Decolonising the University

Decolonising the University:

The Challenge of Deep Cognitive Justice

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

The university is one of the institutions that has most resisted the erosion of time, no doubt because over the course of the years its institutional structure has undergone deep changes. There is today very little in common between the oldest universities, the University of Timbuktu (a city in today's Mali, West Africa) founded in 982 CE and attended, throughout the 12th century, by about 25,000 students, or Al-Azhar University, founded in Cairo in 970 CE and supervising today a network of institutions with two million students; the main medieval European universities: Bologna founded in 1088, Oxford, ca. 1096, Sorbonne, 1150, Salamanca, 1218, Coimbra, 1290; and Paris Napoleonic University, 1808 and Humboldt University, Berlin 1811, the latter two being universities models that spread throughout Europe, the Americas, and the whole world in the last two centuries. What all of them had in common at the outset was the drive to develop advanced studies and form elites, whether religious, political, cultural, or scientific.

The history of the university gives us a twofold image. At each particular historical moment, the university appears as a heavy and rigid structure resisting changes, whereas throughout time it has actually undergone many changes. Often such changes have been drastic and almost always provoked by factors external to the university, be they religious, political or economic factors. The University of Cordoba (Argentina) is perhaps the only exception, by way of a change due to internal factors; the students' movement of 1918, which was to have ample repercussions in the universities of all Latin America. The students' movement aimed, among other things, to make the university more socially responsible, more sensitive to the needs of the emergent social classes in the processes of social transformation which the Latin American societies were undergoing.[1] Conceiving of the present as historical present,

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[1] The students' manifesto of 21st June 1918 declares at a certain point: "Men of a free Republic, we have just broken the last chain which, in the twentieth century, still shackled us to the ancient monarchic and monastic domination. We have decided to call things by their proper names. Cordoba redeems itself. As of today, we count for the country one less ignominy and one more freedom. The remaining sorrows are the missing freedoms. We believe we are not mistaken. Our heartbeat warns us: we are treading a revolution, we are living an American hour" (FUBA, 2008).

the question confronting us here concerns the nature and dynamics of the transformation that the university is undergoing today. I argue in this book that, for the past 40 years, the university has been undergoing a process of paradigmatic change to which both external and internal factors contribute. This is a time when everything is open-ended. The projects proposing change are so contradictory that, depending on the evolution of the conflicts they generate, the question about the future of the university may well turn into the question of whether the university has a future. In this context, if the objective is to guarantee the future of the university, resistance to certain kinds of change may not be a negative factor.

The Western-centric modern university was entrusted with preparing (in technical, scientific and cultural terms) modern solutions for the modern problems, solutions which, after the French Revolution, were formulated as the fulfillment of the revolution's ideals of *liberté, egalité, fraternité*. Right at the start, the envisaged solutions comprised a vast field of social innovation, expanding even more as time went by. The abyssal line that divides Western thinking is representative of

According to Bernheim, the manifesto can be summed up like this: "freedom in the classroom, democracy outside it." (2008: 81)

a way of thinking premised upon the abyssal line separating metropolitan sociability from colonial sociability, and proclaiming supposedly universal principles which in practice only apply to the metropolitan side of the abyssal line. Given this schism exists, such innovation, even though formulated in general terms, was to be carried out on this side of the abyssal line alone, that is to say, in the metropolitan societies.

The litany of the menu of solutions is known, but let us mention those in which the university was most specifically involved: scientific and technological progress; formal and instrumental rationality; the precedence of the ideas of utility, calculability and representation over those of curiosity, passion, emotion, reflexivity; the individual, not the collective as the primary unit of society; choice and power, rather than birth and fatalism as determining social life; the modern, bureaucratic state; constitutional government; secularism in the state, laicism in society; individual identity as a matter of choice and achievement and collective identity as national identity; culture and society as emerging, not from nature, but against and in rupture with nature; domination of nature as human emancipation; progress as infinite and linear development of productive forces, both material and spiritual; childhood and youth as stages preparing for life; work

separated from family and community; the institutionalisation of social conflict raised by social divisions through liberal democratic processes.

