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# Legitimation of knowledge, epistemic justice and the intercultural university: towards an epistemology of ‘living well’

PAULA RESTREPO

Throughout modernity and up to the present, indigenous communities over Latin America have had a difficult, even traumatic, relationship with institutionalized, Western-originated systems of knowledge. What we today call the ‘Indigenous Movement’ has had to face both the Kantian-Humboldtian university, and the corporate university or university of excellence. Both versions of the modern university have either ignored, or consistently contributed in a systematic, if not always deliberate, way to drafting the epistemic, political, and economic disavowal of Latin American indigenous peoples. Both have turned indigenous communities either into objects of study, or into targets for acculturation and incorporation through monocultural indoctrination. Education has been a vehicle of Coloniality and, in this sense, a tool to enforce and strengthen a global project that excludes indigenous people and the knowledge they produce.

Recently, indigenous communities have confronted these two versions of the modern university in a critical and proactive way by creating what they call the intercultural university. It is important to note that this indigenous system of knowledge is not intended solely for indigenous communities, and that introducing indigenous themes in its programmes is not its sole purpose. Rather, this kind of university attempts to question the logic that has been reproduced for centuries by the hegemonic, modern university. Its implementation involves a radical transformation in structures, and not just a change in contents. The intercultural university entails a mental liberation process, as part of a decolonial project. The Intercultural University, asserts Mignolo, rethinks fundamental questions about knowledge<sup>1</sup> from an indigenous perspective. These questions, according to Fonet-Betancourt, involve a review of what should be known, for what purpose, how to know it, and what should be the criteria to legitimize knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

My intention in this article is not to carry out a comprehensive survey of intercultural universities, but to reflect instead on the particular achievements of one of them, *Unitierra* (Universidad de la Tierra) in Chiapas,<sup>3</sup> Mexico, and to present its work as a contribution to intercultural studies and the construction of knowledge in general. The theoretical perspectives that I use in this article are the critical-liberating intercultural philosophy of Raúl Fonet-Betancourt, critical interculturality, as proposed by Catherine Walsh, and the decolonial approach, especially as advocated by Walter Mignolo. Mignolo’s approach has been chosen because rather than simply developing a critique of the modern-colonial system, he has tried to understand and illustrate the many ways in which Latin American indigenous communities have faced and responded to this system.

Decolonial and critical-intercultural proposals not only denounce injustices, but are also productive, in that they generate alternative proposals, including many that are not confined to academia. Decoloniality and interculturality strive to find existing alternatives to coloniality. In this sense, describing and drawing attention to an alternative project of knowledge construction of global importance,<sup>4</sup> such as Universidad de la Tierra, becomes a decolonial exercise. To regard practices outside academia as valid, and even as necessary, attempts at the construction of knowledge otherwise, politically and philosophically nourishes the decolonial proposal, and challenges the methodological order of the Western Social Sciences. The supposed objects of study are not a source of information anymore, but instead a source of knowledge.

My analysis makes use of Immanuel Wallerstein's theoretical and methodological approaches. Wallerstein was one of the key developers of world-systems analysis. Along with Ilya Prigogine, he asserts that when a system starts to decay, it faces a bifurcation. Wallerstein's systemic approach has a political and philosophical background that suggests that we humans have choices, that is, a degree of freedom that allows us to choose among possible paths. From a geo-historical perspective, Universidad de la Tierra struggles to make one of those paths possible, one emerging 'from below and to the left'.

The methodology used here is based on the theoretical insights of decoloniality. It is close to what anthropologists call an 'emic perspective'. The author of this text adheres both theoretically and politically to the proposal of the intercultural university, as embodied by Universidad de la Tierra. In this proposal the methodology of classic anthropology, whose vein is descriptive, intertwines with the methodology of classical philosophy, whose vein is normative. This perspective is not methodologically new; it has been long used in philosophy, when someone writes explanatory or exegetic texts about Hegel or Kant, in celebratory tone. What is relatively new is the use of the perspective of the oppressed, instead of that of Western authors.

One of the main sources of this methodological approach comes from Liberation Theology, which has highlighted the ability of the oppressed not only to produce knowledge that has an epistemic and moral value, but also to nourish models of life full of solidarity that enhance the existential possibilities of human beings.<sup>5</sup> One of the scopes of the epistemic privilege of the oppressed is that, according to Mohanty,<sup>6</sup> it shows the epistemic constraints generated by social conditions. When history is narrated it presents just one side of reality, the perspective of the powerful. But the faces of the weak, the poor, the oppressed, are hidden or do not come to light because they often do not have the means to be heard or, rather, to overcome the repression of those who do. However, without their perspective, history is incomplete. According to Gutierrez, a 'story of captivity and deliverance—which must be retold, now, from the viewpoint of the oppressed—is the constant undercurrent of our contemporary praxis in Latin America'.<sup>7</sup>

The superiority of the oppressed goes beyond their ability to describe the dark side of the world, or to account for other possible worlds. Rather, their experiences generate other possibilities of being-in-the-world that, according to Sobrino, lead us to salvation through shared solidarity: the salvation from the

civilization of consumption, and ecological or human disaster.<sup>8</sup> The experience of the oppressed is not that of pure negation. Instead, it is the affirmation of another world.

