

Decolonizing the University

Workshop at the Coimbra Group University Network General Assembly
Wednesday, 5 June 2024, in Turku (Finland) (15:00h -17:00h EEST)



Context

The current state of globalization has long highlighted the need for a new approach to knowledge. It can no longer be viewed as a neutral and universal field when, in reality, it is the product of specific geo-political and cultural contexts. The new challenges facing the global community today, such as climate change, pandemics, and migrations, clearly indicate the necessity for an intercultural attitude in knowledge construction that can no longer be considered as a specificity of the Western world but rather as a plural and multi-centred space. In the fields of humanities and social sciences, these issues have been debated for several decades, starting from the seminal interventions of E. Said on the post-colonial and of the Latin American group "Modernidad/Colonialidad." This reflection increasingly envisions knowledge not from a Eurocentric perspective but from an intercultural point of view. Diversity is imagined not as something that needs to be hierarchically assimilated but as an enriching element, where various epistemologies interconnect horizontally and collaboratively. Moreover, the issue of diversity touches also the field of cultural heritage in general and those of universities in specific. Cultural heritage is embedded into a context of relations between humans and the environment and is often an expression of historical entanglements – also into colonialism.

'Decolonizing the University'

Three Working Groups of the Coimbra Group University network, namely WG Heritage, WG Latin America and WG Global Partnerships, propose a reflection that goes beyond the realm of theoretical discussions that can cross-fertilize academic policies and the way they are conceived in relation to the Global Majority. The core idea is to share experiences of researchers who have built solid research/teaching experiences with non-European realities based on intercultural and collaborative principles in order to enhance added value and good practices. The purpose of the workshop is to induce a profound rethinking of the colonial entanglement in academic relations through which all sides can mutually benefit.

Programme

- 15:00: Welcome & introduction by **Prof. Leila Koivunen** (University of Turku); programme & methodology of the workshop by Piet Wostyn (KU Leuven).
- 15:10: Keynote lectures '**Decolonization in Higher Education**'
 - '*Decolonisation's Long Struggle: Imperialism, the University, and the Advent of AI*' by **Prof. Parvati Nair** (Queen Mary University of London), Professor of Hispanic, Cultural and Migration Studies and Convenor of QMUL's Global Policy Institute.
 - '*Legal studies from an intercultural and collaborative perspective – experiences from Erasmus+ capacity building projects in Latin America*' by **Prof. Silvia Bagni** (University of Bologna).

- 15:40: **Good practices from CG members:** case studies on decolonization of teaching, research and outreach activities in higher education. (10' per case study)
 - Case 1: 'Dealing with complex pasts' (Markéta Křížová, Charles University (Prague, Czech Republic))
 - Case 2: 'Decolonizing scientific collections' (António Carmo Gouveia, University of Coimbra)
 - Case 3: 'Incorporation and restoration of Indigenous languages and epistemologies as a path to the decolonization of knowledge' (Rebeca Hernández, University of Salamanca)
 - Case 4: 'Human Capital Initiative. Decolonizing the workforce' (Omar García, Trinity College Dublin)
 - Case 5: 'The relationship between the University of Leiden and the colonial and slavery past of the Netherlands' (Mara Constantinescu, University of Leiden)

- 16:30: **Challenges for the future:** Overcoming barriers towards decolonization (Participatory interactive expert discussion) (moderator: Piet Wostyn KU Leuven).

- 17:00: **Closure & next steps.** Recommendations towards 'Decolonizing the university'

Coimbra Group Co-organisers

CG WG Heritage: Marketa Krizova (Charles University)

CG WG Global Partnership: Katia Cardoso (Coimbra University), Piet Wostyn (KU Leuven)

CG WG Latin America: Edoardo Balletta (University of Bologna), Omar García (Trinity College Dublin), Kirsi Korpela (University of Turku), Mara Constantinescu (University of Leiden)

About the presentations and the speakers

Welcoming words on behalf of the University of Turku by Prof. Leila Koivunen

Leila Koivunen - Bibliography

Leila Koivunen is a professor of European and World History (University of Turku) with a special emphasis in global history and history of cultural interaction. Her research has focussed on the history of intercultural knowledge formation, especially between Africa and Europe. She has recently studied the Finnish involvement in colonial activities and the historical relationship between Finland and Namibia.

