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# ***The Dilemmas of Ethnic Studies in the United States***

## **Between Liberal Multiculturalism, Identity Politics, Disciplinary Colonization, and Decolonial Epistemologies**

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**Abstract:** This paper is an analysis of the Westernized university and its Eurocentric fundamentalism in relation to the subaltern struggles of racialized groups in America and its impact on the formation of ethnic studies in the university's epistemic structure. The paper goes on to discuss questions of epistemic racism/sexism and the dilemmas that ethnic studies programs confront today in particular forms of disciplinary colonization, liberal multiculturalism and identity politics.

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Ethnic studies in the United States represents a contradictory space within which two hegemonic discourses (identitarian multiculturalism and disciplinary colonization) and a counter-hegemonic one (decolonial epistemologies) condense and enter into debate and struggle. In contrast to other parts of the world, ethnic studies in the United States emerged as a part of the civil rights movement for racialized minorities. In the late '60s and early '70s, a number of student strikes and university occupations were organized by these minorities, leading to the creation of African-American, Puerto Rican, Chicano, Asian, and Indigenous studies programs in many

universities all over the United States. This *epistemic insurgency* was key to the opening of spaces in universities for professors from ethnic/racial groups suffering discrimination and/or with non-Western epistemologies in areas which were up to that point monopolized by white professors and students and Eurocentric epistemologies privileging the Cartesian "ego-politics of knowledge" (Grosfoguel 2008a).

In contrast to the Eurocentric epistemology in Westernized universities which is characterized by the privileging of a Western male canon of thought and the study of the "other" as an object rather than as a knowledge-producing subject—concealing at the same time the geo-politics and the body-politics of knowledge through

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which white academics and intellectuals think—the entry of professors of “color” through affirmative action programs and the creation of ethnic studies programs aimed at studying the problems confronting oppressed minorities constituted an important change in the production of academic knowledges.

At that time (late ‘60s and early ‘70s), many of those minority professors were activist intellectuals who privileged the “geo-politics of knowledge” and the “body-politics of knowledge” over the “ego-politics of knowledge” in the production of knowledges. This represented a break, for the first time in Westernized universities, with the subject-object dichotomy of Cartesian epistemology. Instead of a white male subject studying non-white subjects as “objects of knowledge,” assuming a neutral, privileged viewpoint not situated in any space or body—i.e., the “ego-politics of knowledge,” which allows the subject to claim a false objectivity and epistemic neutrality—we have a new situation in Westernized universities in the United States in which subjects from racialized minorities study themselves as subjects who think and produce knowledges from bodies and spaces (the “geo-politics” and “body-politics” of knowledge)—approaches which had been routinely subalternized and inferiorized by Westernized racist/sexist epistemology and power. Moreover, it can also be said that their work questioned the hegemonic white understanding of racialized minorities which sought to make the latter responsible for the marginalization and poverty they experience in the United States (for example, the paradigms of “the culture of poverty” and “modernization theory”), thereby concealing the rampant racism of that society (Grosfoguel 2003). Not only did this challenge the epistemic racisms/sexisms that recognize only the production of theory by white/male Western subjects while non-whites are assumed to produce

only folklore, mythology, or culture but never knowledge equal to that of the West, it also opened up the *potential* for the decolonization of knowledge, by also challenging the Cartesian “ego-politics of knowledge” of Western Social Sciences/Humanities and counterposing to this the “geo-politics” and “body-politics of knowledge” of subaltern subjects. I say “potential,” because this decolonial process is not complete and faces several obstacles. This article seeks to identify these obstacles which ethnic studies still confront.

However, it is necessary first to clarify some concepts that are indispensable for our discussion.

## II. EPISTEMIC RACISM/SEXISM AND THE WESTERNIZED UNIVERSITIES IN THE WORLD-SYSTEM

The “Modern/Colonial Capitalist/Patriarchal Western-centric/Christian-centric World-System” (Grosfoguel 2008a<sup>1</sup>) is composed of a heterarchy or intersectionality of multiple global power structures beyond the sole economic and political structures frequently identified in world-system analysis and neo-marxist political-economy perspectives more generally. In my work on decolonizing paradigms in political-economy, I identify about fifteen global power structures of the world-system. In this section I would like to discuss one of these structures: the global epistemic hierarchy in the world-system. This hierarchy produces and reproduces the same structure of the global racial/ethnic hierarchy and the global Judeo-

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<sup>1</sup> For a justification of this characterization of the contemporary world-system and the cartography of power implied in this large phrase, see the online English version of this article originally published in Portuguese in: “Decolonizing Political Economy and Postcolonial Studies: Transmodernity, Border Thinking and Global Coloniality” (<http://www.eurozine.com/pdf/2008-07-04-grosfoguel-en.pdf>).

