



Decolonizing the University: Epistemic Hierarchies, Legal Orders, and Cognitive Justice

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Abstract

This article examines the neoliberal university through the lens of decolonial thought, arguing that contemporary higher education must be understood not only as a site of knowledge production, but also as a normative and quasi-legal apparatus that organizes legitimacy, authority, and exclusion. Moving from the notion of the colonality of knowledge, as developed by Aníbal Quijano and further elaborated by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Ramón Grosfoguel, Achille Mbembe, and others, the paper reconstructs the historical entanglement between colonial epistemologies, capitalist rationalities, and academic institutions. It shows how the modern university has functioned as a privileged space for the universalization of Western knowledge and for the reproduction of epistemic hierarchies that are inseparable from broader structures of domination. The article develops this argument along three interconnected axes. First, it analyzes the neoliberal university as a space structured by mechanisms of selection, evaluation, and academic commodification that reproduce not only social inequalities, but also legal-normative distinctions concerning what counts as legitimate knowledge and who is authorized to produce it. Second, it argues that the decolonization of the university requires more than curricular diversification: it calls for cognitive justice, epistemic pluralism, and a radical transformation of the relation between the university and society. Third, it examines the archive, language, and institutional space as key terrains in which colonality is materially sedimented and normatively reproduced, proposing intercultural translation as a decolonial methodological option capable of challenging the epistemic monopoly of the modern university. The article ultimately suggests that decolonizing the university is not simply a matter of inclusion, but a practice of epistemic, institutional, and normative disobedience. From this perspective, the university can be reimagined not as a neutral site of universal reason, but as a contested space in which legal orders, knowledge regimes, and claims to justice are continuously produced, negotiated, and transformed.

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1 Colonial Epistemologies, Legal Rationalities, and the Neoliberal University

The question of decolonizing the university does not concern only the content of teaching or the representation of difference within academic curricula. Rather, it addresses the very structure of academic modernity itself—its regimes of truth, its mechanisms of selection, and the historical forms through which knowledge has been legitimized. The notion of decoloniality has by now become consolidated within the social sciences as a distinct interpretive category. Here, it is employed as a critical lens through which to interrogate specific forms of knowledge, epistemological structures, and research methodologies that define Western universities.

The historical construction of European universities is deeply rooted in colonial and capitalist logics, which have shaped institutional architectures, pedagogical contents, and modes of inquiry. In this context, the reflections of scholars such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Ramón Grosfoguel, Achille Mbembe, and Walter Dignolo offer, among others, both an analytical perspective on Western epistemology and a set of theoretical, methodological, and research-oriented proposals aimed at the decolonization of academic institutions.

The concept of the coloniality of knowledge emerges within Latin American decolonial thought, particularly in the work of Aníbal Quijano, who describes the persistence of colonial structures in the post-colonial world by distinguishing between colonialism—understood as direct political and economic domination—and coloniality, that is, the enduring pervasiveness of an epistemic, cultural, and social model that survives the end of formal colonial rule; including in the production of normative orders that define what counts as legitimate knowledge and who is authorized to produce it. [1]. Once colonialism as a political order was dismantled in much of the world—although important forms of settler colonialism continue to shape the lives of indigenous peoples in countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere—a global coloniality emerged, reshaping classical forms of domination without altering the structural relations between center and periphery on a global scale. If colonialism is the practice of conquest, subjugation, and exploitation, coloniality has proven to be a more enduring and pervasive system of power, particularly because it is grounded in the justification of the colonizers' role as rational organizers of the world and bearers of a superior order.

