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DISSEMINATING ‘BEST PRACTICE’?

The coloniality of urban knowledge and city models

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Introduction

Although it may be banal to say so, practices of city modelling are not neutral. They are conceived in economic, political and cultural contexts that are completely different from the cities to which the concepts and theories are disseminated, packaged up as ‘tool boxes’ and action models. Effacing the realities and social and territorial problems of the global periphery, they propose solutions that are, in the end, supposedly all-purpose ‘instruction’ on ‘best practice’; applied in situations and contexts entirely different from the ones for which they were conceived.

In this chapter, I engage and question the coloniality of the broad histories and power-alignments that have shaped the dissemination of what we call in the contemporary period urban ‘best practice’. Constituted and legitimized in theoretical, methodological, or operational paradigms, shifting notions of ‘best practice’ have built and sustained universal notions of the city models, planning practices, and projects embedded in and disseminated through colonialism and globalization. These problematic practices shape how we imagine the roles university departments and schools that specialize in land use and urban planning should play at the centre and periphery or – if the World Bank’s geo-referenced language is preferred – in the global north and global south.¹ A critical analysis of this history can help us re-imagine the training city planners and land use specialists receive, so they are able to reinvent cities and be free of competitive planning models and urban marketing that dream of making metropolises on the capitalist periphery into ‘global cities’, or, as is it is now fashionable to say, ‘world-class cities’.

Since the Americas became a part of (European) History with a capital H, our towns and territories have been conceived and designed based on imported models. Colonial powers built towns – ‘their towns’ – in conquered territories, either as new settlements or on top of subjugated pre-colonial existing towns.² With the waning of the power of the Iberian Peninsula and the abandoning of urban directives brought together in the ordinances of King Manuel I of Portugal and the code of King Philip II of Spain, French architects and landscape designers took up this role. In nineteenth-century Brazil, for instance, French missions arrived to beautify Rio de Janeiro, giving rise to the construction of mansions, gardens but also private homes for rich, slave-owning coffee plantation owners.

With a turn to Haussmann and hygiene, this project was no longer about an art or a style but became a model for the ‘modern’ town, a process whereby old neighbourhoods were torn down to make way for the wide boulevards of a clean, disciplined and disciplinary town with sanitation. English-style

garden towns and company towns were ‘brought aboard’ from Europe and ‘unloaded’ in America to help the first industrial cities on the capitalist periphery deal with the problems posed by a nascent working class. Progressively, the Western – European and later North American – city became a universal model, exported in modes of urbanization and territorial land use planning and practices of production and consumption.

This trend intensified in the post-World War II years. A time of Keynesian consensus and clarity on the state’s role as planner, we – in the south – were taught to draw up master plans. From 1950 to 1970, models and modes succeeded one another: from the diffusion of regional development plans, inspired, for instance, by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), to François Perroux’s growth poles, and the World Bank’s programmes to strengthen what it called medium-sized cities. Embedded in these processes and projects, international consultants became the contemporary heirs of nineteenth-century architectural and artistic missions. Under the banner of neoliberal consensus in the 1980s and 1990s, they have urged everyone to abandon the *dirigiste* pretensions of overall plans and their rigidities. Instead, ‘market friendly’, ‘market oriented’ plans, ‘historic neighbourhood revitalization’ and ‘regeneration of waterfronts’ are promoted to attract large amounts of ‘footloose’ capital. More recently, mega-projects and mega-sporting events have catalysed a time of ad hoc city planning (Ascher 2001), giving place to the ‘city of exception’.³ Universities and international conferences have become venues of choice for disseminating ‘best practices’ that are seen as the ‘handbook’ of urban studies specialists and planners from the south.

Framed in a Latin American experience particularly, the chapter explores the multiple forms of coloniality that sustain the dissemination of ‘best practice’ city modelling. Beginning with an examination of conquest and colonization, the chapter turns to the nature of current coloniality. Drawing on a literature that critiques the epistemological basis of coloniality, I argue that dialogue and debate, and a differently configured practice of engagement and city building, could help decolonize knowledge and reclaim how and for whom cities are produced.

Conquest and colonization

Latin American history began with conquest. And the paradigm of this conquest is, of course, the invasion and victory of the *conquistador* Cortez. The defeat of the powerful Aztec empire by a small group of Spaniards, no more than 550 of them, still baffles historians. Explanations for it run the gamut. Todorov (1982), Gruzinski (1988) and Dussel (1994) have shed much light on the subject. For my purposes here, colonization – rather than the conquest itself – is what must be understood.