The argument which I develop here is that the intercultural university, as analysed from a critical perspective, is an alternative to the hegemonic university and to the forces that have produced it. This means that parallel to the emergence of a critical intercultural university, a radical epistemological and social transformation must occur. I will show how this intercultural university uses intercultural learning and the pursuit of knowledge, not as elements that contribute to sustain the nation-state (the goal of the Kantian-Humboldtian university), but instead as elements that contribute to the construction of a world other, a world which many worlds can fit into. I wish to emphasize that I do not try to speak on behalf of this university—rather, I talk about it here because I believe that its thoughts and practices are valuable and exemplary.

### **The learning process at CIDECI-Unitierra**

Unitierra is not an intercultural university only because of its students, professors and curricula, but also because of its structure and its political, epistemic, epistemological and economic bases. An intercultural university such as Unitierra regards education as a cornerstone to build, support and legitimize philosophical, sociocultural, political and economic projects. Its goals are not the pursuit of economic growth, social development or the social advancement of individuals, but instead the respect of ecological and communitarian equilibriums through other forms of understanding politics, economics and knowledge. Its work seeks to redistribute the ability to build a different kind of knowledge, of politics and of economics. It has a community orientation that pursues ‘living well’—a philosophical category that I will develop later—rather than the capitalistic individualism that hegemonic universities encourage.

Understanding what Unitierra is and its goals requires contextualizing it inside the system that contains it and which makes it possible, supplying its philosophical, political, social and economic underpinnings: the SIIDAE (Intercultural Indigenous System of Learning and Studies Abya Yala). Unitierra is one of seven centres of SIIDAE. This is a community of communities that strive for epistemic justice. Epistemic justice means to guarantee the conditions that allow human cultures to create their own life projects from their everyday knowledge. Different knowledges create diverse worlds, because they result in actions that shape the way in which cultures manage their materiality, time and space. It is because of these critical bases that SIIDAE does not believe in a hegemonic structure of knowledge, such as the one expressed by the hegemonic university. However, this approach does not mean it is unscientific or anti-intellectual. Rather, it is a system that understands knowledge not as an individualizing and individual privilege, but instead as a communitarian experience that promotes resistance—against the ravages of the capitalist world—and ‘living well’.

Although all centres from SIIDAE are equally important, I will focus my analysis on the relationship between the Centre of Comprehensive Training Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (CIDECI) and Unitierra, because they are more

directly focused on education. The full name of the university is CIDECI-Unitierra. The CIDECI 'is an indigenous centre because of its task, its definition, the way it works, its constituents and the people who are part of it'.<sup>9</sup> It is aimed primarily, but not exclusively, at indigenous youth. There they can learn arts and crafts. The institution incorporates elements of various learning approaches, based on students' interests. According to the coordinator, these elements have emerged in the process and CIDECI has adopted them because people find them useful in their path to form a community.<sup>10</sup> The learning system fits the social and cultural conditions of the students and their communities and seeks to reinforce them, rather than trying to inculcate alien and homogenizing values. Students are free to choose the workshops they want, and are also free to move back to their communities when they deem it necessary. Workshops are places where teachers are not authority figures that lecture students on how to do things; instead, the teachers guide and advise them occasionally. Advanced, intermediate and beginner students are all together in the same workshops, so that they teach each other, while learning three elements: a specific skill; how to get into the process of learning; and how to teach. This dynamic allows many students to become teachers at the Centre, something that has emerged out of necessity, due to limited funding.

Workshops do not have formal curricula; students can come at any time of the year and, although the courses last three months, the system accommodates the schedules and needs of the students. If the student only needs, or is only able, to stay a month, the system can adapt.<sup>11</sup> This learning system is not certified by the Mexican government by means of a diploma. CIDECI-Unitierra is an autonomous institution that does not seek official recognition, but instead strives for the legitimation from communities and indigenous peoples. Through this form of learning the CIDECI believes that its students are immersed in learning three principles:

- 1 Learning to do: they learn by doing, as the native communities do. While learning a task or skill, students are introduced to the second principle: learning to learn.<sup>12</sup>
- 2 Learning to learn means that the learning activity must unleash self-learning dynamics.<sup>13</sup>
- 3 The third principle is to learn to be more. This principle materializes at the same time that the other two are attempted, based on the aforementioned learning elements.

We try to keep the spirit that still survives in villages and communities, where production and survival activities are not dominated by greed. What matters is ontonomy:<sup>14</sup> what you are, what governs you and puts you in the world, what allows you to achieve a being-more-you, a you in the infinity of quality, one that does not pervert you. This third principle is the ground that puts us in front of the modern world as a countertrend.<sup>15</sup>

The result of following these three learning principles, according to the CIDECI, is that students are able to achieve the goals of self-reliance, self-worth and self-management at three levels: individual, group and community. The students

themselves decide when they have achieved these goals and when they are ready to leave and go back to their communities to replicate what they have learned. At that moment they are entitled to a small monetary grant to develop a project in their communities. They are trained 'to resist and to strengthen the organizational capacity of their peoples and their communities',<sup>16</sup> not for personal development or for the labour market.

The creation of CIDECI in 1989 was the first step in the construction of the whole System. Its founders began working in a space provided by the Salesians, from where they were later expelled. At that time, they had no other plan, because they have always operated without long-term projects. Unitierra emerged from the outrage which this people felt as a response to their expulsion. Initially, they referred to this project as a polytechnic or as the University of the Poor, trying not to attract much attention. But with the expulsion came the question: Why does knowledge have to be legitimized in the formal, Westernized institutions' way? Why is it not possible for us to be a university that legitimizes knowledge from below and to the left?

