

C A T H E R I N E W A L S H

# The geopolitics of knowledge and the coloniality of power

An interview with Walter Mignolo

**CW:**  
WHAT ARE THE CENTRAL ISSUES POSED BY  
THE GEOPOLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE  
IN TERMS OF THE LATIN AMERICAN/ANDEAN  
UNIVERSITY AND OURSELVES, THE ACADEMICS?

**WM:**  
The first part of your question refers to the institutional dimension and thus points towards economic and political foundations in the production of knowledge. Let us again take the Cold War years and, most recently, the post-Cold War years, as a reference point. But let us remember, however, that the Uni-versity was and is a part of the global designs of the modern-colonial world. By this I do not mean that the major civilisations already in existence when Europe was still a weak and semi-barbaric community still in the process of formation had no educational institutions. What I mean is that the educational institution of University was consubstantial in the epistemic conceptualisation that we now know as uni-vers(al)ity. Western religious and economic expansion ran parallel to expansion of the University. As a result, the University's situation should in this sense be thought of in relation to the global distribution of economic wealth. However, it should also be viewed in relation to the devaluation of education in neo-liberal global designs, in parallel to the devaluation of human life. Argentina's second Finance Minister in two years in the De la Rúa government, Ricardo López Murphy, was "educated" in the free market economy. The first thing he did was to cut the budget, and he did this in the least "necessary" area – education. However, we already know all this. I am merely trying to view things in terms of the framework of the double-sided concept of modernity/coloniality and of local histories and global designs.

Those phenomena undoubtedly also occur in the European Union and in the United States. However, and this is particularly the case in the United States, the University no longer relies on state funding, but on private capital in areas such as



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medical research, engineering, physical sciences etc., and on “donors”, particularly in humanities. Who are these “donors”? They are ex-students of prestigious Universities, both state-run and private, who have had successful careers in terms of earnings. So, for example, Melinda Gates, the daughter of the Microsoft magnate Bill Gates, was a student at Duke and is now a member of the University’s Higher Council (these Councils at major Universities are always composed of influential individuals from the world of politics and economics — bankers, senators, businessmen and women. Melinda Gates recently donated 20 million dollars to Duke, and both she and Bill Gates have also donated money towards special undergraduate education programmes. There are other cases, one example being a Chinese millionaire who donated 100 million to Princeton University to help foster the quality and quantity of study of Chinese in the United States. The French and Spanish governments have been funding Universities in order to increase the study of Spanish and French in the United States. Of course, in countries such as Bolivia and Ecuador, for example, this is not a possibility. This situation has its advantages insofar as resources are readily available,

libraries are well stocked, and there are plenty of computers. On the other hand, the role to be played by humanities and critical thought in Universities in which research is sponsored by private capital and which are becoming more corporate day by day, is becoming a major focus of debate.

Let us return to the ex-Third World. For some time now, social scientists in Africa, and recently also in Latin America, have been discussing university working conditions in these regions. In Latin America, institutions such as the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) or the University of São Paulo (USP) in Brazil are exceptional cases. The chancellor of each of these Universities has the same power, both political and eco-



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conomic, or more so, than the governor of an Argentinian or Ecuadorian province. This is not the case with Universities in Argentina, Bolivia or Peru; here I refer to state universities, where conditions are increasingly precarious (recently, in January/February 2000, the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) published a special report on *The crisis of the Latin American University*. On the other hand, private Universities with extremely high standards of research and teaching are emerging. Examples include Torcuato di Tella and the University of San Andrés in Buenos Aires, the ARCI University in Chile and, among those which are already well known and respected – the Javeriana in Bogotá. Finally, to all of this we would have to add institutions such as the Latin American Social Sciences Council (CLACSO) and the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO). What is important, however, is that although leading centres of research and education exist, be they private or state-run universities, or

politically robust entities such as UNAM and USP, the difference which interests us here is that which exists between local histories in which global designs are put forward and distributed, and local histories which must negotiate these global designs. In short, what interests us here is the architecture of the colonial difference within the institutional educational framework.

Now, all this is useful in addressing the final part of the question, that of “ourselves, the academics”. I think it is necessary here to present the problem in wider terms, without neglecting, of course, the economic and political factors to which I referred earlier. In order to simplify a complex issue, and at the risk of oversimplifying it, the question here is that of “the role of the intellectual”. To begin to consider the question, three key points occur to me:

The notion of the organic intellectual, as put forward by Antonio Gramsci, now seems insufficient. Above all, this is true of the ex-Third World, and particularly due to the emergence of a strong indigenous intellectuality which, as Freya Schiwiy argues, questions the concept of the intellectual as

created in the notion of modernity/coloniality: indigenous peoples, by definition, cannot be intellectuals, given that the intellectual is defined in terms of the power of letters (the 19th century intellectual is the transformation of the lettered person of the 16th century) and indigenous peoples were not “people of letters” — in other words, they were not “learned”. However, aside from letters, the intellectual is also defined in terms of “intellect”, and indigenous peoples, according to prevailing global designs, were not people of letters, and as a result, intellect had to “develop” through civilisation.

