

# TRUTH AND UNIVERSALITY: A NECESSARY ANTINOMY? Verdad y universalidad: ¿una antinomia necesaria?

JOSÉ RAMÓN FABELO CORZO\*

Instituto de Filosofía de La Habana, Cuba  
Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, México.  
jrfabelo@gmail.com, jose.fabelo@correo.buap.mx  
Orcid number: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1367-1201>

## Abstract

Throughout history, oppressors have used multiple forms of violence to impose their own logic on the human universe they oppress. One such form is epistemic violence, which is based on the monopoly control of truth and the hijacking of universality. Those who apply this violence seek to convince everyone of the absolute character of their supposed truths, of the quasi-natural universality of their ways of thinking, of living, of organizing socially. Truth and universality are ineludible objects in dispute between conservative and emancipating forces. The scenario of this complaint today reaches global dimensions. Life itself is at stake. It is obvious that, without an undermining of oppressive truths and predatory particularisms dressed-up as universalities, social emancipation is not feasible. It is also not possible to conserve life. Unlimited growth, the permanent trend towards wealth accumulation, the pursuit at all costs of profit, make capital increasingly incompatible with life. False truths, such as the inevitable centrality of the market and the natural character of capitalism, must be dismantled. Following the logical-deductive method, this work aims to speak critically of the truth, but not denying its existence. This work speaks critically of truth, but does not negate its existence. Attempts are made to uncover the social conditions of the possibility of truth. It seeks to describe how truth can and should exist, if it aspires to be free and decolonized within a social paradigm such as Our America.

## Keywords

Truth, universality, violence, knowledge, epistemology, coloniality

**Suggested citation:** Fabelo, José (2021). Truth and universality: a necessary antinomy? *Sophia, colección de Filosofía de la Educación*, 31, pp. 41-61.

\* Has a PhD in Philosophy. Is a researcher at the Institute of Philosophy of Habana. Tenure professor. Responsible for the Academic Body and coordinator of the Master's Degree in Esthetics and Art of the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP). Member of the National System of Researchers of Mexico. Director of *La Fuente* Collection (Publications in Esthetics and Art of the BUAP).

### Resumen

Entre las múltiples formas de violencia que los opresores históricamente han utilizado para imponer su lógica propia al universo humano que oprime, está la 'violencia epistémica'. Ella se basa en el control monopólico de la 'verdad' y en el secuestro de la universalidad. Quienes la aplican buscan convencer a todos del carácter absoluto de sus supuestas verdades, de la universalidad cuasi-natural de sus maneras de pensar, de vivir, de organizarse socialmente. 'Verdad' y 'universalidad' se convierten en insoslayables objetos disputables entre las fuerzas conservadoras y los empujes emancipadores de los pueblos. El escenario de esta disputa alcanza hoy dimensiones globales. Lo que está en juego es la vida misma. Es obvio que, sin echar abajo las 'verdades opresoras' y los 'particularismos depredadores' vestidos de 'universalidad', la emancipación social no sería factible. Tampoco sería posible la conservación de la vida. El crecimiento ilimitado, la propensión permanentemente acumulativa de riquezas, la vocación hacia la maximización a toda costa de ganancias, hacen tendencialmente incompatible al capital con la vida. Es preciso desmontar las falsas verdades que han convertido en sentido común la centralidad supuestamente inevitable del mercado, que han transformado al capitalismo en el modo natural de convivencia humana. Siguiendo el método lógico-deductivo, este trabajo tiene como objetivo hablar críticamente de la verdad, pero no negando su existencia, sino intentando develar las condiciones sociales de su posibilidad, de cómo puede y debe vivir la verdad si aspira a ser libre y descolonizada en un marco social como el de Nuestra América.

42



### Palabras clave

Verdad, universalidad, violencia, conocimiento, epistemología, colonialidad.

## Introduction

*La verdad se revela mejor a los pobres  
y a los que padecen.*  
José Martí (1975, p. 139).

*¿Tu verdad? No, la Verdad. Y ven conmigo a buscarla.  
La tuya, guárdatela.*  
Antonio Machado (2017)

Throughout history, oppressors have used multiple forms of violence to impose their own logic on the human universe they oppress. One such form is epistemic violence, perhaps the most veiled yet indispensable for them. This violence is based on the monopoly control of 'truth' and the kidnapping of 'human universality' by those who, with their own and particular interests, thanks precisely to this control and kidnapping, mask as true their own vision of the world.

Naturally, epistemic violence relates to other forms of violence — economic, political, military —. The economic and political ‘victories’ now achieved by transnational capital, sometimes by turning to physical-military violence, and sometimes through all sorts of ‘memo-liberal’ tricks, seek to be legitimized and progress in time. This is the responsibility of epistemic violence. Their doers must convince all and themselves of the absolute character of their supposed truths, of the quasi-natural universality of their ways of thinking, of living, of organizing socially.

Thus, ‘Truth’ and ‘Universality’ are unavoidable objects that can be disputed between the conservative forces and the emancipating struggle of people. The scenario of this dispute now reaches global dimensions and goes even beyond the capital-labor contradiction. What is at stake is life itself. It is obvious that social emancipation would not be possible without putting down oppressive ‘truths’ and predatory ‘particularisms’ dressed as ‘universality’. Nor would it be possible to preserve human life. The logic of capital is increasingly misplaced with the self-reproductive logic of life. Unlimited growth, the permanently cumulative propensity of wealth and the vocation toward maximization at all costs of profit, make capital incompatible with life. The false ‘truths’ that have made the supposedly inevitable centrality of the market, which have transformed capitalism into ‘the natural’ mode of human coexistence, must be dismantled. Epistemology must also contribute to safeguarding the species.