Decolonisation's Long Struggle: Imperialism, the University, and the Advent of AI

Keynote by Prof. Parvati Nair (Queen Mary University of London)

The proliferation of universities in the UK and worldwide, together with the subsequent mass increases in the number of graduates, have coincided, in recent decades, with major changes to the values attached to higher education. Once a privilege, higher education has been normalised. Whilst the university was at one time considered an ivory tower that honed the intellect and provided a space for communities of learning, higher education in the United Kingdom has entered the free market and become commodified, so that universities have become fee paying institutions that are driven by profit and primarily charged with providing skills for employability. Simultaneously, many academics continue to see their role as vocational and find themselves increasingly engaged through teaching, research and action in a struggle for justice that is at once historical, social and environmental. The overriding neoliberal contexts within which universities operate are seen by many as ongoing and renewed forms of imperialism that threaten to engulf academic and intellectual freedoms. At the present juncture, the interjections of AI across disciplines opens up further dilemmas as technology serves many purposes and empowers many ideological fronts. In this paper, prof. Nair considers the challenges faced by efforts to decolonise higher education with a specific focus on how AI might both help and hinder such efforts. As we stand witness to the threshold of a new era where AI intervenes across contexts, is decolonisation an ever-distant dream or can technology help to subvert the very imperialist contexts within which it was developed?

Parvati Nair - Biography



Parvati Nair is Professor of Hispanic, Cultural and Migration Studies at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL). Her research interests lie on the nexus of Cultural Studies and Migration Studies, with a special focus on visual representations of migration and displacement. She published extensively on photography as a mode of engaging with socio-political issues relating to migration, such as ethnicity, gender, urban spaces, borders, inequalities, environmental displacement, cultural memory and community. Between 2009 and 2012, she directed the Centre for the Study of Migration at QMUL, where she currently convenes the Global Policy Institute. In 2012, she took a secondment from QMUL to work as Founding Director of the United Nations University Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility in Barcelona, Spain, where she led projects on migration and media, statelessness and transnational connections, international women migrants, cities and migration, and migration-related crises. In 2017, she acted as Working Chair of the Global Migration Group at the United Nations, leading work on the first draft of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration adopted by Member States in 2018.

She has authored several publications, among others *'Configuring Community: Theories, Practices and Narratives of Community Identities in Contemporary Spain'* (MHRA, 2004), *Rumbo al norte: inmigración y movimientos culturales entre el Magreb y España* (Edicions Bellaterra, 2006), *A Different Light: The Photography of Sebastião Salgado* (Duke University Press, 20011). She is the Principal Editor of the refereed journal *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture*. Her forthcoming book *Displacement, Environments, and Photo-Politics in the Mediterranean: Migrant Sea* will be published by Routledge in Autumn 2024.

www.qmul.ac.uk/sllf/modern-languages-and-cultures/people/academics/profiles/nair.html and www.parvatinair.com

Legal studies from an intercultural and collaborative perspective – experiences from Erasmus+ capacity building projects in Latin America

Keynote by Prof. Silvia Bagni (University of Bologna).

Based on her experience in three Erasmus+ 'Capacity Building in Higher Education' (CBHE) projects (OPTIN, REMOVE, and DEMOS), prof. Bagni will describe the attitude of the project group towards the main goals of the CBHE programme. The project team aimed to build a real interdisciplinary and intercultural study programme that could harmoniously mix the skills and competences within the staff participating in the project. This internal 'mission' characterized both the drafting of the proposal and the development of the financed projects. The projects were considered as an opportunity of mutual learning for both European and Latin American partners. Prof. Bagni will i) describe how this conviction was reflected in the structure of the projects, in the selection of the topic, in the management structure, in all the capacity building activities, and in the deliverables; ii) offer some critical perspectives both on the overall objectives of the CBHE programme and on the technical rules that govern these projects; and iii) propose to shift the methodology of EACEA international cooperation strategy from Capacity Building to Mutual Learning.

Silvia Bagni - Biography



Silvia Bagni is currently Associate Professor of Comparative Public Law in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna, Italy. She earned a PhD in Constitutional Law from the same University in 2005 and completed a 2-year post-doc in Bioethics, from UPRA (Università Pontificia Regina Apostolorum, Rome) in 2013.

Her research interests include constitutional justice, Latin American constitutionalism, interculturalism, and ecological law. She has been visiting professor or invited speaker at Universities in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru. She is professor of the PhD Programme in Constitutional and International Law at the Universidad San Carlos in Guatemala and in the PhD Programme in Law at the University of Cádiz in Spain.

