

## ***Epistemological Decolonization and Education. International Perspectives***

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**Abstract:** It is increasingly argued that European colonialism has left its mark not only in the political and economic structures of the current world system, but also in the fields of culture, science and education. Against this background, the demand for a comprehensive epistemic or epistemological decolonization is raised. This issue follows on from this demand to clarify to what extent the phenomena of cultural colonization and coloniality also affect the fields of pedagogy and educational science. In particular, the meaning of the demand for epistemic or epistemological decolonization in the field of education will be discussed. In the introduction to this volume, the main features of decolonial thinking are presented. This is a movement of critical thinking that starts from the history of Latin America in order to reconstruct, criticize and deconstruct the globally powerful connection between modernity and coloniality. After this short introduction, the individual contributions from this issue on decoloniality will be briefly presented. Finally, the differences and similarities of the individual articles are briefly referred to. In the end, the question is raised, whether decolonial education should distinguish itself more strongly within the discipline.

**Keywords:** colonialism; decolonization; eurocentrism; coloniality; decoloniality; epistemology; border thinking.

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Especially since the beginning of the 21st century, it has been increasingly pointed out that modern thinking is extremely limited and restricted to the extent that it has been developed predominantly from a Western and Eurocentric perspective. Thus it articulates and prefers not only Western points of view and worldviews, but ignores, veils or even suppresses other points of view. *European colonialism* is cited as the cause for this, since it has not only extended to the areas of politics and economics, but also to those of culture and education. Since the corresponding *colonization of the mind* has not only had an effect on the historical colonial context, but has to this day limited the cognitive possibilities of many people, there is now a demand for a comprehensive *decolonization* of modern thought and knowledge.

If this diagnosis is correct, it must be assumed that *education* as well as *pedagogy* and *educational science* are also affected by epistemic or epistemological

colonisation, and may even play a central role in this phenomenon. This special issue was initiated in order to discuss from an educational perspective and on an international level how plausible the thesis of a comprehensive colonization of modern culture and education is. In particular, it addresses the question of what the articulated demand for *epistemic* or *epistemological decolonization* means for the field and the discipline of education.

Before presenting the individual contributions collected here, at least some important aspects of the discourse on *decoloniality* should be mentioned in the sense of a brief introduction to the topic. Contributions and approaches which can be attributed to a specific, predominantly Latin American stream of contemporary critical thought can be regarded as central here, because they clearly formulate the demand for epistemic or epistemological decolonization. This line of thought is inspired above all by the works of Enrique Dussel, Anibal Quijano and Walter Mignolo, who are among the most prominent representatives and initiators of *decolonial thinking* in the humanities, and the cultural and social sciences. Despite all differences, a common starting point of these authors is that they deal with modernity from a decidedly Latin American perspective and come to the conclusion that a comprehensive and critical understanding of modernity can only be achieved if the constitutive connection between *European modernity* and *European colonialism* is taken into account.

In order to approach decolonial thinking, a few biographical notes by Enrique Dussel may be helpful at first. According to Dussel, who studied philosophy in Argentina in the 1950s, there was «no doubt in his generation that we were part of the ‘occidental culture’» (Dussel 2013, p. 135)<sup>1</sup>. Only European and Western philosophy was taught at the university, ultimately in order to develop a deeper understanding of one’s own (supposedly) occidental culture. Other philosophies, such as a specifically Latin American philosophy, were not only not dealt with, but were also not known at all, and were even considered unthinkable. The prevailing understanding of culture «knew no cracks and, as the Hegelian view of world history demanded, proceeded chronologically from East to West» (ibid., p. 136).

This Eurocentric understanding of culture and philosophy became fissured for Dussel, however, when he travelled to Europe for the first time. «With our journeys to Europe - in my case I crossed the ocean by ship in 1957 - we became aware, as soon as we disembarked in Lisbon or Barcelona, that we were ‘Latin Americans’ and not ‘Europeans’. The differences were obvious» (ibid., p. 136). But how can one identify with a history of ideas, culture and philosophy in which Latin America plays no role at all? Of course, this problem arose only from a Latin American perspective, since it seemed plausible from a European perspective for a long time that Latin America had no formative influence on its own culture and history. To answer the resulting questions - «Who are we in cultural terms? What is our historical identity?» (ibid., p. 136), Dussel devoted himself to the task of «reconstructing the historical identity of Latin America [...] within the framework of a world history» (ibid., p. 138).