The notion of the academic, or “scholar”, raises the question of the formation of “academic cultures”, the role of research and education, and the relations and distinctions between the academic and the intellectual. In this regard it is necessary not just to rethink, but to fundamentally reorientate the principles and objectives of research and education. To begin with, I would say that there are three key issues to explore in this area:

What type of knowledge/understanding (epistemology and hermeneutics) do we wish/need to produce and transmit? To whom and for what reason?

Which methods/theories are relevant to the knowledge/understanding that we wish/need to produce and transmit?

For what reasons do we wish/need to produce and transmit such types of knowledge/understanding?

The critical thought process which responds to these questions should be an ongoing venture (the publication of an article or book would constitute a specific moment in the process, but would not transcend it); it will require interventions and the adoption of particular stances in such politically diverse positions such as that of the Ecuadorian and US universities, as I said earlier. Economic and technical excess in the United States makes the exercise of critical thought more difficult, given that its society values and prefers “efficiency”. In this sense, those who work in Latin America (or in Asia or Africa) have a fundamental contribution to make. In an opposing sense, those of us who work in the United States and who benefit from critical thought produced in Africa, Asia or Latin America also have a considerable back-up role —political as well as material and intellectual— towards critical thought produced outside Europe and the United States. Future critical thought can no longer take the form of a continuous update of European and US critical thought, or that produced by Third World intellectuals in Europe and the United States. In other words, if criticism of the globalisation of the right is serious, in the sense that globalisation tends towards homogenisation, then this criticism is also valid for the left. The idea that Marxism should be universal differs in content, but is the same in terms of logic, as the idea that Christianity and liberalism should be universal. So, to answer the final part of the question, I would say that the intellectual task of the academic in the United States, Latin America and indeed anywhere, is to produce critical thought, and critical thought cannot consist of replacing the Bible with Marx, or Hegel with Heidegger, or Fukuyama with Žižek, etc. Critical thought must come from the perspective of coloniality, from decolonisation both economic and intellectual, from both the right and the left. Critical thought is, ultimately, that of a critique with no guarantees.

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Therefore, to conclude, cultural or postcolonial studies are useful and necessary, but also serve to preserve the limits of academia and, above all, of modern epistemology which thinks of knowledge as the “study” of something. In this precise sense, cultural studies are no different from sociological, historical or anthropological studies. That is why cultural studies are celebrated so, since they are interdisciplinary. This is an important aspect of the University as an institution, in that it allows the creation of spaces beyond disciplinary norms and therefore provides those who feel stifled by the tyranny of disciplines which invoke “scientific rigour” over critical thought with an outlet in which to produce their research and study. Nevertheless, “critical thought” is very different to “cultural studies” or “postcolonial studies”. The objective of critical thought is not knowledge or understanding of that which is studied. It is rather that knowledge and understanding are the necessary steps towards “something else”, and that “something else” is summarised in the three questions I set out earlier. In *Local Histories/Global Designs*, my intention was not to “study”. What concerned me, and still concerns me, was to “reflect on certain problems” and not “to study certain objects or spheres or areas or fields or texts”, as with cultural or postcolonial studies. In conclusion, the task of the academic/intellectual should be reformulated in terms more epistemic, ethical and political than methodological. A border epistemology which will contribute to conceptualisations and knowledge practices which Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui in Bolivia formulated as “the epistemological and theoretical potential of oral history”, and whose aim is the

“decolonisation of Andean social sciences” (and, I would add, social sciences in general). Critical thought in the global society should be a continuous process of intellectual decolonisation, which should aid decolonisation in other ethical, economic and political areas.

However, as I said earlier, I feel that the Intercultural University project is the most radical in terms of the geopolitics of knowledge and for possible future means of implementing transformations which are radical, epistemic and, therefore, ethical and political. I would like to end this interview by addressing this (in my opinion, radical) project of the Intercultural University, by citing some paragraphs regarding the project as put forward in the *Boletín ICCI-Rimai* (monthly publication of the Institute for Indigenous Sciences and Cultures):

Until now modern science has been absorbed in a series of soliloquies from which it took the fundamentals of truth from the parameters of western modernity. Its founding categories were always self-referential, i.e., in order to criticise modernity it was necessary to adopt the concepts put forward by modernity itself, and in order to acquire knowledge of the otherness and difference of other peoples, it was also necessary to adopt concepts created by modernity.