As known, epistemology focuses its attention on knowledge and its basic problem is the true status of that knowledge. Following the logical-deductive method, this work speaks critically of the truth, but not denying its existence, but trying to reveal the social conditions of its possibility, how can truth live and must live if aspiring to be free and decolonized in a social framework like that of America. In short, it refers to how to combat the often-invisible epistemic violence.

To this end, the paper is structured in three parts. The first part dedicated to elucidating fundamental aspects of the relationship between knowledge and coloniality, deepening on the link between the content of knowledge and its place of enunciation, and at the same time, to warn about the dangers of denying universal truth to which recognition of that link is sometimes led incorrectly. A second part addresses the fundamental ways of the humanly universal existence as the basis for differentiated epistemological strategies in their apprehension, having the first two as premises; finally, the third part of the work seeks to respond to its main problem: Can knowledge about the universal be true? Under what conditions?



## Knowledge and coloniality

The topic is relatively old. This is an old concern about the relationship between the content of knowledge and the sociocultural context in which it is placed. As known, the classic paradigm of knowledge prevailed in modernity, signed by an ideal of scientific objectivity that presupposed the full reproduction of reality, an uncontaminated reflection in relation to any interest or subjectivity element, an image that sought the revelation of the world as this supposedly is, regardless of the belonging to that world of the subject of knowledge itself.

That modern paradigm tends to be overcome more and more in our days, and the idea that any subjective interference in the knowledge process can be avoided has clearly been questioned. Seen more as a somewhat romantic pretense of the classical era, the aspiration to pure knowledge, it does not seem to have real possibilities to remain as an epistemological ideal.

To the same extent a substitute is being imposed, which recognizes the conditioning of knowledge from the place it is stated. This place of enunciation does not strictly refer to a spatial place (although it also includes it), but to a social place, a historical place. It is a set of temporal, spatial, social, classist, geo-cultural or geopolitical coordinates that shape the content of that knowledge.

What is that place in the case of Latin America? nations and people who lived at least three centuries of direct political colonialism and who have so far continued to experience other forms of more overlapping colonialism, such as indirect and undeclared. It is a fact that colonialism lasted beyond political independence, not only in the neo-colonial (politically and economically asymmetric) relationship between ancient (and new) metropolises and their former colonies, but also on the cultural, and epistemic spheres.

A concept arose to refer to such cultural colonialism: 'coloniality'. It was created in 1992 by Peruvian Aníbal Quijano and appeared in his works referring to the meaning of the 500 years of America's so-called 'discovery'. These works were titled coloniality and modernity-rationality (1992) and Americanness as a concept, or America in the modern world system (1992), the latter published together with Immanuel Wallerstein.

The concept of 'coloniality' has had multiple developments, not only on the part of Quijano until his death in 2018, but also on the part of many other authors. There is a whole theory around this concept: 'the theory of coloniality/decoloniality'. This latter concept—decoloniality—



was later incorporated and alludes to the thinking and alternative practices to coloniality.

How can coloniality' be defined succinctly and understandably? In response to this question, a fragment of a work published a few years ago by the same author of these lines indicates:

Coloniality [...] encompasses what could be considered as the cultural logic that is part, accompanies, complements and survives colonialism itself. It is disguised as supposedly absolute truth, supposedly universal values, as supposedly human and/or cultural superiority of the colonizer. It appeals to the authority of religions that exclude the right to exist in any other creed, scientific theories that present as irrefutable, ethical norms that moralize inequality, oppression and even extermination of artistic expressions that are presented as the only ones able to satisfy the most purified judgment and that mark their difference in relation to everything that, at most, begins to be codified as the folklore and crafts of exotic societies. Coloniality conquers common sense, that of the colonizers, but also that of the colonized (Fabelo, 2013, p. 92).

Coloniality is lived everyday by turning on television and listening to international news, most often elaborated from the perspective of international broadcast; when going to the cinema to watch almost always an American film in which the world is perceived as they see it, worshipping the 'heroes' or 'superheroes', who are of course Americans, and who are created for themselves and also for the viewers. There is coloniality when the politicians of southern nations surrender to supposedly successful social models designed in North America or when they subordinate their own policies to imperial dictates. Additionally, when it is assumed that a work of art produced in the global south is good because it is recognized or exhibited in one of the European capitals; or when academic excellence is attributed to a product because it was published in another language and in another central country, even if none of its fellow citizens read it; or when a program is taken from humanities subjects taught at universities not located in the global north and, when reviewing the bibliography and seeing that all the content is European or American, although authors do not have any idea of the characteristics of humanity that do not belong to that group and assume the characteristics of their own as if they were universal.

All this is an expression of subtle epistemic violence. Coloniality is something like glasses through which the world is seen unnoticed. Even the self-image of the (ex)colonized subject depends in many cases on the discourse that Europe and the West has built upon it. From the Said's

Orientalism of (2008) to Mignolo's Latin America idea (2007), the idea is the same: the other, the non-European is a kind of discursive invention of Europe.

There are excesses here. More than a discursive invention, 'East' or 'Latin America' are the result of practical construction. More than invention is construction, and more than speech is colonial historical practice that constituted Latin American and the people of the 'South Global' as a new historical reality. These excesses have been mentioned at other times (Fabelo, 2014, 2016).

