exploring the possibility of studying with him in Mexico. I still remember Walter Mignolo's remark when introducing Dussel. Mignolo said something to the effect that, typically, when he was asked what he did in the academy, he would answer: "Well, I think," but after teaching with Dussel he had to modify his answer to say: "I *try* to think."

Dussel could not have been more generous and receptive about the possibility about me studying with him in Mexico. Shortly after that, he welcomed me as a visiting scholar, student, and interlocutor from the Fall of 1998 to the Spring of 1999 in Mexico City. His massive *Ética de la liberación* had just been published when I met him and I became one of its first readers. It was a great honor to have the opportunity to talk to him about the book and to listen to him discuss his philosophy of history and his ethics of liberation in various courses and seminars during that year. Our conversations started early in the morning when I rode with him to the Universidad Autónoma de México-Iztapalapa. I also attended his seminars at the Universidad Autónoma Nacional de México (UNAM), and we also participated in a discussion group on the philosophy of Xavier Zubiri at the Universidad Iberoamericana. It was a delightful treat to listen to *el maestro* present his philosophical ideas and engage in dialogue with multiple constituencies. He was tireless, going from one discussion to the other, and generously engaging students during and in between classes. Dussel did not have to be envious of any of my former teachers, including figures such as Hilary Putnam and Cornel West at Harvard University. If anything, it was philosophers from the North who could not quite capture or rise to the level of Dussel's world-encompassing, highly creative, and exceedingly generous thinking.

It was Dussel who formally introduced me to Walter Mignolo in 1999 while still in Mexico, not too long before I would join Duke University as a faculty member in 2001, where Mignolo had been and continues to be a distinguished professor. Both Mignolo and I greatly admired Dussel. By that point Mignolo had already invited Dussel to Duke University and they co-taught at least one doctoral seminar together. The exchanges and enriching conversations with Mignolo were many, but my time at Duke did not last long, as other opportunities appeared.

While in Mexico with Dussel, we also talked about the important contributions to the philosophy of liberation by Latinx philosophers, particularly, Eduardo Mendieta and Linda Martín Alcoff, both of whom would generously welcome me to the philosophical Latinx community in the United States. Dussel had an enormous appreciation for the serious engagement with his work in the United States, and he continued learning throughout his life about the Latinx presence in the US and about blackness and indigeneity through the Americas.

Shortly after my return to the United States in 1999, I would meet Ramón Grosfoguel in Boston, where we excitedly exchanged bibliographies: I shared primary sources by Dussel, and he gave me copies of Anibal Quijano's works. Grosfoguel had been Quijano's colleague at the State University of New York at Binghamton, where he and Agustín Lao-Montes had organized an event that brought together Dussel, Quijano, and Mignolo.

In 2003, I left Duke University and joined the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, where Grosfoguel was a faculty member. Along with José David Saldívar, we organized several conversations and conferences where we brought Dussel, Mignolo, and Quijano, among other Caribbean, Latin American, and Latinx theorists and philosophers. It was in that context that I proposed the concept of the “decolonial turn” to refer to the various forms of thinking from the global South that proposed colonization/coloniality as a fundamental problem and decolonization/decoloniality as an unfinished project. My conversations with Dussel in Mexico were very much in my mind when I proposed the term, as Dussel and I frequently discussed the possibilities and limits of various philosophical “turns” (linguistic turn, pragmatic turn, etc.). Later on, Dussel would invite me to write a chapter on “El pensamiento filosófico del giro descolonizador” [The Philosophical Thought of the Decolonizing Turn] in his pioneering and massive co-edited anthology *El pensamiento filosófico latinoamericano, del Caribe, y “Latino” (1300-2000)*. The publication of this volume in 2011, coincided with the appearance of my article “[Enrique Dussel’s Liberation Thought in the Decolonial Turn](#)”, which anticipated two special issues on the decolonial turn that would appear in the open access web journal *Transmodernity* in the Fall of 2011 and the Spring of 2012. The first special issue is entitled “Thinking through the Decolonial Turn: Post-Continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique,” and it opens with a contribution by Dussel where he situates the philosophy of liberation in relation to the Frankfurt school’s critical theory (“[From Critical Theory to the Philosophy of Liberation: Some Themes for Dialogue](#)”).

Dussel also became an important contributor to the *Caribbean Philosophical Association*, of which I am a founding member. Dussel joined the 2005 meeting that I organized in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where he offered a presentation arguing that modern philosophy originated in the Caribbean. He was thinking about the debates with regards to the humanity of Indigenous peoples and the rights of peoples in the emerging modern western context. A revised version of the talk appears in a [special issue on Caribbean Philosophy](#) published by the journal *Caribbean Studies*. Dussel joined a meeting of

the *Caribbean Philosophical Association* again in 2009, where I had the privilege to welcome him in my position as the recently appointed president of the organization. Everyone in the organization was thrilled at having Dussel among us to receive the Frantz Fanon Lifetime Achievement Prize.

In 2008, I published *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity*, which dedicated two chapters to each of the following figures: Frantz Fanon, Emmanuel Levinas, and Dussel. While I criticize Dussel's account of alterity and his interpretation of Levinas and Fanon in the first chapter dedicated to analyze his work, the second chapter is a celebration of his serious attention to geopolitics, which I find indispensable to generate philosophical accounts that effectively overcome Eurocentrism. Dussel's *oeuvre* is a marvelous treasure, most of which has yet to be explored with the depth that it deserves. In it, there are, and there will surely be found many more indispensable concepts, analyses, and arguments that will animate and elevate the pursuit of any philosophy with a global and transmodern scope.

In the last decade, I had the privilege of continuing dialogues with *el maestro* during his visit to Rutgers University, where I invited him, and at the decoloniality summer school in Barcelona, Spain. The last time we were together was in 2018, when we were given a session to present our work at the Hannah Arendt and Reiner Schürmann Annual Symposium for Social Research at the *New School* in New York City. The symposium was dedicated to the theme "Philosophy and Coloniality." Dussel was clearly moved to be addressing the topic in a place that he often celebrated because of the contributions to critical theory. A publication with contributions at the symposium appeared at the *New School's Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* (vol. 41, 2020). (For an account of Dussel's approach to critical theory and its relation to his philosophy of liberation see the aforementioned "From Critical Theory to the Philosophy of Liberation: Some Themes for Dialogue.")

No brief exposition of Dussel's contributions to liberation thought and world philosophy would make justice to the incredible reach and depth of his work. As his existing work continues to be discovered and read, his unpublished volumes start to see the light of day, and translations continue, new generations will continue grappling with new material from *el maestro*. In that process, it will be important not to lose from sight that Dussel left an example of engaged philosophical thinking, something that is easy to miss in most philosophy programs. His thinking drew from and contributed to political movements, such as neo-Zapatismo in Mexico, and the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. The philosophy of liberation is not properly understood when seen as simply a methodology or a philosophical approach. The philosophy of liberation is, first and foremost, an engaged way of life, a form of combat against the logics and structures that militate against the affirmation of life in community, and a passionate effort to contribute to the unfinished project of decolonization.

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Nelson Maldonado-Torres is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Connecticut, Professor Extraordinary at the University of South Africa, and Honorary Professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, South Africa. A former President of the *Caribbean Philosophical Association*, he co-chairs the *Frantz Fanon Foundation* with its founder, Mireille Fanon Mendès France, and is a senior associate of the Soweto-based *Blackhouse Collective*. His recent publications include the co-edited book *Decolonial Feminism in Abya Yala: Caribbean, Meso, and South-American Contributions and Challenges* (2022).