

Pluriversity, Interculturality for the Decolonization of the University. Negotiations and Partial affinities

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Abstract

Teaching practice and research processes are scenarios in which it can be shown that the university is a structure of knowledge built on the ideology of modernization and cognitive Eurocentrism. The support of these diagnoses is found in the hierarchization of knowledge, the exclusion of popular wisdom, the pretension of autonomy, the surveillance and control of university borders. This is a critical question, given the university closure or blindness to what surrounds, constitutes, and challenges it. To argue this, first, this paper focuses the discussion on modern/colonial knowledge patterns, and the university's epistemological and administrative autonomy at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. Furthermore, autonomy becomes a matter of management of indicators and resources, given the state and business pressures. Then, are considered the efforts of critical interculturality and situated epistemology to explore alternative ways of "cracking" university structures. If Extension is guided by the epistemological and political perspective here exposed, this axis of university missions can be thought as Critical extension and welcome plural forms of knowledge and the democratization of knowledge, considering political-pedagogical projects that challenge the "colonial-racial" structure of Eurocentric epistemologies. This allows to conclude that Latin American critical pedagogies, situated and decolonial thought offer conceptual, and methodological tools, for counter-hegemonic epistemologies that drive alternative knowledge and social projects in the face of systems of colonial domination.

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Introduction

We consider alternatives to modern/colonial ways of articulating spaces of training, research, and extension at the university, to confront the confinement of the university on itself and its dependence on economic profitability, on the interests of other actors and institutions. We turn to pluriverse and situated epistemologies, to interculturality and critical extension as routes to inhabit and crack coloniality in the university. We follow Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Catherine Walsh, Achille Mbembe, Eduardo Restrepo, and Santiago Castro-Gómez as they provide pragmatic political, conceptual, and methodological tools, for counter-hegemonic epistemologies that drive alternative knowledge in the face of systems of colonial domination, such as those explored by Latin American critical pedagogies, which seek to consolidate epistemic, pedagogical and social projects. At the same time, it favors the positioning of intercultural education as a political, critical, and emerging approach through structural changes, woven in a double way and bottom-up, permeating from institutionality to the creation of educational practices and social commitments. It makes it possible to position alternative knowledge in the face of systems of colonial domination, and their effects of power on colonized, marginalized, and dispossessed bodies in our south-south. This is based on social justice, the recognition of diversities, respect for differences, and “the construction of new and different societies, relationships and living conditions” (Walsh, 2008, p. 140).

Modern/Colonial Patterns at the University

Problematizing the institutional and epistemological models of modern/colonial origin that structure universities, and their distribution of knowledge and disciplines, allows us to identify how hegemonic views of the world are reproduced in educational institutions. Given their dependence on the university, the Humanities, and Social Sciences, they have been established under the colonial pattern that establishes totalitarian forms of knowledge, regulation, and individuation, as they suppose abstract subjects and passive nature (Castro-Gómez, 2005, p. 48). Coloniality is also implicit in the attempt to follow supposedly

progressive and universal temporal schemes in the State-Market relationship. So that,

Coloniality is the hidden side of modernity, which articulates since the Conquest the patterns of power from race, knowledge, being, and nature in accordance with the needs of capital and for the white-European benefit as well as the creole elite (Walsh, 2007, p. 104).

This is identified in the persistence of hierarchical structures that oppose the types of knowledge, and the ways of doing and give rise to distributions of roles, disciplines, and faculties. Hierarchical delimitations favor the isolation of academic knowledge from the social, technological, and economic conditions that make it possible. The colonial pattern considers other ways of knowing as inferior, denying the existence of non-academic and non-scientific knowledge. Now, “in this hierarchization, there are assumptions such as the universality, neutrality, and non-place of hegemonic scientific knowledge and the superiority of Western logocentrism as the only able rationality to order the world” (Walsh, 2007, p. 103). Thus, is justified the criticism of the concealment of the location or point of view, what Santiago Castro-Gómez calls “observation zero point” (2005, p. 18), which leaves no place for other social and cultural rationalities, avoiding dialogue of cultures and knowledge, privileging the production of knowledge from an abstract place and by a disembodied and dehistoricized subject.