The global structures of power that developed through the colonization of the Americas thus preserved pre-existing hierarchies while introducing new classificatory categories: East–West, primitive–civilized, magical/mythical–scientific, irrational–rational, traditional–modern [1]. Within this framework, hierarchies of knowledge have historically been mobilized to legitimize relations of power between the Global North and the Global South, as well as between Western scientific knowledge and indigenous, popular, and traditional forms of knowing. As de Sousa Santos argues in *Decolonizing the University*, the coloniality of knowledge manifests

itself in the systematic exclusion of non-Western epistemologies from academic curricula, in the marginalization of non-European languages and perspectives, and in the imposition of scientific standards that reflect exclusively Western paradigms [2]. To be sure, important exceptions exist. Over the last decades, several institutions and educational experiments have attempted to challenge the epistemic dominance of Western academic models. Examples include indigenous-controlled higher education institutions in Canada, such as First Nations University of Canada, intercultural universities in Latin America designed to serve indigenous and afro-descendant communities, Māori-centered educational initiatives in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and experiences such as the Universidad Popular Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, which emerged from struggles for memory, human rights, and social justice. These experiences seek not merely to diversify student populations, but to recognize indigenous languages, oral traditions, community-based forms of learning, and alternative conceptions of knowledge as legitimate sources of intellectual authority.

Across the academic world, the knowledge that is reproduced continues to correspond largely to the canon of Eurocentric colonial thought. This phenomenon, which de Sousa Santos defines as “academic capitalism,” represents not only a threat to the emancipatory function of education, but also a powerful mechanism for reproducing global and cognitive inequalities.

Contemporary universities are thus deeply embedded within a broader neoliberal project of knowledge colonization, articulated through multiple processes.

The neoliberal transformation of higher education has unfolded through a set of interconnected institutional, economic, and cultural processes that have progressively reshaped the mission of the university. Since the 1980s, universities in many parts of the world have been increasingly subjected to market-oriented reforms inspired by the principles of competition, efficiency, performance measurement, and managerial governance. Public funding has often been reduced or made conditional upon measurable outcomes, while institutions have been encouraged to compete for students, research grants, international visibility, and private investment. Within this framework, education is no longer conceived primarily as a public good aimed at fostering critical citizenship and democratic participation, but increasingly as a private investment capable of generating economic returns. The student is reconfigured as a consumer purchasing educational services, while academic institutions are expected to operate according to entrepreneurial logics. Research activities are increasingly evaluated according to their capacity to attract funding, produce innovation, and contribute to economic competitiveness, often privileging forms of knowledge that can be translated into market value.

The British experience provides a particularly significant example of these dynamics. Policies aimed at widening participation in higher education were accompanied by a progressive withdrawal of public funding and the introduction of increasingly costly tuition fees. While access formally expanded, higher education simultaneously became more deeply integrated into market logics, transforming students into both consumers and future economic resources. Similar processes, although with different national trajectories and intensities, can be observed across Europe and beyond. From a decolonial perspective, neoliberalism should not be understood merely as an economic doctrine but as a broader governmental rationality that reorganizes

institutions, subjectivities, and systems of value. The university becomes a strategic site in which market principles are normalized and presented as objective criteria of excellence, merit, and quality. What appears as a neutral process of modernization often conceals the reproduction of older colonial hierarchies, since access to academic recognition, international visibility, and epistemic legitimacy continues to be unevenly distributed across regions, languages, and knowledge traditions. In this sense, the neoliberal university does not simply commodify education; it contributes to the reproduction of a global epistemic order in which certain knowledges circulate as universally valid while others remain structurally marginalized. These include the standardization of academic evaluation criteria—imposed by international agencies and metrics such as rankings and impact factors—which tend to privilege disciplines that are “productive” in market terms while marginalizing the social sciences and humanities. At the same time, knowledge itself becomes commodified: students are transformed into clients, academics into producers of measurable outputs, and research into a service aligned with the interests of capital and enterprise. This logic produces a highly segmented university system, in which a small number of global academic elites coexist with a mass of precarious institutions subject to efficiency imperatives, the precarization of intellectual labor, and the progressive withdrawal of public investment.

The neoliberal transnationalization of higher education, together with its conversion into a commodity, has contributed to the emergence of a deeply unequal and stratified global academic system. These inequalities are evident not only between universities in different countries, but also within national contexts themselves [3]. In Italy, for instance, 32% of students choose to enroll in a university outside their region of origin—a figure that, out of a total student population of approximately two million, corresponds to around 600,000 individuals in mobility (MUR). This phenomenon reflects an intensification of internal migratory flows that continue to follow the same patterns as the economic migrations that shaped twentieth-century Italy. The South is still often perceived as a problematic area, and the aspiration to be a talented and ambitious student is frequently associated with moving to universities in the Center or the North. In this process, it is often forgotten that talent, ambition, and competence do not originate elsewhere, but are instead produced within the very territories that are being abandoned [4].

