The OECD and the Colonial Geopolitics of Knowledge (0165)
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Background

International organizations (IOs) construct and influence global higher education (HE) policy through their cross border collaboration and policy learning activities (Shahjahan, 2012; Bassett & Maldonado, 2009). Some frame IO's higher education initiatives as neo-colonial domination suggesting that IOs reproduce client dependencies, limit local decision-making, and/or promulgate universal solutions based on Western knowledge and neoliberal ideology (e.g., Aboites, 2010; Anwaruddin, 2014; Collins, 2011). This conceptual paper aims to extend the above debate by presenting a fine-grained analysis of OECD's epistemic activities (rarely discussed in the literature above), by shedding light not only on *how* its epistemic activities promulgate universal solutions, but centering the colonial structures of knowledge/power (encompassing epistemic-economic-geopolitical dominance), stemming from the 15th century, that inform the *why* (or logic) of the OECD's epistemic activities and their effects.

Decoloniality perspective

This paper centers the notion of coloniality, which refers to an ongoing logic of domination underlying imperial powers (whether Spanish, Portuguese, British, and, later on, American) and a Eurocentric process of expansion of mode of knowing, being, and representation (Mignolo, 2011) to understand and disrupt ongoing colonial domination in HE. Coloniality is reproduced through the production of *colonial difference*. The construction, classification, and hierarchization of peoples and places in the colonial imaginary were effective for projects of exploitation and domination. New identities and categories of personhood cast "the imperial image as the locus of the right and unavoidable march of history and the colonies as the locus of erroneous, the inferior, the weak, the barbarians, the primitives, and so on" (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2008, p. 110). The *geopolitics of knowledge* production—a subset of coloniality— affirms that all knowledge is interested and socially located and suggesting that, "local histories are everywhere but that only some local histories are in a position of imagining and implementing global designs" (Delgado & Romero, citing Mignolo, 2000, p. 8). In order to build a universal and objectivist conception of knowledge, or a *'god-eye' point of view*, western epistemology masked its origins in particular geo-historical and biographical conditions.

Comparative logic and 'god eye point of view'

Although under the directives of its member countries for policy learning, the OECD introduces comparative logic by unhinging local higher education issues from their original matrices and transforming them into transnational issues that can be solved in the global arena. The unhinging of the policy agenda from local context is apparent in OECD's *global scenario building efforts* and *comparative thematic reviews*. Through its development of forecasting studies like *Higher Education to 2030* (HE2030), the OECD has a platform to shape global

imaginaries of HE and structure the policy debate (Hunter, 2013). *HE2030* constructs the Knowledge Based Economy (KBE) as the external context for HE reform, and in turn suggests the goals and strategies for reform—HE needs to respond to the needs of KBE (Hunter, 2013). KBE is a discourse that the OECD introduced into the policy world, which is a poorly defined concept, yet is taken as an unquestioned reality (Woodward, 2009). As such, the OECD's view of HE is god-like because it promotes KBE and future of HE as views as being views from nowhere: decontextualized and ahistorical 'facts'.

The OECD's thematic reviews also transforms local HE issues into transnational problems. While there undoubtedly is value to bringing local HE policy and discourse into more international comparisons, some critique the normalization that may result. Kallo (2009) has suggested that the OECD's modus operandi entails "multilateral surveillance and peer pressure which invites the member countries to either 'conform or reform'" (p. 62).

OECD's gods-eye point of view depends on stressing the importance of universal policy levers and factors for HE reform rather than managing the effects of social and historical contexts (or inequities) (Sellar & Lingard, 2013). The construction of context of global HE, the goals and strategies for HE reform in OECD policy report obscures its own positionality in transnational governance of education (Hunter, 2013; Kallo, 2009).

Policy by numbers: The construction of colonial difference

The OECD's Education at a Glance (EAG) program embodies a 'policy by numbers' logic paralleling the time-related construction of colonial difference. Comprised of approximately 30 indicators along with over 100 tables and charts, it includes higher education data such as: enrolment ratios, persistence rates, spending per student, and financial commitment—the share of GDP devoted to tertiary education (Charbonnier, 2009). EAG enjoys wide circulation and has garnered media attention, and informs higher education policies around the world (Schuller & Vincent-Lancrin, 2009).

The legacy of colonial difference—rooted in the question "Who is human?"—has shifted to encompass the question: "How well do you perform?" As some scholars have noted, EAG is an important part of global rankings schemes, which increasingly demarcate and label populations based on 'intelligence' to justify the expansion and implementation of global HE policy (Robinson, 2013). The legitimacy of these OECD indicators obscures the fact that different scores according to in HE indicators are, "the consequences of a history of power" (Quijano, 2000, p. 542). Said differently, the OECD's EAG is not simply a tool of epistemological governance as suggested by others (Sellar & Lingard, 2013), but by redefining what constitutes an 'able' human being through its indicators perpetuates ontological governance (defining ways of being) paralleling the construction of colonial difference (Fanon, 1968).

Future Implications

Inspired by Andreotti (2011), I would suggest that educators, policy makers, and experts working with the OECD need to interrogate where they are understanding and speaking from. Asking the following questions, may help in this regard: How does one or an institution attain 'expert' status? Who is advising, researching or analysing whom? Whose epistemology forms the basis of a project or indicators? Whose perspectives or epistemologies are silenced or remain absent? Given the global membership of the OECD, it is well positioned to facilitate difficult

conversations, including: How can we ethically engage the global HE development arena even as they operate from unequal positions within the dominant global imaginary?

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