Intersectional Decoloniality: Listening to the Other 'Others'

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How is it possible to respect differences while also asking to change and/or transform something? How is it possible to define what is 'colonialism' and to create a decolonial praxis while also encompassing difference even at the level of epistemic politics? The importance of this problem of difference lies on the possibility of knowing, being, and enacting a context-dependent multiplicity of struggles, voices, and projects simultaneously. Additionally, this query carries us towards an examination of what needs to change in order to understand, be, and enact more multiplicity: What transformation does decoloniality demand in order to create possibilities of co-being, co-knowing, and co-enacting? As I have shown elsewhere (Scauso 2021), these questions can be answered by fruitfully sustaining a dilemma or paradox, which teaches us to create a different kind of decolonial approach, enabling action while also treasuring the reflexivity and circularity of a much more humble starting point.

To engage in this discussion, the article begins by delineating the dilemma that emerges when approaches aim towards multiplicity and action at the same time. Second, the article describes how Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui sustains this tension by discussing Andean cosmologies and constructing a different kind of relational approach. Third, the article outlines some of the advantages that emerge when we use a precarious and momentary way of settling the dilemma to construct decolonial and intersectional praxis. Finally, the conclusion brings back the questioning nature of the dilemma, which is hereby sustained as an ever-lurking source of reflexivity and democratic dialogue.

The Problem of Difference as a Dilemma

On one side, essentialist and foundationalist discourses such as some forms of Liberalism and Marxism often resolve the problem of difference by constructing ontological notions of 'humanity,' which define what is undeniably 'real' and universally shared by all 'humans' (Foucault 1970; Wynter 1995; Mignolo 2000; Reinaga 2014). From these notions of a 'human' commonality, these approaches determine what needs to be defended, protected, or enacted; they validate a set of traits that then become bases of equality and foundations for entire systems of justice. These bedrocks are often used to construct the linear temporalities that guide action towards futures of 'justice'. Through epistemological notions of connections between these realities and particular identities, discourses also link these ideas of equality to those who appear to be closest to 'humanity'.

In the validation of single equalities, legitimation of particular projects, and authorization of specific identities, these epistemic assumptions create the conditions of possibility to elevate ways of knowing, being, and enacting, organizing other forms of justice, identity, and transformation as 'wrong,' 'deviant,' 'inferior,' 'barbaric,' 'traditional,' 'uncivilized,' 'threats,' etc. (Foucault 1970; George and Campbell 1990; Seth 2010). That is, this epistemic elevation of specific ideas constructs conditions of possibility for action, but it also leads to the violence that emerges when 'other' ways of knowing, being, and enacting are annexed, assimilated, transformed, erased, and/or killed. In a sense, they solve the problem of difference by elevating and universalizing some 'human' traits, which then allow them to include guides for actions, but this epistemic strategy also constructs the othering tendencies that sustain colonial legacies. As I analyze elsewhere, these epistemic assumptions are not intellectual productions forgotten in some dusty bookshelf; they appear in institutionalized and consequential constructions of states and civilization (Scauso 2021).

On the other side of the problem of difference, the possibility of encompassing more diversity and renouncing essentialist foundations has led to diverse approaches and difficulties. As other authors point out, the radical renunciation of foundations and epistemic moments of validation can prevent us from having the possibility of making assertions and acting (Habermas 1992, 2). Similarly, others affirm that our liberation from the prisons of 'humanity' leads to the very destruction of the subject (Wynter 1995, 33). Instead, authors such as Foucault have emphasized the possibility of 'diversification' (1972, 175) or 'desubjugation' (1997, 10). By renouncing foundations, and by taking discourse only in its moment of irruption, interpreters can analyze the epistemic constructions within these formations (Foucault 1972, 127) and the variety of ways in which discourses relate to each other (Foucault 1972, 160–61). The practical implication of this study is the possibility of desubjugation, which entails the deconstruction of the universalizing tendency that emerges from the epistemic meanings of particular formations.