Within this context, the neoliberal discourse of merit and competence becomes a site of ideological struggle in the interpretation of student mobility. This dynamic is further reinforced by the infrastructural advantages enjoyed by Northern universities, which benefit from higher average incomes, more dynamic labor markets, and greater employment opportunities for graduates. From this perspective, the neoliberalization of the university can be understood as a strategy for managing migratory flows—a mechanism that generates contractual precariousness and unpaid labor, while reproducing inequalities between those who can afford to study and those who cannot. This process produces individuals compelled to mobility, constantly searching for funding, opportunities, and better-resourced academic institutions, while simultaneously impoverishing their regions of origin and weakening local communities.

As in the contemporary metropolis, value extraction within the neoliberal university operates through the concentration of individuals coming from peripheral areas,

from other cities or countries, and from territories marked by deprivation or conflict. This form of intellectual extractivism produces profound and often detrimental effects on places of origin, depriving them of human, social, and economic resources.

A similar line of analysis is developed by Ramón Grosfoguel [5], who, through a genealogical study extending back to the sixteenth century, demonstrates how universities have internalized Western epistemic structures—racialized and gendered from their inception—transforming them first into common sense and then into canonical knowledge. From that moment onward, indigenous, Islamic, African, and other critical traditions from the Global South have been rendered epistemically invisible. Grosfoguel outlines several possible pathways for the decolonization of Western academic knowledge: recognizing the epistemic racism and sexism embedded in its foundational structures as outcomes of genocidal and epistemicidal colonial-patriarchal projects; breaking with a universalism in which one defines for all—where that “one” is the epistemology of Western man; and fostering epistemic diversity within the canon in order to create a pluriverse of meanings and concepts, in which inter-epistemic dialogue among multiple traditions generates new conceptual frameworks in which “many define for many,” rather than “one for all” [6, 82).

In *Decolonizing the Westernized University* (2016), Grosfoguel further argues that universities are not merely capitalist because they reproduce capitalist societies, but because they have themselves become commercial enterprises. They produce a commodity—education—whose value is determined by its capacity to generate further economic value, for example by granting access to well-remunerated positions. This commodification occurs through a variety of mechanisms. Educational programs are increasingly marketed as investments in future employability, students are encouraged to evaluate degrees according to expected economic returns, and universities compete for tuition revenues, external funding, and positions in international rankings. In this context, the value of education tends to be measured less by its contribution to critical thinking or democratic participation than by its capacity to generate marketable skills and economic productivity. In elite institutions of the Global North, academic capitalism appears as a relatively recent phenomenon, yet one that builds upon a long-standing historical continuity. Since such institutions have always been closely linked to the formation of capitalist elites, their adaptation to this model represents less a rupture than an intensification of an already existing relationship. By contrast, for lower-ranked universities, and especially for those in the Global South, academic capitalism constitutes a much more disruptive transformation—one whose effects can be so profound as to signal not merely change, but potential decline, if not the erosion of the institution itself.

The contemporary university can thus be understood as traversed by two apparently contradictory dynamics. On the one hand, a bottom-up expansive force driven by social demands for access to higher education, which challenges the selective nature of the university as a symbol of class, racial, and gender inequality. To the extent that these demands are partially realized, access broadens, allowing new social groups to enter and increasing the social and cultural heterogeneity of the student body. On the other hand, a top-down imposition driven by global pressures that compel universities to conform to the criteria of relevance and efficiency dictated by global capitalism. Financial constraints—however real—are often mobilized as a jus-

tification for enforcing such alignment. These pressures reveal that the selective character of the university is not grounded solely in socio-economic disparities, but also in epistemic, cultural, ethnic, and gendered inequalities. As the university's entanglement with capitalism intensifies, its connections with colonialism and patriarchy become increasingly visible. In this sense, the university may also be understood as a site in which epistemic hierarchies are translated into normative and quasi-legal forms of recognition, exclusion, and authority.