This work is directed to what is considered the source of another unnecessary excess: The one referring to the epistemological status, in which the truth remains after having done this critique of coloniality.

The evident historical kidnapping of the truth imposed by hegemonic colonialist epistemologies undoubtedly requires the search for alternatives. 'Epistemological resistance' must be added to the political resistance to the perpetuation of colonialism, as pointed out by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2009, p. 49).

What does resistance mean? Lyotard (1987), have understood it in the postmodern sense as the 'end of metanarratives' or as renunciation of any truth that claims universality. No individual is supposed to be able to attribute centrality in the knowledge of universality. The story of epistemic eurocentrism is considered as more than eloquent argument.

The theoretical basis of this idea would seem to be as follows: because all knowledge is valuable and conditioned by its place of enunciation, then its validity would be referred exclusively to the existential frameworks of its enunciating subject; there would not be and could not be universal truths. It would be the epistemological basis of the postmodern statement on the 'end of metanarratives'.

But is that the alternative? Considering that individuals have different ideas and therefore different ways of seeing what is universal, can the universal itself be, at least, incognizable and, at most, non-existent? Will this not be an even more veiled form of epistemic violence?

It is immediately apparent that there are two issues to be solved: One, 'the issue of real and objective existence' of human universality and the way in which it exists; the other, assuming that its existence is recognized, 'the problem of whether or not this universality is apprehensible' by knowledge and, moreover, under what social conditions it is best understood.



## On the ways of existence of the humanly universal

It is appropriate to begin by recognizing the existence of the universal that unites us as 'species' and 'gender', something that is not necessarily bypassed with the infinite diversity of the human. Based on this, it could be affirmed that we are, at the same time, unrepeatable singularities and representatives of the same human universe. The reliability of this statement seems obvious. However, the absence of a minimally dialectical thought has rarely led to a false disjunction. If our universal common identity is accepted as human, collective or individual differences tend to be unknown. On the contrary, if diversity is recognized, then the common, the general and the universal are denied.

Despite their unilateralism, the two positions described have their real epistemological basis. On the one hand, that foundation lies in the fact that the human being is a species like others, with common attributes that allow to identify himself as such and to differentiate himself from any representative of other non-human species. In this real characteristic of the human, the emphasis is placed on the first position. On the other hand, the human being is also an individual and socially differentiated bio-socio-cultural product, with immense range of variants that make virtually impossible the exact repetition from individual to individual and from culture to culture. In this characteristic of the human, the attention is in the second way of understanding him.

As a trend, modern, classical, Eurocentric and colonial Western thinking, explicitly or tacitly, assumed the first alternative. The studies on the human, especially on the own and European, were presented as the knowledge of the universal human. Its experiences were elevated to the range of universal knowledge, even though in its construction it would no longer take into account multiple concrete expressions of the human.

The second variant, denying universality itself, is quite typical of postmodern thinking and is also present in representatives of postcolonial and decolonial theories. By focusing attention on the diverse and the immense variety of human expressions, it tends to deny, both the general, that nourishes collective identities, and the universal, that qualifies the human himself. As seen below, this way of (not) understanding the universal leads (consciously in a way or not on the part of the authors who promote it) to a 'new variant of epistemic violence' that mistakenly appears as 'emancipator' in relation to it.

Because of the latter, it is very important to show, once again and in spite of its apparent obviousness, the very existence of the human-universal as a constituted reality and the ways in which it is conceived. It

is worth distinguishing between what could be termed ‘species universality’ and ‘gender universality’.

The distinction between *species and gender* can offer the methodological key to solving the problem of the *absence of dialectics* that often characterizes the way in which the relationship between the different and the common of human beings is addressed, and at the same time, the different types of universality in which they can live.

The concept ‘species’ points to a type of universality associated with the ‘specific difference’ that allows the human to be distinguished from what is not. Its existence is an evolutionary result and its admission must already be, at this point, unquestionable. It is based on those branches of knowledge that need to distinguish the human species from other species: biological sciences, evolutionists, anthropological, etc.

More problematic is the concept of ‘gender’, which is polysemous<sup>1</sup>. In this paper is used the concept with the semantic meaning that refers to the possession of common general characteristics, as the case of ‘human gender’, and not precisely when talking about ‘gender approach’, alluding to the set of characteristics used in society to distinguish between masculinity and femininity. The concept of ‘gender’ (‘human’), however, as used here, refers primarily to a certain historical-evolutionary result, to a product that also includes the cultural, the constructed practically and spiritually by the human being itself.

Species laws are closer to human biosocial nature. Generic laws are also sociocultural and, therefore, differentiated for disconnected human groups. They are a result of their own and particular historical evolution, often dependent, in turn, on short-term factors, on environmental specificities, climatic, characteristics of flora, fauna, height, proximity to the sea, sources of drinking water, soil fertility, etc.

As a species, the human being is already born, regardless of the cultural or temporal framework, as a real or potential bearer of a series of universal attributes. It refers to ‘real’ or ‘potential’, because some of these attributes are not presented at birth and require ontogenetic development in a socio-cultural environment for their development<sup>2</sup>. They are both biological (genetic information, anatomical and physiological structure), psychological (awareness, reflexive capacity, especially human sensitivity mediated by conscious processes) and social (community life, exchange of activities and their products in the form of social work, linguistic communication, etc.).