Despite this methodological advantage of desubjugation, deconstruction is not innocent either. In so far as the universalizing tendency of foundations appear to be the problem that leads to annexation and colonialism, the consistent implications of post-structuralism equally demand the deconstruction of all universalizing positivities. Within this logic, the epistemic assumptions of institutionalized projects such as liberal civilization, and the epistemic assumptions of Indianista critiques of colonial legacies appear to be equally problematic (Scauso 2021, 166). Moreover, renouncing foundations and strictly staying within discourse also entails rejecting any kind of extra discursive notion of power, which undermines any possibility of distinguishing between more 'institutionalized' or powerful discourses and other projects (163). As several authors point out, this kind of post-structuralism runs a risk of abandoning the very voices that it seeks to desubjugate (Viaña, Claros, and Sarzuri-Lima 2010; Alcoreza 2014; Rivera 2015). Perhaps Foucault aimed towards avoiding these implications when he warned us against the generalization of deficit (1972, 118), but his approach to the problem of difference does not provide a way to determine when deconstruction ought to stop either (Scauso 2021, 167).

To avoid these tendencies, a number of decolonial authors sought to re-attach meaning to something other than itself, enabling a possibility of distinguishing among the levels of domination of different discourse. For example, Walsh and Mignolo affirm that domination has an overarching structure of coloniality, which explains and organizes other struggles and alternatives (2018, 23). To classify a particular form of domination as overarching, Mignolo and Walsh attach this structure to particular geo-political contexts, regarding it as a more objective structure of exploitation (2018, 146). The problem of grounding discourses in particular geo-political contexts is that it annexes the diversity of struggles in those 'locations' within a hierarchicalized and assimilating logic, which then establishes what experience matters most and should be heard first (Scauso 2021, 220).

Relational Cosmologies

Many authors have analyzed this dilemma or dealt with it from feminist (e.g., McCall 2005; Mann 2013), queer (e.g., Weber 2016), post-colonial (e.g., Inayatullah and Blaney 2004), post-structuralist (e.g., Butler 1990), constructivist (e.g., Doty 1997), and relational lenses (e.g., Trownsell et al. 2019). In order to contribute to this discussion, I aim to learn from the work of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (1999; 2010b; 2010a; 2012; 2015; 2018), while also adding some of my own conclusions from previous research.

Rivera discusses a relational notion of Andean cosmology. As Trownsell et al. affirm, cosmologies include ontological assumptions about the nature of existence in conceptualizations of our relationships with the cosmos and our places in it (Trownsell et al. 2019, 1). However, instead of defining our place in the cosmos by drawing hierarchicalized notions of a subject that is above knowable objects, Rivera develops her approach by understanding all the participants of relationships as equal subjects in a dialogue (Rivera 2018, 90). Through this notion, Rivera equalizes the diverse forms of senti-pensar that enable all subjects to know, feel, be, and enact relationships; she discusses a form of epistemological equality, which undermines the notion of a subject that is separated from knowable objects. This kind of *co-participation* in relationships creates possibilities of knowing (2015, 25), but the approach moves away from ideas of essentialized objects such as liberal ideas of 'humanity' and it focuses on relationships to think about the cosmos.

On one side, this notion enables the interpreter to understand the radical diversity of relationships and experiences

expressed in multiple ways. Rivera affirms that this should include not only rationalized, written, and/or systematic ways of knowing, but also more complex forms of experiencing worlds 'con las entrañas' (2018, 121), which entails feelings, intuitions, thoughts, arts, images, and other kinds of senti-pensar. Here, Rivera is able to co-participate as yet another equal subject, interpreting a plurality of meanings, weaving multiple narratives, and constructing multi-layered and dynamic maps of relationships (2015, 126).

Within this possibility of understanding multiplicity, the approach allows us to move beyond the essentialist claims of objectivity and singularity that often lead towards the othering and violence of civilizing projects. In this sense, Rivera's approach is a deep critique of objectivity that emerges from fragmented visions of society (Rivera 2015, 91). At the same time, however, Rivera acknowledges the problem that surges when this logic is universalized as another foundation, reality, or perfect bedrock. By assuming that co-participation is the essence of the Cosmos itself and by universalizing this epistemologically equalizing understanding of relationality, the position of the interpreter would also become assimilated as an equal subject whose authority to demand any change or transformation is undermined and epistemically erased. Moreover, the generalized equalization of all relationships undermines the possibility of making any judgement even against the 'colonial' aspects of some relationships. This threat against action and categorization is discussed by Rivera in her definition of the Khä Pacha (2015, 212). The re-essentialization of yet another approach could thus lead to the universalization of a particular logic, notion of epistemic equality, and understanding of relationality, which could create, in this case, a paralyzing destruction of all action. Instead, Rivera urges us to use this dilemma and threatening tendency as a different kind of starting point.

