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Is there any future for critical management studies in Latin America?

Moving from epistemic coloniality to ‘trans-discipline’

Eduardo Ibarra-Colado

To discuss properly the situation of Critical Management Studies in Latin America, it is necessary to recognize the colonial condition under which the region has developed since the ‘discovery/invasion’ of America five centuries ago. Generally, the discussion over coloniality emphasizes its political dimension, but not its epistemic one.

When we consider Management Studies and how they have been developed in Latin America, it is essential to discuss the function of knowledge as a mechanism of colonization.

Coloniality must be understood in its institutional dimensions, as a deliberate action of power to dominate and subjugate the other. It is the hidden face of Modernity, always considered the stage made possible by the development of reason, instead of the process of invasion/destruction/invention based on the power of weapons, ideas and symbols to impose a unique civilizing process. From this point of view, power instead of reason explains the splendour of Europe and America and the prevalence of some kind of knowledge over others.

At least three institutions have been essential in the operation of colonization: the Church and evangelism to produce silence and colonize the soul; the Hacienda and mills to produce discipline and obedience at work and to colonize the body; and the University and science to produce truth and colonize the understanding of the world. The organization of knowledge and their associated practices in the modern Universitas has guaranteed the reproduction of disciplines as we know them and, at the same time, has obstructed different ways to live and imagine academic work, discouraging or forbidding alternative practices.

This institutional conformation is essential when debating the current situation of Management Studies in Latin America, because it has facilitated the transfer of knowledge from the centre. Until now and dominantly, most of the Latin American researchers have been copying and pasting syllabus, theories, methodologies and other management fads and fashions manufactured in the Anglo-Saxon countries, it doesn’t matter if the appropriation is on mainstream theories or in those produced by critters or pomos.
In a preliminary exercise of intuition, we can recognize some mechanisms that stimulate these copy-paste practices. For example, most of the Latin American scholars in the field do not recognize the colonial condition of the region and, consequently, they systematically deny the structural differences and asymmetries with the centre. The problem is seen as one of development and the solution is reduced to the appropriate application of those management and organizational knowledge produced in the most developed countries. This uncritical acceptance of the Anglo-Saxon theories conditions the type of explanation of the problems of the region and the type of solutions to confront them, producing in this way a certain kind of self-imposed coloniality.

Other mechanisms operate when the Latin American governments support young scholars to study overseas. By obtaining the status of ‘foreign students’, they can be ‘educated properly’ before returning to their countries and teach all the secrets obtained in the modern temples of knowledge. They will be trained in those ‘proper academic practices’ to become first-class scholars and to be able to follow the rules of the discipline to produce ‘good science’. We are thinking, for example, in the argumentative and expository logic of a paper or presentation, usually governed by the internalized sequence of beginning with an introduction, establishing the main questions, developing the arguments to prove them with some sort of ‘legitimate’ data, and closing with a conclusion. Gaining this discipline implies also the adoption of a specific written style, the use of some expressions instead of others, the avoidance of some metaphors or symbolic constructions that seem to have no meaning for ‘the modern self’ and the scrupulous observation of schedules and deadlines.

Aside from this expertise about proper academic practices, language also plays a central role, operating in different ways. For example, when Latin American scholars speak or write in English, they adopt a strange way of expressing themselves, losing in their communicative action some degree of elaboration, complexity and specific meanings associated with some ways of saying or writing that can be expressed only in their native language. We must recall and emphasize that language is more than a neutral or innocent tool. It is a cultural device historically and locally constructed, that mediates the relationships between concrete individuals that live and operate in specific spaces and times. It entails the ways in which people learn and imagine who they are, what the world is, and to what community they belong.

Under these sorts of adopted rules, practices and language, ‘the other’ disappears and is silenced. Thus, when a Latin American scholar speaks and writes, their voice and words usually pronounce the learned ideas and arguments of ‘the modern self’ reinforcing the epistemic coloniality through transference and translation.

Despite this dominant situation, Latin America retains the vitality of its history and culture. There has been an important production of original ideas related to management and organization problems in the region. To give only some examples, there are relevant contributions made by Guillermo Bonfil-Batalla, Enrique Dussel, Enrique Florescano, Nestor García-Canclini, Alberto Guerreiro-Ramos and Leopoldo Zea to refer to only a few of a broader list. Scholars in Management Studies have usually ignored these contributions because they were produced in fields like philosophy, history, anthropology or sociology, and because they only read management literature! However, these contributions are important insights to develop CMS in the region to the extent they help us to recognize the organizational conformation of Latin American countries and of the specific experiences of management associated with some traditional, communitarian or non-modern ways of organization and government. Consider, for example, the experiences of communities that have learned how to survive in the worst conditions and how to create something with nothing, a real art of management and organization. By
working in this direction, Latin American scholars will be able to recognize themselves in their differences and specificities, producing original knowledge about other ways of organizing and managing, and breaking the mechanical application of current approaches and recipes developed in the context of the centre.

The future of CMS in Latin America rests in the capacity to recognize and transcend the colonial condition, and to move from a stage of copying and pasting to a stage of self-recognition sustained in the production of knowledge locally referred. In addition, the future of CMS entails an encounter with a ‘trans-discipline’, understood as a corpus of knowledge that ‘transcend the discipline’ because their knowledge is transversally built from one locale to another, considering different problems, experiences and solutions all over the world. In addition, the future of CMS must be imagined as a set of multiple dialogues and conversations between scholars and people of different regions and cultures to learn from each other, in the permanent re-construction of diverse management and organizational devices to improve and protect local styles of life respecting the differences.