For the development of decolonial thinking, the finding already mentioned here that the development of modern culture, at least in the well-known and dominant treatises, is usually traced back to a purely European or occidental intellectual history

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<sup>1</sup> All translations of German quotations into English were done by the author himself.

is central. «Many (such as Jürgen Habermas or Charles Taylor) consider modernity to be an essentially or exclusively European phenomenon» (Dussel, quoted from Mignolo 2012, p. 58). Walter Mignolo (2002) speaks in this context of a philosophical macro-narrative through which modernity is associated with literature, philosophy and the history of ideas: «modernity (and obviously postmodernity) maintained the imaginary of Western civilization as a pristine development from ancient Greece to eighteenth-century Europe, where the bases of modernity were laid out» (Mignolo 2002, p. 60).

From a decolonial perspective, this narrative is problematic insofar as it conceals the connection between modernity and colonialism. For it is claimed that the modern image of Europe and the European-Western culture and civilization emerged in demarcation from other cultures and civilizations that were either under direct European colonial rule, or were dominated in one way or another by Europe and the West in the context of modern European imperialism and the emergence of the modern capitalist world system. In this sense, modernity on the one hand represents a «European phenomenon», but on the other hand it has only «constituted itself in dialectical relation to a non-European alterity as its final content» (Dussel, quoted from Mignolo 2012, pp. 58-59). Modern Europe had to appear all the more enlightened, progressive and civilized the wilder, primitive and darker the image of the rest of the world was drawn.

The modern European self-image is therefore based on an external demarcation. This *exteriority*, however, is a construction, an imagined 'outside' through which, on the other hand, the 'inside' of modernity is constructed. «The exteriority, the 'outside' of modernity, which is actually constructed by the rhetoric of modernity [...], must be conquered, colonized, controlled and converted or eliminated in the name of progress and modernity» (cf. Mignolo 2012, p. 93). Since, according to Mignolo (2012; p. 117-127), the demarcation between modernity and exteriority took place both on the temporal and spatial level, he speaks of a «colonization of space and time» (Mignolo 2012, p. 117). Thus modern Europe does not only differentiate itself *temporally* from the Renaissance invention of the Middle Ages, but increasingly from 'tradition' in general, and thus also from other 'traditional' peoples and cultures. Furthermore, in the course of the so-called European expansion, the 'discovery' and colonisation of the world, a *spatial* image of *distant* countries and cultures is emerging. In this way, the idea that «Europe [...] is both the present and the centre of the world» (cf. Mignolo 2012, p. 118) is consolidated.

In order to get a better idea of the connection between modernity and colonialism, it is helpful to fall back on the concept of *coloniality* coined by Quijano (cf. among others 2016). «Coloniality, unlike colonialism, is [...] a continuous power relationship that emerged with the colonial expansion of Europe into the Americas and as such represents the downside and the necessary precondition of Western modernity» (Boatcă 2016, p. 119). This power relationship, which is also referred to as the *coloniality of power* or the *colonial matrix of power*, encompasses different but interwoven areas. In this context, Mignolo (2012, p. 50) distinguishes between the control of economy, authority, nature, gender and sexuality as well as subjectivity and knowledge. For Mignolo, modernity and coloniality represent two sides of the same coin, whereby modernity, as it is imagined in the philosophical narrative of

Western civilization, is described as the *bright side*, coloniality, on the other hand, as the *dark side* of modernity.