The modern university, particularly from mid-19th century onwards, has been a key component of such solutions. It was actually in light of them that institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and social responsibility were originally designed. The generalised crisis of the modern equation of modern solutions for modern problems is today so evident that we can safely say: if we still choose to formulate our problems in the modern Western way, we are bound to conclude that we face modern problems for which there are no modern solutions. The crisis of the modern Western equation has thereby brought with itself the crisis of the university. The high period of university development took place after WWII, till the 1970s- a period of intense reformist impulses worldwide. In most cases, the student movements of the late 1960s to early 1970s were the force behind them. In the past 30 years, however, for different but convergent reasons, in various parts of the world the university has become—rather than a solution for societal problems—an additional problem.

As far as the university is concerned, the problem may be formulated in this way: the university is being confronted with

paradigmatic questions for which it has so far provided only sub-paradigmatic answers. Paradigmatic questions are those questions which go to the roots of the historical identity and vocation of the university, in order to question not so much the details of the future of the university, but rather whether the university, as we know it, indeed has a future at all. They are, therefore, questions that rouse a particular kind of perplexity. Sub-paradigmatic answers take the future of the university for granted. The reforms they call for end up being an invitation to immobilism. They fail to abate the perplexity caused by the paradigmatic questions and may, in fact, even increase it. Indeed, they assume that the perplexity is pointless.

In this book, I submit that we must take up the paradigmatic questions and transform the perplexity they cause into a positive energy, both to deepen and to reorient the reformist movement. The perplexity results from the fact that we are before an open field of contradictions in which there is an unfinished and unregulated competition among different possibilities. Such possibilities open up space for political and institutional innovation, by showing the magnitude of what is at stake.

As I said, these are paradigmatic questions for which the public university has so far provided only sub-paradigmatic answers. There is, however, a dovetailed problem with this assertion: The first one is that it assumes as a given the existence of an entity with some general characteristics called *the university* which is identically present all over the globe. Such a name does exist but the realities it covers are so diverse from country to country, and within the same country, that any generalisation may become abusive. The second problem is that focusing on general answers to be given by the "university" as a general type of educational institution may lead us to ignore the highly creative and very paradigmatic answers that specific universities in specific countries are providing, as well as those that are emerging in the shadow of the university. Focusing on the absent university may mislead us into ignoring the emergent university.

However difficult it is to generalise, this much can be said. When we consider the public university worldwide, the present is a moment in which it is as important to look back as to look forward. I submit that the public university in the 21st century will be less hegemonic regarding the production of advanced knowledge, but not less necessary. Its specificity as a public good consists in being the institution that links the

present (and the past) to the future (medium- and long-term future) by means of the knowledge and the training it offers. It is also the institution that creates a privileged public space, potentially dedicated to open and critical debate of ideas. However, precisely for these two reasons, the university today lacks strong allies. It is, therefore, a public good under constant threat. Threats come both from inside, from those who refuse to change the crisis of the university into an emancipatory opportunity, and from outside, from those who see in the university a menace for their powerful political and economic interests.

Bearing in mind the legacies of Baruch Spinoza, David Hume, Ibn Khaldun, Paulo Freire, Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela, we realise that much innovative and transformative knowledge in the past was developed outside the university. There is no reason to think that the same is not happening today.[2] However, under the

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[2] Some will remember the following dialogue about the medieval university in Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*:

"But then ..." I ventured to remark, "you are still far from the solution ..."

"I am very close to one," William said, "but I don't know which."

"Therefore you don't have a single answer to your questions?"

"Adso, if I did I would teach theology in Paris."

new conditions it is experiencing, the university may now be more aware of this than in the past, and open itself up more to the different kinds of knowledge circulating in society, particularly among oppressed social groups fighting against social domination, be it capitalist, colonialist or patriarchal. In the terms of the epistemological proposal I have been formulating, it is imperative that the university look for new allies interested in the articulation between different kinds of knowledge – what I designate as epistemologies of the South (Santos, 2014).

The book is divided into three parts. In each of them, I try to respond to a major question. In the first part, the question is: the university being an institution of knowledge, which are the main issues raised by both epistemology and sociology of knowledge concerning the kinds of knowledge produced and reproduced at the university? In the second part, the question is: what are the main challenges that have been facing the

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"In Paris do they always have the true answer?"

"Never," William said, "but they are very sure of their errors."

"And you," I said with childish impertinence, "never commit errors?"

"Often," he answered. "But instead of conceiving of only one, I imagine many, so I become the slave of none." (1994:306)

university for the past 40 years, and face them today more than ever? Finally, in the third part, I reply to the question: is it possible to decolonise the university?

