2010

Decolonization, Interculturalism, and Critical Indigenous Methodologies: Three Contributions

Sylvia Escárcega Zamarrón

DePaul University

Follow this and additional works at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo

Part of theLatin American Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Latino Research at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Diálogo by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.
Decolonization, Interculturalism, and Critical Indigenous Methodologies: Three Contributions

Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

This article is available in Diálogo: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol13/iss1/24
Here we are, forty years after Freire’s insightful and provocative analysis of our historical realities, the nature of power, and the role of pedagogy; and of his proposals for humanizing our relationships, ourselves, our perceptions of cultural diversity, and our societies’ institutions including, especially, academia. And yet, even when recognizing its corrosive and dehumanizing effects, we continue to reproduce in many ways what Alberto Quijano has called the “coloniality of power” (2000). It is thus imperative to always engage with, acknowledge, learn from, and be humbled by the enormous contributions of those who dare to speak against it, to deconstruct theories and praxis, and to challenge us to practice other ways of knowing and living. For this reason, in this issue of Diálogo, it seemed highly appropriate to review, even briefly, these three recent books that confront us from different locations to imagine different ways to build a dialogue for seeking justice and decolonizing our minds and hearts. Since one of the locations from which all the authors speak is academia, they advocate the necessity for continuously having a larger conversation that includes Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, academics, activists, artists, healers, practitioners, policy-makers, state officials, etc. who can speak from a diversity of experiences that go beyond, but that recognize the axes of oppression and discrimination that determine such experiences.

**DECOLONIZATION**

Denzin and Lincoln suggest that it might be impossible to escape the colonial formations of the past, that there is no postcolonial, but rather only endless variations of the present, and that decolonization is the reaction to the neocolonial; thus, they remind us, we always have to swim upstream against these forces (22). But it is in this process of swimming upstream where the possibility of “turning the table on the colonizers” exists (15). In fact, these three books are engaged with this possibility and are examples of how research can cease to be a “dirty word,” with real devastating consequences for Indigenous Peoples. To begin, it is clear that for Denzin, Lincoln, Smith, Del Valle and Dietz decolonization has to include a deep criticism of the ontological, epistemological, and pedagogical bases of Eurocentrism. As they describe it: decolonization involves the challenging of “hegemonic narratives of modernity, history, nation, and cultural identity as these relate to the indigenous world” (Del Valle, 2) while “valuing, reclaiming, and foregrounding indigenous voices and epistemologies” (Denzin and Lincoln, 22), being “constantly mindful of the ways in which the process or outcomes of [... ] research endeavors might reify hegemonic power structures, thereby creating marginality
(Swadener and Mutua in Denzin and Lincoln, 33). As I read the books, I kept remembering how as Freire clearly put it, decolonization is a project that embraces the demands of the oppressed, and the liberation of the oppressed and of the oppressor.

Through the examination of the projects of various actors involved in Guatemala’s indigenous movement and in the revitalization of Maya ethnicity, Del Valle analyzes how contemporary Maya narratives promote alternative nationalisms or political-cultural projects oriented toward the future and looking at the past. He argues that while some of these projects pose significant epistemological challenges by recognizing a Maya locus of enunciation, some of them may end up reproducing the very same mechanisms through which Mayas are placed in subalternity. This is because “Any celebration of difference and particularity that ignores the transnational structures of geopolitics and of capitalist accumulation cannot but be implicated in the global dynamics of this world system [based on] economic exploitation” (166).

It is this uncritical celebration of difference what concerns Dietz. He warns: “The self-referential character of the discourse that is ‘tolerant’ of cultural differences reveals a new kind of Eurocentrism” (33). One that ends up incorporating cultural diversity into the market in the form of commodities that can be acquired, exchanged, discarded, and sold; and one that it recognizes the “Other” as long as it remains “authentic,” apolitical, out there, and in the distance. Any decolonization project thus has to recognize the persistent colonial situation.