With these criteria, is undertaken the review of the ideal of the university presented as natural and necessary, but underpinned on modern/colonial discourses. The slogan of the “independence of the university from state”, does not recognize that it is financially supported and a fairly territorialized institution, which tries to isolate itself from the society that surrounds it. “This is particularly relevant as most current diagnoses of the crisis of the university are often based on a highly abstract, idealized, and – not least – historically, geographically and culturally specific notion of the university” (Bacevic, 2018, p. 4).

The epistemic privilege that the university assumes implies the inferiority of other spaces or practices of knowledge production, so that the criteria of knowledge as universal and progressive go hand in hand, indicating the relationship between knowledge and power that operates at different scales (territorial, social, cultural, symbolic) and generates unequal practices, differentiating patterns, hierarchization, exclusion and dominance. In this regard, Castro-Gómez points out:

The first common element that I identify is the arboreal structure of knowledge and the university. Both models favor the idea that knowledge has hierarchies, specialties, limits that mark the difference between some fields of knowledge and others, epistemic borders that cannot be transgressed, canons that define its procedures and its particular functions (2007, p. 81).

Now, it is controversial to consider that the university is an autonomous institution or an agent separated from other areas of society and from the material and symbolic conditions in which it takes place. Accordingly, another element of the colonial structure of the university is

the recognition of the university as a privileged place for the production of knowledge. The university is seen not only as the place where knowledge is produced that leads to the moral or material progress of society, but also as the vigilant core of that legitimacy (Castro-Gómez, 2007, p. 81).

This comprehension of knowledge and university influences their self-interpretation and the divisions into disciplines. Therefore, the bases of the social sciences are questioned, in search of counterhegemonic epistemological alternatives that transgress these epistemic boundaries and are consistent with the social function of knowledge. To do this, wisdom dialogues, meetings between disciplines are necessary, to go beyond the arboreal view under which knowledge has been legitimized. Human and hopeful dialogues open the field of possibilities and practices for those knowledge that have been excluded, without ignoring other forms of knowledge production. Considering that the disapproval of the monocultures of knowledge and their hierarchies

does not imply completely discarding this rationality, but rather showing its colonial and imperial pretensions and disputing its position as unique, in this way they also

question the supposed universality of scientific knowledge that presides over the social sciences, to the extent that it does not capture the diversity and richness of social experience nor the counter-hegemonic and decolonial epistemological alternatives that emerge from this experience (Walsh, 2007, p. 104).

The political-pedagogical project that survives today in universities must be read from within, to analyze how it is interwoven with the colonial world system and neoliberal colonialism of the 20th and 21st centuries (Gandarilla, 2018). Without limiting ourselves to regrets for an idealized past of the university and the humanities happening far from the south and in historical moments in which we have no agency. The risk of assuming apocalyptic discourses of end or death of the university and the humanities is serious, because they increase the anxiety about heroic or messianic solutions. It is not pertinent to exclude extra-academic factors as the economy. Neither, to pretend that the value of the university, the humanities, or the social sciences, its moral and epistemic status consists of denying material, legal, and institutional conditions. Understanding the practices and epistemologies inherited from modernity, colonialism, and capitalism makes it possible to imagine different configurations for the production and appropriation of knowledge.

The interaction with historical, ideological, economic, and political scenarios structuring university models and disputes over knowledge requires a transformation. In search of the commitment to the complexity of social realities, openness to epistemic discussion, the positioning of partial affinities, and the creation of open and collective spaces of knowledge. At the same time, it requires dismantling the power-knowledge structures typical of global logic, such as the systematic processes of commodification, the logic of technicalization of knowledge, and the “dehumanity(s).” An issue that Walsh (2020) also discusses when he states “today in South American universities stinks and hurts” (p. 69).