Christian gender/sexual hierarchy of the world-system—that is, it privileges as superior Western male knowledges and treats as inferior knowledges that are women-centered and non-Western. This racist/sexist hierarchy of knowledge operates on a world-scale with variations and particularities in different regions of the world according to the diverse colonial and local histories. As will be discussed below, this global epistemic hierarchy is not merely a ‘superstructure’ but is constitutive of capitalist accumulation at a world-scale. Without it, there would be no historical capitalism as we know it today.

This epistemic hierarchy has its own discourses, ideology and institutional framework. Eurocentrism is the global discourse/ideology of the epistemic hierarchy. Eurocentrism as an epistemic perspective privileges the knowledges, memories and histories of the Westernized male colonizers throughout the world. This epistemology is institutionally globalized around the world through the Westernized university. The Westernized university is organized around a canon of thought that is both Western and masculine. Nearly all disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities, with very few exceptions, privilege in their canon of thought Western male thinkers. Not even Western women are included within the canon, while non-Western males and women are excluded from it. This is not a question of representation or recognition, but rather one of how Western universities are provincial in their scope while claiming to be valid for all humanity beyond time and space—that is, while pretending to be universal.

The main problem is that the Westernized university model, with its provincial sexist/racist structure of thought and its nineteenth century liberal disciplinary divisions of knowledge, is institutionally globalized around the world. The provincialism of Westernized universities, with their Eurocentric sexist/racist foundation

of knowledge, is taken as the normality everywhere it goes. Non-Western social scientists, historians, philosophers and critical thinkers, thinking from different geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge and/or from different cosmologies/epistemologies, are considered inferior to Western male epistemologies and, thus, excluded as valid knowledge from the Westernized university. Thus, the Westernized university is a machine of global mass production of *Eurocentric fundamentalism*. Any critical thinking or social scientific development produced by and from a non-Westernized perspective/epistemic location is inferiorized, received with suspicion and considered as not serious or not worthy of being read in the Westernized university.

We find the same structure of knowledge in Westernized universities everywhere in the world, no matter where they are located. Be they in Dakar, Buenos Aires, New Delhi, Manila, New York, Paris or Cairo, they have fundamentally the same disciplinary divisions and the same racist/sexist canon of thought. Thus, in terms of global capitalism, the Westernized university produces the Westernized political and economic elites all over the world, without which the world-system would be unmanageable. Through this mechanism, the core powers of the world-system are able to form the Westernized Eurocentric fundamentalist elites that will suppress any alternative way of thinking beyond the system and will carry to every corner of the world its epistemic racist/sexist knowledge structures and policies. This monocultural, monoepistemic and monocosmological Eurocentric fundamentalist framework is what defines who is a valid social agent, who is a terrorist, who is a plausible candidate to win an election, and who is a valid interlocutor in the globe today. Moreover, the Westernized university is a machine of “epistemicide” (Sousa Santos 2010). It inferiorizes and destroys the epistemic poten-

tial of non-Western epistemologies.

The absurdity of this epistemic structure has been demonstrated very well in the work of Portuguese social scientist, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2010). He has pointed out many times that if we examine what is called social theory in the social sciences of Westernized universities today, it comes fundamentally from Western male thinkers of only five countries: Italy, France, Germany, England and the United States. The claim is that the social theory created to account for the social experience and history of these five countries, which comprise only 12% of the world's population, should be taken as valid and universal for the rest of the countries of the world, which account for 88% of humanity. This structure throws away the social experience of most of humanity.

Epistemic racism/sexism is one of the most hidden forms of racism in the "modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal Western-centric/Christian-centric world-system" we inhabit (see Grosfoguel 2008a). To move beyond this structure would require not a *uni*-versity (where one epistemology defines for the rest the questions and the answers to produce a colonial, *uni*-versal social science and humanities) but a *pluri*-versity (where epistemic diversity is institutionally incorporated into necessary inter-epistemic dialogues in order to produce decolonial, pluriversal social sciences and humanities). This is why Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls for an "ecology of knowledges" (2010) as a point of departure to decolonize knowledge and the Westernized university. According to Sousa Santos, the "ecology of knowledges" is an opening to a new decolonial space of epistemic diversity where Western social sciences are not the only source of valid knowledge but one among others.