The university is 'de la Tierra'<sup>17</sup> first of all because it is firmly planted on 'holy mother earth' and its curricula look towards encouraging people to become more attached to it. Second, it has a vision that encompasses the whole earth as a system, believing that to achieve interculturality implies to change the whole world. CIDECI-Unitierra regards itself as a companion to indigenous communities, and tries to enhance the cognitive, organizational and practical abilities to resist.<sup>18</sup>

CIDECI supports the workshops and Unitierra the open seminars. These are attended by natives, academics, activists and people from around the world who are interested in the university. Some of the participants are permanent and some are floating, as the researcher who wrote this article.

### **Political-epistemological context of the intercultural university**

In the following section, I will focus on two key seminars which the organization holds on a regular basis, and will use these as clear examples to explicate the way in which CIDECI-Unitierra operates, and the goals it aims to achieve. The *Immanuel Wallerstein Permanent Seminar* is held the first Saturday of each month. It was established because some organizations around Chiapas began to assert that the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), one of the spiritual and intellectual cores of this system, was making many mistakes. SIIDAE's coordinator agreed that there were misunderstandings about the ideas of the EZLN. He proposed to study the texts of Wallerstein, who had helped them to understand the world as a geo-historical system and the EZLN as a key political player in it. *The Sixth Declaration and the Other Campaign Analysis Workshop* is a seminar that takes place every Thursday. A selection of short texts that deal with issues relevant to the analysis of the relationship between the Zapatistas and the world is read at each weekly session. By exploring the themes of the two seminars and trying to understand their relationship with the SIIDAE, we can better understand how CIDECI-Unitierra engages with its local, regional, national and global contexts, both in theoretical and practical ways.

The Immanuel Wallerstein Permanent Seminar's initial task was to study the work of Wallerstein, first to understand the novelty of the EZLN and the Zapatista movement from the interpretive world-systems analytical scheme,<sup>19</sup> and second, to make explicit the moral and political commitments of Unitierra.<sup>20</sup> As a system, Unitierra regards itself as part of a larger system, namely, the world-system. This type of analysis seeks to explain the social, political and economic relationships, from a *longue durée* historical perspective that covers the entire planet, i.e. geo-historically, and to understand the world as a totality composed of interconnected parts, with operational rules and a certain continuity.

The world-system we inhabit nowadays is the modern/colonial capitalist world-system, which arose in the sixteenth century with the so-called 'Discovery of America'. European conquistadores arrived in the Americas and imposed conditions and epistemologies that created a world of oppression and death for local cultures and to humanity as a whole.<sup>21</sup> Since it is located in a geo-historical context, Unitierra believes that the reality which determines its future options is not only that of the nation-state, but also that of the modern/colonial capitalist world-system. Unitierra tries to understand itself and the Zapatista movement, trace the origin of their resistance all the way to the birth of the world-system they inhabit, propose actions and understand those of the Zapatista movement, everything as part of the current world-system. In other words, the present of Unitierra is a continuous weaving together of its past and future.

The modern/capitalist world-system, as Wallerstein has been arguing for years, is in crisis, a crisis that has become more visible since 1968, when the limits of the system began to be apparent. But the crisis emerged out of structural problems, out of contradictions that the system had since its birth<sup>22</sup> and that could destroy it. This systemic crisis is giving rise to a bifurcation, which offers two options as possible trajectories to follow once the old system expires. On one side is the vision of the World Social Forum and on the other side is that of the World Economic Forum.<sup>23</sup> Following Wallerstein's approach, Unitierra works assuming that this world-system has reached its limits and that the disorder and entropy are revealing a terminal crisis. 'If you look at the world from that angle and look at what we're doing, then what we're doing is valid. We're in the future, and we're sounding an alert because we also believe that the critical fluctuations over the next few years will be such that they'll bring a catastrophe.'<sup>24</sup> In this vein, Unitierra proposes and promotes interculturality as the best option of the bifurcation.

The socio-historical context in which Unitierra operates is a national and global structural crisis, with political and practical consequences that are unsustainable and irreparable. It was in this political scenario that the EZLN arose in 1994, helping to accelerate the terminal crisis of the current world-system and to strengthen and renew the options to it. In agreement with this view, Wallerstein regards the Zapatista rebellion as 'the most important social movement in the world—the barometer and the igniter of antisystemic movements around the world'.<sup>25</sup> On 1 January 1994, both the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the EZLN entered the Mexican and world scene. According to Wallerstein, the Zapatistas claimed with this that their 500-year struggle for justice and recognition was structurally linked to the struggle against neoliberalism.<sup>26</sup>

They emerged then as a force that placed their struggle in a historical and global perspective.

The transformation goals proposed by Unitierra go beyond the local or national contexts; they seek a radical transformation of politics in which power circulates from the bottom up. This idea is present in the Zapatista principle, 'Lead by obeying'.<sup>27</sup> In 2005, the movement became much more globalized when in late June, the Zapatistas launched the *Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle*.<sup>28</sup> It asserts that they have decided to join forces with other communities and social movements in Mexico and the world to develop a shared position of resistance to neoliberal globalization. Through this action, they are saying that, like capitalism, revolt must also become global. The proposed political alliance created in Mexico that seeks to 'build a national programme of struggle' is given the name of the *Other Campaign*. The Zapatistas offer their assistance and support to Mexicans and everyone in resistance around the world, and express their willingness and desire to learn from them.<sup>29</sup> Although this moment marks a more inclusive second stage of the movement, since 1994 the Zapatistas had become an example for many, who saw in their uprising a path of hope to believe that 'another world is possible'.

