Dialogue on Modernity and Modern Education in Dispute

MICHAEL BAKER
Warner Graduate School of Education and Human Development,
University of Rochester, USA

MICHAEL A. PETERS
Policy, Cultural and Social Studies in Education,
University of Waikato, New Zealand

This is a dialogue or conversation between Michael Baker (MB) and Michael A. Peters (MP) on the concept of modernity and its significance for educational theory. The dialogue took place originally as a conversation about a symposium on modernity held at the American Educational Studies Association meeting 2010. It was later developed for publication in this form.

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MB: I am working on initiating a dialogue on modernity and modern education along with articulating a post-Eurocentric or post-Occidental narrative of modernity developed from the modern/colonial world system perspective. It seems to me that modernity and modern education are still largely self-understood from within the modern Eurocentric intellectual tradition (Bhambra, 2009). Modernity constitutes a civilizational-educational framework for knowing, teaching, and learning about the world as modern.

The modern/colonial world system perspective is a Latin American critique of modernity based on the work of Immanuel Wallerstein, Walter D. Mignolo, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Ramon Grosfoguel, Santiago Castro-Gomez, Arturo Escobar, among others (Quijano & Wallerstein, 1992; Mignolo, 2000, 2007a, 2011; Escobar, 2007; Quijano, 2007, 2008; Castro-Gomez, 2008; Morana et al, 2008). The world system is a set of social relations – ‘a network covering a single space of social relations’ that emerged during the sixteenth century (Castro-Gomez, 2002b, p. 29). The modern/colonial world system perspective interprets modernity as a Eurocentric projection, imposed upon the world as if it were valid, universal, and beneficial for everyone. The particular experiences and interpretations of elite, male, Christian Europeans in the early modern period were not only the initial conditions for conceiving modernity, but those experiences and interpretations have been universalized within particular global designs that constitute the modern/colonial world order we live in today. One of the central arguments of this Latin American world historical narrative is that the global designs of modernity are mutually constituted within a global system of power/knowledge relations identified as coloniality. According to Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, ‘coloniality of power’ refers to a global model of power/knowledge relations involved in the ongoing control or governance of the economy, authority, gender and sexuality, and knowledge and subjectivity, tied together through the modern concept of race. Coloniality is embedded with contemporary forms of governmentality (the conduct of conduct) that began to emerge from European state formation and European colonialism in the sixteenth century (Quijano, 2000). ‘Modernity is a project of governing the social world’ (Castro-Gomez, 2002a, p. 277).

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I interpret your work (post-structuralist, critical theory, post-analytic) as falling loosely within the postmodern movement, understood as both an internal critique of modernity and a description of the contemporary transformations of modernity. I am wondering how you understand and use the term postmodern, and if this label adequately captures your work in philosophy of education? Or, maybe you have other ways of categorizing your interpretations and perspectives on modernity?

I prefer the term post-Occidental, or closely related, post-Eurocentric, to post-colonial, because colonialism and modernity are inseparably connected (historically they emerged together); and yet, post-colonial criticism does not usually interpret modernity as an inherently colonial project from its sixteenth-century emergence within Occidentalism (Rizvi et al, 2006; Rizvi, 2009). Occidentalism is ‘the conceptual and historical space in which a particular narrative of the subject and a particular narrative of history have been constituted’ from the sixteenth century to the present (Venn, 2000, p. 2).

This dialogue on the multiple and interrelated ways of interpreting modernity (and hence modern education) should include those missing and intriguing connections (i.e. Heidegger and Nietzsche) you pointed to in your interpretation of Leo Strauss between postmodern and neconservative critiques of modernity (Peters, 2011). I really appreciate your work and I look forward to further conversation.

MP: I would be happy to participate in the dialogue you propose. I have read some Dussel and done some work on multiple/alternative modernities, rereading Weber in particular. I need to read the others you mention: Walter D. Mignolo, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Anibal Quijano, Ramon Grosfoguel.

Here’s a brief glance at what I am doing. I would like to talk about Weber and Foucault in relation to the ‘modern’ and countenance the ways in which Foucault’s insights on governmentality might be made more relevant to discussions of globalization, post-coloniality and post-Eurocentrism (a good term). I’m not all that happy with modern/modernism/modernity and parallel terms for ‘postmodern’, ‘postmodernism’, and ‘postmodernity’ although certainly my interests have been so far focused on thinkers such as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and then both contemporary French (structuralist/post-structuralist) and German (critical theory) thought, and recently and increasingly the Italian ‘autonomist’ tradition.

My account of what I call the spatial politics of ‘modernities’ begins with Max Weber’s ‘Conceptual Preface’ to General Economic History, where he says:

> it should be emphasised that economic history (including the history of class struggles), is most definitely not, as the materialist conception of history claims, identical with all culture in its entirety. Culture is not simply the resultant, nor solely a function, of economic history; rather economic history presents only a foundation, without which however productive study of any of the great realms of culture is inconceivable. ([1927] 2006, p. 37)

I say begin with this quotation because it immediately accents the importance of culture and dethrones universalist accounts of capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, or the west. Yet Weber is also interesting on the cultural specificity of the west. In the ‘Author’s Introduction’ to The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism he states his belief in the cultural specificity of the west in terms of a process of rationalization and disenchantment of the world that sets the west apart from the east and, indeed, the rest of humanity:

> A product of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having universal significance and value. (Weber, [1920] 1992, p. 13)

This process of rationalization, a kind of metahistorical teleology, does a lot to account for an undifferentiated world history.

In the present context I think the term ‘post-American’ is interesting although I would probably favor a more positive term that tries to characterize the profusion of ‘cultures’ reasserting themselves as well as the hybridization of cultures (rather than the ‘clash of civilizations’) as a kind
of 'interculturalism' – with an accent on the practical question of intercultural dialogue. I am reviewing what this question looks like from the western tradition. (How else could I proceed?)

I take my lead from Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) hypothesis in The Postmodern Condition that: ‘the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age’ (p. 3). In my short presentation I will focus on the political economy of post-industrialism as a history of the increasing spatialization of time, knowledge, and education that takes the global form of integrated world capitalism (IWC), structured through emerging global information systems and new media networks.

For Lyotard (1984) the history of globalization is above all a history of the way knowledge has become transformed into information, that is, into coded messages within a capitalist technoscientific system of transmission and communication that has dissolved epistemic and narrative coherence. In these terms the history of IWC as an emerging global techno-scientific system is a history of both the increasing formalization, abstraction, and mathematicization of language and communication where 'space annihilates time' (the late modern) and the shift from closed to open systems (the postmodern) based on mathematical principles of nonlinear and dynamic self-organization.

Lyotard (1984) combined the analysis of postmodernism with post-industrialism, reviving the sociological theory of (post-)industrialism that can be traced back to the first critiques of industrial political economy around alienated labor (Marx), arts and crafts (Morris, Ruskin), technology (Heidegger) and global ecology, and at the same time projected it into the future, anticipating discourses of the knowledge and creative economies that made higher education and research central 'industries' or leading economic sectors. His account of the postmodern condition provided grounds for the critique of the knowledge/information economies at least in their neoliberal forms in terms of 'performativity'.

It has been suggested that the philosophical roots of French (post-structuralist) theory and the techno-scientific foundations of cyberspace are born of one and the same cybernetic matrix that was formulated in the aftermath of the Second World War essentially as an industrial-military project by Norbert Weiner, Claude Shannon and many others in the series of Macy conferences that focus on understanding language and communication as a informational system (Lafontaine, 2007).