Decolonial Action in Precarity: Professions of faith and epistemic moments

Instead of reaching for the 'master's tools' (Lorde 2018), Rivera seems to sustain the tension at the cosmological level. The epistemic elevation of a 'humanity' or even broader logics of equality enables action, but often at the expense of 'others.' To the contrary, the generalized possibility of renouncing foundations enables us to understand more difference, but it either leads to relativism or towards indiscriminate notions of deconstruction. Instead of seeking the perfect and universalized answer to this dilemma by building another essentialist epistemic platform such as the notion of geo-politics, Rivera's approach teaches us to sustain this dilemma as an ever-lurking and irresolvable question. In a sense, she avoids the destruction of all action and she aims to create a possibility of decoloniality, but she also teaches us that this praxis emerges from the void of Khä Pacha, renouncing consolidated foundations and without assuming completely innocent or perfect solutions.

To achieve this goal, Rivera constructs her moment of epistemic elevation and action as separated from the cosmos and reality 'out there.' She teaches us to construct action without the arrogance that emerges from assuming it as corresponding to unquestionable foundations. Rivera states that she makes '… a profession of faith, which is based on the idea that decolonization can only be realized within practice. This would be, however, a reflexive and communicative practice founded in the desire of recuperating a memory and our own corporality' (2015, 28, author's translation). This profession of faith enables the epistemic elevation of a bounded definition of relationality and equality, which include a consistent form of decolonial action, but, at the same time, action is detached from the essence of the Cosmos and it is enabled only from a much more precarious epistemic platform of validation, which ultimately relies on the political 'energy of desire' (2015, 302).

This cosmologically precarious epistemic moment of elevation is centered on the 'fact of colonialism' (Rivera 2015, 28), which validates voices denouncing multiple kinds of othering, violence, exploitation, marginalization, and/or death. Rivera epistemically emphasizes the 'convergence' of meanings. Her field of inquiry includes a possibility of mapping meaningful 'convergences' and/or 'discursive atmospheres,' which emerge from the synthetization of texts, voices, and images (2015, 23–24). This possibility of finding and interpreting convergences assumes that meanings include shared elements that might belong to voices beyond the interpreter herself. The fact of their convergence presupposes a social moment of shared meanings, which lei beyond the interpreter herself. Therefore, the possibility of convergence grants an epistemic status of non-arbitrariness and validity to the sets of meanings that are mapped and interpreted. Moreover, this epistemic form of non-arbitrariness equally validates the different voices that weave diverse ways of being, knowing, and enacting. That is, the epistemic assumption of convergence acts as an epistemic moment of validation and equality; it settles the relativity of universalized difference and it creates a

moment of action.

This possibility of action emerges insofar as we assume that convergences make diverse ways of knowing, being, and enacting equally valid. Then, their annexation or articulation into the logic of dominant discourses that locate 'them' as inferior, less 'real,' more 'traditional,' or 'uncivilized,' becomes unwarranted and epistemically problematized. Their erasure becomes classified as a moment of illegitimate violence as well. The equality of converging meanings invalidates othering, which also denounces the ways in which 'others' are often regarded as inferior to justify exploitation, violence, and/or death.

One of the fruitful aspects of this epistemic moment of elevation and definition is that it allows us to avoid what Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall have called 'single axis thinking' (2013, 787). By following the multiple ways in which converging voices confront and fracture annexation, we can discuss how dominant discourses aim to construct others through different axes of power such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and so on. Moreover, the possibility of listening to converging voices also leads us towards mapping the ways in which these axes might converge or cross each other. It is in this sense that this form of decoloniality can be regarded as 'intersectional' (Crenshaw 1991; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Collins 2015). Whenever a shared and converging voice unveils a moment of annexation either from highly institutionalized projects of civilization or from anti-colonial moments of struggles, they fracture that assimilating tendency and create more possibilities of difference. Hence, Rivera discusses the importance of indigenous and ethnic struggles in Bolivia against colonial legacies that still impose exploiting, marginalizing, and violent experiences, but she also limits the scope of these movements whenever gendered experiences (Rivera 2010a, 179) and ecological questions (2015, 219) cut across these projects.