However, these universal attributes of the human being as ‘species’ do not cover the full spectrum of human universality. They identify the





human being as a 'biosocial being', distinguishing him from other species and thus delimiting his 'specific difference'. But these are not enough to explain, for example, the functioning of the value law in the world market, a law that today, in fact, reaches a universal dimension. This second is a different universality. The world market is a 'historical product' that arises from the development and universalization of a market that was not always global but local.

But how has this new universality become a historical product? We will have to go to the beginning. The history of today's human being begins as one, which began in Africa, from the same position related with the offspring of a common parent, the so-called symbolically as 'Mitochondrial Eve'<sup>23</sup>. The universality of species, initially guaranteed by common origin, was derived in gender universality to the extent that it incorporated socio-practical elements with a historical nature. But that story, to the extent that the descendants of that symbolic 'Eve' remained, concentrated and interacted in the same social space, was fundamentally the same for the species' representatives. Therefore, species and genus have basically the same human universe.

The successive waves of migration from their place of origin, now known as Tanzania region, originated particular stories. Although the species remains, the genus is dispersed and disaggregated. Each story shapes its own version of the generically human. There is one species, but there is no longer a single genus. The initial generic dimension of the universal human is becoming extinct to the same extent that its praxis and history lose the universality with which they were born.

Every wave of migration from the original human nucleus, dissimilar settlements in new regions to almost the entire planet, promoted a process of cultural diversification. As the Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro (1992) points out, this "process, with a diversified nature, responds to the need for differentiated ecological adaptation that makes the culture of each society more specific, specializing in a certain environment or diverting its development by particular historical events" (p. 9). Thus, originating multiple local stories increasingly disconnected from each other and from their common trunk. Each promotes its own cultural characteristic.

Different trajectories, such as those of historically *pre-universal* towns (prior to the process of (re)universalization of history that began in 1492), could not result in the same historical product. Diverse cultural products have an indefinite quantity of mediations that, due to their complexity, make their exact reproduction in different contexts to



be practically impossible, especially if they do not have contact with each other. Diversification reaches such a degree that when, over the centuries, some cultures meet others, it is often even questioned whether the others belong to the same species.

But diversity never completely breaks with universality of departure. Belonging to the same human family sets the need for common responses to similar external stimuli. Moreover, even at this stage of cultural evolution, marked by diversification, there are factors that tend to make human acting general and common. For Darcy Ribeiro (1992), this is due to “the performance of a series of uniformed causal forces, among which we must include a general imperative [...]” (p. 9). According to this author, the ‘general imperative’ lies in:



The uniformity of nature upon which man acts and which forces him to adjust to physical-chemical and biological regularities external to culture. The homogenizing role of this imperative is expressed mainly in the productive technology which, because of its direct relationship with nature, must necessarily comply with its requirements. In response to this imperative, we find a minimum of objective knowledge and of generalized ways of doing something in all cultures, i.e., the logic of things is imposed on cultures, challenging them to develop through perception and adjust to their principles (1992, p. 10).

Thanks to this imperative and to the fact that it is the same species with common basic needs and capabilities, differentiation never becomes absolute, even if various human groups have no contact with each other for long periods of time. It is striking that they share common ways of acting, of thinking, and of saying, even with the use of similar logical rules in thought and similar syntax in languages that seem to have very little in common. As Ribeiro (1992) points out:

The whole anthropological bibliography shows [...] the reiterative nature of the responses recorded in history for the different causal challenges that societies have faced, expressed in the presence of so many common forms of social stratification, institutionalization of political life, religious behavior, etc. [...] (p. 11).

Most of the traits of different non-connected human groups occur in the field of the production and reproduction of material living conditions, associated with their basic needs and capabilities, as well as their consequent ‘common logic’ of practical action and thinking. Obviously, as the analysis moves away, differentiation, and particular features of different cultures appear, and its ‘own historical logic’ is more prominent.

Therefore, differences are more substantial at the level of spiritual culture and the values of collective consciousness, especially in these 'pre-universal stages of history'.

These 'own historical logics', which follow the various historical resources of historically 'pre-universal' societies, are the main responsible for all the immense diversity of the human. Beyond the unity of departure as a species and the unity of the natural world with which the human interacts, history and its logic respond to social laws which are a historical product, which presupposes alternatives and 'free' choice by the human actor. The well-taken 'historical necessity' that Marx rightly speaks of is itself a concrete historical product. Social laws are not made without subject, without subjectivity, and there is no way in which there can be uniformity in human subjectivities as a whole in populations that have followed different historical courses. A subjective difference, insignificant as it may seem, can lead to totally divergent historical lines.

None of these stories is in itself more universal than the others, none is more human than the others. The socio-historical and cultural evolution of the human does not pass through a fatally *pre-determined* lane. History is born with its own practical realization and will only create universal products when it is itself universalized. Understanding it and avoiding the extremes represented by both cultural relativism and radical teleological evolutionism is the only way to assume the existence of the generic universal as a historical product. At the same time, avoiding ethnocentrism that tends to take a particular cultural history like 'classical' and 'universal', while considering towns that have not followed their course as 'out of history', 'barbarians' or 'uncivilized'.

However, just as standardized forms of cultural behavior are much less likely among unrelated societies, they occur frequently among societies organically linked by history. The processes of historical integration, through imperial wars of conquest and colonization, tend to foster cultural standardization, a product not only of the cultural imposition of the victors to the defeated, but also as a result of the assimilation, by the former, of cultural products of their victims that they consider exploitable.