The decolonization of the university generates ruptures in the “triangular structure of the colonality of knowledge, being and power” (Quijano, 2000), as well as in the institutional configuration, the curricular contents, the training processes, leading to the recognition of the links with the territories and to the valorization of life and

social struggles; the efforts on decolonization allow to think about the polyphonic university that assumes pluriversity and subversity, “which exercises its commitment in a pluralistic manner, not only in terms of substantive content but also in institutional and organizational terms” (Santos, 2021, p. 270). This supposes internal and external challenges in the university configuration, in the ways of conceiving research, training, and social extension, as well as pedagogical, social, and political practices, which must challenge these other ways of conceiving knowledge for the decolonization of the methodologies and methods, considering the contexts, the communities, the experiences felt and inhabited by the people. Hence the relevance of the questions that we take up from Walsh:

How to think about new places of thought inside and outside the university? Places of thought that allow us to transcend, re-construct and overcome the limitations set by “science” and the knowledge systems (epistemology) of modernity. Places that, at the same time, put diverse logics and rationalities into debate, dialogue and discussion (2007, p. 110).

The current conceptions of the University as monodisciplinary, universal, and professionalizing require paradigmatic transitions, given that in the contemporary situation, capitalist, colonial, and indolent reason has considerable force. For this reason, Santos (2006) places us in the perplexities that arise from the unfulfilled promises of modernity; and invites us to move towards insurgent cosmopolitanism in the face of the crisis of the dominant paradigm, a cosmopolitanism that converges the sociology of absences, the sociology of emergencies and the work of intercultural translation, as they imply an epistemic and political commitment to crack the silences from the reciprocity of experiences, practices and peripheries.

From this background, alternative ways are explored to crack university structures from the perspectives of critical interculturality. To do this, situated or localized epistemological perspectives are required, according to which there is no neutral knowledge alien to the location of individuals and communities. Such discussions have important references, from South America and other latitudes, from fields such as science, philosophy, or social sciences. For example, Achille Mbembe points out the contributions of Latin American, feminist and decolonial thought compared to

unified stories of humanity or the world, since they deal with power relations and the configurations of knowledge with other cartographies and imaginaries, which implies epistemic pluriversity (2023, pp. 55-56).

Critical interculturality in the cracks of the university

We have exposed debates about the crisis of the inherited notions of the modern/colonial university that, as an imperfect and in permanent transformation institution, goes through epistemic disputes to find emerging places that overcome the privilege of scientific knowledge and enable pluralist perspectives for the democratization of knowledge. This is related to the approval of institutional policies -still incipient- for higher education institutions that encourage affirmative actions and connect with open science and technology commitments, promoting more democratic knowledge.

The decolonization of the university involves political-pedagogical proposals that pressure the epistemic systems and the “colonial-racial” structure that operates within them and the so-called autonomy. This “does not imply completely discarding this rationality, but rather bringing to light its colonial and imperial pretensions (Walsh, 2010, p. 214)”, to question how the social sciences and humanities have been configured and to seek epistemological alternatives that value that porous, emergent and plural knowledge. It is also necessary to think about the relationship between criticism and crisis, to avoid methodological elements that do not alter the theoretical framework being questioned (Silveira, R. A. T. 2023). In many cases, in the Humanities and Social Sciences, the terms crisis and criticism are thoughtlessly assumed, generating automatic responses that hide the epistemological patterns that we challenge, despising and separating the economic features as if they were separated from the disciplinary structure. It is important to problematize the “crisis” because it is used as a justification to implement or prolong modern, colonial, and capitalist models.