To do so, it first must be emphasized that the Spanish already had inter-cultural contact and conquest experiences when they fought the Moors in the re-conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, a re-conquest that came to an end with the taking of Granada in early 1492; this was the same year – surely not by chance – in which Christopher Columbus, under the patronage of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabelle of Castile, arrived in America.

The next most important element is the modernity arising from colonization, and which Cortez, to a certain extent, announced: a modernity that invented, structured and inaugurated a Eurocentric vision of the world. This vision was the basis for the construction of the ‘civilized European ego’ and the ‘savage/barbarian other’. Not simply the bearers of superior technology of arms and the horse, as some argue, the Spanish or European bearers of modernity saw indigenous people as backward inferiors. On the other side, arriving in ships – described as ‘floating palaces’ – for Montezuma and his people the Spanish were superior beings or gods. As the prophecies had foretold, Cortez arrived by sea and was seen as the incarnation of the god Quetzacóatl.

Yet, to conquer does not suffice, one must colonize; in other words, ‘include’ these pagan, savage inferiors in the world, more specifically, ‘in *our* civilized, Christian world’.⁴ This process of inclusion,

however, was also a process that registered a difference: inclusion also created the periphery. Dussel (1994) demonstrates, for instance, that the 'discovery' of America was also the act of 'covering up', of hiding and veiling the other by erasing his or her otherness and projecting oneself onto this albeit inferior, backwards other.

Traditional, mythic discourse describes modernity as an endogenous process generated in and initially limited to Europe, which then spills over the European frontiers through the benefits of navigation and colonization. From the sixteenth century the Spanish and Portuguese, and then in the eighteenth century, the English and the French, progressively took over increasingly vast territories, broadening their world and thereby creating a space for expanding modernity. Building on critical theorization by Andre Gunder Frank (1972), Fernand Braudel (1979), and others, Wallerstein (1991) would deconstruct this myth and its central founding assumption that the essential movement of European modern history is the city's inclusion in a national economy, the binding of the local sphere into the territory of the nation and state. In this picture and its analysis, he questions the exclusion of a narrative about the world and its economy in the building of European states (1991: 73). Proposing an alternative view, he argues instead that:

The transition from feudalism to capitalism involved first of all (first logically and first temporally) the creation of a world economy. That is to say, a social division of labor was brought into being through the transformation of long-distance trade from a trade in 'luxuries' to a trade in 'essentials' or 'bulk goods', which tied together processes that were widely dispersed into long commodity chains ... Such commodity chains were already there in the sixteenth century and predated anything that could meaningfully be called 'national economies'. These chains in turn could only be secured by the construction of an interstate system coordinate with the boundaries of the real social division of labor, the capitalist world-economy.

(Wallerstein 1991: 73)

Priests, soldiers and merchants wielding bibles, swords and merchandise, were the means whereby this world was born; it is how indigenous peoples were introduced to the world and to civilization as backward, uncivilized and underdeveloped savages. Contrary to the myth, modernity was established as a unity made up of a founding and insurmountable duplicity that reproduced from the outset and throughout its history a centre and a periphery.

Consequently, unlike the Eurocentric myth, modernity is only half European as it is only in the discovery and erasure of the other, in this invention of the other and conversion of the other into a peripheral, inferior being, that modernity ushers in a new world that is European/American, built around essential dichotomies of centre and periphery, developed and backwards,⁵ or north and south.

But it is not enough to rout armies and conquer territory; world visions must also be destroyed and the imaginary conquered. The war waged, for instance, against the art of painting as presented in the magnificent book written by Gruzinski (1988) illustrates that this new stage in the conquest was not limited to controlling territories (such as *latifundium* and *encomienda*⁶), bodies (in the form of slavery) and arms; it made its conscious goal to subjugate minds through colonization of the imaginary and its associated images.

Moreover, conquest of the natural world was achieved by conquest of the supernatural world, or at least by the way in which it was conceived, imagined, desired (heaven) and feared (hell). How could the very notions of sin and punishment be inculcated if the new believers did not have the frame of mind to imagine hell, to make – it must be said – an image of it? Laying to waste villages and temples and repressing indigenous painting were the means used to erase the imaginary and images that upheld visions of the world and beliefs that had to be destroyed and replaced by those that were European.

Once the conquest was complete, all parts of this new world had to be rebuilt in the image of the ideal world at the centre: Europe. The parts that had just been discovered and then erased were remade as a replica, albeit imperfect, inevitably corrupted and perverted due to the very condition of being on the periphery; by definition backward, places where modernity would always be threatened by deviations, incompleteness and even impossibility. Reincarnated in the present, this coloniality of knowledge powerfully persists in contemporary notions and practices of city making.

