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## Introduction: From University to Pluriversity: A Decolonial Approach to the Present Crisis of Western Universities

Capucine Boidin

*Université Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3, France, capucine.boidin@univ-paris3.fr*

James Cohen

*Université de Paris VIII, France, jim.cohen@libertysurf.fr*

Ramón Grosfoguel

*University of California - Berkeley, grosfogu@berkeley.edu*

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## ***Introduction: From University to Pluriversity*** **A Decolonial Approach to the Present Crisis of Western Universities**

**Issue Co-Editors: Capucine Boidin, James Cohen and Ramón Grosfoguel**

*Université Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3, France • Université de Paris VIII, France •  
University of California at Berkeley*

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capucine.boidin@univ-paris3.fr • jim.cohen@libertysurf.fr • grosfogu@berkeley.edu

**Abstract:** This is a co-editors' introduction to the 2011 special issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, entitled "Decolonizing the University, Practicing Pluriversity," including papers that were presented at the conference entitled *Quelles universités et quels universalismes demain en Europe? un dialogue avec les Amériques* (Which University and Universalism for Europe Tomorrow? A Dialogue with the Americas) organized by the Institute des Hautes d'Etudes de l'Amérique Latine (IHEAL) with the support of the Université de Cergy-Pontoise and the Maison des Science de l'Homme (MSH) in Paris on June 10-11, 2010. The aim of the conference was to think about what it could mean to decolonize the Westernized university and its Eurocentric knowledge structures. The articles in this volume are, in one way or another, decolonial interventions in the rethinking and decolonization of academic knowledge production and Western university structures.

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The articles included in this volume of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* were presented at the conference entitled *Quelles universités et quels universalismes demain en Europe? un dialogue avec les Amériques* (Which University and Universalism for Europe Tomorrow? A Dialogue with the Americas) organized by the Institute des Hautes d'Etudes de l'Amérique Latine (IHEAL) with the support of the Université de

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**Capucine Boidin** is a Lecturer in Anthropology at the Institut des Hautes Etudes de l'Amérique latine (IHEAL), Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris. Her research focuses on the anthropology and history of representations of mestizaje, and the history and anthropology of wars. She has been a member of the editorial board of *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos* since 2002. Most recently, she is the author of *Guerre et métissage au Paraguay (2001-1767)*, PU Rennes, 2011. **James Cohen** is an Associate Professor (maître de conférences) in the Department of Political Science at Université de Paris VIII, Saint-Denis, France. He is also Lecturer at the Institut des Hautes études de l'Amérique Latine, Paris, and member of the editorial committee of *Mouvements*. **Ramón Grosfoguel** is Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and a Senior Research Associate of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris. He has published many articles and books on the political economy of the world-system and on Caribbean migrations to Western Europe and the United States.

The crisis that American and European universities suffer today are not only the result of pressures created by neoliberalism, the financial crisis and global capitalism (such as the “Bologna Process” in Europe, budget cuts in American universities, state abandonment of its historical policies of strong support to public education, etc.). This crisis also originates in the exhaustion of the present academic model with its origins in the universalism of the Enlightenment. The participants in the conference were in broad agreement that this type of universalism has been complicit with processes of not only class exploitation but also processes of racial, gender, and sexual dehumanization.

In fact, internal criticisms of Western forms of knowledge are not new. But in the last decade, the Kantian-Humboldtian model of university (including “science by and for science” detached from theology, the encyclopedic character of research, the figure of the teacher-researcher and of the researcher-student) has been widely questioned and criticized by Asian, Latin-American, North American and European post-colonial thinkers who call for decolonial social sciences and humanities. In particular, the Latin American and US Latino critical intellectuals, who prefer to refer to themselves as decolonial rather than post-colonial, are questioning the epistemic Eurocentrism and even the epistemic racism and sexism that guide academic practices and knowledge production in Westernized universities. They use these terms in critical reference to theories that are (1) based on European traditions and produced nearly always by European or Euro-American *men* who are the only ones accepted as capable of reaching universality, and (2) truly foundational to the canon of the disciplines in the Westernized university’s institutions of social sciences and the humanities. Moreover, they question the intention of total encyclopedic knowledge, in particular anthropological

knowledge, which is a process of knowing about “Others” that never fully acknowledges these “Others” as thinking and knowledge-producing subjects.

Such criticism does not necessarily lead to a narrow relativism and/or to the rejection of all research-making claims of universality. On the contrary, the most interesting dimension of Latin American and US Latino thinkers’ latest reflections is that they underline the necessity of a process of universal thinking, built on dialogue between researchers from diverse epistemic horizons. This is what some Latin American decolonial intellectuals, following the Latin American philosopher of liberation, Enrique Dussel, has characterized as *transmodernity*. The latter refers to *pluri-versalism* as opposed to *uni-versalism*.