Addressing the crisis as an ambiguous concept requires a full reading of the “epochal problems” (Guarín, 2017), and supposes contact between delocalized, dematerialized ideal notions, in tension with political and economic demands, hiding their place among other modes of production and management. Also, modern critical theory requires self-reflexivity understood as “the attitude of critically walking the path of criticism” (2000, p. 16), referring to the epistemic, historical, ontological, and political tensions this implies. So that the spectacular and emotional burden of the crisis does not hide gestures that validate the position and situations that are questioned (Santos, 2019, p. 13). Therefore, critical exercises are required in which the idea of the university, of the human, and the very notion of criticism is reviewed (Derrida, 2002).

What has been exposed so far represents important “cracks” in how critical interculturality is conceived and contributes to overcoming the functionality of the discourse that operates in many policies, such as the adoption of proposals for the inclusion of diverse groups that end up in the naturalization of the problem. This shows the importance of projects of hope woven from the classroom that enable plural encounters and the positioning of counterhegemonic methodologies, highlighting the need for located and “from below” efforts, which implies epistemic disobedience and strengthens intercultural education. In this regard, Walsh points out

that intercultural education in itself will only have significance, impact and value when it is assumed critically, as a pedagogical-political act that seeks to intervene in the refoundation of society, as Paulo Freire said and, therefore, in the refoundation of its structures that racialize, inferiorize and dehumanize (p. 2).

This means transcending Eurocentric criticism and the critics against modern science. As Castro-Gómez points out, “when we say that it is necessary to go “beyond” the categories of analysis and modern disciplines, not because we must deny them, nor because they have to be 'surpassed' by something 'better' (2007, p. 90). While Eduardo Restrepo affirms that the idea is not to go against modernity, but to

establish open conversations with other languages to “make them more complex, to complement and interrupt them” (2018, 21-22).

This emerging, critical, political approach to decolonizing the university is vital to “interculturalizing the university” (Mato, 2015; Walsh, 2007). Although “interculturality emerged in the 90s as a concept, as a collective practice and social project, interested in revaluing ethnic and cultural diversity” (Garrido, 2012, p. 35), the transition from interculturality towards a critical approach to the dominant and colonial system. Therefore, it must be questioned the foundations of the colonial matrix and the devices of power and knowledge persisting in higher education institutions. As Walsh suggests, interculturality needs to be addressed from the “structural-colonial-racial” problem and not from the problem of diversity and difference (p. 4). That is, “if critical interculturality is yet to be built,” it must surpass its functional vision in the framework of state policies and continue working to constitute itself as a society project. This requires continuous, transdisciplinary, reflective, collaborative, and permanent negotiation work, transversal to training, research, and “social extension” and demonstrates the need to establish pedagogical, social, and community practices that involve struggles of social movements and open paths for the transformation of institutions.

As suggested by Rojas & Castillo (2007), intercultural education goes beyond the mere fact of “educating subjects of otherness”, it is not limited to affirmative actions and inclusive policies, which are fundamental for the recognition of differences, but they must be worked on at a structural level and in the long term; It requires training spaces that reveal conflict, patterns of power as part of a “structural, colonial and racial” problem. An issue that we have been problematizing in our work as teachers and researchers, to the extent that we contrast the epistemological and methodological perspectives for research, training, and extension, considering the epistemological shifts and ontological alternatives from Latin American critical pedagogies.

Extension as a negotiation strategy

The link between education, research, and extension should not be considered ahistorical, it is the result of tensions and questions, not an ideal agreement, but an imperfect negotiation, in many cases unequal. It does not imply friendly mergers between actors or agreements of goodwill. It is a complex and challenging link, since it requires an ethical-political commitment to social transformation and legitimacy on the part of the communities, families, or the various social actors that intervene in it, seeking as an end the democratization of knowledge and wisdom.

Democratizing knowledge implies a pedagogical-political project woven in contexts of otherness, from communal transit, horizontal encounter, and plural recognition, which enables the critical reading of reality and intentional actions to transform it. Then, communities participate, get involved, and influence the production of knowledge and wisdom, which translates into transformative and emancipatory political action (Cardona, 2023). This is related to the implementation of different national policies concerning the gaps created by scientific production and the need to move towards the conception of knowledge as a common good, among them is the “Public Policy of Social Appropriation of the Knowledge 2021 and the National Open Science Policy in Colombia 2022-2031, issued by the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation. Policies focused on a participatory and democratic model.