One can speak of the philosophical narrative of modernity being entangled in the coloniality of power in so far as this narrative repeatedly referred to the cultural and intellectual superiority of the West over all other cultures and regions in order to justify asymmetrical power and domination relationships dominated by the West, and thus at least to justify implicitly also their 'dark sides'. Therefore, decolonial theory emphasizes that the European Enlightenment and all other emancipatory movements and critical theories of Western provenance are not rejected. Rather, it criticizes the entanglement of these critical intellectual movements in the colonial matrix of power. «Modernity contains a 'rational' concept of emancipation, which we affirm and respect. At the same time, however, modernity develops an irrational myth, a justification of the violence of genocides» (Dussel, quoted from Mignolo 2012, p. 59).

However, this ambivalence of modernity makes it quite impossible to completely evade colonialism or to oppose it decisively. If one rejects modernity as a whole, referring to its involvement in the colonial matrix of power, this not only strengthens anti-Western resentments, but also all kind of anti-Enlightenment and anti-emancipatory positions. But if criticism - with reference to enlightenment, emancipation, human rights and democracy - is directed only at the 'dark sides' of modernity, one ultimately follows a rhetoric that is closely linked to the construction of a Eurocentric worldview. However one positions oneself - the involvement of one's own pattern of argumentation in the colonial matrix of power seems almost inevitable. In this sense, one can certainly speak of a comprehensive *colonialization of the mind*, of a *coloniality of thought*.

Against the background of this diagnosis, it also seems more than necessary for pedagogy and educational science to support the demand for *epistemic* and - explicitly related to science - *epistemological decolonization*, which has been raised by decolonial theory. But the question arises how this is possible in front of an almost hopeless situation, and what is to be understood concretely by such a decolonization. How can one escape coloniality when thinking itself is colonized?

If one follows Mignolo, the only possibility at present lies in border thinking, which he locates on the border between modernity and coloniality. Because modern critique of colonialism and coloniality as well as colonial (and postcolonial) critique of modernity itself are entangled in the coloniality of power, a change of perspective between the two can at least illuminate the bright and dark sides of both positions. Thus, according to Mignolo, it should also become clear that emancipation and liberation projects and theories can no longer be articulated universally today. «The global future will neither be designed or realized by an ethno-class nor by a secular or religious ideology, but will be interepistemic, dialogic and pluriversal. Border thinking will thus inevitably become a critical and decolonial method of epistemic and political projects that fill in the trenches and show the imperial complicity through which the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality are connected» (Mignolo 2012, p. 206).

If I understand Mignolo correctly, the *decolonial border thinking* that he demands already seems to me to be based on a different basis, on a different epistemology,

than modern or modern/colonial thinking. The change of perspective between critical modern or Western and critical colonial or non-Western perspectives that is strived for here irritates and confuses the Eurocentric world view, which starts from a clear separation between *modernity* and *coloniality*, between *civilization* and *barbarism*, between the *West* and the *rest*, or, as the Brazilian liberation pedagogue Paulo Freire put it, between *oppressors* and the *oppressed*. On the one hand, this seems necessary because «the colonial matrix has long since escaped occidental control» (Mignolo 2012, p. 200), and the global relations of power and domination can no longer be traced back solely to an asymmetrical relationship between *Western* and *non-Western* cultures or countries. On the other hand, this seems important in order to overcome the Eurocentric view of the world contoured in the course of modernity and colonialism. It makes sense to locate *critical border thinking* in a non-Western intellectual tradition, since it can be traced back to the specific historical experience of the colonized. Because of the cultural colonization it became increasingly unclear to what extent the colonized, and later analogously the inhabitants of the formerly colonized countries, were to be regarded now (culturally) as European, or even nevertheless - due to a supposed or presumed (cultural) *colonial difference* - as non-European. That such ambiguities can lead to existential questions about one's own cultural identity was underlined by Dussel (see above) in relation to his own biography.

Even though concrete goals have been named with the concepts of epistemic and epistemological decolonization and decolonial border thinking, the question of how delinking from modern/colonial thinking can be implemented, introduced and guided remains for pedagogy and educational science still largely open. However, it can already be stated that it will be necessary to include different points of view and their respective forms of criticism and to relate them to one another. It is therefore extremely gratifying that we have been able to include contributions for this issue that articulate and reflect this *pluriversity* in one way or another: be it through the different academic or institutional positioning, be it through the subject matter dealt with or through the regions or countries examined. What is particularly pleasing is that not only pedagogical and educational contributions in the narrower disciplinary sense, but also decolonial perspectives on education from psychology and sociology could be included.