The emergence of global knowledge systems and new media networks thus can be seen as the emergence of a global political economy that takes modernity as a central concept for understanding the development of the world in terms of the premodern, the modern and the postmodern, and projects globalization as a technical integration of the world economy driven increasingly by global informational capitalism (Castells, 2000; Featherstone et al, 2006; Fuchs, 2008). This is one reading of the history of postmodernism that anchors itself in the concept of the post-industrial and emphasizes the future of a global post-industrial economy in which the creation, distribution, diffusion, and use of information is the central defining characteristic.

MB: In response to your conference paper draft, it seems to me you are asking a two-part question – what is the postmodern transition and what are the consequences for education? From these questions there are multiple questions: What is postmodernism? What is modernism from a postmodern perspective? What is the postmodern transition – what is changing and how are we best to make sense of what is emerging today? What are global knowledge systems? What are new media networks? What are the implications or consequences of these changes and this transition for education? How is education changing in relation to the changing cultural political economy of education and knowledge?

On the question of what is changing today under the label postmodern, your title suggests a focus on global knowledge systems and new media networks, yet you do not characterize these changes. I can recognize somewhat (intriguingly) the connections you are making between poststructuralism, cybernetics, post-industrial and the commodification and instrumentalization of knowledge, but this deserves to be laid out in substantial detail, and it seems to be your main link between postmodern transition and postmodern education. It also suggests that part of the postmodern phenomena is actually serving as an intellectual foundation for the new imperialism of neoliberal globalization. Finally, I think the question of what the contemporary historical transition
means for the future of education is sorely underdeveloped, and likely is the most important or relevant topic for our audience.

Your last few sentences begin developing a characterization of education in the emerging political economy. I know you have been studying and writing on this for years. What can you tell us about the transitions underway in, and the futures of, higher education or education more generally?

After reading your piece, I am still not clear – what is 'postmodern education', other than an emergent trajectory towards increasing commodification and instrumentalization, harnessed more tightly and securely to global capitalism? On my own responses to your ideas – you are linking post-structuralism and structuralism with cybernetics and post-industrialism in ways that de-emphasize the intellectual critique of foundational assumptions of modernity developed in post-structuralist thought. You seem to be drawing intriguing, yet for me, confusing parallels between the postmodern description (Foucault and Deleuze) and the modern/postmodern normative project. Although you list the essential ideas, I can hardly recognize the far-reaching critique of modernity coming from the post-structuralist perspectives. Maybe this is simply a matter of your focus here.

Although the field of communication theory is fragmented and in dispute about its fundamental concepts, along with all the other disciplines today, Shannon and Weaver’s and Norbert Weiner’s cybernetic systems models of communication (from the 1950s and 1960s) were widely critiqued (subsumed or delimited within) with the social constructionist and rhetorical turns during the 1980s and 1990s. I am thinking of Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores’s (1987) book *Understanding Computers and Cognition: a new foundation for design*, or the work of Gregory Bateson, Humberto Maturana, and Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson’s pragmatic theory, or W. Barnett Pearce, etc. Does the idea of non-referential language systems evaluated solely on productivity really escape the modernist subject-object, representational framework? Isn’t the very concept of ‘system’ a construction, a representation, conceived and used within an existing system of power/knowledge relations?

I associate postmodern philosophy as a radically nominalist critique of all conceptual constructions that questions modern intellectual efforts to provide certainty of knowledge, particularly knowledge reduced to information and commodities as if they were outside of space and time. Maybe these remain marginal theories in the global information utilities business, as they remain in everyday conceptions of communication as a linear sender-receiver-feedback process, and language as a mere tool or instrument serving intentional purposes. It seems to me that Heidegger’s end of metaphysics was less aligned with Baudrillard’s *simulacra*, than a statement opposed to the enclosure of thought within a ‘world as picture’.

I am also questioning whether David Harvey has made too much of the idea of space-time compression as an overarching, widespread characteristic of the transition occurring today, beyond the global financial networks. The capitalist techno-scientific side of the spatial turn (emerging sociospatial relations) does not appear to be denaturalizing absolute space as much as reinscribing abstract space within a new configuration of power/knowledge relations, ignoring the fundamental questions of the historical ontology of space that Henry Lefebvre and Edward Soja raised decades ago. If the absolutizing of space and time were central to the ways European colonization in the nineteenth century occurred, then further incorporation of space and time within a global capitalist system suggests another formation of coloniality of power.

**MP:** I know you were looking for the postmodern critique but I have written on that topic in one form or other so many times over the years. So I thought I would try to take the critique of industrial society more seriously through the history of political economy in its modern and postmodern forms and the transition into global cybernetic economy. This is also largely a cultural history of one branch of mathematics (geometry, topology) and its relationship to language and linguistic theory starting with the Russian Formalism/structural linguistics, etc. I do not want to impose on your time but I am sending another paper where I try to provide some of this cultural history at least in outline.

My argument does not rest so much on Harvey as on Lyotard (Harvey provides an extension of the critique of the postmodern condition… read his critique of cybernetic economy) and in some sense this is also an extension of Kant’s first critique (of Pure Reason) except that we replace the
Newtonian categories of ‘time’ and ‘space’ with Einsteinian ‘spacetime’, and Prigogine’s ‘dissipative structures’, i.e. nonlinear, dynamical systems. We can also biologize the original Kantian schema (e.g. Lorenz, Piaget) and historicize it (Foucault) … all of these moves I would describe as postmodern (at least in an epistemological sense).

Bateson of course was a contributor to the Macy cybernetic conferences along with Margaret Mead. I do not want to assimilate Baudrillard to Heidegger, and I think we should definitely revisit Harvey ‘st compression’ especially in terms that examine the relentless and systems logic of technoscientific capitalism based on the mode of information. This still seems to me the greatest threat to education in any global sense.

MB: Thanks for responding. I appreciate this opportunity to communicate with you on these ideas. I was thinking further about your draft conference paper, and I recall you distinguished neoliberalism as modern and cybernetic capitalism as postmodern. I think I was trying to question and understand further this categorization. Could you clarify this distinction?

MP: The distinction is really that (neo)liberalism is still wedded to an individualist conception of subjectivity (in epistemology, ethics, politics), a form of political economy based on homo economicus which is comprised of individualism, rationality and self-interest whereas postmodern is based on systems, ecologies, and networks that de-center the individual (i.e. cybernetics or informational capitalism).

I think adding the conservative, neoconservative and the indigenous would be useful. I would probably write a different piece – the postmodern critique.

MB: I draw upon concepts from Charles Taylor’s hermeneutics of western modernity as a particular ‘social imaginary’ that enables our shared practices and constitutes our forms of self-understanding and modes of interpretation. Human understanding and social practices occur through conceptual networks embedded within narratives that cohere within historical social imaginaries. According to Taylor, social imaginaries do not designate the set of ideas and beliefs possessed and professed by people, but the underlying assumptions about the world, a kind of background horizon, that makes those ideas and beliefs thinkable and possible (Cabrera, 2005, p. 616). Our shared or intersubjective contemporary understandings of the present are embedded within this historical/conceptual horizon – the ‘modern social imaginary’. The social imaginary comprises our shared sense of ourselves and our whole world – our sense of our whole predicament in time and space, among others and in history. The social imaginary contains a network of interrelated and layered concepts and categories situated within an historical horizon of narrative understanding.