2 Toward a Decolonial University: Cognitive Justice, Epistemic Pluralism, and Normative Transformation

The decolonization of the university is a complex and conflict-ridden process, inevitably embedded within broader historical, institutional, and political tensions. For this reason, a decolonial transformation of academia cannot be conceived as a discrete, sector-specific intervention, nor as a reform confined to the curriculum alone. Rather, it calls for a more far-reaching reconfiguration of the conditions under which knowledge is accessed, of the epistemic hierarchies through which legitimacy is conferred, and of the very relationship between the university and society. To decolonize the university, first and foremost, means challenging the institution's selective character not only in economic terms, but also along cultural, linguistic, epistemic, and gendered lines.

Although there is no single model of a decolonial university, several practical directions can be identified. These include the recognition of epistemic plurality within curricula, the incorporation of indigenous and community-based forms of knowledge into teaching and research, the promotion of multilingual education, and the creation of institutional spaces in which local communities, social movements, and historically marginalized groups can participate in defining research agendas. A decolonial university would also require more democratic forms of governance, greater accessibility for underrepresented populations, and evaluation systems capable of recognizing different forms of intellectual contribution beyond conventional academic metrics. Such measures would not eliminate existing inequalities, but they would contribute to transforming the university from a space that reproduces epistemic hierarchies into one that actively interrogates and challenges them.

At stake, first of all, is material access to higher education, which remains profoundly unequal. Economic barriers, the rising costs of education, the fragility of support systems, and the uneven territorial distribution of educational opportunities continue to constrain both access to and permanence within university systems for large sectors of the population. From this perspective, even practices that may appear limited in scope such as tuition waivers for incarcerated students introduced in several prison university programs take on paradigmatic significance. They show that democratizing the university does not simply mean expanding educational provision in the abstract; it means concretely removing the obstacles that prevent the exercise of a right.

Yet a decolonial university cannot be built through broader access alone. It also requires a profound transformation in the ways knowledge is produced, transmit-

ted, and recognized. In this regard, the decolonization of curricula represents a necessary step, provided it is not reduced to a merely symbolic gesture of inclusion. The issue is not simply one of adding authors from different cultural traditions, but of critically interrogating the historical conditions that have rendered certain forms of knowledge universal and others marginal, some texts canonical and others invisible, some languages academically authoritative and others negligible. By “Western knowledge,” I refer not to all forms of knowledge produced in the West, but to a dominant epistemological tradition grounded in claims of universality, objectivity, and neutrality that emerged alongside European modernity. This tradition has historically privileged written texts, disciplinary specialization, and the separation between subject and object, reason and emotion, nature and culture. Decolonial scholars contrast this model with other epistemic traditions—including Indigenous, African, and many non-Western knowledge systems—that tend to emphasize relationality, collective memory, situated experience, oral transmission, and reciprocal relations between humans, communities, and the natural world.

To decolonize the curriculum, then, means unsettling the hierarchy that has placed Western knowledge at the center of the world, and opening space for a plurality of perspectives that are not merely ornamental additions, but capable of redefining the very boundaries of what can be thought. Within this horizon, the reconfiguration of disciplinary structures also becomes crucial. Disciplines are not neutral containers of knowledge, but historically situated technologies for organizing reality. A decolonial university, therefore, cannot limit itself to diversifying content; it must also interrogate the disciplinary forms through which knowledge has been classified, segmented, and hierarchized. This requires fostering interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches capable of sustaining what may be called an ecology of knowledges. It is precisely on this terrain that the contribution of Southern epistemologies becomes decisive. De Sousa Santos has argued with particular clarity that there can be no global social justice without global cognitive justice [3]. No body of knowledge, however sophisticated, can claim on its own to exhaust the intelligibility of the world, because relations of domination are mediated through heterogeneous temporalities, memories, experiences, and grammars that cannot be reduced to a single theoretical language.