In 2013, Silvia was co-founder of the Centro di studi sull'America Latina, in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna. In 2018, she was nominated as an expert for the United Nations Harmony with Nature Programme, (www.harmonywithnatureun.org) and in 2019 she was invited to be a speaker at the UN Dialogue on Harmony with Nature in New York. In 2020, she co-authored a study commissioned by the European Economic and Social Committee, Towards an EU Charter of the Fundamental Rights of Nature (www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/towards-eu-charter-fundamental-rights-nature).

Dealing with Complex Pasts

Case study by prof. Markéta Křížová (Charles University)

The 'Dealing with Complex Pasts'-project is one of the first concerted efforts of numerous European universities so far to deal jointly with the "uncomfortable" legacies of the past of colonialism, but also authoritarianism and modernization. This legacy imprinted itself both in tangible and intangible heritage of European universities, be it in the museum collections, the university buildings and campuses, or the specific intellectual traditions. The principal aim of the project is to develop critical epistemology and raise fundamental questions about the very essence of university institutions, their core practices and self-representations, as well as their wider role in society and their social responsibilities; but also to present policy recommendations to university managements.

Colonialism still casts long shadows, yet universities have so far preserved their "innocence". As a result, these problematic and often painful issues have not been addressed, especially within the frame of the celebratory approach to the university heritage (e.g. treasuring of valuable pieces of art, buildings, biographies of great men). Numerous universities received unexpected response to the initial call to address their uncomfortable heritage, showing that there is a demand to overcome the silencing of certain aspects of university histories. In her presentation, prof. Křížová will present the case study of the Hrdlička Museum of Man at Charles University in Prague.

Markéta Křížová - Biography

Markéta Křížová, Ph.D., is a professor of Ibero-American Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague. Her research involves the history of overseas expansion, migrations and cultural transfers, history of modern slavery, as well as intellectual history (including the history of museums and history of racial thought). Her previous publications include the edited collective volume (with Jitka Maleckova) *Central Europe and the Non-European world in the long 19th century* (Berlin 2022). She participated in several European projects, among them 'Migration and Modernity: Historical and Cultural Challenges' (MOVES), European Joint Doctorate funded within the Horizon 2020 (2019-23); and 'Teaching European History in the 21st Century' (TEH 21, E+ KA2 project 2020-23). She cooperates intensely with the Náprstek Museum in Prague (the museum of non-European ethnology).

Decolonizing scientific collections

Case study by prof. António Carmo Gouveia (University of Coimbra)

The University of Coimbra (UC) has amassed considerable natural history collections stemming from former colonies in Africa (Angola, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique and São Tomé and Príncipe), but also from Brazil, India, Macao and East-Timor, housed in several organic institutions, such as the Science Museum, the Herbarium, or the Botanic Garden. These collections, distinct in scope, audiences, and public visibility, hold, curate and interpret natural history specimens gathered under distinct historical circumstances, imperial and colonial, ranging from the more organized expeditions (the late 18th century Philosophical Voyages, or the Angolan botanical missions of the 20th century), to smaller, episodic collections sent by amateur naturalists that were brought into intercontinental networks of biological material exchange, and significantly expanded the amount and geographical range of the collections. The UC has thus an ethical and scientific responsibility to initiate a discussion on decolonising the scientific collections under its care. These recontextualisation and reparation initiatives rely on analysing the contexts of production and refocusing our narratives about the natural collections.

Prof. Carmo Gouveia argues that one should not be afraid of the commitment and ethical obligation to change the way we deal with this sensible heritage, regardless of the decisions that may arise from reflecting and acting on such matters. Decolonising natural history collections, acknowledging, and addressing the historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation on these collections and their associated knowledge systems, defining their shared stewardship, or deciding on restitution and repatriation processes, must be an inclusive and enduring process, anchored in continuous learning and sharing, allowing for improvements, and responding to the changing expectations of the actors involved.

António Carmo Gouveia - Biography

António Carmo Gouveia holds a Ph.D. in plant ecology and is the executive coordinator of the UNESCO Chair in Biodiversity Safeguard for Sustainable Development and a researcher at the Department of Life Sciences of the University of Coimbra. He was director of the Botanic Garden of the University of Coimbra and of the Serralves Foundation Park. His projects cover plant diversity and ecology, scientific collections, the history and communication of science, scientific collections, and citizen science initiatives.

www.buala.org/en/to-read/some-notes-on-decolonising-natural-history-collections-at-the-university-of-coimbra

Incorporation and restoration of Indigenous languages and epistemologies as a path to the decolonization of knowledge

Case study by prof. Rebeca Hernández (University of Salamanca)

In 1492, a pivotal year in History, Elio Antonio de Nebrija published in Salamanca the first grammar of the Spanish language. This groundbreaking work marked a significant milestone in linguistic studies and played a crucial role in the conception of Spanish as the language of a future Empire. Also, this grammar would later pave the way for the writing of the first grammars of Amerindian languages by Spanish men of letters.