The uses of modernity can be insightfully understood as reflecting the variety of historical forms of self-understanding that change over time. From this perspective, modernity is not something separate from the ways different people in different historical contexts have interpreted themselves, their experiences, and their worlds (Wagner, 2008). There are different modern times and different modern spaces in a world of multiple meanings of modernity (Taylor, 1999). The multiple meanings of modernity reflect the historical ways ‘modern societies’ represent themselves to themselves, the ways they make their societies modern, or more generally, the ways they understand themselves (Taylor, 1999; Pratt, 2002, p. 27). Modernity can thus be interpreted as an identity discourse that originated with European identity formation and now assumes global significance (Delanty, 1995).

MP: You place the emphasis on the narrative representation of the past – even the origin of the concept of ‘modern’ is conceived as a break with the past, a conceptual narrative (historically) strategy adopted by those who embrace the postmodern, the post-industrial and the post-colonial. For some this means a break with ways of conceiving the past – an epistemic, ethical, political and economic break – but also for some it also means a reflection on the role of narrative itself as an historical form of representation. Lyotard’s critique of the postmodern condition is promoted through ‘incredulity toward meta-narratives’ (largely narratives of legitimation) in favor of ‘petits récits’, i.e. incredulity of a conception of history that originates with German historical idealism and the Hegelian idea of ‘world history’. These grand narratives to a large extent are sustained by
liberalism and are part of the liberal story of world history as a story of the west. But Lyotard later also thinks he privileges the role of narrative too much.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard (1984) argues that grand narratives (or master narratives or meta-narratives) functioned in the past to legitimate institutional and ideological forms of knowledge and are no longer credible; master narratives have now given way to little personal narratives (*petits récits*). Lyotard champions Wittgenstein’s language games as the basis of his analysis of the crisis of narratives. He emphasizes the pluralistic nature of language games to advance an attack on the conception of universal reason and of the unity of both language and the subject. (This is also an attack on narratives of world history and a certain coherent conception of narrative as reason.) There is no one reason, only reasons, he argues, where no one form of reason takes precedence over others. The traumatic aspect of *The Postmodern Condition* here points to the tearing apart of old organic bodies that regulate thinking. Where Habermas and Critical Theory emphasize the bifurcation of reason into its instrumental (positivistic) and moral-practical forms, Lyotard (following Wittgenstein) and Foucault emphasize the (postmodern) multiplicity and proliferation of forms of reason, defined by the rules of particular discourses or language games. Each of the various types of utterance – denotative, prescriptive, performative, etc. – comprises a language game, with its own body of rules. The rules are irreducible and there exists incommensurability among different games. Lyotard makes three observations concerning language games. First, he argues in true Wittgensteinian fashion that the rules do not have a bedrock justification, nor do they carry with them their own legitimation. Where Wittgenstein might say they are constituted in practice, Lyotard claims they are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players which gives rise to an ‘agonistics’ of language. Second, ‘if there are no rules, there is no game’; and, third, ‘every utterance should be thought of as a ‘move’ in the game’ (Lyotard, 1984, p. 10). Indeed, the social bond is comprised of such moves. I think this indicates why writing history, providing world or global narratives, is a suspect and problematic activity.

This is also in part why I try to embrace a history of the moment of the emergence of global capitalism as integrated world capitalism and the history of forms of political economy. Yet the prior question about narrative is not easily dismissed especially in view of the work of people like Barthes (‘The Discourse of History’) and Hayden White who argues that history narratologically is more a literary artifact than a true or objective representation of the past. This problem becomes magnified when just as we have realized the deficiencies of a liberal view of world history that privileges the west and are leaving it behind, we enter another post-colonial era equally motivated by the moral, religious, and political enframement of competing world narratives thrown up by civilizational analyses that privilege different cultural starting points – as symbolized by discourses such as ‘the decline of the west and the rise of the rest’ or ‘post-Americanism’, etc. In my view these new post-colonial discourses are equally suspect, especially if they are based on the ‘nation’ or ‘civilization’ or ‘religion’.

Part of the way forward in my view is to realize the discursive nature of all such representations including civilization and national historical projections, i.e. the discursive creation of the ‘west’, ‘China’, etc. This is what Benedict Anderson (1983) had in mind in *Imagined Communities* when he commented that ‘since WWII every successful revolution has defined itself in national terms … and, in doing so, grounded itself firmly in a territory and social space inherited from a pre-Revolutionary past’ (p. 2). And it expresses itself in Bhabha’s (1990) *Nation and Narration* when he reminds us that: ‘Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye. Such an image of the nation – or narration – might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west’ (p. 1). His work, together with a host of leading scholars including those strongly influenced by Foucault and Derrida such as Edward Said, also led to explorations of what we might call ‘place, race and space’ within the framing rhyming couplet nation and narration – not only the narration of the nation-state but also its colonizing and post-colonizing narratives (see, for example, Said, 1979; Chatterjee, 1993).

Personally, I think we need to return to the narratological tropes of Hegel to begin to understand the different between a scientific view of history (one form of objective narrative) versus its literary and imaginative reconstruction. In Hegel, especially his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (1988), we also get the origins of a form of modern education as ‘Bildung’.
(educational self-transformation as a national duty of realization) that services the modern liberal ideal of education and the university.

MB: Many thanks for your considerable responses to my introduction to our upcoming conference panel. Your comments lead me to consider where I am coming from – the epistemological/theoretical perspective I am starting from in characterizing modernity. On the issue of meta-narratives and historical interpretation, I am embracing an alternative (post-Occidental) historical macro-narrative, situated in an historical-sociology of civilizational processes (Mandalios, 1999, 2000; Bowden, 2009). I am supporting my use of this alternative macro-narrative with a post-social discursive theory of historical knowledge (Joyce, 1995; Cabrera, 2004). And as I mentioned, I am relying on Charles Taylor’s theory of the modern imaginary (developed from Castoriadis) combined for me with Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory of historical horizon of understanding. Elaborating further on Taylor (2002, 2004), the social imaginary is the background horizon that preconditions thinking about the world, providing the interpretive context and enabling common practices. The social imaginary is not only the common understanding that makes common practices possible, but a widely shared sense of legitimacy as well. From this perspective, understanding the past is not a representation of what occurred or of a particular social reality. Understanding and practice occur in and through historical discourses comprised of networks of categories, concepts and principles – a conceptual grid of visibility, specification and classification. The categories themselves generate and become embodied in practices. This is what I meant by characterizing modernity as particular ways people understand themselves – historical forms of self-understanding that change over time, and modernity as a network of concepts embedded within historical narratives. The post in post-Occidental refers less to after or temporal succession and more to thinking and learning beyond the modern social imaginary.

I have some questions for Lyotard, maybe we can discuss some of these, including: doesn’t understanding of the present necessarily include (mostly implicitly) narratives of the past? In other words, don’t we understand the present through our (collective) understandings of the past? Was Lyotard referring (exclusively) to the loss of credibility in the meta-narratives of modernity – those liberal, Eurocentric, representational narratives of western civilization where everything great begins in Ancient Greece and ends in the most advanced European and North American nation-states? Did Lyotard mean by meta-narratives modern discourses that claim to represent reality? Maybe this idea of incredulity of meta-narratives is not that different from the idea that the modern social imaginary is losing its hold? The crisis of modernity centrally involves a crisis of representation. Does his descriptive claim that meta-narratives (modern representational ones or not) have lost their legitimizing function, entail a prescription that meta-narratives of any kind should be avoided? Can local narratives be separated from macro-narratives? Could his description of the significance now of local narratives suggest the emergence of new alternative narratives – that do not legitimate (and in fact challenge and provide alternatives to) dominant Eurocentric historiography? Does the exclusion of macro-narratives and the favoring of local narratives lead to a refusal to engage analytically with large-scale historical processes that profoundly influence the development of both individual societies and the larger world?