The current nature of coloniality

If we return to the narrative developed at the beginning of this chapter on urbanity and city planning, it is clear that cities and towns of the periphery⁷ are products of the colonial relationship. This is also true for cities in the centre. Would it be possible to understand the history and the evolution of European cities without reference to the centre–periphery relationship? Doesn't the primitive accumulation that Marx spoke of correspond basically to the founding moment of capitalist development in the centre, and, therefore, to the modern city that would soon be the ideal place for industrial development?

Although our cities have always been designed and built according to rules received from the centre throughout the twentieth century, after the Second World War development aid has had an increasing impact in disseminating development models, and shaping the form of urban development. Nonetheless, we have never had before us such omnipresent international cooperation, both bilateral and multilateral. Never before have international consultants played such central roles in the design of urban and regional strategies, in other words, in drawing up and disseminating theoretical and practical 'agendas' that shape practices of land use and urban planning.

On one side, development agencies and foundations stimulate and fund research on a number of subjects, themes and issues. On the other, national or multi-lateral development agencies suggest and support institutional forms of practice that reflect particular conceptions and goals of land use and urban planning. This is done in the context of a generalized increase in communication among researchers, university academics and professionals, moving between national institutional frameworks and multilateral development agencies such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the United Nations' Habitat Programme, among others.

Today, this is the context and framework in which most university researchers and urban planners design and carry out their research and organize projects in the south. North American universities, for example, dedicated to training planners have developed 'international studies'⁸ that prepare consultants who will be the bearers of 'development aid', the peddlers of models and 'best practices' from the north.

These ways of working are not the exclusive prerogative of the most conservative groups, of single-minded thinking about urban planning prevalent, for instance, in multi-lateral agencies, or in the materials that consultants disseminate as they move around the world. In the academy, they surface in the unequal development of theoretical production. Many well-known authors on the left and the right replicate these practices and analyses, disseminating these perspectives, concepts and proposals developed 'in and for' the centre, in publications and personal visits to the periphery. Rooted in personal experience, views and perspectives are necessarily located.

Contemporary global processes are complex and cannot be simply reduced to social, economic and cultural relationships and inputs. Moreover, globalization may not easily be categorized or redefined by scales or roles, neatly categorized as the south or the north, reflective of hierarchical notions of the local, national or global (see Sassen 1991; Ohmae 1995; Hardt and Negri 2000; Smith 1993; and Swyngedouw 1997). Yet, we must contest the notion that globalization's homogenization is a *fait accompli*, disseminated through a single universal model. This goal shapes the central question considered in the remainder of the chapter: Can theories and models built in singular contexts really be disseminated

as universal? What are the possibilities and limits of such theories when they travel to the periphery, in other words, the south? In asking these questions, I am arguing for a critical discussion on the conditions that shape the production and distribution of knowledge, in our case, of urban and regional realities. In doing so, we might reflect on how we can reshape our ideas, theories and tools in order to engage southern urban and regional issues and to what extent we can re-direct urban knowledge so that it can be drawn on to invent more equitable or appropriate cities and land use. To reflect on these questions and issues, I turn now to an epistemological discussion that helps deconstruct and critique coloniality and its impact on how we know and plan for cities in peripheral, southern contexts.

Recent epistemological developments: a theoretical critique of coloniality

At the opening session of the 23rd Congress of the Association of European Schools of Planning in 2009, a learned presentation by Liverpool City Council's head of planning Nigel Lee, entitled 'Liverpool Regeneration: Reflections on the Past, Lessons for the Future', gave attendees an extraordinary journey through the history of the city. His lecture evoked the wealth and luxuriousness of Liverpoolian buildings in the second half of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century when the city was undergoing its greatest development, describing the efforts to revitalize and regenerate the old town and the new uses to which redeveloped buildings were being put. Nothing was hinted about the fact that most of the city's wealth came at that time from the slave trade, particularly from the role of rich maritime traders from Liverpool in the forced transportation of more than 1,300,000 slaves. Until England abolished slavery or became abolitionist, all the city leaders of this major port were traders in human flesh.⁹ This silence, and many others like it, hides the barbarian side of primitive accumulation, but also of coloniality.