### III. ETHNIC STUDIES FACE WESTERNIZED UNIVERSITIES: IDENTITIES IN POLITICS AND TRANSMODERNITY

For the first time in 500 years of globalization of the Westernized universities (first Christian-centric, then secular Eurocentric, and, more recently, the corporate university), the irruption of the US civil rights struggles for the decolonization of the US empire penetrated the Westernized university at the center of empire, challenging its knowledge production in a radical way. Ethnic Studies, Women Studies, Queer Studies, etc., were founded within the United States' Westernized universities, in response to the demands of people of color, women and gay/lesbian movements. The goal of these programs is not to produce a particular knowledge that will be 'added on' in order to supplement the social sciences and humanities today, but *to produce a pluriversal decolonial social science and humanities*. Pluriversal decolonial social sciences would have epistemic diversity guiding their processes of knowledge production. The kinds of knowledges Ethnic Studies, Women Studies and Queer Studies have produced challenge the racist/sexist capitalist/patriarchal Western canon of thought and epistemology. In opposition to white male hegemonic identity politics, which are hidden as the norm within the process of knowledge production, these subalternized subjects developed via a struggle against identity politics. However, this does not mean that there are small groups inside these new fields of knowledge that reproduce a subaltern kind of identity politics.

Identity politics sets out from an identitarian and culturalist reductionism that ends up essentializing and naturalizing cultural identities. In these identitarian projects there is a powerful suspicion towards groups whose ethnic/racial origin

differs from their own. This epistemic closure of walled identities is what characterizes the *Eurocentric fundamentalism* of the hegemonic identity politics of Western male epistemology, which produces phobia and rejection of non-Western epistemologies and knowledges.

Identity politics usually maintain closed identitarian frontiers even among oppressed groups themselves that practice a subaltern form of identity politics, making dialogue and political alliances among them impossible. In some cases they end up inverting hegemonic racism and reproducing an inverted racism by making the subaltern ethnic/racial group into one which is culturally and/or biologically superior to whites.

In sharp contrast to such identity politics there are what Angela Davis (1997) calls "identities on politics." The latter are based on ethico-political-epistemic projects which are open to all regardless of ethno/racial origin. For example, the Zapatistas in the southwest of Mexico are an insurgent indigenous movement that thinks epistemically from an Amerindian epistemological/cosmological points of view. These are open to all people and groups who support and sympathize with their political proposals as well as those who criticize them in constructive ways. Within the Zapatista movement there are whites and mestizos. The movement led by Evo Morales in Bolivia is an indigenous movement that thinks from the perspective of the Ayllú cosmology of the Aymara communities. This movement counts, among its leaders and in its ranks, both white and mestizo activists who have assumed the Aymara ethico-political-epistemic political project as well as those who provide constructive critiques to the movement.

Another example would be African spiritual practices in the Americas that, while setting out from cosmologies/epistemologies of African origin (Yoruba, Bantu, etc.), are nevertheless open to the participa-

tion of all. That is to say, there is no correspondence between the ethico-epistemic identity of the project (in this case its indigenous or African origin) and the ethnic/racial identity of the individuals who participate in the movements. As a result, these movements are quite distinct from "identity politics," since they exclude no one who supports their project for reasons of ethnic/racial origin.

If Eurocentrism seeks to disqualify these alternative epistemologies in order to inferiorize, subalternize, and discredit them—thereby constructing a world of "unitary thought" that does not allow us to think of "other" possible worlds beyond "white, masculine, neo-liberal capitalist globalization"—the project proposed here would be one that transcends the Eurocentric epistemic monopoly of the "modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal Western-Centric/Christian-centric world-system." To recognize that there exists an epistemic diversity in the world poses a challenge to the existing modern/colonial world. It is no longer possible to construct a global design through a single epistemology as a "single solution" to the problems of the world, be it from the left (socialism, communism, etc.) or from the right (developmentalism, neo-liberalism, liberal democracy, etc.). On the basis of this epistemic diversity there are various anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist proposals that offer different ways of confronting and resolving the problems produced by the sexual, racial, spiritual, linguistic, gender, and class power-relations within the current "modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system" (Grosfoguel 2008a). This diversity of proposals rooted in "other" epistemologies that have been subalternized and silenced by Eurocentric epistemology would provide ways of transcending Eurocentered modernity that go beyond those proposals involving the culmination of that modernity (Habermas

1985) or the development of postmodernity. The latter represent Eurocentric critiques of Eurocentrism (Mignolo 2000).