Another advantage of this approach is that it entails a continuous demand to listen (Rivera 2015, 270). The interpreter can analyze distinct narratives from the convergences of particular voices, establishing a map of struggles, voices, and projects, but this map can be called into question by other converging voices that might have been ignored, assimilated, or previously erased by the universalizing tendencies of other struggles. That is, the approach creates a much more circular and bottom-up possibility of mapping, which leads towards a more reflective and context-dependent 'moral compass' (Rivera 2018, 80). Due to the epistemic status of convergences, the interpreter has to remain open to other ways of knowing, being, and enacting that might confront yet again the universalizing tendencies of mapped struggles, agents, and projects.

Finally, the epistemic notion of convergence and its consistent notion of equality provide a way to determine how much deconstruction is required in a particular context to construct more decoloniality and difference. That is, the epistemic status of converging voices demands the de-universalization of the dominant discourses that annex 'others' in particular contexts, but once these ways of knowing, being, and enacting lose their privilege, the approach no longer demands further deconstruction. Thus, this kind of decoloniality seeks to create a 'planetarity' that depends on the micro-politics of confrontations (Rivera 2018, 57). Here, Rivera explicitly aims to resist the universality of liberal ideas of 'globalization' that homogenize and assimilate worlds, but she seeks to achieve this goal by creating a possibility of heterogeneity and difference for multiple worlds, including provincialized western ideas. Consistently, she seeks to construct a possibility for 'self-poiesis' (Rivera 2018, 84); a possibility to be. In this sense, Rivera teaches us to move beyond the logic of self and other, only asking for the possibility of contextualized de-universalization and desubjugation.

Conclusion

Due to the polysemic characteristics of meaning, our differences of positionality, and many other factors, I do not claim to 'translate' Rivera's work. At the same time, I do not wish to commit symbolic extractivism, claiming as my own ideas that are only possible thanks to her writings. My work is only possible as a provincialized interpretation of Rivera's writings, framed within a genealogy of Bolivian intellectual productions, in conversation with ideas of intersectionality, and often influenced by concerns that emerge from a particular experience of colonialisms. Beyond some of the fruitful implications that unfold from the kind of decolonial praxis delineated above, I analyze this approach because it also has a deeper ramification in the way that it creates a moment of epistemic settlement and condition of possibility for action.

By abandoning essentialist understandings of cosmology, this approach teaches us to begin from a dilemma that is not solved through assumptions of correspondence, reality, certainty, and perfection. Instead, it is a constantly present question that also demands action, but always reminding us about the inevitable limitations of our provincialized epistemic constructions. Consistently, the profession of faith in the equality of meaningful convergences avoids the threat of pure deconstruction and/or relativism, but it also appears to be cosmologically equivalent, which means that its own epistemic elevation does not emerge as a direct consequence of the 'nature' or 'essence' of a Cosmos.

This questioning and equalizing notion of cosmology fruitfully sustains the dilemma of difference and praxis, asking us to act with humility and reflexivity. Additionally, the cosmological equivalence of epistemic platforms democratizes discussions among diverse approaches because they are asked to abandon the siloed thrones that they often sustain behind claims of perfect and singular 'reality.' Here, approaches have to lay out how they are fruitful in a much more transparent manner. For example, the notion of intersectional decoloniality is fruitful because it aims to expand the possibility of difference, listening to multiple struggles at the same time, and creating more open opportunities of co-existence. At the same time, the approach teaches us to stop deconstruction at the contextual point at which dominant discourses internalize and annex 'others.'

On the other side, the Khä Pacha and the sustained dilemma remind us that this is but a profession of faith among others; it is a moment of epistemic settlement within the threatening void of the Khä Pacha. Hence, this cosmology asks us to think about the limitations of our approaches. For example, this particular understanding of relationality might differ from other approaches, which might have fruitful insights and broader notions of praxis (Trownsell et al. 2019; Kurki 2021). The Khä Pacha thus calls for a moment of democratic dialogue among diverse approaches, which can create deeper possibilities of learning and more honest opportunities of solidarity.

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