The response to the crisis of the neoliberal university, then, lies neither in relativism nor in a generic celebration of difference, but in the construction of real conditions for dialogue, translation, and reciprocity among heterogeneous forms of knowing. In this sense, cognitive justice is not a secondary or supplementary demand in relation to the democratization of the university; insofar as it concerns the redistribution of epistemic authority in ways that are also normatively and legally consequential. It requires acknowledging that knowledge is not the exclusive property of academic institutions, but a collective, situated, and relational process one that may also emerge in territories, in social practices, in political movements, and in the historical experiences of oppression and resistance.

A fundamental consequence follows from this: the decolonization of the university cannot take place without a profound redefinition of its relationship to society. The modern university has often constructed its authority through separation, producing the idea that legitimate knowledge must remain at a necessary distance from

the social world. A decolonial perspective, by contrast, requires this distance to be critically rethought not in order to dissolve the institution's critical autonomy, but to free it from its self-referential closure. This means developing forms of research, teaching, and public engagement that do not merely "transfer" knowledge outward, but are capable of learning from communities, conflicts, marginalized subjectivities, and the questions that emerge from social life itself. Within this horizon, the university is no longer the exclusive site of knowledge production, but a space traversed by multiple forms of collective intelligence. To decolonize it, then, means restoring to it a more demanding and more radical public function: not that of adapting competitive individuals to the logics of the global market, but of contributing to the creation of more just forms of life, knowledge, and coexistence.

In *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive*, Achille Mbembe advances, in this direction, the idea of a "critical cosmopolitan pluriversalism" as a possible horizon for the university of the future [7]. This perspective stands in explicit opposition to the traditional model of the Western university, historically founded upon a Eurocentric epistemological order that has systematically excluded or subordinated forms of knowledge emerging from the Global South, from Indigenous worlds, and from subaltern subjectivities. The pluriversalism evoked by Mbembe does not consist in a mere multiplication of differences within an otherwise unchanged institutional structure. Rather, it points to the possibility of constructing an academic space capable of hosting multiple intellectual traditions without subordinating them to a single ordering principle.

Its critical dimension, however, reminds us that no epistemic opening can ever be politically neutral. Every form of knowledge must be interrogated in light of the historical conditions of its production, the power relations that traverse it, and the exclusions it helps sustain. In this sense, pluriversalism is not a depoliticized form of academic multiculturalism, but a practice of displacing the center. Its cosmopolitan dimension, moreover, does not invoke a false and abstract universality, but rather the possibility of placing distinct traditions of thought into relation without erasing their specificity. Finally, its openness implies an understanding of the university not as a closed and self-contained institution, but as one permeable to the urgencies of the present, to social movements, to struggles for recognition, and to emergent forms of knowledge production. From this perspective, to decolonize the university means restoring its capacity to become not merely an apparatus for the reproduction of power, but a space in which other ways of thinking and inhabiting the world can be imagined and enacted—even through conflict.

3 Archive, Language, and Space. Translation, Authority, and the Legal Ordering of Knowledge

A decolonial critique of the university would remain incomplete if it were confined to curricula or to a mere revision of the canon. The coloniality of knowledge is not sedimented only in the contents of teaching; it is inscribed in the materiality of institutions, in their archives, in their language policies, in the distribution of space, in their architectures, symbols, and in the administrative dispositifs that regulate access

and permanence. In this sense, the modern university is not simply a site for the transmission of knowledge, but a complex apparatus of selection, classification, and epistemic authorization. Achille Mbembe has forcefully insisted on this point, arguing that decolonization cannot be reduced to a nominalistic or iconographic dispute, and yet must necessarily also traverse the economy of symbols, the memory inscribed in buildings, the material quality of the spaces in which intellectual life is produced, as well as the systems of access and management that have transformed higher education into a measurable, purchasable, and assessable product, governed by abstract units of equivalence [7].