MB: I have many more questions to raise with you, and one is what is your sense of my claim that western intellectual thought is contained and enclosed within a Eurocentric conceptual/narrative framework, characterized in part by a monocultural epistemology (and not just positivist) that is totalizing? It seems like the power and reach of cognitive science is a prime example of this totalizing epistemology. Are you familiar with Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s edited book, *Cognitive Justice in a Global World: prudent knowledges for a decent life* (2007)?

MP: I am not sure that the framework is necessarily ‘epistemological’. Santos talks of ‘global justice’, right? I’m inclined to say that it is political-economic and that’s why I adopt an approach from political economy yet I am not anti-science and see a difference between capitalist technoscience and public science.

I’m inclined to want to revisit Hegelian philosophies of histories as the source for emerging modernities as historical meta-narratives. This is why I am also suspicious of Taylor’s social imaginaries: how do we validate or test historical self-understandings? How can we make the core
background assumptions transparent? To what extent do social imaginaries assume a realist view of history? What of historical hybridization? (The era of the nation-state is very recent... isn’t history the history of intercivilizational exchange except perhaps for the period of the emergence of modern European powers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?)

My question to you in this dialogue is how is it possible for a Westerner to step outside their own history and culture to assert alternative or multiple modernities (if these are bound by different cultural and linguistic traditions)? I think we also need to understand the sources of anti-westernism, which is a topic I am trying to write a paper about.

MB: I have been thinking about my responses to your comments on history and your question regarding whether one (western or non-western educated) can think outside of their own culture/civilization or historical consciousness. The modern/colonial world system perspective emerged, in part, out of an internal critique of the political-economic approach – a critique that argues for a more comprehensive perspective that centrally includes the cultural and the epistemological, and problematizes their separation. Ramon Grosfoguel has persistently articulated this critique of political economy paradigms (Grosfoguel, 2007, 2008). The political, the economic, and the epistemological (knowing and being) are intertwined inseparably in the ways the modern/colonial world system (the geoculture of the modern world) has been constructed over the past 500 years. As a discourse, the economic sphere did not exist prior to the sixteenth century, but once it emerged, along with the modern epistemological framework in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it controlled or delimited the possibilities of the political and worked hand in hand with the epistemological (Wagner, 2008). Modern epistemology and modern economic ideology are intertwined in the relation between a subject and an object, and the economic relation between a subject and private property ownership (Quijano, 1999). Western epistemology ‘runs parallel to the history of capitalism’ (Mignolo, 2002, p. 78) and is complicit with racism, sexism, and universalism. The subject-object western epistemological model that organizes the ways modern educated people think and live grew out of the historical process of colonial and economic dominance and has, in turn, provided an ideological justification for this dominance (Dussel, 1993; Mignolo, 2000, 2011; Quijano, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2008). The philosophical foundation of Eurocentric modernity was built on the knowing subject that was constructed from the prototype of White, heterosexual, Christian, European male. Like European capitalism, this particular ethnicultural way of knowing the world was universalized as the only or best way of being. Consequently, knowledges and experiences of all non-Europeans were and continue to be excluded. Modern western education presupposes that everyone must assimilate this modern/colonial mind-set (framework) or be stigmatized and marginalized as ‘uneducated’ (Mignolo, 2005, p. 138). This Eurocentric conception of knowledge provides the powerful justification for assuming the inferiority of all other knowledge systems and knowing subjects that are not White, heterosexual, male, Christian and European (or of European descent) (Mignolo, 2005, p. 139). Coloniality (or the colonial matrix of power) essentially names the hegemony of European knowledge and being through the hierarchical incorporation of all other cultures into a Eurocentric cultural project. Through coloniality of power the entire planet was conceptualized in the production of knowledge and classificatory apparatus, linking capitalism to labor, race, knowledge and education in the European will to Christianize, civilize, modernize, and most recently, marketize the world (Mignolo, 2000). This post-Occidental interpretation of modernity as intertwined with coloniality of power offers an original transdisciplinary (and not interdisciplinary) critique of the Eurocentric production of knowledge and subjectivity, global racial formation, and their interrelated links in the history of the world capitalist system.

If knowledge and education are controlled by the reproduction of the colonial matrix of power then knowledge and education need to be decolonized. Decolonizing education initially involves de-linking education from the modern/colonial epistemic framework (Mignolo, 2007b). For educational practice, this initial de-linking involves two interrelated pedagogical projects: 1) introducing historical analysis across the curriculum of the past 500 years and the complicity of various knowledge disciplines and school subjects within this history of modern power/knowledge relations (e.g. imperialism and colonialism) and, 2) de-centering the Eurocentric knowledge system by pragmatically including a variety of the most culturally relevant non-western knowledge systems and studying them comparatively in relation to the western canon, i.e. knowledges of
‘nature’ as cultural, histories as local narratives, etc. A de-centered teacher education would bring the decolonial genealogy of thought into the humanities and teacher education curriculum (i.e. Césaire, Fanon, Anzaldúa, Du Bois, Sylvia Wynter, Waman Puma de Ayala, Ottobah Cugoano), along with teaching the interconnected histories of colonial and metropolitan education. Could teachers learn to understand and teach the ways in which their particular subjects and the modern educational system overall have participated in the imperial/colonial histories of modernity (Willinsky, 1998)?

The inclusion of non-western and hence subalternized knowledges (i.e. indigenous knowledges), treated as ontologically equal with western knowledge, open up the possibilities of a critical cosmopolitan education. Recognizing and overcoming the limits and boundaries of the western civilizational horizon of thought (Occidentalism) involves expanding the horizon of human knowledge beyond the western knowledge disciplines and beyond the western concepts of knowledge, rationality, and history. Alternatives to modern knowledge and education are needed now that no longer reproduce the dogmatism of a single truth.

No one can say what will become of our civilization when it has really met different civilizations by means other than the shock of conquest and domination. But we have to admit that this encounter has not yet taken place at the level of authentic dialogue. That is why we are in a kind of null or interregnum in which we can no longer practice the dogmatism of a single truth and in which we are not yet capable of conquering the skepticism into which we have stepped. We are in a tunnel, at the twilight of dogmatism, and the dawn of real dialogues. (Ricoeur, 1965, pp. 283-284)

On the issue of historical periodization, Hegel, as you suggest, is deeply and widely present in the meta-narratives emerging today, as is evident in the writing of Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington, and in a different way Charles Taylor too. Taylor does not avoid (Hegel’s) Eurocentrism, in my view, but his historical account of modernity as emerging from civility in the practices of civilizing in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and their constitution in the modern social imaginary does point to a more adequate historical understanding of modernity or the modern/colonial project. Hegel’s writing can be situated within the cosmology of the modern/colonial world system that emerged out of the crisis of Christendom and Spanish/Portuguese colonialism during the sixteenth century, i.e. his racial hierarchy, his assumptions of universal progress or the telos of history (Tibebu, 2011). According to Mignolo, the modern/colonial world was articulated in the growing imaginary of western civilization. The ideas of western civilization, western metaphysics, western logocentrism are the consequence and necessity of the modern/colonial world (Mignolo, 2000). Western metaphysics is an instrument of Euro/American colonization from religion to reason (Mignolo, 2000). Derrida’s deconstruction of the modern system of thought overlooks the historical convergence of western metaphysics and the Occidental imaginary in the sixteenth century (Mignolo, 2000, p. 328). Modern western nation-states and the interstate system were also beginning their formation within the growing civilizational imaginary of the modern/colonial world system. The Renaissance was the beginning of an effort to constitute homogeneous linguistic, national, and religious communities. You recall Foucault refers to this period as the explosion of the problem of governmentality (Foucault, 1991, p. 87). Modernity is the period when new forms of subjectivity began to emerge through state and church political structures and disciplinary practices, described by Foucault as an unprecedented and ‘tricky’ combination of individualization techniques and totalization procedures (Foucault, 1983, p. 213; Gorski, 2003).