Only from 1492, with the beginning of the contradictory modern process of universalization of history and the appearance of what Wallerstein calls the 'first modern world-system' (1974-1989), does the practical and historical possibility of a universal generic return of human beings reappear. The new generic universality could only be the product of a universalized history. If the different stories used to foster a predominantly differentiation process, the new process of historical universaliza-



tion now entailed a tendency toward interlinking, the result of a cultural exchange that also included much imposition. The differences dragged by the dissimilar human ensembles who were victims of conquest and colonization did not disappear, but they had to be subordinate to the imposed culture. Coloniality is born and, with it, the kidnapping of universality by the colonizing culture.

But recognizing that kidnapping, real and deplorable, does not mean denying the real practical basis of a new kind of universality. One thing is what the contact and practical interaction of great human groups, which has taken place since the conquest and colonization of America by Europe, means in terms of real universality, and another is the way in which this new universality is interpreted and instituted from the imperial power. Here, a multidimensional approach to this fact is needed<sup>4</sup>.

The reflection carried indicates that if sticking to 'the real dimension' and 'objective of human universality', it would result on what Maturana (1995) described as 'phylogenetic drift' (pp. 120-122). There is a very important component of this universality that is a historical result, the product of praxis, of the practical construction of a human world of dimensions increasingly identifiable with those of the planet itself, with the whole biosphere.

This universality is not guaranteed by the mere fact of being human, it is a universality built historically and, therefore, after the emergence of the human being itself; it is a dynamic, changing, concrete universality in each of its moments. The ingredients that make it up are not eternal, because they are precisely historical; they arose at a certain moment and can disappear at another time and be replaced by new attributes that are also universal. The world market, as a fundamental way of socially relating humanity, does not have to be eternal, at least, not with that role, which is an abstract-unfamiliar role of the concrete life of every human being.

Being 'human' does not mean the same thing in all ages or culture, precisely because its attributes are not only the result of a phylogenetic evolution, but also of a historical evolution of humanity that has passed through diverse moments, in the framework of ethnicities, cultures and civilizations without full mutual contact.

Only by bringing together phylogenetic universality (as a species) with historical universality will the generic universality of the human being, the concept of human gender, be obtained. The human being, generically understood, is, as in the case of other species, a result of phylogenetic evolution, but, unlike other species, it is also a historical product



constituted by the human being through the accumulated praxis. This historical universality, as a component of the human gender, is transmitted from generation to generation and from culture to culture through the proper human means of transmitting experiences: the sociocultural heritage, which finds its synthesis in human objects, results of praxis, and in language, which allow the symbolic substitution of those in the process of transmitting experiences.

It means that the objective existence of the universal human must be recognized in both versions, as 'species' and as 'gender'. In characterizing it as objective, it is being alluded to the fact that its existence does not depend on someone assuming it, but as an evolutionary and historical product.

## Can knowledge about the universal be true? Under what conditions?



Once recognized the existence of this universality, it is worth asking: is it apprehensible by knowledge? It must be clarified that this question does not only refer to the way in which this universality (subjective dimension) is subjectively interpreted, nor to the way in which certain interpretation is institutionally imposed on the human universe through power (institutionalized dimension). Both dimensions are obviously searchable by sociological surveys, in the first case, or by studying the institutions in charge, in the second. The question of interest here is whether a relationship of truth or appropriateness is possible between the subjective dimension, on the one hand, and the objective dimension, on the other; in other words, if it is possible a true knowledge of the real universality, as an evolutionary product that leads to the appearance of our species and that it is, later, objectified by the very historical praxis that constitutes us as a genre.

With this question, the main concern moves from the ontological aspect (the problem of the being of universality) to the epistemological aspect (the possibility of its true knowledge). The idea is to accept or not accept the possibility of that true knowledge and, secondly, to see what epistemological and/or social conditions would be necessary for a particular subject to be able to capture it in his truth.

This topic is definitely complex. First, because of the complexity of the object to be reproduced as truth. Humanity is found only in the uprooted of a true universal history, full of enormous contradictions, yet

without full recognition of the ‘other’ as belonging to the same human universe. In the history of humanity much progress has been made in that recognition, from the equality of all men before God in Christianity, going through the acceptance of humanity of the ‘American Indian’ in the papal bull of 1537 and continuing with the announced equality before the law of all human beings in the liberal ideal of the French Revolution. The fact is, however, that humanity still has to move to the real (and not just formal) equality of all humans in terms of their opportunities, the possibility of unlimited development of their capabilities, and the full deployment of their personality.

But this is no longer entirely possible within an oppressive society such as capitalism, which increasingly shows its incompatibility with the sustainability of human life. Capitalism is also a historical product, certainly universal today, but transitory, ephemeral, finite, maybe because it ends with humanity and its history, or because humanity ends with it historically and replaces it with a new form of universal coexistence, for a new world-system.

However, because of these contradictory relationships that, within an oppressive society such as that of capital, are present within the human universe, the relationship to universality is different and even contrary among the various groups that make up that universe. Exploitation, inequalities, private ownership over the means of production are the main causes of the clash of interests between these various groups and between them and the gender that includes them. Driven by hegemonic, class or imperial interests, society can lead against the generic interest of the species, diverting from the course it would need most, associated today, as never before, with the safeguarding of life.