What we are speaking of, then, is developing what the philosopher of liberation Enrique Dussel (1994) calls “transmodernity”—the utopian project for the fulfillment, not of modernity or postmodernity, but rather of the incomplete and unfinished project of decolonization. “Trans” is used here in the sense of “beyond.” In an utopian transmodern world there exist as many proposals for the “liberation of women” and “democracy” as there are epistemologies in the world. Parisian “feminists of difference” cannot impose their solutions or their forms of struggle against patriarchy on Islamic feminists in Iran, indigenous Zapatista feminists in Mexico, or black feminists in the United States, just as the Western world cannot impose its liberal concept of democracy on indigenous, Islamic, or African forms of democracy. Zapatismo sets out from Tojolabal cosmology to redefine democracy as “command [while] obeying,” and its institutional practice constitutes the community spaces known as “caracoles” (“shells”). Such concepts are very different from Western democracy in which “those who command do not obey and those who obey do not command,” and in which the practical institutional forms are parliaments or national assemblies.

Transmodernity is not an “everything goes” relativism, since we are speaking of a critical anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-Eurocentric (never anti-European), anti-colonial and anti-imperialist perspective that is born from the epistemic diversity of the world. For decolonial thought there is no single epistemology that can claim a monopoly over critical thinking on the planet as imperialism has sought to do for Western thought in the last 500 years of the world-system. My proposal here is to redefine ethnic studies departments/programs as “transmodern decolonial studies.”

#### IV. ETHNIC STUDIES IN THE UNITED STATES

Ethnic studies in the United States is at present torn between two problems of the coloniality of global power: 1) the “identity politics” of liberal multiculturalism in the United States and 2) the disciplinary colonization of the Western colonial human sciences (social sciences and the humanities) over these spaces.

Furthermore, those forms of “identity politics” that absolutize and privilege the “identities” and “projects” of their own ethnic/racial group at the expense of other racialized/inferiorized subjects lead them to view other ethnic/racial groups with suspicion and as competitors, including those who share a similar situation of ethnic/racial discrimination. The scholars who promote the worst forms of “identity politics” in ethnic studies programs end up: 1) celebrating their own identity while leaving ethnic/racial hierarchies as such intact; or 2) emphasizing their own ethnic/racial group, gazing at their own navel and, as a result, considering themselves to be in constant competition with other groups that are equally discriminated against, thereby contributing to the reproduction of a system of “divide and conquer” which also maintains intact the status quo of ethnic/racial hierarchies. Thus, both “identity politics” positions—that of “liberal multicultural identitarians” as well as that of “militant identitarians”—end up in complicity with the ethnic/racial hierarchies of white supremacy by leaving the status quo intact. Beginning with the first point: the organization of ethnic studies departments and programs takes place on the basis of ethno/racial identities (African-American, Asian-American, Latino, Indigenous, etc.) in the US. A minority of scholars in the field of ethnic studies uses this structure to reproduce the worst kind of “identity politics.” Rather than decolonial studies, “identity politics” tend to reproduce colonial rela-

tions that manifest two main tendencies: one based in Anglo-American “light” liberal multiculturalism and the other based on the chauvinist and nationalist absolutization of one’s own ethnic/racial identity to the detriment of dialogue and alliance with other racially oppressed groups. Hegemonic liberal multiculturalism allows each racialized group to have its space and celebrate its identity/culture, as long as they do not question the ethnic/racial hierarchies of white supremacist power and as long as they leave the status quo intact. This privileges certain elites within the racialized/inferiorized groups, granting them a space and resources as “tokens,” “model minority,” or “symbolic showcases,” thereby giving a cosmetic multicultural tinge to white power, while the majority of these populations victimized by this rampant racism experience the coloniality of power on a daily basis. Condoleezza Rice is one of the most extreme examples of this policy. This African-American woman has been one of the architects of the racist foreign policy of the Euro-American empire (white capitalist elites) in the Middle East and Iraq, thereby giving an anti-racist and multicultural face to what otherwise are racist imperial policies.<sup>2</sup>

The other tendency of the coloniality of knowledge (Lander 2000) is the academic disciplinary colonization of ethnic studies. Disciplinary colonization occurs when the fields of knowledge within ethnic studies are divided on the basis of the disciplinary