When Mbembe writes that access is not simply a matter of demographic openness, but of being able to inhabit an institution and experience it as one's own, he invites us to recognize that the decolonial question is always also a question of belonging, livability, and recognition. The neoliberal university, by contrast, tends to produce estrangement: it is a machine of credits, rankings, classifications, continuous evaluation, and bureaucratic performativity; a space that demands adaptation rather than transformation. Within such a framework, formal access can coexist quite seamlessly with substantive exclusion.

This materiality of coloniality becomes even more visible when read through Santiago Castro-Gómez's reflection on the "hubris of the zero point" [8]. In its Enlightenment self-understanding, modern science legitimized itself as a language capable of rising above contingency, locality, memory, and historical languages, situating itself on a neutral platform from which the world could be observed objectively and universally (*ibid.*). Yet this neutrality is precisely the ideological name for a historically and geopolitically situated position. The modern university, insofar as it consecrates an abstract and universalizing scientific language, does not merely order knowledges; it also hierarchizes languages, speaking bodies, the memories deemed worthy of archiving, and those relegated to the status of oral residue without epistemic standing.

The academic archive thus becomes the site where a double violence is sedimented, operating not only as a repository of knowledge, but as a normative apparatus that implicitly regulates what can be recognized, validated, and authorized. On the one hand, it gathers, classifies, and preserves; on the other, it separates, depoliticizes, and often expropriates. Not everything that enters the archive enters it with equal dignity, and not everything excluded from it is therefore devoid of value. A decolonial critique of the archive, in this sense, does not simply consist in adding new sources or new authors, but in asking which histories have become documents and which have been reduced to noise, folklore, minor testimony, or pre-scientific residue. To decolonize the university therefore also means reopening the conflict over the language of knowledge, over the hierarchy between writing and orality, between canonical text and embodied memory, between institutional archive and the knowledges produced in struggle [3]. It is at this point that decolonization ceases to be a simple politics of inclusion and becomes a radical critique of the way in which Western knowledge has constructed its own claim to universality. The crucial point is that there can be no decolonization of the university without a transformation of the practices of knowledge themselves. The issue concerns not only who enters the university, or which authors appear on syllabi, but the very way in which truth is produced, problems are defined, research objects are constituted, and interpretive authority is distributed. It

is here that the contribution of the Epistemologies of the South becomes particularly fruitful. De Sousa Santos has shown with clarity that there can be no global social justice without global cognitive justice, and that the response to the epistemic monopoly of the modern university can consist neither in relativism nor in the mere celebration of difference, but rather in the construction of an ecology of knowledges capable of bringing scientific, practical, popular, territorial, Indigenous, feminist, and subaltern forms of knowing into relation without erasing their differences [9].

From this perspective, the work of intercultural translation he proposes constitutes one of the most significant methodological nodes of a decolonial university. What is at stake is not the imposition of a common language that absorbs everything into itself, but the search for forms of reciprocal intelligibility without “cannibalization,” without homogenization, and without the presumption that one historically situated lexicon can exhaustively name all the experiences of the world (*ibid.*). Translation, in this sense, is not an ancillary or merely pedagogical gesture, but a political and epistemological method that acknowledges the incompleteness of every form of knowledge and makes possible a non-extractive mode of knowing. For this reason, decolonization cannot be exhausted by a pedagogy of inclusion, which often leaves intact the hierarchies of enunciation and merely incorporates the other within already established theoretical frameworks. As methodological reflections in more recent decolonial scholarship have also emphasized, decolonizing research requires a profound reconsideration of the subjectivities involved in knowledge production and of the ways in which Western academia organizes knowledge, selects legitimate problems, and attributes value to methods. A decolonial methodology, then, does not consist in a pre-established protocol, but in a critical posture that decenters the knowing subject, renounces the sovereignty of the observer,

and recognizes that knowledge also emerges in social conflicts, collective practices, and in the historical experiences of oppression and resistance. From this perspective, the university should no longer conceive of itself as a self-sufficient center that exports knowledge outward, but as a porous space into which other knowledges enter, interrogate, destabilize, and compel the institution to redefine its own criteria of legitimacy. In this regard, de Sousa Santos speaks of a kind of “extension in reverse”: not only the university moving toward society, but society entering the university, bringing with it forms of knowledge, practices, needs, and languages that disciplinary knowledge cannot produce on its own (*ibid.*). It is perhaps here that the deepest difference between neoliberal reform and decolonial transformation can be measured: the former opens the university to the market, the latter opens it to the world; the former valorizes innovation as competitiveness, the latter understands it as the capacity to build non-hierarchical relations among knowledges and among historically unequal subjects.