Under these conditions, marked by deep social asymmetries, it is not possible to identify human universality in a practical-generic sense, as occurs in all individuals who make up the gender. Universal interests are not the same in all human beings. They are born from the social and historical system of social relations. They are not abstract, but historical and concrete. For that reason, when Marx (1980b) reflected on human essence in a world plagued by social contradictions, he pointed out that essence (and the same could be said of the universal identity of the human) “is not something abstract inherent to every individual. It is in reality the whole of social relations” (p. 3) in which all other individuals are inserted.

Is it possible, under these conditions, a true discourse on the universal? If the answer is no, then it should be assumed as a derived practical recommendation, renunciation of any claim to capture something that is



not in itself observable, and acceptance as valid of any practical conduct derived from the self-perception of universality, although it differs diametrically between different subjects. But is that actually practicable? Will there be anyone who really gives up any worldview or denies any truthfulness so as to please those philosophers who ask to forget the universal?

It can be seen what this would lead to. If internationally there are, indeed, frankly conflicting views on a global issue involving all human beings, such as climate change, and one of the parties (the one that expresses the interests of capital transnationals) denies or minimizes it (or says it is a ‘Chinese invention’, as Donald Trump once pointed out), while the other seeks at all costs to protect nature and stop climate change, who is right? If no one can grasp the universal, no one is right, we would say both positions are equally valid, even if one leads to the self-extinction of humanity. That cannot be the way out. The truth is relative, it is concrete, it is contextual, but it is real and, above all, it is necessary to life.

Human beings will never renounce, in practical terms, to the attainment of a truth in the knowledge of the universal. Possessing a conception of the world is a requirement of one’s own consciousness as a human psychic attribute. Nor will it be able to get rid of its particular social environment at the time it is established as the subject of knowledge. The solution to this theoretical-practical conflict cannot be an even greater division between theoretical and practical components. Neither abstract theory nor pragmatic practicality will shed light on the problem alone. The theoretical-practical symbiosis that this issue calls for leads to the point that the way out to the evident centrism that has always accompanied knowledge is not in the acceptance of an alleged theoretical runout, which relativizes and ends up annihilating the truth, while leaving things as they are—threatening the life of the species and the future of humanity—to the practical level, but in recognizing a protagonist, both epistemic and practical, those social subjects who, precisely because of the place of enunciation of their thought, are in a preferential position to achieve a truth that is not only for themselves, but also for the generically human. As Antonio Machado (2017) mentioned: “Your truth? No, the truth. Come with me to look for it. Keep your truth for you.”

De Sousa Santos (2018) does not by chance resort to the concept of ‘Our America’ of José Martí when he mentions the need for ‘new emancipating paradigms’ and ‘new epistemologies of the South’, certainly pluralistic, democratic, but ‘of the South’, which points to a subject (complex, but definable and preferential) in the knowledge of the universal. To such an extent it can be universal that the Portuguese thinker speaks of this

moment that we are living like that of a possible ‘century of Our America’ (pp. 84-106), alluding to the universal potentialities of our region as a place of enunciation and praxis, a place whose idea would allow not only a better capture of the universal, but also a more likely practical emancipatory projection, something humans need urgently at the crossroads between life and death, in which the logic of capital has placed them.

The idea is not to mention that only emancipatory praxis is universal. In fact, universality is a historical result of other practices that are not necessarily emancipating, in the case of people of Our America, from the practices that submitted them as colonized people. Instead, it was the practical colonizing action of Europe that united its victims as colonized and that articulated their respective demands for emancipation. It is the same methodological idea that Marx followed. It is capitalism that unites all workers as proletarians. Today we would go further: it is the system of multiple domination of capitalism, including its colonial ingredient, that unites its dominated, as subordinates, as oppressed, as ‘global South’.

The most common and universal needs that all human beings have is the lack of satisfying objects, which originate concrete and shared material interests, those that are, in fact, universal interests. What unites them as subjects who need to know and change universality itself is not some kind of metaphysical reason, but, in any case, historical reason, i.e., the real fact that under certain historical conditions some subjects, acting toward the attainment of their own interests, express interests that transcend them, interests of a human universe greater than that of themselves.

Overcoming the West’s self-attributed epistemic centrality necessarily goes through its denial by assuming the epistemic privilege of its opposite, as a necessary step ahead for a decentralized epistemology that can only come after the subaltern world imposed the power of ‘its truth’, not only and not so much in epistemological terms, but above all in practical terms, through the revolutionary transformation of the material existence conditions of all humanity. This place is not reached by denying all truth, but by making universal use of its own, for which it is essential to give it the appropriate institutional frameworks, including academics.

This means that it is also essential, from the epistemological and practical point of view, to recognize and reinforce – and not dissolve, which is sometimes sought from postmodern positions— the collective identities that unite those subjects in recognition and in action with common or even different emancipatory interests, but mutually articulating. Fighting for self-identity does not mean fighting for non-change—as it is sometimes implied— it is not to seek that the oppressed, the subaltern,





the colonized, remains being one, but quite the opposite, is to seek the changes necessary for that identity and its essence, to be aware, in the subjects involved, of the objectives necessary to their struggle.

When the need for recognition and strengthening of the identity of a particular collective subject is sustained, it is not done by invoking an (im)possible return to some civilized environment lost in the past, but in the sense of its reaffirmation as oppressed, as exploited, as subaltern, as a condition of possibility to stop being. Assuming that identities change, as is true, this does not imply complacency with the victim status of those subjects. Notions such as ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’<sup>5</sup>, ‘preferential option for the poor’<sup>6</sup>, even Ignacio Ellacuría’s<sup>7</sup> so-called ‘civilization of poverty’, seek to reaffirm identities and at the same time change them. There is nothing strange about it if viewed from a dialectical perspective.