specializations of the human sciences (social sciences and the humanities) and ethnic studies are carried as thinking “on” or “about” rather than thinking “from,” “with” and “alongside” the ethnic/racial groups in question. Instead of producing knowledge from the *critical* thought created by racialized/inferiorized subjects, these disciplines impose the Western canon of thought and the Western Cartesian “point zero” epistemology (Castro-Gomez 2006)—the point of view that does not assume itself as a point of view, i.e., the “God’s eye view” that has characterized modern Western philosophy from Descartes to the present in the Western human sciences. This has affected the production of knowledges in ethnic studies departments/programs because instead of producing knowledges “from” and “with” these ethnic/racial groups and aimed at their liberation, such a perspective privileges the production of knowledges “about” the “others” according to the colonial epistemological tradition, from 16<sup>th</sup>-century Christian missionaries to present-day Cartesian social scientists. This tradition makes of the racialized/inferiorized subject an “object of study” to control and exploit. This raises the following questions: Knowledge for what and for whom? Is it possible to produce neutral knowledges in a society that is divided in racial, sexual, spiritual, and class terms? If epistemology not only has color but also sexuality, gender, cosmology, spirituality, class, etc., it is not possible to assume the myth or false premise of neutrality and epistemological objectivity (the “point zero” of the “egopolitics of knowledge”) as the Western sciences claim to do.

Furthermore, that current which hopes to make ethnic studies into “interdisciplinary studies” reproduces the same problems mentioned above. Interdisciplinarity maintains disciplinary identities intact (with their canon and Eurocentric epistemology) and only opens up an interdisciplinary dialogue within Western

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<sup>2</sup>The same could be said of the Obama Administration. Although Obama came to power as part of a mass movement discontent with eight years of Bush Administration that led to domestic and international chaos and a new Great Depression, his commitments with Wall Street, Transnational Corporations and the Pentagon make the present US imperial state (with a Black President in charge) “a white power imperial structure with a black face.” This is part of what I have described elsewhere as the 21<sup>st</sup> century post-civil rights new apartheid (neo-apartheid) imperial structure in place in the United States (Grosfoguel 2008b).

epistemology, closing itself off to a transmodern dialogue between various epistemologies. If we think not from academic disciplines but instead from the notion of “transdisciplinarity” in the sense of going beyond disciplinary knowledges, then the ethnic studies project would be opened up to epistemological diversity instead of the current monotopism and monologue of the dominant Western Eurocentric fundamentalist epistemology that refuses to acknowledge any other epistemology as a space for the production of critical or scientific thought. The disciplinary colonization of ethnic studies constitutes an epistemic colonization since these academic disciplines privilege a Eurocentric epistemic canon.

## V. CONCLUSION

My point is not to dismiss the important and useful critical work produced from within the disciplinary fields of Western academia. I am simply questioning the colonial Eurocentric nature of mainstream disciplines and, thus, the appropriateness of creating ethnic studies departments/programs, if these are reduced merely to studying the sociology of race, the anthropology of ethno/racial identities, the history “of” (not “from” or “with”) blacks, the economics of the insertion of indigenous labor, etc. To colonize ethnic studies through the Western disciplines does not constitute an innovation in the field of knowledge production. It was already possible to do so through the respective academic disciplines of the human sciences, and it requires neither ethnic studies departments nor programs.

It would be a different story if ethnic studies departments or programs proposed to open themselves up to transmodernity, that is, to the epistemic diversity of the world, and redefine themselves as “transmodern decolonial studies,” offering to think “from” and “with” those “others”

subalternized and inferiorized by Eurocentered modernity, offering to define their questions, their problems, and their intellectual dilemmas “from” and “with” those same racialized groups. This would give rise to a decolonial methodology very different from the colonial methodology of the social sciences and the humanities (Smith 1999). It would also imply a transmodern dialogue between diverse ethico-epistemic political projects and a thematic internal organization within ethnic studies departments/programs, one based on problems (racism, sexism, xenophobia, Christian-centrism, “other” epistemologies, Eurocentrism, etc.) rather than either ethnic/racial identities (Blacks, Indigenous, Asians, etc.) or Western colonial disciplines (sociology, anthropology, history, political science, philosophy, arts, economics, etc.).<sup>3</sup>

Ethnic studies, once redefined as “transmodern decolonial studies,” would make an extremely important contribution not only to the decolonialization of the production of academic knowledge toward a decolonial transmodern social sciences and humanities, but also to liberation as the political project toward the (epistemic, social, political, economic, and spiritual) decolonization of those groups oppressed and exploited by the “Western-centric/Christian-centric capitalist/patriarchal modern/colonial world-system.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Here I am not implying that Latino Studies, African-American Studies, Asian American Studies or Native American Studies should not exist as such. To maintain these programs is important in order to focus on the particular contributions the experience of each of these groups brings towards the decolonization of the world. What I am saying here is that inside each of these programs, the focus of research should be primarily based on problems rather than on affirming “identity politics.”

<sup>4</sup> For a perspective very close to that which I am proposing here, see Maldonado-Torres (2006).

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