In her contribution, *Iris Clemens* deals with the task and challenge of decolonizing knowledge. She points out that not only diverse knowledge stocks should be decolonized, but above all the concept of knowledge itself. Using the example of philosophical traditions from India, Clemens shows that the European-North American understanding of knowledge is by no means congruent with other understandings, and in some cases these concepts of knowledge can even be described as radically different. While knowledge from a European-North American perspective, for example, must always be true, there are Indian epistemologies, which also recognize truth-value-neutral forms of knowledge. Therefore, according to Clemens, one should acknowledge the multiplicity of knowledge, also in order to counter the dominant narrative according to which relevant, above all scientific knowledge was produced solely from the European and North American side. One has to speak of a colonization of knowledge in so far as the European-North American understanding

of knowledge has been used as a universal reference in order to determine the value of other philosophical traditions. If, however, one now deals with the Indian traditions of thought in a more unbiased way, the tendency becomes apparent that, quite similar to current postcolonial and sociological approaches, great value is attached to social and psychological aspects in the emergence of knowledge. This view is informative for educational science insofar as, due to the diversity of global realities, the contexts in which its theories and concepts emerge should always be critically questioned in order to assess their connectivity and appropriateness. The examination of different forms of knowledge and epistemologies is also promising for educational science because it can stimulate the creative development of new positions and perspectives.

*Silvia Natalia Retamal Cisterna* presents the results of a study aimed at contributing to the development of autonomous educational concepts for indigenous communities in San Juan de las Costas, in southern Chile. This is required, for example, because the interests and perspectives of indigenous populations are still insufficiently taken into account in Chile's current education system, and even where indigenous communities are given opportunities for autonomous design, these remain unused due to a lack of concepts. The project does not want to orient itself on conventional curriculum models or provide external support for a specific educational need. Rather, it is a matter of opening a fundamental debate with the interested and committed parts of the indigenous community of San Juan de las Costas about new and different forms of pedagogy and education. In order to develop proposals for an autonomous indigenous education, the study is therefore based on the concept of Participatory Action Research (PAR), in which the persons concerned are decisively involved both in the collection and evaluation of data. As a result of this complex process, Retamal Cisterna presents five principles that have been developed primarily to distinguish them from previous school education and are intended to serve as a basis for the development of autonomous educational concepts. The first principle is that autonomous indigenous education should critically examine the history of the Chilean education system and the policies aimed at homogenizing the population that have contributed to the cultural oppression of the Mapuche. The aim is to link recognition of past misconduct with reparation. The second principle is to strengthen collective consciousness by dealing with one's own local history. The aim is to counteract the fragmentation of consciousness by differentiating between subjects and individual tasks based on science. A third principle is the critical examination of existing concepts of intercultural and bilingual education. The fourth principle is to attempt to evade the prevailing discourse of power by opening up new educational spaces. These principles should serve as a starting point for developing a local basis for autonomous indigenous education.

Using political education as an example, *Jarol Andrés Piedrahita Rodríguez* examines the question of what contribution epistemological decolonization can make to the transformation of the Colombian educational system. First, an insight into classical epistemological debates is given with reference to Popper, Kuhn, Feyerabend and Critical Theory. Subsequently, various decolonial approaches and concepts are presented which, in contrast to the modern Western understanding of science, are dedicated to epistemological decolonization and aim at the development of new

epistemologies of the South. It is emphasized that such alternative epistemologies, based on the experience of colonized and excluded peoples, should not only relativize the universal validity of modern science, but above all enable the development of new ways of thinking and living that elude the modern paradigms of development and progress, and ultimately any form of domination and exploitation. After the examination of classical western and decolonial Latin American epistemologies, the article is dedicated to the central theme of the decolonization of political education in Colombia. The existing forms of political education are first attested an instrumental and individualistic orientation that would counteract a comprehensive human development and the shaping of a more just society. In order to develop alternative, decolonial pedagogical concepts, the orientation towards Paulo Freire's liberation pedagogy is recommended. Social movements in Latin America, for example, would pursue this path, taking up decolonial concepts and epistemologies of the South and increasingly relying on the concepts of *Buen Vivir* and *Vivir Bien*. These concepts originating from Ecuador and Bolivia are presented and the thesis is articulated that the orientation towards the principles of *Buen Vivir* and *Vivir Bien*, respectively, can make an important contribution to the epistemological decolonization of political education.