It is for this reason that, in order to understand other peoples, nations and tribes from outside modernity, sciences such as ethnology and anthropology were created, in which those who observed and studied could not allow themselves to be compromised or contaminated by the object being studied. Indigenous peoples were transformed into objects of study, description and analysis. The study and understanding of indigenous peoples shared the same experiential and epistemological attitude with which one studies dolphins, whales and bacteria, for example. This distancing, supposedly determined by the conditions of knowledge, eliminated the possibility of self-understanding for indigenous peoples.

**CW:**

IF MODERN SCIENCE HAS BEEN ABSORBED IN A SOLILOQUY AND IF THE CONDITIONS OF KNOWLEDGE ARE ALWAYS RELATED TO THE CONDITIONS OF POWER, THEN HOW CAN THE CONDITIONS FOR DIALOGUE BE GENERATED?

HOW CAN INTERCULTURALITY BE FORMULATED WITHIN THE LIMITS OF EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE?

HOW CAN THE HUMAN QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE BE ENHANCED FROM NEW SOURCES?

**WM:**

The Intercultural University is, in fact, designed towards that theoretical dimension, but it also has a deontological and ethical dimension, in which the core issue is the notion of interculturality, as a proposal to accept radical differences and construct a fairer, more equitable and tolerant world. Returning to the concept of “interculturality” in Betancourt’s argument, I have no doubt that here we are facing a radical proposition which, as you say, is gradually dismantling internal colonialism and validating knowledge and power from the internal colonial difference. The progressive projects implemented in state and private Universities (such as the Andina and the Javeriana respectively) can no longer ignore these propositions. With regard to US Universities, both the private such as Duke and the state-run such as Michigan, with projects such as the Intercultural University they will encounter a powerful instrument with which to neutralise the coloniality of power implied by area studies, in “Latin American Studies” in the United States. These studies, although well-intentioned and emanating from the left, still maintain the belief that knowledge is situated elsewhere but not, specifically, where it is formulated and implemented by the Intercultural University. As and when “the Indians” have

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their own University in which self-understanding and the study of modern and Western epistemology are practised, what need will there then be to “study the Indians” as formulated by the Intercultural University’s own project?

The Intercultural University is, perhaps, the most radical proposition faced not just by academics, but also by the State and civil society. And, as such, it is one that we, either as professionals or citizens, of single or dual nationality, should adopt. One of the greatest challenges is that of contributing to projects such as the Intercultural University via works which advance the decolonisation of knowledge, fundamentally at the legal and economic level. These ideas figure among those which have already been produced in the research and arguments put forward by Aníbal Quijano over the past ten years. The coloniality of power implied the coloniality of knowledge, and the coloniality of knowledge contributed to the (sometimes well-intentioned) dismantling of indigenous legal systems and also to the (never well-intentioned) dismantling of indigenous philosophy and economic organization. Moreover, the indigenous intellectuals themselves are today already correcting the historical mistakes made down through the centuries and implemented by the coloniality of power and knowledge; works such as those by the Aymara intellectuals Marcelo Fernández and Simón Yampara Huarachi on “Ayllu law” and on the “economy”, respectively. To me it seems that we need to take this radical step and construct new conceptual genealogies, given that the Huntingtons (for the right) and the Zizeks, the Laclaus, the Bourdieus (or even better, the Giddens who advise Blair and the Becks who advise

Schroeder) can no longer be those who guide critical thought from the “other side” of colonial difference. Hence the importance of considering the geopolitics of knowledge within them. That is to say, the geopolitics of knowledge should not be treated as an object of study and seen from a perspective “outside” geopolitics. There is no outside to the geopolitics of knowledge because there is no outside to imperial difference or colonial difference! The central issue of the geopolitics of knowledge is, firstly, to understand, although it may be critical, what type of knowledge is produced “from the side of colonial difference” and what type of knowledge is produced “from the other side of colonial difference” (these will be different in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, Africa and in Europe or North America in the case of Afro-Americans, Latinos, Pakistanis, Maghrebians etc.). By this I mean knowledge from the subaltern experience of colonial difference, such as that produced by, for example, Marcelo Fernández and Simón Yampara Huarachi in the Andes, Lewis Gordon and Paget Henry in the Caribbean, Gloria Anzaldúa among the Chicanos, Rigoberta Menchú in Guatemala, the Zapatistas in southern Mexico, al-Jabri in Morocco and Ali Shariati in Iran, or Vandan Shiva and Ashis Nandy in India. I know that certain “progressive” and “post-modern” intellectuals in Europe and the United States are wary of these names and mistrust them from the perspective of national or fundamental credibility, and who prefer to adhere to the hegemonic genealogies of modern Western thought. Indeed, that is the area in which future debate lies, the true debate on interculturality, and on the geopolitics of knowledge and epistemic colonial difference. ❧

*Full interview in Spanish at [www.oei.es/salactsi/walsh.htm](http://www.oei.es/salactsi/walsh.htm)*

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