It is striking to note that the reforms proposed by the Bologna Process and the budget cuts to universities in the Americas do not address the internal and external critiques of the university outlined above. On the contrary, they reinforce the academic world’s disenchantment with traditional forms of knowledge production in the social sciences and humanities.

Yet the potential for the renewal of American and European universities is considerable. One important path to renewal would involve opening the university resolutely to inter-epistemic dialogues with a view to building a new university, following what Boaventura de Sousa Santos has called an “ecology of knowledges.” Far from limiting itself to a weak relativism by default, or to “micro-narratives,” the decolonial proposal would be to search for universal knowledge as pluriversal knowledge, but through horizontal dialogues among different traditions of thought, or in Dussel’s terms *transmodernity* as pluriversalism. The construction of “pluriverses” of meaning by taking seriously the knowledge production of “non-Western” critical traditions and genealogies of thought would imply a refounding

of the Western university. There are social scientists and humanists in many parts of the world who, because of epistemic racism/sexism, are silenced or ignored or inferiorized by the canon of Western male tradition of thought, that is, the foundational authors of all the major disciplines in Westernized universities. Reforming the university with the aim of creating a less provincial and more open critical cosmopolitan pluriversalism would involve a radical re-founding of our ways of thinking and a transcendence of our disciplinary divisions.

The conference began a dialogue with other traditions of thought, particularly among Latin American, North American and European thinkers. It also included experiences such as those of the indigenous universities in the Americas. As was observed by several speakers, one of the main effects of neoliberalism has been the market-oriented university where research priorities and funding are based on market needs. As a result, the US model of the corporate university has been elevated to the status of a model since the 1970s. Latin America rapidly adopted this model and caused it to multiply into hundreds of private institutions during the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s. In other words, analyzing and discussing the academic changes that have occurred in the Americas and in Europe for the last decades should enable us to get a more profound understanding of the situation we find ourselves in today and to better rethink the university of tomorrow. The Bologna-inspired reforms of universities in the European Community are in many ways attempts at imitating the corporate neoliberal university model of the United States and, increasingly, Great Britain.

In one way or another the conference papers published in this volume discuss critiques of Eurocentric knowledge and of the universities (or other, related institutions such as museums) that have gener-

ated it, and explore initiatives to fight epistemic coloniality in several countries in Europe (the Netherlands, Great Britain, Germany Denmark) as well as in the Americas (Bolivia and the U.S.).

Regarding the Bologna university agenda in Europe, the intervention of Boaventura de Sousa Santos in this volume is fundamental for understanding the contemporary structures of the university. De Sousa formulates a series of what he calls “strong questions” about the contemporary European university in the context of the Bologna Process. These are questions that, in his words, “go to the roots of the historical identity and vocation of the university in order to question ... whether the university, as we know it, indeed has a future” (p. 8). The aim is to determine, for example, whether the European university can successfully reinvent itself as a center of knowledge in a globalizing society in which there will be many other centers as well; whether there will be room for “critical, heterodox, non-marketable knowledge,” respectful of cultural diversity, in the university of the future; whether the scenario of a growing gap between “central” and “peripheral” universities can be avoided; whether market imperatives can be relativized as a criterion for successful research and whether the needs of society—in particular those not reducible to market needs—can be taken sufficiently into account; and, whether the university can become the site of the refounding of “a new idea of universalism on a new, intercultural basis.” A decade after the beginning of the Bologna Process, De Souza observes that these strong questions have received only weak answers to date but he imagines a future scenario in which stronger answers can be provided and the university can “rebuild its humanistic ideal in a new internationalist, solidary and intercultural way” (p. 13).

In the context of the Bologna Process of neoliberal European university reform,

Manuela Boatcă argues that the German authorities have recently promoted an “Excellence Initiative” which has defined as one key objective the promotion of area studies. To the extent that such initiatives constitute a more modestly funded imitation of existing US programs and share their affinity with evolutionist modernization theories and their instrumental function in orienting elite strategy, they operate as a vector of “re-Westernization” of the German university. However, these initiatives may also in some particular cases open up new spaces for the development of critical approaches to migration studies and ethnic and racial studies, from a more subaltern perspective, with openings to critical gender studies and attention to minority politics.

In the Danish university, outlooks on the countries of the South and issues of development are strongly conditioned by hegemonic perspectives marked by coloniality. Although, in an era of neoliberal university reform, decolonial critique of dominant forms and institutions of knowledge is a marginal pursuit, Julia Suárez-Krabbe draws on the experience of the collective *Andar Descolonizando*, based at Roskilde University, to suggest some ways in which decolonizing critique can be trained on the university institution itself and its “position within global articulations of power.” Such critical work, aiming in particular at epistemic racism, can be accomplished through what she calls, with philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “epistemic *coyotismo*”—that is, introducing into the discussion theories and perspectives that are generally excluded from academia and causing them to be recognized at least, if not openly accepted and seeking decolonizing forms of collaboration with social movements in the South.