In the context of Chiapas, the Zapatista uprising gave visibility and political weight to actors who had hitherto remained invisible.<sup>30</sup> The uprising made the world turn its face to look at them and support their actions. In this scenario, and not without tensions, threats and attacks by the Mexican army and paramilitary groups, the Zapatistas have managed to establish *de facto* autonomous communities. These communities work with unparalleled political sophistication by implementing radical democracy measures such as the 'Juntas del Buen Gobierno', councils which allow them to enact the idea of 'lead by obeying'.

The Zapatista movement has given a centrality to the indigenous people of Chiapas that has allowed the emergence and maintenance of a university such as CIDECI-Unitierra. This institution regards itself as operating in the shadow of the Zapatistas: they are the living subject that gives it shelter and density in history, without which the project of an intercultural university would not be possible. In this sense, the coordinator asserts, 'All of this could only be done within the panorama of what the Zapatista struggle has been able to open up: autonomy, self-determination, radical democracy, no to party politics, no to taking power.'<sup>31</sup>

In this context, since 2013 the Zapatistas have also been developing the 'escuelitas Zapatistas', a proposal that seeks, from the Zapatista bases and the 'Juntas del Buen Gobierno', to teach people outside the Zapatista communities in Mexico and the world about the achievements, successes and failures of the Zapatista self-government. They send direct invitations to people who in one way or another have been in contact with the movement. They welcome them into their communities, enabling them to live and share their everyday life, and to teach them about what they have constructed politically.

Just as the nation-state is the perfect niche of the Kantian-Humboldtian university, and globalized capitalism of the corporate university, the environment created by the Zapatista movement is the niche that makes possible the existence of a university such as CIDECI-Unitierra in Chiapas. The conditions created by the Zapatista movement have allowed this university to grow up on the fertile soil



of 'living well', and enabled it to assume a critical position concerning concepts and practices such as knowledge, politics, economics and everyday life that have been created by various hegemonic institutions, including universities. Interculturality, Fornet-Betancourt asserts, is only possible when a total intercultural transformation of the whole social life is undertaken,<sup>32</sup> and that is exactly what the Zapatista movement has done in places in Chiapas.

### **A critique of Western approaches to knowledge and a response to the hegemonic university**

The actions of CIDECI-Unitierra should be understood as active and critical responses to an understanding of knowledge and the world that is currently represented by both the Kantian-Humboldtian university and the corporate university and their sociopolitical contexts. I will summarize the origins and scopes of these two Western models of knowledge institutions in the next paragraphs, and then analyse the alternative introduced by intercultural universities such as Unitierra.

First, I will address the Kantian-Humboldtian university and its relationship with modern nation-states. The French Revolution produced social change for Europe and the rest of the world. The basis of this transformation was the 'normalization of change and the reformulation of the concept of sovereignty, now residing with the People, understood as "citizens"'.<sup>33</sup> Besides its effect on France and Europe, the French Revolution also led to consequences in America, first in Haiti in the early nineteenth century with the 'first black revolution', and later in other Latin American countries also influenced by the struggle for independence in America. European colonies in the Americas achieved independence through a decolonization movement that only meant the end of colonialism, not the end of coloniality. In other words, the process of political restructuring undertaken by the independence and the formation of nation-states in Latin America retained the same mythic-epistemic structure: Coloniality.

With regard to the organization of knowledge, social transformations catalysed by the French Revolution played a role in at least two arenas: the advent of the Kantian-Humboldtian university and the birth of the social sciences as separate disciplines. The Humboldtian proposal complements the rational analysis of knowledge proposed by Kant with a social function: promoting progress and the sustainability of the nation-state. Thus, it is an institution linked to the ideological project of the nation-state. In the Humboldtian model, scientific progress and instruction are grouped, and the university emerges as a connector between the production of knowledge on culture (research) and culture as a learning process (teaching).<sup>34</sup> This type of university is the result of the search for an institution that allows the replacement of old social forms and the establishment of self-awareness and self-determination, without the destruction associated with a revolution. The university was a key institution for the construction of nation-states around the world, but in Latin America it also served as part of the process of decolonization. The insertion of the Renaissance university in Latin America was part of the process of epistemic, political and economic recolonization, and the Kantian-Humboldtian university continues and enhances this process with

new tools. Sacred reason is displaced by secular reason, but from both perspectives knowledge produced by Afro and indigenous cultures has been regarded as evil, primitive thinking that has to be eliminated.

In addition to the birth of the Kantian-Humboldtian university, the French Revolution also catalysed the consolidation of the social sciences. After the dramatic political changes that took place at the end of the eighteenth century, came an era of normalization of those changes. The social sciences, asserts Wallerstein, emerged in response to the need to understand and manage change, so that government and society could be organized around the idea of progress.<sup>35</sup> The study of the past of the so-called 'historical nations' was the task of History, while Economics, Political Science and Sociology focused on the present time in countries that were considered as constantly changing societies. But other societies were considered static or societies in which change was introduced by the historical nations through colonialism, war or commerce. The aforementioned four disciplines were not considered appropriate to study these societies; so they became the object of Oriental Studies and Anthropology. Oriental Studies originated as the study of petrified literate peoples,<sup>36</sup> while the people studied by anthropologists were regarded as 'pristine survivors of a timeless past'.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, the social sciences divided intellectual labour to study the peoples, with some social scientists focusing on the past and present of the 'historical societies' while the others studied the 'societies without history'. The social sciences and their intellectual division of labour were justified by an alleged historical sovereignty of European thought, and by the relationships that European culture established with other cultures and with itself. This division of labour took place within a university that was becoming Kantian-Humboldtian and both the division and university were tools of political legitimacy. The leaders of such political-epistemic transformation were France, England and Germany. After the Second World War, the economic and political landscape changed, and the United States became the most influential country, replacing Germany, France and England.