Here, Mignolo's work proves useful. He reminds us that, although the discourse of science is a particular regional discourse from Europe, '[t]his particular (regional/local) history is nevertheless double: on one side is the history of European modernity and, on the other, the "silenced" history of European coloniality' (2004: 680). In this discussion, *colonization* and *coloniality* must not be confused. Colonization refers to a specific historical period while coloniality refers to one of modernity's essential, permanent characteristics; the ongoing relationship which throughout modern history marks both the centre and the periphery. Dussel (1994), Mignolo (1995, 2003, 2004), Quijano (2002), and Coronil (2005), among others,¹⁰ have clearly shown that coloniality evokes the permanence of an essential trait, to wit, the existence of a relationship that while including us all in the same world also sets up different modes of inclusion for each of us. Although the aim of this chapter is not to make a broad-stroke presentation of this debate, an attempt to summarize this thinking could help us pose some critical questions about city models and knowledge disseminated globally.

Inspired to a certain extent by feminist and ecologist critiques of modern science, this literature shows us that by the very token of their rootedness in movements and universities of the centre, these critiques have been incapable of unveiling another essential trait and pillar of modern science: coloniality. In other words, the discourses of modernity veil the constitutive dimensions of modernity: its coloniality. In sum, Dussel, Mignolo and Quijano suggest that, given the co-essential nature of modernity and coloniality, it is impossible to design and implement complete 'modernization' of the periphery in the image of the centre. Dussel (1994: 45) expresses this clearly:

Modernity is a project that can never be completed as it is not possible without coloniality. The future cannot be imagined as a movement towards completion of what is always an incomplete project of modernity.

His argument is not about colonialism; it is about the coloniality of power and knowledge (*savoir*). This brings us to another idea, which is also essential: knowledge, even very abstract knowledge, is not

something that floats around in the air. It is always, necessarily, located in a context, arising from a context and put into context. Mignolo challenges us to question under what conditions a concept, a method or a theory was conceived of and drawn up, arguing:

[K]nowing (*savoir*) is not only a conceptual apparatus that floats around in the mind of humankind but ... it is placed, located in a geopolitics of imperial and epistemic knowledge (*savoir*) as well as in the structure of gender divisions in the Christian, capitalist West.

(Mignolo 2004: 699)

In this context and critique, we are challenged:

to work on an ongoing basis to decolonize knowledge (*savoir*) in different fields. The decolonization of knowledge ... is a crucial task to make possible the imagining of a different world, a better world than the one based on the epistemic principles of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

(ibid.: 705)

Instead of the colonial claim of universalism, this argument promotes pluri-versalism, insisting on a radical change in the dominant culture, not only at the centre, but above all at the periphery. In such contexts, too often mixed background, colonized professionals and researchers make up a kind of 'comprador intelligentsia', who, despite location at the periphery, have had their imaginary colonized. In effect, this comprador intelligentsia has become an intermediary and articulator of the centre's vision of the world at the periphery.

Conclusion: building dialogues to decolonize urban theories and models

Bourdieu and Wacquant (2002: 15) provide a simple and clear definition of cultural imperialism; they suggest that 'cultural imperialism is based on the power of universalizing particulars associated with a singular historical tradition'. With a parallel intent, Schwarz (1992) proposes the expression 'out-of-place ideas' to refer to those imported concepts, imaginaries and idealizations that are foreign to a reality, in his case the transposition of nineteenth-century liberal ideas to Brazil where local epigones punted Adam Smith and David Ricardo-inspired visions of the virtues of the free market, despite the harsh reality that labour was not free and slaves were responsible for the wealth of the nation. In other words, we return to the idea that theories and concepts are not free floating and that the coloniality of knowledge rests on the power of attributing universality to a particular experience.

With this perspective, our duty becomes clearer: to aim towards decolonization, in this instance in the field of urban studies, policy and planning. Of course, this is easier said than done, especially since we are not in possession, for instance, of World Bank-directed tool kits and 'best practices' with which consultancies abound. Yet, following Quijano, Mignolo and Dussel, we can assert a certain set of responsibilities. First, researchers in Latin America, the context in which I work and live, and elsewhere in the global south must decolonize urban knowledge.¹¹ This call is not a proposal to replace the self-centred dominant epistemology built in countries in the centre by another egocentric epistemology built in peripheral countries. To be clear, I am not proposing the replacement of a Eurocentric, mono-topic epistemology by another one – a global southern one – also mono-topic in nature, though centred instead in Latin America or elsewhere in the periphery. The deconstruction of the coloniality of knowledge must avoid all kinds of epistemological nationalism or chauvinism.