On the basis of direct experience in the Dutch university system, Kwame Nimako analyses the ways in which knowledge about ethnic minorities—so-called “minor-

ity research”—has been hegemonized by dominant elites who view minorities as problem populations and seek to manage minority problems in such a way as to minimize them and never question their own domination nor the historical heritage of colonialism and slavery. This forced Dutch minority groups to search for critical thinking and knowledge production outside the university structures. Nimako describes several initiatives undertaken—mainly outside the university—by minority groups to re-examine race and ethnic relations and the history of slavery and abolition, including the National Platform on the Legacy of Slavery, the National Institute for the study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy (NiNsee), the Black Europe Summer School, etc.

The domination of Eurocentric social sciences in the Dutch university is reflected in the reproduction of ideological myths in its knowledge production. Sandew Hira examines certain dominant historical narratives regarding slavery and abolition produced and disseminated in the Dutch university and Dutch governmental institutions by colonial social scientists and historians. He denounces their ideological and non-scientific approaches and in particular their strong tendency to understate or deny the oppressive character of slavery and the responsibility of Dutch ruling classes in its promotion, while also mystifying the historical factors that explain why abolition took place.

Drawing inspiration from Patricia Hill Collins’ critique of the “Eurocentric, masculinist knowledge-validation process,” Stephen Small examines various ways in which universities, both in Britain and the United States, have long suppressed critical inquiry into the history of empire, slavery and the slave trade. Parallel to this critique, he examines museums and other memorial sites devoted to slavery in Britain and the U.S., including a small number of initiatives that challenge hegemonic accounts

and draw attention to the agency and the resistance of slaves. He further draws attention to initiatives within academic institutions in the U.S., Britain and other parts of Europe to challenge dominant accounts of slavery and its legacy.

Contrary to Western European universities, ethnic studies and gender studies in the United States emerged from social pressures from below as part of the legacy of the civil rights struggles. This is why they are centres of critical thinking inside the United States' Westernized university. Ramón Grosfoguel examines the formation of ethnic and racial studies programs in the United States as a form of epistemic insurgency against epistemic racism/sexism. He develops an epistemic and institutional critique to the Westernized university as well as a critical view of the dilemmas ethnic studies confront today.

Taking ethnic studies as a decolonial project in the sense of "a southern epistemological space within a northern setting," Nelson Maldonado-Torres develops a radical critique of the humanities—and its crisis—today. He uses the decolonial epistemic revolt of ethnic studies as a point of departure for thinking about ways to decolonize the humanities. He calls for serious consideration of the experiences and epistemic perspectives of racialized colonial subjects traditionally ignored by the humanities in order to address its present crisis centred in Eurocentric knowledge production irrelevant to the present demographic shifts in the United States. He shows the parallels of the racial logic that have excluded colonial subjects and the neoliberal logic that today justifies huge budget cuts in the humanities. He argues that: "The temptation for the humanities would be to show that they are the depositories of a better form of whiteness (without ever calling it that, or recognizing it as such) than the one that is putting the humanities at the level of 'unproductive' people of color" (p. 98).

Drawing on his anthropological field work in Bolivia in the midst of profound social and political change, Anders Burman examines various interlocutors' attitudes towards knowledge, and in particular the important differences between "hegemonic theories of knowledge and indigenous epistemologies, between propositional and non-propositional knowledge, between knowledge *of* the world and knowledge from *within* the world, or between representationalist and relational ways of knowing" (p. 111). He stresses that there is "no absolute dividing line," no "clear-cut dichotomies after almost 500 years of asymmetric and colonial intermingling of epistemologies and knowledge systems from different traditions" (Ibid.). Yet he notes: "Relational ways of knowing and indigenous traditions of thought continue to be systematically treated as inferior but they are still present and are currently making themselves felt at the university" (Ibid.).

Maria Paula Meneses, speaking as a Mozambican researcher living and working in Portugal, examines the different types of knowledge about the history of the colonial relationship and the independence movement produced in the two countries. She observes that (at least) two separate narratives coexist and render difficult any possibility of mutual recognition. Colonialism involved much forgetting and silencing; the dominant Eurocentric perspective on colonial history needs to be questioned and problematized. This does not contradict a critical questioning of the official post-colonial narrative of the independent Mozambican state, whose state- and nation-building function has caused it to silence the diversity of memories generated by the interaction between colonizers and colonized and to justify the repression of those who questioned the official version of history. Public narratives, official or otherwise, that construct or reconstruct memories are inevitably in competition with each other and reflect power relations. But the

full plurality of memory does not receive public attention; it must be dug out by activist researchers who are able to distinguish among different subjective viewpoints and produce knowledge with a full understanding of the complex relations among conflicting historical legacies.

Each essay of this volume in its own ways constitutes a contribution to the growing literature on the crisis of the university today. Our hope is that the decolonial focus of the collection will represent a contribution to present struggles, for the decolonization not only of the Westernized university but also of the world at large.