The Kantian-Humboldtian university survives to this day because of the role it plays in the sustenance and evolution of the nation-state. However, once this starts to break down, a new model of university begins to emerge: the Corporate University or University of Excellence. In Western countries, this change began in the 1970s, while in the formerly called 'third world countries' the corporate model was first introduced in the late 1980s, but this gained momentum following the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>38</sup>

In this transformation process many public universities are disappearing or have been transformed gradually into 'universities of excellence'. As part of this shift, areas of knowledge such as the humanities and some social sciences have started to disappear or come under threat, as they are not considered useful for the new globalized world order.<sup>39</sup> The same process has taken the university increasingly closer to business and entrepreneurial thinking, leaving aside its critical face, as it pursues efficient and instrumental knowledge. Academics are not the only ones aware of these transformations; social movements such as the Zapatistas have perceived them as well, because they see themselves as actors in the process of nation-state abolishment.<sup>40</sup> Critical academics such as Readings, as well as the Zapatistas, regard the current world as one in which political and economic

dominance by way of the nation-state is fading, being replaced by a global economy. The difference between their perspectives is in the way they see the future. For Readings, the university is no longer an ideological instrument of the nation-state; it is becoming a consumer-oriented autonomous corporation.<sup>41</sup> The Zapatistas regard neoliberal globalization and its academic manifestation, the corporate university, as just one of the paths available before us. The other one is represented by the intercultural university and by what they, and many other leftist movements such as those grouped in the World Social Forum, look for: democracy, freedom, justice and dignity. Their actions are guided by the hope that 'another world is possible'. CIDECI-Unitierra was born and is rooted in the same hope and is working for its creation.

### **Living well and development**

If the French Revolution ignited a passion for change and progress, the Second World War that consolidated the hegemony of the United States gave rise to the political-economic dimension we now identify as development. The concept of 'development' is one of the most dangerous elements of all the mythology that supports Coloniality, and Westernized universities have taken part in its emergence and expansion. It is an ontological category that started to emerge in the sixteenth century, became a political-epistemic category in the eighteenth century and a political-economic category from the first half of the twentieth century. While it is true that the modern economic concept of development does not arise until the twentieth century, it is also true that the idea of development as ontological principle dates back to the sixteenth century. Then begins what Dussel calls the 'myth of modernity'.<sup>42</sup>

This development project was possible because of the economic, political and epistemic conditions created by the 'Discovery of America'. Such conditions have persisted for years influencing the struggles for independence from Spain and Portugal inspired by the French Revolution, the economic development projects fostered by American President Truman, and more recent alternative development initiatives such as sustainable development. Development must be understood as a myth that has led to the construction of particular North–South relationships and as a 'perception that shapes reality'<sup>43</sup> in economic, political, epistemological and ontological senses; not as a concept describing a pre-existing reality.

Three elements are at the base of the concept of development and oppose alternatives to it: the notion of nature as an object and as a resource; the individual as the fundamental core of society; and the search for unity instead of diversity. Development has been supported by the nation-state and its power as a political and economic institution. Through the ideology of development, the nation-state became responsible for planning the elimination or modification of whatever was conceived as a barrier to development, namely, other forms of knowledge, cultural traditions, and different ways of relation to land and to other human beings. But when the nation-state began to lose strength and the globalization of markets started to take charge, the idea of development weakened and was replaced by that of sustainable development.<sup>44</sup>

Sustainable development seeks to make development more efficient without questioning it as a problematic idea, and without questioning the true sustainability of a society that promotes it. To keep development going, artificial limits to nature are set and no limits are imposed on the consumption capacity of our society. Sustainable development promised to correct the errors of development, but it also desecrates nature, breaks the bonds of reciprocity and community among human beings and between them and nature, and leads people to ignore the true limits of regeneration. As part of its dynamics, relationships among human beings and between them and nature are reduced to transactions and profits. In Latin America, sustainable development was introduced supported by a discourse that talked about equality, democracy, participation, protection of biodiversity and natural resources and respect for ethno-cultural diversity. But as reported by Castro,<sup>45</sup> Walsh<sup>46</sup> and Wallerstein,<sup>47</sup> these concepts were used as tools to gain better control of products and markets. Both development and sustainable development share a common ontological root, namely, the idea that there are states of life that must be overcome at all costs.

Critics understand development not only as an economic project that regards nature as a resource to be exploited and that seeks individual material satisfaction above all, but also as a cultural experience of European modernity that seeks the subordination of other cultures.<sup>48</sup> Many critics denounce the failure of the idea of development, having generated more economic inequality, depletion of natural and cultural diversity and promoted a brutal competition between individuals that leads to the destruction of community ties.<sup>49</sup> Development is only one of the facades of a process of destruction. If colonialism is the dark and inseparable side of modernity, the destruction of nature, the denial of cultural and natural diversity and individualism are the dark sides of development.

Unitierra became aware of its geo-epistemic context with the help of its seminars. Understanding this historical depth gives it a set of conceptual and political tools that have helped it generate epistemic abilities to resist. Epistemological and epistemic transformation here becomes a way to build better relationships with the world.