Prior to the sixteenth century some of the world’s civilizations were in contact and exchange. After the sixteenth century all non-western civilizations were in collision with the newly emerging European cosmology. Modernity/coloniality is a period in world history in which contact and domination between human beings reached their peak. Western expansion brought to the foreground the need to negotiate differences across cultures and to rethink links between differences and values. The multiple non-western principles governing modes of thinking of local histories entered into conflict with western thought over the past 500 years. The western cosmology or imaginary justified economic decisions, policies, wars, education, and many other forms of management, control, and exploitation of both metropolitan and colonial populations. Understanding the sources of anti-westernism, I think, will point to some of the long-term legacies...
of these complex and inadequately understood experiences of European imperial consolidation and colonial domination.

MP: Here are a few points to be considered in the dialogue that are also relevant to the article.

1. To what extent is it possible to confront one’s own ethnocentrism? Many good philosophers and sociologists have addressed this question from Sumner onwards. Some would argue that such a confrontation is not primarily an issue of epistemology… of knowing, but ontological… of being (Wittgenstein and Heidegger and all who follow, including Taylor and Gadamer).

2. To what extent is it possible for the West and the western tradition to overcome the sources of Western bias and racism? (I think it is possible, otherwise I would not be involved in teaching… and in the modern period principally through the principle of self-criticism that inaugurates the modern – with Kant and Descartes).

3. Universal or world history is a suspect and ideological notion that needs deconstruction from its first sources in the modern period in Hegel’s ‘Christianized’ Lectures on the introduction to the philosophy of history. This I take to be one of the major thrusts of post-structuralism… the deconstruction of phallogocentrism and the suspicion of meta-narratives. If this is so how do we proceed?

4. Clearly we can and ought to make the distinction between the content of an idea and its source… in one sense it doesn’t matter where the idea comes from, what matters is its truth-value or efficacy; on the other hand, ideas emerge from a context and are indelibly marked by that context.

5. There are signs that we have passed through the age of colonialization not only in the sense of national movements for self-determination that happened rapidly in the 1950s and also in the sense of understanding – the emergence of post-colonial literature. Now we have moved to a form of globalization where scholars routinely talk of the decline of the west (since Spengler in 1918 and earlier) and end of America etc. and the emergence of China, India and the BRICs. What this suggests is that colonialization is an historical period that is now over and we are in transition to something else.

6. What that something else is seems to me best characterized by IWC although I do not want to employ world systems theory (WST) to describe it because it is not as totalizing or determining as WST suggests.

7. What WST does get right in my view is the emphasis of both the global and the systems but I think we need to turn to an understanding of nonlinear, dynamical systems theory to understand the global which means the turn to mathematics and the sciences especially the likes of Prigogine (who has written for Wallerstein’s journal). I don’t know whether this helps or hinders but it makes my views clearer.

MB: Thanks for your responsive seven points. My corresponding responses are intended to continue our dialogue over our different presuppositions of modernity.

1. Other than analytically, can the ways of being and ways of knowing be separated? Isn’t becoming aware of our ethnocentrisms both an intellectual (epistemological) and an experiential (ontological) process? Isn’t this epistemological/ontological distinction itself part of the modern framework of understanding? In general, from my own experience, becoming aware of my own ethnocentrism involves physically leaving my own geocultural comfort zones and entering other and very different geocultural ways of knowing and being. Traveling throughout Central and South America, as well as Cuba, for 13 months, speaking only Spanish and avoiding the insulating tourist tracks was a decolonial experience of coming to understand the modern world differently. From this boundary-crossing journey at the margins (among the victims) of modern ways of knowing and being, I became interested in understanding and promoting dialogue among different civilizational complexes based upon a multi-civilizational curriculum. Intellectual and experiential moving back and forth between different but interrelated civilizational histories, epistemologies, and ontologies, I believe is one way toward overcoming western ethnocentrism associated with living in the center of western modernity (western Europe and North America).

2. For me, overcoming racism as a systemic historical pattern of thought and action involves overcoming Eurocentrism. I hold both Descartes and Kant, among nearly all modern European
philosophers into the twentieth century, responsible for contributing to an epistemological framework through which European racism was constructed and justified (Eze, 1997a, b, 2008; Elden & Mendieta, 2011). The political and philosophical thought emerging with colonialism invented race as the pivotal notion that supported the process of world classification. The issue of race became the rationale used to support, justify, and perpetuate the practice of imperial/colonial domination. Race became the central principle for classifying and ranking people, redefining their identities and justifying European slavery and other forms of capitalist exploitation and domination. Race, according to Quijano, is a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism’ (Quijano, 2000, p. 533). Racism here refers to classifications and ranking of human beings according to a model that corresponds with Euro-American ways of life and sensibilities (Mignolo, 1999b, 2003). From this perspective, modern Western education systems, designed and maintained to reproduce Euro-American ways of life, are inherently racist. It is by structural design that modern schools continue to reflect and reproduce the racial/cultural hierarchies within particular societies.

3. On the question of universal history and meta-narratives, you mean linear, progressive, teleological narratives that point to western modernity or modern Euro-American civilization as the apex and ideal – the most modern? If you are referring to this Eurocentric type of history, I agree, deconstruction is a necessary initial task. The history of education, like national and world history overall, constitutes the master-narratives of modern civilization. But this is also the case with social theory. At the core of modern social theories are constructed stories that comprise the master-narratives of modernity (Somers & Gibson, 1994). Social theory and philosophy need to be deconstructed as regional narratives projected within the projects of modernity as if they were or could become universal. If the universal (Eurocentric) history of modernity is inadequate and suspect or complicit with the dominant power/knowledge relations, then a more adequate historical understanding is necessary along with its deconstruction, particularly if historical consciousness (however diverse in expression) is a transcendental characteristic of human beings that cannot be jettisoned. Particular forms of historical consciousness provide the basis for political and social imaginations. As the presuppositional ground upon which social/political imaginations are constituted, historical narratives hold hope as curative knowledge of ourselves where the diversity of local knowledges and histories can contribute to a pluriversal project that displaces the abstract universalism of one local (European) history and epistemology disguised as linear and universal. While the postmodern critique of modernity points to the limits of the hegemonic narrative of western history, the post-colonial critique points to alternative macro-narratives.

The overarching, and necessary, concept of the coloniality/modernity implies the need, indeed, the strong need, for building macronarratives from the perspective of coloniality...