In the first part, entitled, *Setting the stage for a debate*, I maintain that it is not possible to discuss the university as an institution without questioning the kinds of knowledge produced by the university, given that they are not the only ones circulating in society or guiding social relations and the lives of citizens. The analytical matrix of the first part is epistemology and sociology of knowledge. I try to show that the dominant university knowledge has two bases: modern science and Eurocentrism. I further show that questioning one and the other may lie either on an internal or an external critique. Chapter 1 offers an internal epistemological critique of scientific knowledge. Chapter 2 is an outline of the external epistemological critique of Eurocentric scientific knowledge based on the epistemologies of the South I have been proposing (Santos, 2014).[3]

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[3] The full presentation of the external critique and of the epistemological alternative can be read in my book, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Duke University Press, 2018).

In the second part, entitled *The University as a contested terrain*, I show that, for the past decades, the changes in global capitalism are the ones that have had most impact on the life of the universities. As the elites outside Europe and North America started to mistrust the national universities for their children's education, and as capitalism was able to hire its qualified workforce in any country whatsoever, the national States stopped investing in their universities, whether regarding financial or symbolic-ideological support. As part of the same strategy, the pressure to turn the university into a capitalist enterprise like any other has been increasing, as has the tendency to proletarise the faculty and turn the students into consumers of a service like any other. Creativity, free and critical thinking, and profit-free knowledge and innovation are becoming more and more marginalised, often considered suspicious or simply useless.

In chapter 3, I analyse in detail the different mechanisms by means of which capitalism and the national elites have been pressing the university to put itself at the service of the imperatives of social usefulness, efficaciousness, and productivity, all of them formulated and measured according to strictly mercantile criteria. In the chapter's second part, I point to ways of resistance to such pressure and propose some

alternatives based on real experiences. In chapter 4, I show that the challenges are of such proportions that the university finds itself at a turning-point and its future is uncertain. To complicate things further, the university has been giving sub-paradigmatic answers to the paradigmatic questions interpellating it.

The third part, entitled *Paths of a liberation pedagogy: from university to pluriversity and subversity*, is of a programmatic nature. I here present and analyse some proposals and experiences meant to show that it is possible to turn the profound crisis affecting the university into an opportunity to change it in a plural, emancipatory, and liberating sense. This requires intellectual and political courage to make radical diagnoses, on the one hand, and, on the other, epistemological imagination and institutional creativity to put the university at the service of the social forces fighting for a post-capitalist, post-colonialist, and post-patriarchal society.

Chapter 5 offers an example of how the Eurocentrism of the social sciences may be critiqued in the classroom, and an alternative provided. This chapter has the particular characteristic of being the revised transcription of a sociology lecture on the great Islamic thinker of the 14th century, Ibn

Khaldun, delivered by the author at the universities of Coimbra and London. In chapter 6, I analyse the different dimensions of a possible project to decolonise and decommodify the university. I claim that the trend towards intensifying the subservience of the university to the needs of global capitalism is bringing to the surface, and deepening, another contradictory feature of traditional university knowledge: the colonialist and patriarchal nature of dominant, supposedly universal forms of knowledge taught and researched upon in the universities. The reforms induced by the financial crisis of the university have often triggered protest and resistances that reach far beyond the economic issues and show the extent to which the university has reproduced colonialist and patriarchal cultures and politics. These facts point to deep seated biases and long lasting problems which, in order to be successfully confronted, would entail nothing less than a refoundation of the university.

In chapter 7, I present my own view of a comprehensive alternative which I call a committed, polyphonic university in terms of which the refoundation of the university will take the forms of pluriversity and subversity. This alternative is presented as a roadmap for a possibly long journey. In the short run, the polyphonic university will amount to building

the counter-university inside the university, seizing any opportunity to innovate on the margins. This will require the intelligent and innovative management of the institutional contradictions unfolding in an increasingly heterogeneous university, divided between the areas of market-as-the-heaven and the areas of the market-as-the-inferno.