If research has to engage in decolonization projects, how can anthropology contribute to this and to the empowerment of the subalterns? For Dietz, anthropology still has a role in decolonization given that today the revitalization of culture is a key factor or political tool for many social movements, especially for Indigenous Peoples’ struggles. As he illustrates with his detailed exegesis, anthropology after all, being the child of imperialism, has developed frameworks for understanding how culture has been used as a tool for power. Anthropology then can be used to turn against its own source of power by unmasking it. Dietz claims that we ought to begin decolonizing anthropology by acknowledging from the beginning the “asymmetrical and dialectic relationships that exist at different levels” of the research process and the power dynamics in which this is immersed (109). I find interesting in his proposition how he conceptualizes the research process as political praxis in which “the inter-subjective, dialectic relationship that thus arises […] generates a continuous and reciprocal process of criticism and self-criticism between both parties” (112). In my opinion, it is here, in this process, where an intercultural dialogue can take place, where the exchange among participants who occupy diverse loci of enunciation can occur.

**INTERCULTURALISM**

Dietz places the origins of intercultural discourse on the impact that “new social movements” have had on identity politics since the 1970s. Through a detailed analysis of how interculturalism became institutionalized in academia, and subsequently converted into a pedagogy, he exposes how it has also influenced disciplinary and interdisciplinary explanations of culture, cultural diversity, and cultural relations. He argues that the confluence between epistemological paradigms and political movements makes it difficult to distinguish conceptual frontiers between the agendas and goals of social movements and academic (self-)analysis. For this reason, and following Eagleton, he proposes to look at all discourses as ideologies in order to unmask how certain interests are disguised, rationalized, naturalized and universalized, legitimizing certain forms of power (11). Dietz invites us to then think carefully about the agendas that might be hidden in intercultural projects. He proposes that anthropology and integral ethnography (through its possibility for translating between several contexts) can and must contribute to a re-conceptualization of cultural diversity and cultural relations, avoiding the traps of essentializing, reducing and instrumentalizing culture, and at the same time recognizing existing power relations.

Del Valle questions interculturality in the making. He states that as Maya narratives about alternative political-cultural projects for the nation confront the coloniality of power, many unresolved tensions emerge. Rather than being a problem, he argues that “departing from these tensions and conflictive intercultural relations is precisely the first step in the creation of a more fruitful, interethnic dialogue” (12). For this reason, he focuses on literature (Luís de Lión in dialogue with Miguel Angel Asturias), testimonio (Rigoberta Menchú’s controversy), the intercultural debate (Roberto Morales and Estuardo Zapeta), and the 1998 Educational Reform Design to explore what kind of “intercultural citizenship” is being promoted in Guatemala and by the Maya movement. He notes that the conflicts and discussions that emerge in the intercultural debate allow us to elucidate Eurocentrism, the coloniality of power, and a Maya cosmovision as a critical locus of enunciation. This cosmovision is already an intercultural exercise in that it emerges in a contested field where neocolonialism (in the form of globalization and neoliberalism) threatens Indigenous values.

Recognizing the field of power relations in which it operates, Del Valle and Dietz advocate for a kind of interculturalism that rests on the premise that the subaltern can and must speak and that the colonizer can and must listen. Furthermore, intercultural dialogue should go beyond a simple act of exchange to actually transform not only the people engaged in it, but also their political, economic, social and cultural realities and worldviews. In this kind of intercultural dialogue, we listen, learn from others, discuss, negotiate, agree by consensus, and our “being in this world” consequently changes. However, Gustavo Esteva recently said in a lecture (Oaxaca, Mexico, April 2009) that the intercultural dialogue is a very complex process that cannot happen within a research framework, as this kind of dialogue demands that we leave aside our rational logic and look at what we have in common with others and with social movements; it demands that we do not emphasize textuality (that is already in a position of privilege) but orality; it demands that we enrich ourselves mutually in the struggles for justice and sovereignty to produce “un saber histórico de lucha, propio de un lugar y un nosotros específico y determinado” for the purposes of the struggle, without trying to analyze it from the outside, and without trying to impose liberation and empowerment from the outside. Others instead propose that research and academia can legitimately participate in the creation of an utopic intercultural project and that they can produce useful and valid knowledge, although it has to be done at the margins (see Alma Esther Hernández’ review of Rosalva Aida Hernández book in this volume). Let me yet address...
CRITICAL INDIGENOUS METHODOLOGIES

