

Introduction: Coloniality of Knowledge and Epistemologies of Transformation

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The point of departure of this special issue of *Kult* is Latin America, and this is so because Latin America has a long – but largely neglected tradition of problematising the west as the logical starting point of valid and relevant theory, and as a privileged site of knowledge production. The Latin American critical academic tradition has developed in close cooperation with social and ethnic movements, and in this way it has always had exclusion as its main concern. More specifically, this tradition addresses two interlocked problems; one regards the place of indigenous and black thought and practices within the Latin American context — that is, it is concerned with exclusion, genocide and epistemicide *inside* of Latin America. The other is concerned with these same problems, but looking into *outside* places and practices. From these concerns emerge alternative, innovative and transforming inputs to anthropology, history, philosophy, political economy and sociology, which aim at contributing not only to the production of knowledge within the academic realm, but

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to the transformation of society as a whole. In recent years, this critical strand of thought has been known as the *modernity/coloniality perspective*, or the *decolonial perspective*. Some of the contributors to this issue are scholars known for heralding this theoretical strand, while others engage in discussion, elaboration, or critique to this perspective. All the articles, nevertheless, share some central concerns, which are worthwhile highlighting.

The first central concern regards the forgetting of the continued existence of structures of racism in the construction of knowledge, or the *coloniality of knowledge*. To speak of the coloniality of knowledge is to speak of a key aspect of the colonial power matrix. Coloniality refers to the fact that the relationship between colonialism and coloniality is structural and persisting, in opposition to the idea that colonialism is over. Central to both colonialism and coloniality is that the global ethnoracial hierarchy (that emerged with the ‘discovery’ of America) remains the main organizing principle of social relations on a world scale (Quijano 2000). Thus, the papers presented here proceed from an acknowledgment that our understanding of the world cannot limit itself to encompass only the occidental scientific renderings. Indeed, the western tradition of knowledge is only valid and useful for some ends; for others it is unworkable. Take the concepts of *Sumak Kawsay* or *Suma Qamaña* (the well living), a notion whose origin lies in the peoples from what is today known as Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru to understand the relationship between human beings and nature, history, society and democracy (Dávalos 2008).¹ To grossly explain the terms, *Sumak Kawsay* is Quichua and expresses the idea not of a better life, nor a life better than other peoples’. It expresses the idea of a *good life*. *Suma Qamaña* is Aymara, and like *Sumak Kawsay*, it refers to the good living, but with a communal element, that is, it roughly translates into English as the *good living together*. These notions,

¹ *Sumak Kawsay* has been endorsed in the Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008 (discussed in Catherine Walsh’s article, this issue), *Suma Qamaña* has entered the Bolivian Constitution of 2009. These inclusions within the legal political documents mark important changes for world democracies.

more precisely, refer not to what life and society are, but to what they could be.² In this sense, they are radical alternatives to the western idea of development. They are notions entailing *an other* way of being and living in the world where the links among human beings and between human beings and nature are not based on ideas of ontological separation, utility and exploitation but on ontological complementarity, reciprocity and respect. Sumak Kawsay and Suma Qamaña might not enable us to make rockets to reach Mars, but these concepts enable us to rethink democracy and conviviality so that they also include the environment and the life of future generations. So taking into account the current climate crisis and the immense problems of poverty on a global scale, Sumak Kawsay and Suma Qamaña are relevant notions not only to local, indigenous peoples, but also to political philosophy in general. They represent global concerns.

Another issue central to the concern of the essays presented here refers to the scholar's position in relation to his or her subject matter. While we have all been exposed to the fact that the studying subject cannot be separated from the studied object, this separation between observer and observed continues to be pivotal in much academic knowledge construction. Furthermore, we are historically, politically, corporeally, existentially and ethically involved in the problems we are addressing. Nevertheless, when scholars like the contributors to this issue insist that no one can hide in a neutral place, behind a desk, outside history (as we often pretend that we can do, in order to *appear objective*) the reaction of many of their peers is negative, and in some cases hostile. I believe that this has to do with an imaginary common to many academics according to which the problems of modernity and modern knowledge construction have been overcome. But if this is the case, then why do many people believe that *Ubuntu*³ is only a Linux operating system? Why do most world history

² Anders Burman, Personal communication.

