Decolonisation in practice: the experience of indigenous scholars in Brazil

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During the last two decades, Brazilian universities have witnessed an entry increase of indigenous and other minorities peripheral to the academy. Due to recently conquered schooling processes by indigenous populations in the country, higher education became one of the indigenous peoples demands of action at a national level. Affirmative actions and the constitution of specific education programmes resulted in a higher rate of indigenous students entering the university. Their presence has raised debates about the coexistence of different knowledge systems and the impacts that a dialogue between these systems can have on the university and society. The debate leads to a reflection on possible changes in the dominant epistemology, teaching methodologies and curriculum structure. It also allows to (re)think and embrace indigenous theories within the academic system, open to all voices and ways of knowing.

Decolonisation in practice is a movement led by the collective of indigenous scholars. The purpose is to embrace the varieties of ways of knowing as part of the academic body of knowledge and think of these varieties as more than just examples that serve the work of Western scholars. The effort is to decentralise the knowledge produced in the 'centre' that devalues 'peripheral' knowledge systems. This means to decolonise the educational system, that is, to rupture with 'colonialist epistemologies'.

Decolonisation is more than an abstract concept; it is what Brazilian indigenous academic and activist Célia Xakriabá[1] (2020) calls 'sentimento de cura' (a 'sense of healing'). Decolonisation in practice for indigenous academics happens through their bodies, through the collective being. Their collective bodies are an extension of their territories, struggles, identities, and epistemologies in this environment. The university, by right, is also an indigenous territory.

This contribution will focus on expanding the notion of decolonisation of the academy beyond the parameters of Western academic vocabulary by highlighting what is being done by indigenous scholars.

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[1] Is from the Xakriabá people and an academic in the Federal University of Minas Gerais, in the southeast region of Brazil.

Decolonisation as lived experience

Decolonisation is part of the indigenous lived experience, meaning that the process against colonisation has been happening all along throughout their history. Florêncio Vaz[2] (2021) says that decolonisation is not new but an ongoing process for the indigenous people. The difference is that today we have a theoretical reflection about it, however it has been part of their lived experience since colonisation.

If we think of decolonisation as an ongoing process and as a lived experience, we can move beyond the idea of just one more concept to be added to the Western academic vocabulary, reinscribing more power to the way Western intellectuals define the world. We can then focus on the participation of minorities, such as indigenous peoples, in the academic epistemological practice and highlight their current concerns. Moving beyond the concept and move towards changes. Célia Xakriabá (2020) affirms that for the 'decolonisation of the mind' or thought to materialise, it is not enough to recognise the indigenous knowledge and narratives, it is urgent to recognise their knowers – the people that participate in constructing, representing, transmitting, and applying knowledge. Deconstructing the prejudice that there is such thing as 'others' that are incapable of occupying the space of the university and actively being part of the academic knowledge system, and finally recognise the intellectual *authority* of indigenous people.

University is indigenous territory

For the indigenous students in Brazil, decolonisation happens with their presence and their bodies in the universities. They use the term 'university as indigenous territory' because the university is also indigenous territory, it is their right to be there, it is a space to re-exist (to resist and reaffirm their identities). Their presence becomes an extension of their own territories, struggles, and epistemologies, as they go to university as a collective, and as a collective resist the colonial idea of singularity over diversity. The indigenous presence can be seen as a movement that provokes a rupture in what seems epistemologically/methodologically homogenous. With more indigenous students at the universities the tendency, according to Gersem Baniwa[3] (2018), is to force a revision of classic epistemological and methodological paradigms to account for these new academics who have 'other epistemological, philosophical,

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[2] Is from the Maytapu people and a professor in the Federal University of Oeste do Pará, in the north of the country.

[3] Is from the Baniwa people and a professor in the Federal University of Amazonas, in the north of the country.

cosmological, sociocultural, and spiritual references' (Ibid.: 182). One way of doing this is by valuing the dialogue between knowledge systems without ranking them.

Coexistence and dialogue

The importance of identifying and supporting the coexistence and dialogue between different 'ways of knowing' in the environment of universities is crucial towards applying decolonisation. A decolonised academic system would have respect and, *most importantly,* recognition for all knowledge systems and for all participants to coexist, which does not mean that they must be considered identical. However, recognise the possibility of multiple experiences "in the world and with the world". The focus is not to deny or refute Western-based knowledge systems, on the contrary, consider that many valid knowledge systems should be recognised – the purpose is to understand other 'ways of knowing' beyond the categories of good or bad, better, or worse. We want to expand from these binary concepts or these scales where one must be better than the other. The idea is not about dismantling one knowledge system in favour of another.

One example of this comes from Silvia, from the Wapichana people, a medical student in Brazil who works with the concept of 'addition' of knowledges, to resort to both types of knowledge (indigenous, the Wapichana and scientific) – both are coupled with their respective practices and procedures and not ranked or nullified. She does not rank the different knowledge systems but mobilizes each one when appropriate and for what it is appropriate. The intent is not about one being better than the other – the two (or various) knowledge systems have validity. That is the opposite of 'colonial epistemology', which is anchored on hierarchy, annulment, and silencing. To 'decentralise' is to do the opposite, give voice and power to diversity.

References

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