The use of language as an instrument of power in European colonial projects has been a central point in the postcolonial and decolonial debates developed in the last decades in the academic context. Language and Empire have gone hand in hand, and the native languages in the colonized territories suffered the consequences of Eurocentered colonialism, as Western languages were used to “civilize”, introduce architectures of knowledge, and write over the recording and transmission of the different Histories, stories, and cultures (Mignolo 1992, Quijano 2000).

As a consequence of colonialism, Latin America has long struggled with the vital task of securing space and rights for its indigenous communities, which have been historically marginalized and have had to search for means to assert their identities in the face of the Eurocentric colonial project and the formation of Latin American nation-states.

In this context, different Academic decolonial practices that aim to challenge the Eurocentric narrative are being developed at the University of Salamanca; some of these initiatives will be highlighted in this presentation.

Rebeca Hernández - Biography

Rebeca Hernández is a Professor of Portuguese Literature at the University of Salamanca. She holds a Ph.D. in Literary Translation of Postcolonial Literature in Portuguese with a special focus on its ethical implications. Her main areas of research are Gender Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and

Literary Translation. She is currently delegate for international university networks at the University of Salamanca.

Human Capital Initiative. Decolonizing the Workforce

Case study by prof. Omar García (Trinity College Dublin)

This case study 'Global Intersections / Decolonizing Frameworks' will focus on the Human Capital Initiative (HCI) funding of the Government of Ireland, which allowed the School of Languages, Literatures and Cultural Studies to set up a Centre for Global Intercultural Communications, for upskilling and reskilling the workforce. It will be argued that decolonizing the workforce is a key element of intercultural communication and that equality is a myth without equity as a core element.

Omar García - Biography

Professor García holds the 1926 Chair of Spanish at Trinity College Dublin. He is a Hispanist, who studies both Latin America & Spain, and a Comparatist, a published, award-winning poet and a human rights activist. He joined TCD in January 2020 with the specific remit of developing Latin American Studies. He has been the Head of School of Languages, Literatures and Cultural Studies since 2021 and director of the Centre for Global Intercultural Communications since its foundation in 2021 and current TCD's representative in the Coimbra Group Latin America Working Group.

The relationship between the University of Leiden and the colonial and slavery past of the Netherlands

Case study by Mara Constantinescu (University of Leiden)

With a rather rich (all puns intended) colonial history, The Netherlands has been faced with intense scrutiny in the recent past by its always forgotten racialized minorities. At Leiden University, famously and proudly the university of the Dutch kings and queens and a large number of government members, this inquiry within has caught force since the massive Black Lives Matter protests that has held a mirror to our whiteness widely spread and fiercely contested. Although this conversation was bound to happen considering Leiden's involvement in colonialization and slave trade, it is only recently that it has been considered as a fundamental and definitory for who we are as an institution and who we serve.

In 2023, the Executive Board decided the formation and funding of a research group that would investigate the relationship between the University of Leiden and the colonial and slavery past of the Netherlands. The group's main focus is to respond to the following questions: i) How did our academic community position itself in relation to people who were robbed of their freedom? ii) What role has the University played as an educational institution with regard to colonialism and the slavery system? iii) How can the University best handle its special collections?

Using this as a starting point and actively considering our community's voices in addressing the impact of our past on present power relations, we aim at creating a framework for constant self-reflection and an environment where not only reflection, but action is made possible. This conversation does include ties with the fossil fuel industry and students' protests in support of a cease fire in the Israel - Palestine war.

Mara Constantinescu - Biography

Mara Constantinescu is the Coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean at Leiden University. Professionally qualified in International Relations, her research interest lies on higher education policy in Latin America and knowledge production system in the cooperation with Latin America, and more broadly, the Majority World. She has obtained a MA Suma cum Laude in Latin American Studies from Leiden University. She is currently overseeing research and education collaborative projects with Latin American partners and represents Leiden University in the Leiden-Delft-Erasmus consortium initiative on cooperation with the Majority World.