Unitierra regards the current world-system as a colonial one and the hegemonic university system as a key part of it. It locates itself in a critical position *vis-à-vis* the hegemonic university and its ways of producing and validating knowledge. As a community of resistance, Unitierra is a decolonial and decolonizing university. One of the main tools for this has been the transformation of hegemonic political, economic and everyday life ideas and actions through the pursuit of 'living well'. This is a critical and active principle: as a critical one it is constructed in opposition to 'living better', a dynamic promoted by capitalism and development; as an active principle it strives to create a world in which relations among human beings and between them and nature are based on reciprocity and relationality, rather than competition and extraction. Indigenous world views do not have a linear conception of time, such as that implicit in development. As Acosta asserts, indigenous peoples 'have neither the notion of a stage of underdevelopment to be overcome nor of a developmental stage to be reached'.<sup>50</sup>

'Living well' is a way of understanding and experiencing the world based on the search for a communitarian life between all forms of knowledge, logics,

rationalities and living beings.<sup>51</sup> The terms of the relationships are radically transformed to the extent that these are established among subjects, not among subjects and objects; and living and living together become synonymous.<sup>52</sup> Understanding the process of living as coexistence between subjects gives rise to the construction of 'a world in which many worlds can fit into' and where democratic processes are so radicalized that governors obey the rules of people, or as the Zapatistas say: 'lead by obeying'.<sup>53</sup> In other words, living well leads to the celebration of natural and cultural diversity and to the political structuring of society from below. With the idea of living between subjects emerges a radical respect for the other, which not only allows them to exist, but also to have access to the control of the possibilities of their own existence. The community is not only made up of humans, but also of nature, which from the world view of indigenous communities is regarded as 'a vital being able to feel, know and act'.<sup>54</sup> There is not an 'other' anymore, but an 'us'.

The modern episteme, asserts Dávalos, took nature out of history and exalted human beings as its masters. Living well, continues this author, reintroduces nature into history and places it as community partner, which like other partners is the subject of reciprocal relationships. Humans are also resettled in community with nature and their role with it is redefined.<sup>55</sup> This does not mean that they disappear as free subjects, but instead emerge as a part of the community unit and are always related to it. History is regarded, thus, not as that of isolated human beings, but instead as that of subjects in community for whom acting and thinking are collective exercises and not individual privileges. It is in this context that the epistemological prerogative given to knowledge as a communal experience at CIDECI-Unitierra should be understood.

### **Final thoughts: university, development and interculturality**

Universities are institutions linked to economic and political projects. The hegemonic ones have become agents and vehicles to build and maintain development and sustainable development ideas in ontological, political, economic and epistemic senses. Those ideas are strongly opposed to the political and economic proposals of indigenous peoples and are against the interests of non-hegemonic cultures and those from groups that do not contribute to the maintenance of the capitalist system. The hegemonic university has been forged on coloniality and colonial difference. Its changes have benefited certain political and economic projects that undermine the lives of indigenous, Afro and peasant communities and those of all groups that oppose capitalism.

CIDECI-Unitierra responds to these problems from an intercultural model opposite to the cultural, epistemic, economic and political processes linked to capitalism and development. In an ontological sense, development involves 'colonial difference', namely, the fact that some cultures have been and continue to be considered as inferior or less developed. The colonial difference has been one of the strongest engines of capitalism, as it promotes an alleged 'natural' international division of labour, not only as (hu)man power in the production and distribution of commodities, 'human resources' and goods, but also as intellectual labour. The Intercultural University is situated in the field of resistance to

development and to a world that has globalized capitalist economy and its epistemic, epistemological, ethical and political arsenal. In this sense, interculturality coming from universities like CIDECI-Unitierra seeks to build a world in which many worlds can fit into, raising the issue not only from the recognition of 'diversity in a rhetorical level' but also as 'the right to build a world otherwise'.<sup>56</sup> This kind of interculturality involves the construction of self-determination for the future and political, economic, epistemic and epistemological participation at all levels of organization in the world. This view does not disclaim universalization<sup>57</sup> as a process, but, as Fornet-Betancourt asserts, it looks for non-imperial universality and seeks to rebuild it from below and by means of a dialogue of traditions including, of course, the Western tradition.<sup>58</sup> In other words, it works to remove the mythic discourse of current universality that justifies an alleged right of some communities and traditions to speak in the name of universal truth.

Indigenous movements around the world see education as a key pillar to build, support and legitimize their epistemic, philosophical, political and economic projects. They have been creating institutions that question the logic reproduced for centuries by the hegemonic university, based on individualism or anthropocentrism. From the perspective of critical interculturality, the intercultural university should be an organization that challenges and radically transforms the structure of knowledge. This means that it regards knowledge as a political tool to build worlds otherwise. In other words, acceptance of other knowledges is not enough; the transformation and diversification of the conditions of existence of such knowledges is essential.

These types of institutions are not exclusively from Latin America; they exist throughout the world. Their globalization is due to the fact that they have identified the fundamental problems shared by the excluded worldwide and they have given rise to crucial questions: What kind of world do we want to build? What knowledge and knowledge organization do we need in order to build it? These questions are taking such force that Wallerstein believes they can become the largest debate of the twenty-first century.<sup>59</sup>

The encounter with 'the other' that interculturality seeks cannot arise from infinitely narrow monoculturality, but instead it must be built from 'interpellation'. Interpellation, according to Fornet-Betancourt, means that incorporation of another or of oneself is not the goal of the intercultural process, the goal is creating a space of coexistence by means of mutual transformation.<sup>60</sup> Coexistence does not seek to remove controversy but instead to promote dialogue among different world views. Considering that the colonial process made Afros and Latin American natives despise their own ways of life, it is necessary for us to listen to these voices that are speaking and that are showing us alternative ways to produce and share knowledge.