A decolonial university, then, is not simply a more inclusive institution. It is an institution willing to cease coinciding with the monopoly of reason, to relinquish its claim to centrality, and to expose itself to the political and epistemic risk of being transformed by what it encounters.

4 Epilogue. Decolonizing the University as a Practice of Epistemic and Institutional Disobedience

If the coloniality of knowledge has constituted one of the deepest infrastructures of Western modernity, then decolonizing the university cannot be conceived as a simple reformist update of the institution, nor as a cosmetic operation of canon diversification. It is not enough to add a few authors from the Global South to teaching syllabi, nor to multiply lexicons of inclusion or declarations of principle about plurality. The problem is far more radical, because it concerns the historical form of the modern university as a space of epistemic authorization, a machine of social selection, and a site in which epistemic authority takes on forms that are deeply intertwined with legal and quasi-legal regimes of validation and exclusion.

In its neoliberal configuration, the contemporary university continues to function as a technology for ordering the world. It establishes which forms of knowledge deserve recognition as scientific, which forms of writing are considered rigorous, which languages are deemed worthy of international circulation, which subjects may aspire to academic legitimacy, and which, by contrast, are destined to remain in peripheral, ancillary, or merely testimonial positions. From this perspective, decolonization cannot be understood as a simple moral openness to alterity, but as a challenge to the very criteria through which the university has historically defined its monopoly over truth.

The strength of the decolonial paradigm lies precisely in having shown that the modern universal was never neutral. It was constructed as a particular that succeeded in imposing itself as a general norm, erasing its own historical and geographical situatedness in order to present itself as the natural horizon of the thinkable. The university has been one of the principal sites of this operation. It is within the university that Western knowledge has been able to narrate itself as disembodied reason, as the language of neutrality, as a superior form of access to reality. Yet what has presented itself as universality was, more precisely, a hegemonic universalization: a grammar of the world produced through a specific entanglement of colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and racialization.

In this sense, to decolonize the university means, first of all, interrupting its innocence. It means withdrawing the institution from the self-absolving narrative that represents it as a naturally progressive, emancipatory, and democratic space. Not because the university cannot become such a space, but because it never becomes one spontaneously. Every opening, every democratization, every movement toward cognitive justice is always the result of struggles, tensions, conflicts, and ruptures. Universities do not transform themselves. They are transformed when they are traversed, unsettled, and compelled to respond to questions that exceed their habitual languages.

For this reason, the decolonization of the university should not be conceived as an exclusively academic project. It is, above all, a political question—and political in a double sense. On the one hand, it directly concerns the redistribution of symbolic and material power: who has access to higher education, who is allowed to conduct research, who can speak, who can name the world. On the other hand, it concerns the very function of the university in contemporary society: whether it should con-