³ Ubuntu is a Pan-African notion which refers to personhood, humanness and humanity. Ubuntu is one of the central philosophical concepts at the core of the South African Truth and Reconciliation process, and has entered the South African constitution. For different

books deal with the history of Europe and the US? Why is theory from the *South* at best seen as ‘postcolonial’ theory? And why is it likely that, when these issues are addressed, the person to expose them is rendered unscholarly and outdated?

The point I would like to highlight by addressing these issues regards the structural flaw in the way in which most academics continue to address the problems in Latin America and the world at large. The obliteration of the theorizing developed by the people they are concerned with confirms that western practices of knowledge construction and development continue to be embedded in a colonial logic where ‘we know, thus we develop you’. There is a difference between considerations of how we think of things, and in considerations of how we make sense of the connections that link things – these need not always be the same, and are definitely not the same in the context of *Ubuntu*, or of ‘democracy’ and ‘development’ in Latin America, as the example of Suma Qamaña and Sumak Kawsay show. This is illustrated in the contribution of Catherine Walsh concerning interculturality and plurinationality, that of Lia Rodrigues on the notion of space among devotees of Candomblè in Brazil, and Anders Burman’s on the notion of colonialism among urban Aymara indigenous people in Bolivia. To understand these *other* ways of creating meaning, knowledge and action requires *complex readings*. Basically, this entails not simply departing from the assumption that what is being talked of, wished for, worked towards, is the same as what *we* think it is. Likewise, as scholars, we need to take responsibility for our complicity in problems encountered on a world scale. This responsibility does imply abandoning the idea of Europe going out to save the world according to what Europeans think the world is, and instead understanding the other as the other, not as (an underdeveloped) part of the same (cf. Dussel 1995). Failing to do so places us in the role of the colonizer with the best intentions in the world. Precisely this failure to see our complicity, and the ways in which we part from the premise that there is one sole epistemic tradition from which to achieve truth and universality is what

presentations and discussions of Ubuntu, see for example Battle (2009), Bongmba (2006) and Ngoenha (2006).

Grosfoguel calls fundamentalism (this issue). According to him, the most powerful of the fundamentalisms today is the Eurocentric one, because it, to a great extent, succeeds in hiding its very nature.

In addition to addressing Eurocentrism, the following papers are examples of how non-Eurocentric work can be conducted. They demonstrate what adopting a different and epistemically diverse perspective throws back at us in terms of new knowledge and, of course, of new problems to be addressed. In the opening article Ramón Grosfoguel outlines the contributions of feminist and subalternized racial/ethnic scholarship in the context of research into globalization and political economy. At the same time, Grosfoguel's paper makes a useful introduction to the modernity/coloniality perspective and its different decolonial suggestions, such as 'border thinking', 'transmodernity' and 'socialization of power'. Edgardo Lander also departs from a critique of the Eurocentric character of knowledge in order to address what he calls 'the *natural* order of capital'. Lander explores the pervasiveness of the main assumptions of Eurocentric knowledge in the principles that guide current practices by which the global order of capital is planned, justified, and naturalized. He thereby demonstrates how these Eurocentric principles continue to define the legitimacy of political action at a world scale. In this way, highly political issues such as the Eurocentric character of legitimate knowledge in the global realm are depoliticized, made natural, and *other* political projects and their corresponding fundamenting knowledges are labeled as *misinformed*.

Catherine Walsh's paper reflects her contributions to the discussions in the Constitutional Assembly of Ecuador in 2008. She explores the substance of notions such as 'interculturality', 'multiculturality' and 'plurinationality', looking into the antecedent adoptions of interculturality by states, within their constitutions (these states include, Canada, the Netherlands, Bolivia among others). Walsh examines the concrete contents of these notions among the biggest political actors in the making of

the new Ecuadorean Constitution, namely the indigenous peoples. Additionally, she analyses the proposals of peasants and black people. Her essay is a thorough examination into these *other* political and existential projects that have a clear decolonial potentiality to which many of the writers in this issue refer. Lia Rodrigues, in turn, draws our attention to the importance of space — not as a symbolic representation but as physical presence imbued with vital energy (*axè*) within Candomblè epistemology and ontology. In this way, she raises our awareness of the diasporic character of lived religion, but – most importantly – of the ways in which the spiritual is an integral part of people’s everyday lives and particular spaces, and how they, with the spiritual, engage in transforming spatial orders by contesting the very meaning of ‘space’.

