

THE RETURN OF HOPE: DECOLONIZATION, KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION, AND THE POLITICS OF CARE

19TH TRANSATLANTIC STUDENTS SYMPOSIUM, VIRTUAL EDITION, 2021



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Projected: Stellenbosch University, South Africa; TBC

Projected: partner university in Brazil; TBC



PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

This is not a hopeful time. Challenges abound: Climate change, political fragmentation, increased demonization of the political other, social strife, cultural and technological changes, and foreign policy challenges, even an increasing uncertainty over the future of democracy. It is easy to despair rather than to be hopeful. But hope is always a hope against hope. It does not arise automatically but needs to be cultivated and built. If we want hope to return, we need to work towards it, to change perspectives, and to create a true politics of care.

Such care needs to build on the awareness of our increasing connectedness in a global society, as the Coronavirus pandemic shows. A new global reality is challenging old established ways of both thinking and governing. Both are intimately connected, for, as the old adage goes, knowledge is power. What you know may make a difference in surviving, adapting to changed circumstances, and preparing yourself for the future. This holds true for individuals just as much as for cultures or nations, and it has been true since the dawn of history.

Throughout history, knowledge production and interpretation were advanced and delayed depending on those who held political power to allow such processes to happen, and more specifically, to happen on their terms. This created the complex layers of entanglement between knowledge and power and resulted in a hegemonic construct becomes coupled with colonialism.

The aim of our 2021 Transatlantic symposium is to examine the interrelationship between the production of knowledge and processes of (de)colonization. Specifically, the symposium aims to interrogate how we decenter or provincialize established master narratives (D. Chakrabarty), as well as terminology and methodology (L. Tuhiwai-Smith) in order to rethink power and positionality, and develop strategies towards a politics of care aimed at fulfilling the kinds democratic and humanistic promises which can transcend the narrow national interests that have challenged our world in the recent years if not decades. For that to happen, we will also need to transcend traditional ways of thinking about the world.

We will examine what is reductively construed as merely “Western” thought despite its global heritage. We will apply multiple critical lenses (such as globalization theory, critical epistemology, trans-national feminism, queer studies, Indigenous and Black sovereignty) which allow us to embark upon a different understanding of knowledge production, particularly knowledge produced under and for any colonialist project. This critique is aimed to help us work towards fulfilling the liberatory promise of a truly post-colonial, democratic and inclusive world that can stand up to the challenges posed by authoritarianism and power politics today.

But is it even possible to disentangle knowledge and power? How optimistic can we be about that? How is knowledge production intertwined with ‘unconscious’ or informal practices of information gathering? How can we integrate ‘local’ perspectives without constructing the ‘local’ as a fixed entity? How can we define transitions from colonial to postcolonial to non-colonial contexts?

There are schools of thought that believe that this connection between knowledge and power cannot ever be separated, that already the discourse is fraught with power relations (M. Foucault, J. Derrida). Knowledge and cultural values would be relative (following G.F.W. Hegel), rather than absolute and provable (following I. Kant). The result of such thinking would be the acceptance of alternative

knowledges and sciences that would compete with each other for an ever more ephemeral truth (A. Sokal, J. Bricmont). The result would be nothing but division, separation, a global lack of communication and understanding, and a world of alternative realities perpetually at war with each other. For if there is no hope for neutral knowledge, for a shared truth and reality, what is there left to talk about? Should we not aim for being able to communicate in a democratic society (J. Habermas, H. Arendt)? If everything is dominated by power, what is there to be done to change it? Is not the point of philosophy to act (K. Marx)?

Such divisions in knowledge have always been useful politically for those seeking to rule by division rather than unity. “Divide and conquer” has been used historically by every group seeking to dominate another. This holds true especially in the fight between those considering themselves civilized, versus those they considered barbarians (Herodotus, L.H. Morgan, F. Engels). Colonization has always been justified by the insistence on the lack of civilized values, of science, of culture by those to be dominated. In order to overcome such historically entrenched political power divisions, the duopoly of civilization versus barbarism thus needs to be overcome. Decolonizing knowledge becomes a central action within those cultures and societies that have been historically oppressed and silenced through policies of erasure, dominance, colonialism, apartheid, genocide, and the Holocaust (H. Bhabha, E. Said, G. Spivak, H. Arendt).

The 19th Transatlantic Students Symposium will thus look at pathways to recover a history of ideas and knowledge that has shed its colonializing gestures of division. The aim is not to create yet another alternative reality, but to uncover the shared human history of knowledge, civilization, and culture. Following Kwame Anthony Appiah’s unyielding impulse to discover the global within the local, we will aim to find a common ground that may allow for a renewed impulse for public policy to succeed in an ever-more interconnected world.

The multiple crises that are challenging every single country on the planet currently, and with it the global order, call for a new politics of care. Most recently, the Coronavirus pandemic has shown that the global and the local need to be considered together, that science cannot be negated without grave consequences, and that attempts to maintain and deepen divisions – whether they be ideological or political – are doomed to fail on a grander scale than ever before.

True decolonization in the transatlantic realm needs to reconsider the traditional sphere of transatlantic relations, and to refocus on the entirety of the Atlantic partners, both in the Northern and the Southern Hemisphere. Newly established video conferencing technologies can serve us well to create an even more inclusive group of young scholars from several continents united in reimagining a future focused on commonality rather than division, divided not by difference but united in hope.

OVERVIEW PLAN:

- We will coordinate participants from the following academic programs:
 - o Oregon State University, Public Policy / Political Science / MA English
 - o Southern Oregon University, Native American Studies Program
 - o Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, American Studies Program
 - o University of Warsaw, American Studies Program
 - o Tübingen University, Public Policy and Social Change; and the International & European Studies Online Spring School (IES-OSS)
 - o Other partner universities that choose to participate can either prepare students on their own, or in conjunction with the Tübingen IES-OSS program. This is a multiweek online program with global reach awarding students with ECTS credits and a certification of participation – we could envision granting this to students from other programs as well.
- Student audience: students from partnering universities, and possibly also externally applying program students (registered with Tübingen’s IES-OSS program)
- Preparatory classes will take place at participating universities for credit at their own timeframe (HU, Warsaw, OSU, SOU, possibly Tübingen MPPSC).
- In coordination with these classes – and as an additional possibility for students taking classes from Oct-Feb – a global virtual curriculum will be conducted via zoom sessions (coordinated by Tübingen’s IES program & OSU), depending on time zones.
- In-person experiential learning experiences may be held post-Covid19, maybe in regional clusters – planning on these should be pending further pandemic developments

DRAFT TIMEFRAME:

- Summer and Fall: student recruitment begins
- Oct-Feb: preparatory classes at Humboldt University and University of Warsaw (Winter Semester)
- Oct-Mar: occasional joint sessions with all participating universities – ideally with guest speakers. Available to all participants.
- Jan-Mar: preparatory and joint class at Oregon State University and Southern Oregon University
- Students from other universities may join the OSU and SOU class sessions
- March-early April: Tübingen Online Spring School – Preparation of Tübingen Master of Public Policy and Social Change program may be coordinated with the Online Spring School
- Joint virtual student conference on Zoom in late March or (preferably) early or mid-April, concrete date & time TBD (this depends on the IES-OSS timeline, and on student schedules). All participants join and present their final projects over 2-3 sessions. This obviates the need at Humboldt for a “Second Symposium.”

ADDITIONAL OUTCOME:

- Establishment of a TraSym Learning Community
- Creation of a TraSym Book – project to start in 2020 already.