### Notes on Contributor

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recent publications are: 'El documental intercultural como herramienta política: bases teóricas y metodológicas a partir de dos estudios de caso' (*Palabra Clave*, 2013) and 'Some Epistemic and Methodological Challenges within an Intercultural Experience' (*Journal of Historical Sociology*, 2011).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Walter Mignolo, 'Las Geopolíticas del Conocimiento y Colonialidad del Poder', in Boris Berenson (ed), *Historiografía Crítica del Siglo XX*, México D.F.: UNAM, 2004, p 365.
- <sup>2</sup> Raúl Fomet-Betancourt, *Tareas y Propuestas de la Filosofía Intercultural*, Aachen: Verlag Mainz, 2009.
- <sup>3</sup> In an article titled 'Some Epistemic and Methodological Challenges within an Intercultural Experience' (*Journal of Historical Sociology* 24(1), 2011, pp 45–61) I offered an account of my experience with Unitierra and the multiple methodological and theoretical challenges that I faced there. The people from Unitierra posed great decolonial challenges to me that led me to propose an intercultural reconsideration of anthropological practice and its geo-historical context. All these thoughts have become flesh in my research by replacing 'anthropological objects' by 'philosophical subjects'. This project is in line with liberating critical intercultural philosophy: it is not looking for 'indigenous philosophies'—as ethnographic objects—but instead other ways of living and practising philosophy, as philosophical subjects. I would like to thank the people from Unitierra and Raúl Fomet-Betancourt because it is thanks to their help that all these considerations became possible. They taught me about interculturality as a way of life. The time they shared with me helped to open my mind and made me realize that Unitierra's experience as an intercultural community could provide important lessons both to Anthropology and to the Social Sciences in general. While I alone am responsible for this article, I would not have written even the first line without their help. I would also like to apologize in advance to those from Unitierra if at any point I misrepresent, misunderstand or distort what they taught me.
- <sup>4</sup> It can be placed in what Boaventura de Sousa Santos in *Decolonizar el Saber Reinventar el Poder* (2010) has called subaltern globalization. *Decolonizar el Saber Reinventar el Poder*, Montevideo: Ediciones Trilce, 2010, p 46.
- <sup>5</sup> Jon Sobrino, 'La salvación que viene de abajo: hacia una humanidad humanizada', *Concilium* 314, 2006, pp 29–40.
- <sup>6</sup> Satya Mohanty, 'The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On "Beloved" and the Postcolonial Condition', *Cultural Critique* 24, 1993, p 72.
- <sup>7</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, Robert Barr (trans), London: SCM Press, 1983, p 77.
- <sup>8</sup> Sobrino, 'La salvación que viene de abajo'.
- <sup>9</sup> Raymundo Sánchez, 'Una universidad sin Zapatos: Sistema Indígena Intercultural de Educación no Formal', *In Motion Magazine*, 18 December 2005, [www.inmotionmagazine.com/global/rsb\\_int\\_esp.html](http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/global/rsb_int_esp.html).
- <sup>10</sup> Raymundo Sánchez, 'Entrevista con Dr. Raymundo Sánchez Barraza. México: Autonomía zapatista', *Autonomía Zapatista*, 2005, [http://autonomiazapatista.com/Entrevistas/entrevistas\\_2.html](http://autonomiazapatista.com/Entrevistas/entrevistas_2.html).
- <sup>11</sup> Sánchez, 'Entrevista con Dr. Raymundo Sánchez Barraza'.
- <sup>12</sup> Sánchez, 'Entrevista con Dr. Raymundo Sánchez Barraza'.
- <sup>13</sup> Sánchez, 'Entrevista con Dr. Raymundo Sánchez Barraza'.
- <sup>14</sup> Ontonomy is a concept developed by Raymond Panikar. It has to do with the construction of a special relationship between the whole and the part, determined by their mutual subordination. What Sánchez argues is that an ontomological relationship is one that does not grant privileges to independence, understood as disconnection, nor to higher spheres, but instead to relationality and radical relativity.
- <sup>15</sup> Sánchez, 'Entrevista con Dr. Raymundo Sánchez Barraza'.
- <sup>16</sup> Sánchez, 'Entrevista con Dr. Raymundo Sánchez Barraza'.
- <sup>17</sup> Tierra has two meanings in Spanish: land and earth.
- <sup>18</sup> Sánchez, 'Una universidad sin Zapatos'.
- <sup>19</sup> They are currently studying other authors that contribute to the same tasks, seeking to understand those authors from the geo-historical context of the modern capitalist world-system.
- <sup>20</sup> Sánchez, 'Entrevista con Dr. Raymundo Sánchez Barraza'.
- <sup>21</sup> Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, p 78.
- <sup>22</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *El Moderno Sistema Mundial: La Agricultura Capitalista y los Orígenes de la Economía-Mundo Europea en el Siglo XVI*, A Resines (trans), Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1979.
- <sup>23</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, 'What Have the Zapatistas Accomplished?', *Fernand Braudel Center*, 1 January 2008, [www2.binghamton.edu/fbc/archive/224en.htm](http://www2.binghamton.edu/fbc/archive/224en.htm).
- <sup>24</sup> Sánchez, 'Una universidad sin Zapatos'.
- <sup>25</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, 'The Zapatistas: The Second Stage', *Fernand Braudel Center*, 15 July 2005, [www2.binghamton.edu/fbc/archive/165en.htm](http://www2.binghamton.edu/fbc/archive/165en.htm).