tinue to operate as a cog in neoliberal governmentality, or whether it might once again become a space for critical elaboration, democratic conflict, and the collective production of alternative imaginaries. The decisive point is that decolonization does not simply ask the university to become more inclusive. It asks it to accept a loss. It asks it to relinquish the epistemic privilege it has historically possessed. It asks it to abandon the illusion of being the sovereign center from which everything can be observed, ordered, and judged. In this sense, a decolonial university is not merely a university that “welcomes more”; it is a university willing to be transformed by what it encounters. It is a university that does not merely incorporate other subjects and other knowledges into pre-existing frameworks, but allows itself to be interrogated and destabilized by them. It is perhaps here that the deepest difference between inclusion and transformation emerges. Inclusion, if not accompanied by a critique of structures, risks producing little more than an expansion of the perimeter of the existing order. Transformation, by contrast, implies the possibility that the criteria of value may change, that the languages of legitimacy may shift, and that the ways of teaching, researching, writing, and evaluating may be fundamentally reconfigured. A decolonial university is not such because it better represents the diversity of the world, but because it changes the very way in which the world is rendered intelligible. This also entails a profound redefinition of the role of critical knowledge. Within the neoliberal framework, critique is increasingly tolerated only insofar as it remains harmless—confined to rhetorical exercise or to a specialist posture without institutional consequences. But a decolonial critique cannot be satisfied with merely describing the mechanisms of epistemic domination; it must also seek to sabotage their functioning, disarticulate their hierarchies, and produce fractures within their automatisms. This also means recognizing that knowledge does not arise only in university classrooms or canonical texts, but in social struggles, movements, margins, and in historical experiences of oppression and resistance. It means fully acknowledging that the university does not hold a monopoly over knowledge, and that precisely this renunciation may constitute the condition of its possible reinvention. From this point of view, one of the most urgent challenges concerns the relationship between the university and society. The academic institution has long been conceived as a separate sphere, the guardian of a distance that would supposedly guarantee the quality of thought. And yet, in a time marked by ecological crises, wars, global inequalities, forced migrations, the racialization of borders, territorial impoverishment, and generalized precarity, this separateness risks taking on the face of irrelevance. To decolonize the university therefore also means radically rethinking its location: no longer as a citadel of knowledge observing the world from the outside, but as a porous space traversed by the contradictions of the present, capable of learning from the struggles and knowledges that emerge beyond its institutional boundaries. It is in this perspective that the decolonial question becomes deeply intertwined with the democratic one. A decolonial university is not only more just from an epistemic point of view; it is also more democratic because it redistributes the right to speak, to interpret, and to be present. It does not neutralize conflict, but recognizes it as a constitutive dimension of intellectual life. It does not fear the political nature of knowledge, because it understands that every form of knowing is always situated within relations of force, and that the myth of neutrality has often functioned as a cover for the most effective

forms of domination. And yet, precisely for this reason, the decolonization of the university cannot be reduced to a new academic moralism. It is not a matter of replacing one canon with another, nor of producing new theoretical orthodoxies. Its deepest strength may lie, rather, in its capacity to keep the question open: Who speaks? From where do they speak? In whose name? With what effects? Which lives, which memories, which worlds are rendered thinkable, and which continue to remain at the margins of intelligibility? Decolonization, in this sense, is not an endpoint, but a permanent practice of critical vigilance toward the forms through which knowledge becomes institutionalized and hardened.

It is perhaps here that the notion of cognitive justice reveals its full theoretical and political power not as a mere rebalancing of representation, but as a condition for imagining another order of knowledge and, together with it, another social order. If colonial modernity imposed a division of the world founded on the hierarchization of peoples, territories, languages, and intelligences, then cognitive justice is not a secondary supplement to social justice, but one of its conditions of possibility. There can be no real transformation of inequalities without a transformation in the ways the world is known, described, and narrated. For this reason, the task of the university today should not be to adapt more efficiently to crisis, but to help render crisis intelligible and politically traversable. At a time when neoliberalism has colonized even desire, imagination, and the lexicon of the possible, decolonizing knowledge means restoring to thought an instituting function: the capacity not only to interpret the world, but to open spaces for thinking it otherwise.

Ultimately, then, to decolonize the university means reopening the question of the future. Not the future as the linear promise of modern progress, nor as the meritocratic rhetoric of individual competition, but as a field of still-contestable collective possibilities. It means defending and reinventing the university as one of the spaces in which it is still possible to resist the naturalization of the existing order, interrupt the reproduction of hierarchies, and cultivate a form of thought capable of responding to the wounds of the present. If the university is still to retain any public meaning, it will likely have to learn how to disobey: to disobey the market, the imperative of efficiency, and the false neutrality of the abstract universal. And perhaps only a university capable of disobedience can once again become a place in which knowledge does not reproduce the world as it is, but helps make it transformable, including the normative and legal orders through which that world is governed.

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