Del Valle, Denzin and Lincoln agree that it is by centering Indigenous knowledge that it is possible to bring about social change and justice. The last two authors propose that it is necessary to merge Indigenous and critical methodologies to create a critical indigenous pedagogy with the following characteristics: It is a form of inquiry that is both political and moral; it uses methods critically for explicit social justice purposes; it values the transformative power of subaltern knowledges and pedagogies; it seeks forms of inquiry and praxis that are emancipatory and liberatory; it embraces the commitment to decolonize Western academia; it is committed to dialogue, community, self-determination and cultural autonomy. It is thus at the same time ethical, performative, healing, transformative, decolonizing and participatory (2). For all three authors, inquiry begins and it ends with the concerns of Indigenous Peoples; yet, it also brings about the transformation of the non-indigenous peoples. Similar to Esteva, Denzin and Lincoln argue that “Truth claims are subject to the critiques of praxis;” unlike him, these two authors argue that truth claims are also subject to critical pedagogy and its methodologies that seek new regimes of truth based on pedagogies of kindness, hope, and love (8). Herein is the “radical” intercultural project of indigenous epistemologies, and of localized Indigenous research and critical theory as Linda Tuhawi Smith has illustrated through her work. Herein lies their transformative and emancipatory potential. Herein is the possibility for revealing power.

Where can a critical Indigenous methodology begin? Assuming that, as the authors suggest, the research project has already been conceived in collaborative participatory dialogue (which can take many forms) and having the concerns of Indigenous Peoples in mind, inquiry has to begin with Indigenous personal performance narratives and testimonios. Testimonios are forms of counter-narratives that expose through the narration of a person, the social injustices suffered by the group. From there, the second step is to confront and elucidate historical and ideological formations that connect Indigenous Peoples to the coloniality of power. This is exactly what Del Valle does throughout his book, and this is also where interventions such as that of Dietz can be legitimate and valid. The third step is to evaluate the line of inquiry and the resulting interpretations using, as Denzin and Lincoln state, participant-driven criteria based on the cultural values and practices of the community or group in which research project is situated. The collection of voices assembled in the book edited by Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith are excellent examples of how this process outlined here can happen. Unfortunately, I do not have space to discuss each voice, but I want to acknowledge the valuable contributions of all the authors who collaborated in the volume, based on a commitment to decolonizing academia. They irrefutably invite us to explore with them otros saberes as an act of kindness, hope and love.

FINAL WORDS

The three books reviewed here invite us to listen, understand, and decolonize our minds and hearts; to rethink and imagine interculturality as a way of being with each other and of living with Mother Earth; to contribute to emancipatory and liberatory epistemologies and pedagogies for social change and justice; to indigenize our worldviews; to recognize that in order to realize our humanity, we first have to recognize the extent to which he have dehumanized ourselves, not only “Others.”

These are not easy tasks, especially in times where the backlashes are coming from all positions of political, economic, social and cultural power. We simply have to open the newspapers (or nowadays, log in to the Internet) to see this. We simply have to listen to the stories of those in positions of less power. We simply have to go to the classroom or observe academia-at-large and witness the effects of more than 500 hundred years of colonialism and neocolonialism. It is not easy to dismantle oppression, discrimination, racism, exploitation, and the entrenched structures that sustain them. However, as Rufino Domínguez Santos asks in his contribution to this issue of Diálogo: When have we not been in tama (a Mixtec word that conveys crisis)? The “we” that he speaks from are the Indigenous Peoples, but I would like to add that this “we” actually includes us all, as the dehumanization of one is the dehumanization of the rest of us. Nonetheless, it is the “politics of the oppressed, with a politics of resistance, hope, and freedom,” (Denzin and Lincoln), the “politics of the possible” (Del Valle), and the “politics of diversity (Dietz) that which gives us the fuel to continue our paths, walking, andando, weaving experiences toward making social change, justice, and alternative politics a reality. After all, it is possible that El Tiempo Princípia en Xibalbá.

NOTES

1 This is Luis de Lión’s novel, written in the early 1970s, discussed by Emilio del Valle. This novel responds to indigenista discourse in order to formulate a project of Maya nationalism, using the Popol Wuj as place of departure. Xibalbá is a place of degeneration and regeneration, death and rebirth.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Contact SYLVIA ESCÁRCEGA ZAMARRÓN: sescarce@depaul.edu

PHOTO provided by Sylvia Escárcega Zamarrón.

Concerns for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as a historical reality. PAULO FREIRE, PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED, 1970