- <sup>26</sup> Wallerstein, 'What Have the Zapatistas Accomplished?'
- <sup>27</sup> Subcomandante Marcos and Yvon Le Bot, *El sueño zapatista*, Barcelona: Anagrama, 1997, p 80.
- <sup>28</sup> EZLN, 'Comunicados', 2005, *EZLN*, <http://palabra.ezln.org.mx/>
- <sup>29</sup> EZLN, 'Comunicados', 2005, *EZLN*, <http://palabra.ezln.org.mx/>
- <sup>30</sup> Marcos and Le Bot, *El sueño zapatista*, p 79.
- <sup>31</sup> Sánchez, 'Una universidad sin Zapatos'.
- <sup>32</sup> Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, *Transformación Intercultural de la Filosofía*, Bilbao: Desclée de Brower, 2001.
- <sup>33</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *Análisis de Sistemas-Mundo: Una Introducción*, Carlos Daniel Schroeder (trans), México: Siglo XXI, 2006, p 86.
- <sup>34</sup> Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, pp 12, 64.
- <sup>35</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Sciences*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, pp 15, 18.
- <sup>36</sup> Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Sciences*, p 20.
- <sup>37</sup> Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, p 385.
- <sup>38</sup> Walter Mignolo, 'Globalization and the Geopolitics of Knowledge: The Role of the Humanities in the Corporate University', *Nepantla* 4(1), 2003, pp 97–119.
- <sup>39</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Sin Fines de Lucro: ¿Por Qué la Democracia Necesita de las Humanidades?*, María Victoria Rodil (trans), Madrid: Katz, 2010.
- <sup>40</sup> EZLN, 'Comunicados', 2005, *EZLN*, <http://palabra.ezln.org.mx/>
- <sup>41</sup> Readings, *The University in Ruins*, pp 11–12.
- <sup>42</sup> Enrique Dussel, 'Etnocentrismo y Modernidad: Introducción a las Lecturas de Frankfurt', in Walter Mignolo (ed), *Cosmopolitismo y Geopolítica del Conocimiento: el Eurocentrismo y la Filosofía de la Liberación en el Debate Intelectual*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Signo, 2001, p 60. The myth of modernity points to Europe's self-perception as a superior civilization that requires educating other people, even against their own will. When they oppose, the civilizing hero will use violence if necessary, provided with the noble aim of introducing civilization, and the idea that such education should follow the model of development that Europe has evolved in its own story.
- <sup>43</sup> Wolfgang Sachs, 'Introducción', in Wolfgang Sachs (ed), *Diccionario del Desarrollo: Una Guía del Conocimiento como Poder*, Perú: Pratec, 1996, pp 1–7.
- <sup>44</sup> Santiago Castro, *La Poscolonialidad Explicada a los Niños*, Popayán: Universidad del Cauca e Instituto Pensar de la Universidad Javeriana, 2005, p 80.
- <sup>45</sup> Castro, *La Poscolonialidad Explicada a los Niños*.
- <sup>46</sup> Catherine Walsh, 'Development as Buen Vivir: Institutional Arrangements and (De)colonial Entanglements', *Development* 53(1), 2010, pp 15–21.
- <sup>47</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Shall We Discuss Poverty?', *Fernand Braudel Center*, 1 December 2010, [www2.binghamton.edu/fbc/archive/294en.htm](http://www2.binghamton.edu/fbc/archive/294en.htm).
- <sup>48</sup> Wallerstein, 'Shall We Discuss Poverty?'
- <sup>49</sup> Some authors supporting this position are Wolfgang Sachs (1996) and Arturo Escobar (2009); Arturo Escobar, *El Final del Salvaje*, Bogotá: Ican & Cerec, 1999; Vandana Shiva, 'Recurso', in Sachs, 'Introduction'; Arturo Escobar, 'Una Minga para el Postdesarrollo', *América Latina en Movimiento* 445, 2009.
- <sup>50</sup> Alberto Acosta, 'Buen Vivir: Una Oportunidad para Construir', *Debate* 75, 2008, p 34.
- <sup>51</sup> Walsh, 'Development as Buen Vivir', p 18.
- <sup>52</sup> Escobar, 'Una Minga para el Postdesarrollo', p 29.
- <sup>53</sup> Escobar, 'Una Minga para el Postdesarrollo'.
- <sup>54</sup> David Cortez, 'Genealogía del "Buen Vivir" en la Nueva Constitución Ecuatoriana', *VIII International Congress for Intercultural Philosophy*, Seoul: Ewha Womans University, 2009, p 6.
- <sup>55</sup> Pablo Dávalos, 'Reflexiones Sobre el Sumak Kawsay (el Buen Vivir) y las Teorías del Desarrollo', *América Latina en Movimiento* 435, 2008, p 29.
- <sup>56</sup> Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, *Reflexiones de Raúl Fornet-Betancourt sobre el Concepto de Interculturalidad*, México D.F.: Consorcio Intercultural, 2004, p 47.
- <sup>57</sup> Universalism as I understand it is a process of dialogue, not an end in itself. Intercultural Universalism as a process allows us to get rid of relativism and give tools for cultures to dialogue about their political, epistemic, moral or ethical bases on equal conditions.
- <sup>58</sup> Fornet-Betancourt, *Transformación Intercultural de la Filosofía*, p. 18.
- <sup>59</sup> Wallerstein, 'Shall We Discuss Poverty?'
- <sup>60</sup> Wallerstein, 'Shall We Discuss Poverty?'