Jan Gustafsson’s work assesses some of the assumptions of the decolonial perspective. Gustafsson’s questions are located in the affirmation of identity that foregrounds the processes of change in the so-called ‘left turn’ in Latin America. Specifically, Gustafsson is concerned with three problems. The first is related to essentialization, the second to the apparent contradiction inherent in colonial categories becoming the point of departure for the struggles of the oppressed while at the same time, being the same categories used to oppress them (i.e. ‘indio’ or ‘negro’). Finally, Gustafsson is concerned that in the context of these struggles there might be a danger of the ‘exclusion of the excluders by the excluded’. In this way he reminds us of the importance of (self)critique in, and between, the excluded and also stresses the importance of intercultural dialogue, and of utopia, as part of the processes necessary to avoid these problems. In the next paper, Anders Burman also explores colonial categories – more specifically the idea of colonialism as an illness in Bolivia. Anders Burman discusses it from the perspective of urban Aymara thought, showing how the notion of colonialism in El Alto entails an Aymara critique of colonial modernity. Burman’s paper reassesses the idea of coloniality by arguing that to indigenous peoples in Latin America notions like coloniality or

postcoloniality are not relevant because, to them, colonialism has been a continuum for the last 500 years. On these grounds, he stresses the importance of ‘anchoring’ the decolonial perspective in specific places and of taking subaltern perspectives into account.

Madina Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo’s paper explores modernity writing Russia and the Americas into its history and showing their role in the context of the past and present global economic and political configurations. Besides illustrating how coloniality was, and is, an intrinsic part of Eastern European modernity and has worked efficiently in the context of the communist and socialist projects, the authors criticize the idea of revolution for being ‘meaningful only within the ideology of progress and development, within the realm of sameness’. The idea of revolution, they state, is an idea made obsolete in the context of today’s global polycentric capitalism. Instead, they propose and defend ‘the decolonial option’.

Asger Sørensen’s essay introduces the thought of one of the central figures in critical scholarship today, namely Enrique Dussel. Among other things, Dussel has influenced scholars like Ramón Grosfoguel and Walter Mignolo. In Sørensen’s essay, political philosophy is discussed from a Dusselian viewpoint, and a few features of Dussel’s work on exclusion, modernity, science, universality and democracy are outlined. Finally, the closing paper engages in a discussion of coloniality from a Scandinavian perspective, exploring the specificities of Scandinavian colonialism. Lars Jensen has a two-fold concern; that of the persistence of the colonial legacy in today’s Scandinavia, and that of the danger which the decolonial perspective can encounter if ignoring local particularities. Specifically he addresses these problems by looking closer into Danish and Norwegian colonialism, and by exploring the ideas of the pivotal Swedish proto-Enlightenment figure, Carl von Linné.

The overt project of this volume is to counter the selective memory of western academic knowledge construction by suggesting alternative knowledge productions that have grown out of various Latin American contexts, but that also challenge universalist approaches to issues such as development, modernity, interculturality, democracy and colonialism. As such they reach beyond a Latin American context, and pose questions that go to the heart of knowledge production and its foundation. Indeed, if exclusion is to be overcome and interculturality and democracy achieved, we need to change our traditional view on empirical material as merely colourful accessories to an implicit Eurocentric system of knowledge. The project of this issue of *Kult* is thus pertinent and crucial in an epoch in which the organization and government of the world are being discussed. Again, it is worth reiterating that the problems of coloniality and knowledge not only are *old* problems, they are also problems that remain *unresolved*. And it is the case with these problems that they are not a regionalist issue —to discuss coloniality, knowledge, and decoloniality from Latin America, Russia and Scandinavia *is* to discuss the world, and is a step towards discussions which are, in truth, universal and including.

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