When Marx assumes the relevance of enacting the ‘revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat’ as a necessary transitional phase on the road to a new society<sup>8</sup>, that concept in itself implies a ‘proletariat’ that has already begun to cease to be in its pre-revolutionary expression. He is no longer a subject without ownership over the means of production, nor a class that is the victim of the systemic oppression of the bourgeoisie. But Marx continues to identify him as such because that new identity (as the collective owner of the means of production and emancipated from bourgeois oppression) must already appear as a horizon of his struggle in a political program such as that of Gotha. The ultimate reason for the use of the word is not to express an immovable identity, but to show the identity of the same subject. The sense is much more practical than epistemological or it is the one that corresponds to a practical epistemology in the sense of Marx’s thesis XI on Feuerbach<sup>9</sup>.

In other words, it is necessary to recognize the characteristics of its own in order to leave it. It is that simple. The transition to the necessary universality, desired and hoped, will only be made through the practical struggle of all subjects who have to get what they lack as oppressed subjects. If there is no full awareness of that oppression, those subjects will never become fighters against oppression.

Therefore, the first thing they have to do is recognize themselves as oppressed. It is the preliminary step to stop being one. They must see themselves as oppressed so that they can see themselves in some future as unoppressed and thus have the awareness to fight for that purpose.

When Marx and Engels appeal to the union of all the proletarians at the end of the Communist Manifesto<sup>10</sup>, it was not for them to remain

eternally, it is obvious, but for them to be aware of who they are. Hence, they would need a ‘revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat’.

The term ‘dictatorship’, now of course controversial in a context such as Latin America, in Marx meant the right and the need for the new class in power to assert its truth, in practical and epistemological terms, to the entire social universe. No more and no less than the same thing that all the classes that have owned power have done throughout history.

However, there is a big difference: the purpose is not to maintain oppression, but to eliminate it; it is not to impose a false interpretation of universality on the full human universe, but to allow everyone to access the universal truths that they will build among all; it is not to perpetuate itself as a group elected in power, but to seek its own disappearance as a social class, together with all the others, increasingly approaching a self-managing society. Self-manager, both in its praxis and in its knowledge of the truth about human historical universality.

58



## Conclusions

It is necessary to confront critically those theoretical positions that by ‘announcing an epistemic decoloniality’ reject all kinds of universality by identifying it with what have been until now European, Western or American particularities imposed as universal. Perhaps without full awareness on the part of its supporters, this position points to a new type of epistemic violence, one that denies alternative, historically oppressed subjects who have never gone beyond being the ‘alter ego of European centrality’, to become now the central subject, knower and doer of the new universality that all humanity needs.

More than theoretically, this position needs to be rejected from the praxis itself. The denial of all universality is in conflict with the practical need to integrate the emancipatory efforts of the different alternative particularities, and without articulation and unity, as subjects of knowledge and action, the necessary change would be impossible. The authors agree with Castro-Gómez (2018), when mentioning:

It is argued that any claim of universality must be completely abandoned in order to seek the release of the particularities submitted [...]. The result of this [...] is the inability to articulate a common will that goes beyond particularisms. Universality does not preexist the articulatory practices that make it possible [...], but is an effect of them (p. 38).

This presupposes ‘other humanities’, which have a critical subsumption relationship with the entire Western humanistic tradition, which does not deny it, but which does not assume it either objectively; that may question it and take from it everything that truly expresses – beyond a particular place of enunciation – a generic human truth. At the same time, they will be ready to build their own truths, without prejudice, without any complexity. Genetics has long demonstrated the non-existence of races. Much less there is greater natural capacity of knowledge in any human being.

If referring to temporal epistemic privileges, it is not by any natural superiority, but by being the truth, ultimately, a bio-logical necessity or, what is the same, a necessity of the logic of life, necessary for those who are most in danger of their own. Hence the phrase of Martí (1975) “Truth is better revealed to the poor and those who suffer” (p.139).



## Notes

1. For more information see the multiplicity of meanings in Wikipedia, which has required a page of disambiguation. (“Gender”, 2020).
2. These are universal attributes of the human being as a species that require a specific socio-cultural context, whatever it may be, for its development during ontogeny.
3. According to research carried out in recent decades and which included comparative studies of mitochondrial DNA from different ethnicities belonging to different regions of the planet, all current human beings have descended from the same woman—a common mother species baptized as mitochondrial Eve, who might have lived 190 000 or 200 000 years ago in East Africa. (Pakendorf & Stoneking, 2005).
4. In another context, in that of axiological theory, we have developed a proposal to interpret values in a multidimensional way, recognizing at least three dimensions in which they exist: objective, subjective and instituted. (Fabelo Corzo, 2007).
5. Nomenclature used by Brazilian Paulo Freire to define his new pedagogy (1999).
6. The preference for the poor is a basic principle of the liberation theology. As Gustavo Gutiérrez argues, it is “a central theme of this theology and is now widely accepted in the universal Church: the preferential option for the poor. It is a deeply rooted biblical perspective” (1990, p. 308).
7. In arguing his proposal, Ignatius Ellacuría points out: “If the world as a whole has been shaping, above all, as a civilization of capital and wealth, in which the one more objectively and the other more subjectively have been the main driving elements, conformers and directors of today’s civilization, and if this has already provided all the positive aspects and is currently causing ever greater and more serious problems, it must be propitiated, not its correction, but its superative impersonation of the opponent, i.e., by a civilization of poverty.” “The civilization of poverty [...] rejects the accumulation of capital as the engine of history and the possession-enjoyment of wealth as a principle of humanization; universal satisfaction of basic needs is the principle of development and the foundation of humanization is the enhancement of shared solidarity” (1989, pp. 169, 170).