In the preparation of this book I benefited from the support of several people. I would like to mention some of them. First of all, I wish to thank Brenda Leibowitz for her initial encouragement, and for her assistance in updating the data on South Africa. Over the course of the years, Maria Irene Ramalho and I have had ample conversations about the contradictions of the institution to which we have both dedicated our professional lives. She revised the whole manuscript and translated the passages originally in Portuguese, Spanish, and French. I had long conversations with Maria Paula Meneses on the challenges facing the university in Africa and could count on her precious research support in writing chapter 6. Margarida Gomes prepared with great professionalism the manuscript for publication, as she has been doing with all my books for almost 20 years. To all

of them, my heartfelt thanks. I only hope their efforts were worthwhile.[4]

PART ONE:

SETTING THE STAGE FOR A DEBATE

CHAPTER ONE

FROM MODERN SCIENCE
TO OPPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Back to Simple Questions

Piaget says that epistemology thrives in periods of crisis.[1] The way the crisis is identified conditions the direction of the epistemological turn. However, since the knowledge used to construct a given definition of the crisis tends to be viewed as part of the crisis from the standpoint of an alternative definition of the latter, the exteriority of knowledge to the conditions it analyses is but provisional, momentarily suspended between one, past or prereflexive inferiority and another; future or postreflexive interiority. Knowledge, particularly critical knowledge, moves thus between ontology (the reading of crisis) and epistemology (the crisis of reading), and in the end, it is not up to it to decide which of the two statuses will prevail and for how long. What then should thrive in periods of crisis is not epistemology itself but rather

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[1] Piaget (ed.) 1967:7.

the critical hermeneutics of rival epistemologies. This chapter is an attempt to develop one possible critical hermeneutic of dominant epistemology.

In my view, what most strongly characterises the sociocultural condition of the beginning of the 21st century is the collapse of the pillar of emancipation into the pillar of regulation, as a result of the reconstructive management of the excesses and deficits of Western-centric modernity, which have been entrusted to modern science and, as a second best, to modern law. The gradual colonisation of the different rationalities of modern emancipation by the cognitive-instrumental rationality of science led to the concentration of the emancipatory energies and capabilities of Western modernity in science and technology. Not surprisingly, the social and political theory that explored the emancipatory potential of modernity in the most systematic way – that is, Marxism – saw such potential in the technological development of productive forces, and used the cognitive-instrumental rationality to legitimise both itself (Marxism as a science) and the model of society envisaged by it (scientific socialism). What is perhaps surprising is the fact that this is equally true of Utopian socialism. Its most sweeping and consequential version, Fourierism, relied heavily on the

scientific rationality and ethos, as is tellingly illustrated in Fourier's mathematical calculations of the exact size of the phalansteries and of their constitutive elements.[2] The hyperscientificisation of the pillar of emancipation allowed for brilliant and ambitious promises. However, as time went by, it became clear not only that many such promises remained unfulfilled but also that modern science, far from eliminating the excesses and deficits, contributed to recreating them in ever-new moulds and, indeed, to aggravating at least some of them.

The promise of the domination of nature and of its use for the common benefit of humankind led to an excessive and reckless exploitation of natural resources, the ecological catastrophe, the nuclear threat, the destruction of the ozone layer, and to the emergence of biotechnology, of genetic engineering and the consequent conversion of the human body into the ultimate commodity. The promise of a perpetual peace based on commerce and the scientific rationalisation of decision-making processes and institutions led to the technological development of war and the unprecedented increase of its destructive power. According to the figures mentioned by Giddens, in the 18th century, 4.4 million people

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[2] Fourier, 1967:162.

died in 68 wars; in the 19th century, 8.3 million people died in 205 wars; in the first nine decades of the 20th century 98.8 million people died in 237 wars. Between the 18th and the 20th centuries, the world population increased 3.6 times while the number of war casualties increased 22.4 times.[3] The promise of a more just and freer society made possible by the plenty resulting from the conversion of science into a productive force has led to the pillage of the so-called Third World and to the ever-widening gap between the North and the South. In the 20th century, more people died of hunger than in any of the preceding centuries,[4] and even in the developed countries the percentage of the socially excluded, those living below the poverty line (the "interior Third World") continues to rise.

In order to grasp the full impact of the unbalanced, hyperscientificised development of the pillar of emancipation, it is necessary to bear in mind the concomitant and equally unbalanced development of the pillar of regulation in the last 200 years. Rather than a harmonious development of the three

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[3] Giddens, 1990:34.

[4] According to the FAO, 795 million people in the world do not have enough food to lead a healthy active life. That's about one in nine people on earth. Poor nutrition causes nearly half (45%) of deaths in children under five - 3.1 million children each year.