Macronarratives from the perspective of coloniality are not counterparts of world or universal history, but a radical departure from such global projects. They are neither (or at least not only) revisionist narratives nor narratives that intend to tell a different truth but, rather, narratives geared toward the search for a different logic... Without such macronarratives told from the historical experiences of multiple local histories (the histories of modernity/coloniality), it would be impossible to break the dead end against which modern epistemology and the reconfiguration of the social sciences and the humanities since the eighteenth century have framed hegemonic forms of knowledge. Western expansion since the sixteenth century has not only been a religious and economic one, but also the expansion of hegemonic forms of knowledge that shaped the very conception of economy and religion. (Mignolo, 2000, p. 22)

4. Knowledge and the content of ideas always originate from particular people and places within traditions and languages of thought. Consider the prevailing geopolitics and bodypolitics of knowledge – the languages of scholarship are all European, while the knowledge disciplines are all part of the ongoing project of European modernity. The cultures of scholarship are complicit with national and imperial states. The strength of post-colonial theorizing (as well as other theoretical practices transforming knowledge as-representation into knowledge-as-enactment, and erasing the subject/object distinction) resides in its potential capacity for epistemological as well as social and cultural transformation. These discourses contribute to redefine and relocate the task of the humanities and cultures of scholarship beyond the disciplinary projects of Eurocentric modernity.
5. The two signs you point to (sovereign nation-states since the 1950s and postcolonial literature since the 1960s) are not convincing to me as indications that the consequences of European colonization have passed (Gregory, 2004). First, the modern western nation-state and the modern interstate system are constitutive of the colonial/imperial apparatus. How sovereign and free are the post-colonial African states today? In many cases the Euro/American educated native elites control the administration and policies of their countries in ways that continue the historical patterns of European domination and control, i.e. western colonial education systems largely remain in place; Nigeria and western oil interests, etc. In other cases, the international politics of western economic development are imposed by the IMF, the World Bank, and many western NGOs that restrict the possibilities for decolonization. The Cold-War inhibited and prohibited processes of decolonization initiated after World War II (Chen, 2010). Certainly the political colonial relations from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries have ended, but the 'logic of coloniality' as a social relation remains in force although concealed within the rhetoric of modernity, i.e. 'education for all'. For Quijano, dependency is the basic strategy in the exercise of coloniality of power. Neocolonialism names the persistence of colonial power/knowledge relations after formal decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s (Venn, 2006).

Adding the term coloniality in the concept modernity/coloniality re-imagines western modernity (and modern education) as constituted, in part, through European colonization and the technologies of power/knowledge that emerged to produce, legitimate, and enforce western expansion and hegemony. The present world system is an historical-structural heterogeneous totality (Quijano & Wallerstein, 1992; Quijano, 2000). The world we live in today operates with a specific power matrix that, according to Quijano, affects all dimensions of social existence such as sexuality, authority, subjectivity, knowledge, and labor. The sixteenth century initiated this new global colonial power matrix and by the late nineteenth century it covered the whole planet and continues today within a reconfigured rhetoric of modernity, i.e. 'globalization'. Globalization is the reconfiguration of the civilizing mission in the transition from the hegemony of the British Empire to US leadership and the emergence of the transnational corporation (Mignolo, 2000). Neoliberalism and cybercapitalism are both key elements within the formation of a global market civilization, no longer controlled by any hegemonic nation-state. This latest reconfiguration of the civilizational missions of modernity should be linked: 1) to the history of the formation of the modern/colonial world system and its geoculture; 2) to the civilizing processes that emerged during the Renaissance and entered into the disciplinary processes involved in the formation of modern subjectivities and territorial states in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; and 3) to the moment in which a new type of mercantilism based on slavery emerges with its connections to the Christianizing mission. Following Walter Mignolo, I understand colonialism as the

geopolitical and geohistorical constitution of western European (in Hegel’s conception) modernity in its double face: the economic and political configuration of the modern world as well as the intellectual space (from philosophy to religion, from ancient history to the modern social sciences) justifying such configuration. (Mignolo, 2000, p. 96)

There are four coexisting moments or cycles in the history of the modern/colonial world system and four corresponding coexisting missions that constitute the ethos and practice of ‘modern’ education: Christianize, civilize, modernize, and marketize. Modernity is reconceived here to bring to the surface its constitutive underside – coloniality – as colonial modernity (Dirlik, 2003a, 2005, 2007) or modernity/coloniality (Mignolo, 2000).

Second, post-colonial literature, particularly in education, remains a critically indefinite discourse articulated largely within the imaginary/epistemological horizon of Eurocentric modernity. Regardless of its adoption of the Eurocentric historical narrative of modernity as an eighteenth-century phenomenon, and its corresponding entrapment within the modern epistemological framework, one of the main contributions of post-colonial theory is its focus on the persistence of colonial power/knowledge relations. Edward Said’s work is centrally about the ways western culture conceptually/discursively participates in the ongoing projects of western imperialism. Post-colonial literature has brought to our understanding that colonialism imperialism is alive and well in the disciplinary structures of thought and epistemological assumptions that comprise the modern worldview.
MP: This is a long passage to respond to in a succinct way and I need to work it through with some more time to consider what you are saying here. I guess that I am suspicious of all meta-narratives – those on the Right and those on the Left especially when it comes to history or the writing and rewriting of history. I need to read Mignolo and Dirlik before I can comment intelligently but on the surface their views sound too sweeping and too general to me and also if we were to accept their ‘theories’ I am not sure how they help us, educationally speaking, either to come to terms with the past or to cope with contemporary geopolitical realities. Let me investigate this further and respond at greater length when I have read Mignolo and Dirlik.

Certainly, making the distinction between epistemology and ontology is a western way of proceeding in philosophy and it may be useful especially if it ‘prejudice’ as Gadamer (1989) argues really means ‘prejudgment’ in an ontological sense, i.e. that it is part of our being. Our world is structured by these prejudgments and if Gadamer is right (or we proceed on his ‘theory’) then this provides us with a useful way of conducting a multi-civilization dialogue. Actually Tina and I have an edited book coming out called *Interculturalism, Education and Dialogue* with Peter Lang (2011). Some of the papers have been written in response to the EU White Paper on this topic.

MB: I am familiar with and plan to go back to Gadamer’s (1989) philosophical-hermeneutics in thinking about inter-civilizational dialogue. Fred Dallmayr has written on this (2002). I am also using Gadamer’s horizon of understanding to further articulate the modern social imaginary that Charles Taylor develops historically. On the ontological/epistemological distinction, aren’t the conceptual networks within or through which we live and understand the world (e.g. Wittgenstein’s language games) also the very same or within the same family of conceptual practices through which we establish and teach knowledge about the world? Systems of knowledge, in other words, are conceptual-cultural-civilizational constructions that comprise our ways of knowing, understanding and being in the world. Understanding and promoting dialogue among civilizations will have to take these multi-dimensional interconnections between ways of knowing and ways of being into account. This involves a de-centering of the Eurocentric presuppositions about knowledge and the superiority of western reason. The modern western prejudice of knowledge as being universal and ahistorical (and therefore separate from our ways of being) lies behind this analytic philosophical distinction that participates in the contemporary enclosures of being within instrumental systems of thought, developed by modern knowledge disciplines.

MP: I accept much of what you are saying, but racism is not solely a western problem or practice, and my point is that the west has the intellectual resources to overcome racism. Racism and ethnocentrism are global problems… think of the 56 minorities in China, or indeed around the world, and the status of indigenous peoples everywhere (under many different kinds of regime) – clearly this is not exclusively a western problem although I recognize a particular historical configuration of the problem under western colonization. I think we must begin to understand the sources of anti-westernism in this context. My major point is that I think the west has the resources to overcome its institutional racism but this is a slow process often led by the disciplines etc. Post-coloniality as a movement that begins in the west and is part of coming to terms with racism. Said, for example, is a western scholar (a Christian Palestinian) who writes in the western tradition.