8. “The period of the revolutionary transformation is between capitalist and communist society. This period also corresponds to a political transition period, whose state can be nothing other than the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat” (Marx, 1980a, p. 9).
9. “Philosophers have done nothing but interpret the world in various ways, but it is a matter of transforming it” (Marx, 1980b, p. 3).
10. “PROLETARIANS OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!” (Marx & Engels, 1980c, p. 69).

## References

- CASTRO-GÓMEZ, Santiago  
 2018 ¿Qué hacer con los universalismos occidentales? Alain Basail Rodríguez, et alt. (Coord.) *Raíces comunes e historias compartidas. México, Centroamérica y el Caribe*. Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas: UNICACH / Buenos Aires: CLACSO.
- ELLACURÍA, Ignacio  
 1989 Utopía y profetismo desde América Latina. Un ensayo concreto de soteriología histórica. *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología*. No. 17, pp. 141-184.
- FABELO CORZO, José Ramón  
 2007 *Los valores y sus desafíos actuales*. 4.ª ed. Lima: Educap.  
 2013 La colonialidad del poder y la lógica del capital. *Perspectiva*, 14(16), pp. 91-98.  
 2014 ‘América Latina’: ¿al servicio de la colonización o de la descolonización? *Revista Casa de las Américas*, (276), pp. 32-48.  
 2016 América (Latina): ¿descubierta, inventada o construida? Fabelo Corzo, J. R. & Alejo Herrera E. E. (Coord.). *La estética y el arte de la Academia a la Academia*, (pp. 89-99), Puebla: BUAP.
- “Género”. Wikipedia. (11 de diciembre de 2020). En <https://es.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=G%C3%A9nero&oldid=131624630>.
- GUTIÉRREZ, Gustavo  
 1990 Pobres y opción fundamental. En Ellacuría, I. & Sobrino J., *Mysterium Liberationis* (303-322). Madrid: Trotta.
- FREIRE, Paulo  
 1999 *Pedagogía del oprimido*. 52.ª Edición. México: Siglo XXI Editores.
- LYOTARD, Jean-François  
 1987 *La condición posmoderna*. Madrid: Cátedra S. A.
- MACHADO, Antonio  
 2017 Antonio Machado: *Proverbios y Cantares* [Entrada de blog] Recuperado de <http://lasesquinasdeldia.blogspot.com/2011/05/antonio-machado-PROVERBIOS-Y-CANTARES.HTML>
- MARTÍ, José  
 1975 El cisma de los católicos en Nueva York, *Obras Completas*, t. XI La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales.
- MARX, Carlos  
 1980a Crítica al Programa de Gotha. C. Marx y F. Engels. *Obras Escogidas*. Tomo III. (pp. 1-9). Moscú: Editorial Progreso.  
 1980b Tesis sobre Feuerbach. C. Marx y F. Engels. *Obras Escogidas*. Tomo I. (pp. 2-3). Moscú: Editorial Progreso.



- MARX, Carlos  
 1980c Manifiesto del Partido Comunista. C. Marx y F. Engels. *Obras Escogidas*. Tomo I. (pp. 54-69) Moscú: Editorial Progreso.
- MATURANA, Humberto  
 1995 *La realidad: ¿objetiva o construida?* Vol. I. Barcelona: Anthropos.
- MIGNOLO, Walter  
 2007 *La idea de América Latina*. Barcelona: Gedisa.
- PAKENDORF, Brigitte & Mark Stoneking  
 2005 Mitochondrial DNA and human evolution. *Annual Review of Genomics and Human Genetics*, 6, pp. 165-183.
- QUIJANO, Aníbal  
 1992 Colonialidad y modernidad/razionalidad. En Heraclio Bonilla (Comp.), *Los conquistados. 1492 y la población indígena en América Latina*. Ecuador: Libri Mundi, Tercer Mundo.
- QUIJANO, Aníbal & Immanuel Wallerstein  
 1992 La americanidad como concepto, o América en el moderno sistema mundial. *Revista Internacional de Ciencias Sociales*, XLIV(4), pp. 583-591.
- RIBEIRO, Darcy  
 1992 *El proceso civilizatorio*. La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales.
- SAID, Eduard  
 2008 *Orientalismo*. Barcelona: Random House Mondadori, S. A.
- SANTOS, Boaventura de Sousa  
 2009 Más allá del pensamiento abismal: de las líneas globales a una ecología de saberes. León Olivé y et al. (Coord.), *Pluralismo epistemológico* (31-84), La Paz: CLACSO.
- 2018 *Justicia entre saberes: Epistemologías del Sur contra el epistemicidio*. Madrid: Ediciones Morata.
- WALLERSTEIN, Immanuel  
 1974-1989 *The Modern World-System*. 3 vols. Nueva York: Academic Press Inc.

Document reception date: December 15, 2020  
 Document review date: February 15, 2021  
 Document approval date: May 20, 2021  
 Document publication date: July 15, 2021