In his contribution, *Carlos Kölbl* deals with the work of the writer Fausto Reinaga, who is regarded as one of Bolivia's most important indigenous thinkers and a central reference of decolonisation. Kölbl sees his analysis as a contribution to a pedagogical psychology of decolonization, which he distinguishes from a decolonizing psychology. While the latter aims to decolonize psychology as a science, decolonization is the object of investigation for the former. In keeping with this program, the article presents three works by Reinaga and examines their statements on education. Since all three works deal with the topic of decolonization and liberation of the indigenous population, but can be assigned to different phases of the author - a pre-indigenist, an indigenist and a post-indigenist phase - the analysis will show whether these literary phases also affect the educational concepts represented in the books. Despite all the differences, Kölbl concludes, it is striking that in all three works the distinction between the own and the Western plays a central role. On the one hand, the own, the autochthonous and the indigenous are always positive, the Western, on the other hand, is always negative. The decisive question as to whether this pattern of thought should be understood as strategic essentialism or simply as essentialism remains open. It is clear, however, that the pedagogy designed by Reinaga aims above all to increase the self-esteem of the indigenous population. The upgrading of indigenous languages and cultures should contribute to this. Ultimately, however, a revolution is necessary for Reinaga in order to fundamentally decolonise social conditions. However, Reinaga imagines this revolution differently in the different phases, as Kölbl shows. While in the pre-indigenist phase it bears Marxist traits, in the indigenist phase the 'indio' liberates itself. In the post-Indigenist phase, on the other hand, a universal revolution is imagined that can be followed by all those who adopt indigenous thinking - such as that of Reinaga himself - and in this sense become 'indios'.

*Philipp Altmann* deals with the question of how the teaching of sociology at universities in the Global South could be decolonized. Decolonization seems

necessary inasmuch as sociology as a scientific discipline was originally developed primarily in relation to social realities in Europe and the USA. The global expansion of this Eurocentric discipline led to the development of two different sociological approaches in the Global South. On the one hand, an internationally oriented sociology of the South, which is aligned to the debates and theories of the Global North, and a peripheral sociology of the South on the other hand, which is more responsive to local peculiarities. Since the theories and methods of the former are rated higher because of their (supposed) universality, Altmann says it is all too easy to apply them 'blindly' in the Global South, on the one hand, and to exclude peripheral sociology from the scientific discourses defined as global and universal, on the other. In the course of a decolonization of sociology, therefore, not only these inequalities should be recognized and the involvement of the discipline in coloniality demonstrated, but above all previously suppressed non-Western views and epistemologies are to be articulated and developed. Altmann discusses concrete possibilities of such a decolonization using the example of sociology at the *Universidad Central del Ecuador*. In doing so, he elaborates on three principles that seem central to a decolonization of sociology: Double contextualization, comparison and self-criticism. Double contextualization aims to shed light on both the (Western) context of origin and the (non-Western) context of application of sociological theories. The comparison between established sociological theories and other, hitherto marginalized or made invisible, knowledge stocks and experiences is intended to clarify whether they can also contribute relevant insights. These could be findings from other disciplines, forgotten classics of sociology, but also non-scientific forms of knowledge. Self-criticism is directed at the university context of teaching, which is to be analyzed in a power-critical way with regard to both the respective teachers and the respective institution. Finally, Altmann points out that these principles do not necessarily have universal validity, since here not only the decolonial debate was related to sociological concepts, but also the concrete history of sociology in Ecuador was taken into account. Without such local references, Altmann concludes, there is a danger that decolonial thinking will become a further legitimizing discourse for elitist and excluding structures.