MB: On the question of race, I am following Anibal Quijano (2008) and David Theo Goldberg (1993, 2002) in arguing that the historical constructions of ‘race’ emerged along with the emergence of the modern/colonial world system in the ‘purity of blood’ doctrine and the Spanish inquisitions (Silverblatt, 2004). These skin color categories quickly became intertwined with the capitalist system of labor where they remain today and are reflected in the system of educational stratification for the national and international labor markets. What became racial thinking was part of the way ‘Europeans’ first began to classify and understand themselves in relation to others both within and beyond ‘European’ civilization. Prior to this early modern moment, racial classifications did not exist, although little is known on this. To what extent then is the problem of race today, around the world, a problem of the racialized system of capitalist labor? Ethnocentrism is a characteristic of all people, past and present, and is different from, a much broader term than, racial thinking. Overcoming racism, it seems to me, involves interrogating its historical emergence
and its complicity with both capitalism and knowledge production. We modern westerners have inherited a racial epistemology or epistemological racism that privileges one cultural system of knowledge over all others. On the fallacy of historical presentism, Hegel’s universal reason and his global racial hierarchy are part of the same modern European racial system of knowledge. Racial thinking is inbuilt into the modern framework for knowing and being in the world. This is not a moral judgment from the present, but a characterization of the modern epistemological framework. Most western philosophy professors have still not included in their teaching nor interpreted in their scholarship these problematic racial discourses, i.e. Kant’s geography, Hegel’s Eurocentrism (Elden & Mendieta, 2011; Tibebu, 2011).

**MP**: I think it helps to understand the origins of western modernity by reference to the works of Hegel in particular. Remember he was writing in the early nineteenth century after the establishment of the University of Berlin in 1812. In the context of the time I am not sure what sense it makes to accuse Hegel of racism. This strikes me as an historical fallacy of ‘presentism’ (see Nietzsche’s ‘Uses and Abuses of History’), that is, using current contemporary moral categories and understandings as a basis for examining the past. It avoids the situation of wagging our moral finger at the past. My approach is based upon analyzing the sources of modernity and especially the meta-narrative that we call ‘universal’ or ‘world’ history that begins with Hegel.

**MB**: What are you thinking about the context of 1812 at the University of Berlin that might explain Hegel’s thoughts on race? The expansion of French imperialism undertaken in the name of universal enlightened civilization? Understanding Hegel it seems to me is important in understanding contemporary Eurocentric interpretations of modernity, but not the historical origins of modernity. The emergence of the discourse on modernity is found in natural law theory and writers such as Bartolomé de las Casas, Juan de Sepulveda, Francisco de Vitoria, Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, involving legal and philosophical debates about human beings, sovereignty, rights, etc., that constructed the modern state, and interstate system (Jahn, 2000; Keene, 2002; Anghie, 2007).

**MP**: I guess I am making an epistemological point: the origination of the universal number system (e.g. from Arabia) while interesting from an historical point of view doesn’t directly bear on the question of its justification (2+2=4). I want to argue that the origin of an idea does not necessarily enter into its justification and that in an epistemological sense where the idea comes from does not bear on the question of whether it is true/false.

I think that as we want to pluralize modernities with regard to the possibility of the future we should also pluralize the past… western modernities etc. proceed historically very differently… this prompts me to disaggregate the ‘west’ and also to talk of ‘enlightenments’ in the plural – at least, Scottish, French, Italian, Spanish, etc. Their histories and trajectories are different. This approach is critical, for instance, in talking about colonization in ‘Latin America’.

**MB**: I presumed you were more postmodern or a pragmatist on the modern distinction between truth and falsity, understanding this distinction (with Foucault) to be part of a discursive regime of truth practices, linked to dominant power relations. Yes, 2+2=4, but isn’t this equation a particular speech act within discursive practices that enable or carry its meanings, i.e. the discourse of western mathematics education? Isn’t this Wittgenstein’s position on language games? Parallel to our ontology/epistemology discussion above (in point one), the truth of an idea is inseparable from the practices (the contexts) in which that idea is used. Ideas are not just true or false by themselves, outside of history, outside of language. This distinction between the truth-value or efficacy of an idea (its justification, its contents or its correct correspondence with a referent) and its context of use is part of the modern epistemological prejudice of universal, ahistorical truth that underlies Eurocentrism.

**MP**: I guess to say that the true/false distinction as part of the Western epistemological frame misses a critical element. I find the true/false distinction essential when it comes to science or scientific thinking (while not underestimating its problems) and I would argue that it is not just an ‘epistemological prejudice’ but a useful and successful way of determining the status of facts in the
empirical world. I would suggest that we find this distinction in many if not most cultures and that working as a philosopher, theorist or social scientist is very difficult without the distinction. Foucault, of course, was talking about the humanities and not the sciences when he talked of ‘regimes of truth’.

I have had some time to read Walter Mignolo, Arif Dirlik and Anibal Quijano. Mignolo’s book The Darker Side of Western Modernity: global futures, decolonial options (2011) looks interesting and I am sympathetic to his literary approach. I wrote a piece called ‘The Geophilosophy, Education and the Pedagogy of the Concept’ based on the work of Deleuze (Peters, 2004). I guess I do follow a trajectory that works its way through Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein to French post-structuralism, ending with an exploration of Deleuze and Guattari. I have also written on the body and politics including the recent collection on Governmentality (Peters et al, 2009).

I think that Anibal Quijano is right that what is termed globalization is the culmination of a process that began with the constitution of America and colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism as a new global power although I also think that when we begin to look at ‘civilizations’ there have been many such imperial moments and they also have contributed to present configurations and new forms of racism and power/knowledge. We might be experiencing the second or third imperial cycle with the rise of China. I have no difficulty with accepting either proposition from ‘Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America’:

The Eurocentric vision is based on two principal founding myths: first, the idea of the history of human civilization as a trajectory that departed from a state of nature and culminated in Europe; second, a view of the differences between Europe and non-Europeans as natural (racial) differences and not consequences of a history of power. Both myths can be unequivocally recognized in the foundations of evolutionism and dualism, two of the nuclear elements of Eurocentrism. (Quijano, 2000, p. 542)

But I do have a problem that links thought exclusively with spatial positionality or geography. I want to somehow preserve the truth-value of a proposition especially in science in a public way that involves a form of verification or testing that moves beyond any determination of locality. I think this is the essence of global science as it has developed say in high-energy particle physics. In this respect it doesn’t matter what my cultural heritage or geographic location is when it comes to contributing to this ‘conversation’: all that matters is the idea and its testability.

So I guess I do not accept that science is western though it certainly passed through a western phase of development and now is transcending it. I have written on the topic of the emergence of global science and I am still thinking about it.

MB: Questions of knowledge and history are at the center of our dialogue.

A useful way to continue our conversation might be to return to the present conjuncture – what we think is happening today and the relevance of the discourse on modernity, along with the issues within this discourse. These questions were recently revived for me from my reading of Lawrence Grossberg’s book, Cultural Studies in the Future Tense (2010), which is all about modernity. I agree with Grossberg, the best way to understanding the present conjuncture is as a struggle over and against ‘euro-modernity’. The main reason the present conjuncture is best understood as a struggle over modernity is because euro-modernity is breaking up. Grossberg does interpret the modernity/coloniality research group and their critique of modernity, but I don’t think he has thought beyond the modern interpretive framework sufficiently yet to get through his uncertainty about the ‘dark side of modernity’. Significantly, Grossberg dates modernity from the seventeenth century onwards, leaving out and obscuring the colonial, imperial, Christian origins of the modern project. I also recently saw the film Schooling the World: the white man’s last burden (Marlens et al, 2010), which I interpret as a documentary portrayal of the dark side of modern education. Following the modernity/coloniality research group, understanding the dark side of modernity involves a more comprehensive and penetrating historical/theoretical understanding of the past 500 years as a global space of social relations, and overcoming the Eurocentric civilizational and nation-state centered historical/conceptual horizon. The sixteenth century is when modern subjectivity (and new forms of subjugation) began to emerge in governmental practices of the church and state formation. The concept of modern civilization is partial and distorted if its early modern origins in the concept of civility are overlooked. European civilization is the youngest of all
the world’s civilizations. The crisis of modernity is centrally a crisis of conceptual framework through which the modern worldview was constructed – a transition within western intellectual culture from a representational to an enactment perspective on knowledge. And finally, I am exploring the idea that one of the best ways to interpret modernity (past and present) is through the notion of self-understanding. If modernity/coloniality brought about new structures and forms of social relations, including relations to oneself, then these self and other relations can be recognized historically in the ways people understand themselves, e.g. who am I, where am I, what am I doing and why? Of course, education plays a central role in the formation of the ways we learn to understand ourselves and the world.