Like Mignolo and Boaventura Santos (2004), in making this argument I propose instead that new decolonizing perspectives should be anchored, located, rooted and engaged in our particular contexts;

this *savoir* will be plural. Based on a dialogical process, an epistemological approach with this sensibility needs to acknowledge and seek universality, while being cognizant of the fact that it will always be incomplete and limited; due to the fact that all knowledge inexorably has a location, and, consequently, is not universal.

In moving beyond 'out-of-place' urban ideas, we must not allow ourselves to be seduced by a mono-topic approach or power centred solely on the notion of the south or the periphery. The exercise should be based on another type of universalism, the principle of which is dialogue and a dialogical approach. Here I shall attempt to list a certain number of principles important to this dialogue:

- It must be the fruit of borderless, free and fair trade of ideas;
- Each and every participant in it should clearly and directly state the place and context from which he or she is speaking and the condition of the production of knowledge (*savoir*) that is being proposed or submitted to the dialogue;
- In sharing discourses, we should explore and express the assumptions they take for granted, their ideas and concepts, even the ones that are believed to be universal and which are so often not verbalized due to the belief that it is unnecessary to say them and articulate them because 'everybody agrees about that' (Santos 2004);¹²
- The challenges posed by different languages and the difficulties of translation should be recognized (as the Italian phrase '*traduttore traditore*' suggests, 'he who translates is a traitor');
- It will be helpful to recognize that misunderstandings are produced not only from the limitations of translation, but also from the singularities of social and conceptual contexts. This tension may be the source of some 'irreducible' issues, ideas, perspectives and concepts that may only be partially or imperfectly transmitted and received.

Despite the challenges and difficulties, we must believe in the possibilities of a plural epistemology and the decolonization of urban knowledge. To do this, so-called 'best practices' must be chucked into the dustbin of history and replaced with multiple, open dialogues: dialogues between researchers, of course, but also between urban studies professors and planners and, maybe above all, between citizens. The latter, better than anyone else, are in a position to transmit their experience, not so that it may be copied but so it may become an inspiration to others, to incite them to invent new urbanities and new ways of studying cities.

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Notes

- 1 Grouped and classified as 'the south', 'developing regions', 'emerging countries', 'underdeveloped countries,' these more or less sophisticated expressions evoke, often without articulating it, the subordinated peripheral position of these countries and the miserable condition of most of their populations.
- 2 The Zocalo, the main plaza of Mexico City, was built for symbolic reasons at the ceremonial heart of the destroyed Tenochtitlan, capital of the Aztec empire, in a square close to Montezuma's palace.
- 3 Under the inspiration of strategic competitive planning, flexibility and master projects now replace master regulatory plans. *Ad hoc* guidelines and discretionary decision-making processes are justified by the need for market opportunities. These processes establish the city where the exceptions become the rule (Vainer 2012).
- 4 There is no other world ('cosmos') than ours; beyond this (our) world, there is only 'chaos' (Eliade 1965).
- 5 In arguing against the tenets of modernist notions of development (*desarrollismo*), Frank (1972) created a pun: the development of underdevelopment. His thesis may be summarized as: the birth of capitalism divides the world into a centre versus a periphery, the former developed, the latter, underdeveloped; evident in the experience of four centuries of the development of capitalism in the central countries, in contrast with peripheral countries' experience of four centuries of the development of underdevelopment.
- 6 Respectively, large plantations established in the colonial era and grants by the Spanish Crown to a colonist in America, conferring the right to demand tribute and forced labour from indigenous inhabitants.
- 7 Here, I am thinking above all of Latin America and Brazil.
- 8 Although, we should critically assess this notion of 'international'.
- 9 Home of the very instructional International Slavery Museum, this museum was nevertheless not on the list of the Liverpool visits and excursions proposed by the congress organizers.
- 10 See the rich collections by Santos (2004) and Lander (2005).
- 11 I do not intend to propose a new kind of geographic determinism, or worse, a new kind of intellectual nationalism. In some cases, intellectuals based in the centre can adopt the perspective from the periphery, and we know that many researchers and writers from the periphery based in centre universities have made very relevant contributions to deconstruct the coloniality of knowledge. Franz Fanon and Edward Said, in different historical contexts, are good examples of in-between thinkers.

- 12 To give one example, it is enough to recall these 'universals' that so often come up in the discourse of multi-lateral agencies, such as: public and private space, home, family, civil society, etc. What universal meanings can these terms have in such varied realities as a favela in Rio de Janeiro, a North American ghetto, a working-class district of London, the streets of Calcutta, the 16th *arrondissement* of Paris or the suburbs of major US cities?