It cannot be overlooked that the contributions collected in this volume differ considerably in some respects with regard to the topics and subjects dealt with as well as the methods, theories and concepts chosen. What they all have in common, however, is that they always address phenomena of (cultural) colonialization and coloniality as well as, analogously, possibilities and methods of epistemic or epistemological decolonization that are, could be, or should be relevant for educational practice as well as for pedagogy and educational science. It would certainly be promising to discuss in detail to what extent the individual contributions are or should be relevant beyond the respective context: Are the attempts of indigenous communities in Latin America to develop autonomous educational concepts also of interest to India and Europe? And should one also deal with (ancient) Indian philosophy and the corresponding concepts of knowledge in Latin America and other regions of the world? What significance should the concepts of *Buen Vivir* and *Vivir Bien* have in the political education of the various countries? Should Reinaga's works (only) be counted among the classics of pedagogy in Bolivia, or perhaps even

worldwide? Can the considerations on the decolonization of sociology in Ecuador also be transferred to other countries and disciplines?

For a further clarification of the concept of epistemic or epistemological decolonization, it would certainly also be informative to discuss to what extent the individual contributions collected here only address the theme of decolonization and, to a certain extent from a distance, reflect on it, or if they can be understood as real contributions to decolonization. For although the articles themselves usually provide an answer to this question, in some cases other answers seem possible: Even if, for example, Kölbl is right that his article does not make a contribution to the decolonization of psychology, and 'only' analyses a classic of indigenous literature in reference to education, one could also ask whether his text does not already make a contribution to the decolonisation of pedagogy and its history by adding a Bolivian contribution to the canon of pedagogically relevant (world) literature traditionally dominated by Western Europe. It would also be interesting to discuss whether the principles worked out by Retamal Cisterna with members of an indigenous community in Chile already present the basis of a decolonial and autonomous pedagogy, or 'only' the starting point for thinking about such a pedagogy. Such questions also appear to be extremely important because they address the relationship between normative and descriptive perspectives, approaches and contributions within an educational science that can be described as decolonial.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that in all contributions binary differences or differentiation practices and corresponding orders of belonging play a central role, which, although terminologically and semantically distinct in part, can be traced back in historical-systematic terms to the difference between modernity and coloniality. At least from the perspective of decolonial theory, it seems reasonable that the distinctions central to the respective texts - for example between European-North American and Indian forms of knowledge and epistemologies (Clemens), between the state and the indigenous communities in southern Chile (Retamal Cisterna), between the existing and the desired decolonial political education (Piedrahita Rodríguez), between the autochthonous or indigenous and the western in Reinaga work (Kölbl) as well as in the juxtaposition of a sociology of the north and the south (Altmann) - can ultimately be brought into the general formula of modernity/coloniality, and thus also the individual contributions in connection with one another. If one gets involved with this abstraction, indeed with this decolonial epistemology, much can certainly be explained by it, but by no means 'everything'. Rather, the decolonial theory (see above) clearly shows how differently the connection between modernity and coloniality can be interpreted, and how important therefore flexible *border thinking* is.

With regard to the future orientation and profile of educational science, the question now arises as to whether epistemological decolonization should not be given more room in this discipline than it has been up to now. This would be conceivable, for example, under the generic term of *decolonial education*, with which corresponding contributions could be clearly assigned, which so far can be located above all between the already established subdisciplines of *comparative*, *general* and *intercultural education*. However, it should also be examined whether it would not be more promising and - perhaps especially in the West - more connectable to

locate decolonial education under the already established term *global citizenship education*; alternatively under the label *education for sustainable development*. Statements from the scientific community would be helpful here, because a discussion on such future issues seems necessary. Should this issue be able to make a contribution to such discussions, this is certainly thanks to Guillermo Ruíz and José Luis Hernández Huerta, who supported the publication of this issue with great commitment. I would like to take this opportunity to expressly thank them and the authors for their efforts in the relatively new topic of *decolonial education*.

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