Extension plays a predominant role in higher education institutions, as a way of projecting in and from communities, consolidating research-action processes, and building networks between actors, sectors, and institutions, that contribute to social transformation. It is not an extensionist strategy of accumulation of indicators and products, which by the way contribute to the development of universities and rankings. It should be conceived as a pedagogical and social commitment that involves research practices under what Flórez and Olarte (2020) call “politics of the turbid”, which supposes a participatory, supportive, and action character from the common good, as well as perspectives. situated that problematizes the social issue.

This context shows the importance of university training that confronts crises and generates the conjunction between research and action, appealing to decolonizing and democratizing interventions under the educational and political practices of the multi-university project, helping to explore alternatives to hegemonic logic, the models of development and modernity that are being questioned. With this perspective, Yesica Amaya traces the “contributions of the decolonial perspective to critical extension and vice versa, understanding that extension is a path to decolonize academic practices and the production of knowledge within universities” (Amaya, 2023, p. 1). In this sense, some extension practices allow for concrete experiences that feed the tensions and ruptures of the hegemonic schemes that structure teaching and research at the university.

Critical extension challenges the ways of production of knowledge associated with research and teaching practices, disrupting the role of universities. Given the limitations of the Eurocentric model or idea of the university, other epistemological paradigms are required to think about extension. The alternatives to the patriarchal, modern/colonial, and Eurocentric accounts of knowledge and the university are the bases of critical extension, “the question is how to combine a model of university in which critical extension and the integrality of functions with logic become central of knowledge production still rooted in colonial and Eurocentric postulates” (Amaya, 2023, p. 5). Now, the conjunction between critical extension and the proposal of interculturality allows us to think of extension as positioning from the border, or the crack, as plural, and decentered thinking. Critical extension implies affinities, social innovation, cultural communication, the strengthening of skills and capacities for the recognition of social struggles and practices situated, decolonizing, and supportive ethical politics that link communities as partners in the processes.

Conclusion

To state other versions of the university generates consequences for the production of knowledge and for disciplinary and administrative configurations, which disturbs the ideal, Eurocentric, and modern/colonial models of the university. On the one hand, the monoculture of knowledge is affected by another ecology of knowledge that

assumes pluriversity and subversity, since it configures diverse interactions and invites us to recognize the construction of knowledge from popular science, action, encounter, and dialogue. Hence, it is important to think about the place of extension in these ecologies, as an ethical-political, emancipatory horizon and under the principle of interknowledge.

Reflection on methodological and epistemological positions and their consequences must be incorporated in the search for alternatives for the decolonization of the university and its procedures (Cardona and Fisgativa, 2024). Given that research or intervention methodologies are not neutral procedures either, alien to epistemological and political orientations, to world visions that are always partial (Cornejo and Ruffer, 2020).

On the other hand, conceiving the university as an entity isolated from other social dynamics prevents thinking about and negotiating relationships with the productive sector, economic issues that are so important for large institutions to operate, or relationships with national projects and interests of the state (Gallego, 2024). Hence, elements such as dependence on interests external to the university, the denial of the ideal of autonomy, and the need for material, technological, and symbolic supports that are not the exclusive domain of the university must be taken into account (Derrida, 1989). Other situations that must be considered due to being massive and recent are related to the entrepreneurialization of university processes based on the return on capital, in which the university extension models that have operated until now in Latin America and that require re-configuration from a critical perspective, considering the importance of this missionary axis to link with the territories, the communities, the needs, the problems they face by constant negotiations. So, it is not enough to investigate, understand, or analyze a certain phenomenon, it is essential to intervene from pluriversity, partial affinities, and critical extension as an exercise of negotiation.

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