Thanks for the writings. I’ll read them thinking about how they each portray or illustrate aspects of the current crisis of modernity – the critiques of intellectual whiteness, moving beyond Eurocentric narratives of western civilization, and the ongoing consequences of modernity in the Middle East. These examples all suggest the utility of post-Occidental civilizational analysis that interprets modernity as a new type of civilization – a second Axial age (Eisenstadt, 2001).

The Axial age was around the middle of the last millennium BCE. I believe this is the period you and Linda Herrera were discussing, characterized by intense intercivilizational contact, exchange, and creativity. On your white philosophy piece, I appreciate your much-needed critique. I was particularly interested in your descriptions of the self-understanding of these philosophers. This lack of social and political awareness in American philosophy can only be fully explained from a longer range historical perspective that links America and Europe within the same racial formation of modern intellectual culture from the sixteenth century. And finally, I have a question regarding critical race theory and your sentence that this tradition arises out of the philosophical engagement with the cultural history of America. Could you elaborate on this connection? I am asking because I have been following (seeking connections with) the Critical Race Studies in Education Association in the United States over the past five years.[1] I have not attended their conferences, but this activist-oriented group seems provincial in their questions and nation-state centered in their topics and analyses. When no one civilization is imposed over all the rest, equality in education could mean the right to be different and to learn from the plurality of ways of knowing and being (Mignolo, 2011, p. 28).

MP: I am not sure that I would embrace a civilizational analysis mainly because the term is so loaded. Even its Latin roots betray its unevenness as a concept that contrasts civility with barbarity. Its history in English is also suspect, although there are some thinkers like Rousseau, Herder, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Elias who use the term as a counter-concept to question especially the rational trajectory of the west.

There are a number of historians (Gibbon, Spengler, Toynbee, and Jared Diamond recently) who hypothesize the collapse or decline of civilization, especially the west. While I think one sense of the concept of ‘collapse’ is helpful, it is only useful in relation to understanding the performance of large complex systems and system events.

On the contrary, I would argue that modernity (read globalization and global communications) precisely spells the end of civilization per se and the beginning of the new city-state and that this is a consequence of new global systems transformation and a kind of interculturalism (based on difference) where new hybrids mingle in super cities. This means that I completely reject Huntington’s framing of the analysis and I do not think we are moving inexorably towards a new civilizational stage. While some of the old civilizations still exercise a strong influence on the present especially through the world’s major religions, I think these forces will wane rather than grow.

Other possible terms like ‘culture’ are equally suspect. To my knowledge critical race theory grows up first in critical legal studies as a response to the establishment of Black rights and the struggle to force them into statute.

MB: Yes, the western concept of ‘civilization’ is loaded, as you say, but so is ‘modernity’. Both terms connote for the western educated subject a certain (self-satisfied) achievement of the west toward which all other civilizations and cultures should aspire. I reject these normative Eurocentric uses, while rethinking them as both analytic and counter-concepts. I wanted to bring into our dialogue this problematic concept of civilization since it has become part of my historical
conceptual analysis of the emergence of modern/colonial education in the German-speaking territories during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I am interpreting the recent work in early modern historiography describing the emergence of European identity as a civilization distinct from Christendom during the sixteenth century along with the expansion of education beyond church and state elite (Hamilton, 1989; Hsia, 1989; Delanty, 1995; Gorski, 2003; Schilling, 2008). The Reformation and Counter-Reformation can be interpreted as the re-Christianization of Europe, just as European colonialism was inspired, rationalized, and legitimated within the Christian mission to convert the world (Orbus Universalis Christianus). In the early sixteenth century, 'Christian civility' became the central rationale behind the creation and expansion of formal education, in both the newly forming territorial states of western Europe as well as the first Spanish colonies across the Atlantic. 

Civilize and civility are constitutive categories in the emergence of early modern western education and the transition from universal Christendom to universal civilization or Enlightenment modernity. As the replacement for Christendom, civilization is a most sacred realm hidden beneath the guise of secular enlightenment and modernization. Although civilization is a late eighteenth-century Enlightenment concept, it emerged within the same semantic field as civility and continued to carry much of this cognate concept's meanings (Huppert, 1971). The civilized–savagism dichotomy remains central to the west's self-understanding and the universal project of modern western education, i.e. modern–traditional, developed–underdeveloped, literate–illiterate, etc. Civilization is an imperial/colonial idea and I am using it as a counter-concept, but I am also using civilization as a constitutive category in the history of the self-understanding of modern/colonial education. Analytically, civilizations can be understood as the ontological realm of being and knowing that underlie and shape particular kinds of practices and institutions, including education (Mandalios, 1999). The modern civilizational identity of western(ized) educators constitutes the background horizon within which metropolitan and post-colonial teaching and learning make sense. The present transformations you describe under 'global' also involve a revival of the use of civilization, suppressed during the Cold War, along with a growing recognition of a vast and varied multi-civilizational, but also profoundly inter-civilizational, world (Cox, 2002). This recent re-emergence of civilizational discourse and analysis provides an opportunity to rethink the historical relationships between modern western civilization and modern western education initiated by Emile Durkheim (1977).

MP: A fascinating and interesting project. The genealogy of the ‘civilized/savagery (barbarism)’ distinction is of great interest and your ability to connect to modern education seems intuitively correct to me. This has been a wide-ranging discussion and very useful to me. I think it provides a helpful commentary on our positions reached in our papers and also stands in its own right as a contribution to understanding a very complex topic.

Note


References

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MICHAEL BAKER is a doctoral candidate at the Warner Graduate School of Education and Human Development, University of Rochester, USA. His dissertation situates the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century formations of modern western schooling among the German-speaking territories within the processes of confessionalization and the emergence of the modern/colonial
world system. He plans to teach the historical sociology of modern/colonial education, and develop a multi-civilizational curriculum. Michael is a former high school and community college teacher in Seattle, USA, where he studied social theory of modernity at the University of Washington. He previously co-authored 'Changing Spaces: urban school interrelationships and the impact of standards-based reform' in Educational Administration Quarterly (2006). Correspondence: ruhlinbaker@frontier.com

MICHAEL A. PETERS is Professor of Education at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, Emeritus Professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA and Adjunct Professor in the School of Art, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), Australia and the Department of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou University, China. He was Excellence Professor at the University of Illinois (2005-11), held a personal chair at the University of Auckland (2000-05) where he was also Head of Cultural and Policy Studies, and was Research Professor at the University of Glasgow (2000-05). He is the executive editor of Educational Philosophy and Theory (Wiley-Blackwell), and founding editor of Policy Futures in Education and E-Learning and Digital Media (Symposium). He is the author of some 60 books and hundreds of articles including most recently The Last Book of Postmodernism (2011). Correspondence: mpeters@waikato.ac.nz