

Marie Curie Actions International Incoming Fellowship

Final Report

IEIPWA
Indigenous Epistemologies and Images of Public Wealth in Amazonia
Project nº: 328421

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1. FINAL PUBLISHABLE SUMMARY REPORT

IEIPWA focused on the place of indigenous epistemologies in intercultural and highly politicized interactions that revolve around the interface of development in Amazonia: on the one hand, the external planning and implementation of development projects in indigenous territories; on the other, indigenous people's own critical responses to such projects. Research project developed from extensive fieldwork in Colombian Amazonia – involving collective research with indigenous communities and individuals in support of processes of self-determination – and from several years of consulting experience in the field of sustainable development. Fieldwork was carried out mostly among the *Gente de Centro*, 'People of the Center', a linguistically diverse, but culturally relatively uniform ensemble of ethnic groups that includes Uitoto, Bora, Miraña, Muinane, Andoke, Nonuya and Ocaina. This interethnic ensemble comprises approximately 7,500 individuals in the Caquetá, Putumayo and Amazon regions of Colombia, and in the northern Amazon region of Peru. Research involved transcription, systematization, and analysis of field data collected from 1996 to 2011, and substantial bibliographic research, which benefitted from the bibliographic resources at CES, the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombia, and the University of Saint Andrews, Scotland, as well as other material available for free consultation or for purchase. Analysis of ethnographic materials was mainly based in anthropological theory, but it also extended to include theoretical contributions from cognitive science, philosophy, history, and social theory.

The project began with an analysis of indigenous interpretations of development, which provided an entry to indigenous notions of wealth, value, and wellbeing, and to how these notions are deployed in contexts of intercultural relations. Indigenous people consider Western money to be potentially pathogenic. Similarly, they include development in their etiology as one of the "illnesses of the white man's path". Such interpretations suggest not only that the indigenous and the Western pursuit of wellbeing are at odds, but also that the notion of wellbeing is embedded in 'orders of worth' that are, at least partly, culturally specific. In order to gain a deeper understanding on these cultural meanings, and how they are mobilized to assess, challenge, and transform the implicit beliefs of development as well as its practical workings, the project inquired into indigenous epistemologies, that is, indigenous theories of knowledge and modes of knowing. Indigenous epistemologies not only involve sophisticated theories of cognition, sociality and personal agency, but also inform native senses of history, interculturality, and cultural change. The consideration of indigenous epistemologies, not as data to be interpreted by our own theories, but as theories and practices in their own right, sheds light on how indigenous people endeavor to cure the illness of development. What's more, it reveals a different horizon for the pursuit of wellbeing that can make a valuable contribution for re-thinking and renovating Western paradigms with regard to democratic participation, cultural rights, and international cooperation.

IEIPWA's Main Questions

1. How does work appear in indigenous social and epistemological theories? In what sense it is seen to contribute to personal and collective wealth?
2. What is 'knowledge' for the People of the Centre? How is it acquired and transmitted? How indigenous epistemologies relate to native notions of wellbeing?
3. How does the People of the Center's theory of knowledge affect social agency?
4. How public wealth can be understood in the context of non-state societies?

IEIPWA's Conclusions

Indigenous responses to Development place emphasis on the key concept of work, which is conceived in native terms as the process that materializes the ancestral law – the Creator's Knowledge of Life – from which wellbeing ensues. Work is a defining element of personal and collective identity. Through this daily pursuit real people are made; humanity and sociality are in fact conceived as projects in the making, by no means as finished products. Such ongoing process of humanization also depends on the correct management of natural resources, and of 'contractual' relations with the spiritual owners of such resources. People's work and personal responsibility is to maintain the weave of life through processes that, at the same time, capture, transform, regenerate, and organize diversity. The ultimate goal of this daily endeavor is to achieve generalized health and abundance. Embodied notions of wellbeing are also the starting point for articulating internal differences and for building consensus in an interethnic and intercultural arena.

For the People of the Centre all knowledge originated in mythical times. As the "essence" of the creator, knowledge is a cosmogonic substance/thought that imbues the world with life, and a 'defense' set up against malevolent agents that sabotage the ordered world with powers, but without proper knowledge. Knowledge involves a normative dimension; it is the law of origin, entrusted to people so that they can live well together in community, interact properly with other people, animals, and spirits, and maintain life and good health. But, perhaps more interesting, are the connotations of knowledge as heuristic search involving the persistent exploration, testing, and interpretation of mythical clues by learners in daily practice. Since all knowledge is already given, for the People of the Center individuals do not construct knowledge but achieve it through engagement in a physically and spiritually demanding personal quest that is simultaneously a process of self-discovering and selfshaping. The phenomenological consideration of modes of knowledge transmission-acquisition reveal that the People of the Center's own understandings of knowledge processes are not articulated on mind-body dualism. Rather, mind-body mediates knowledge's materialization from dreamed to real, from purposeful intention to tangible, generalized abundance. Real knowledge must bring about the state of tranquility, conviviality, and generalized good health that constitute ideal community life. It is evaluated on the basis of underlying intention and tangible contribution to generalized wellbeing. This theory of knowledge upholds the People of the Center in assessing, transforming, and resisting foreign knowledge regimes, such as those deployed by development's technical knowledge apparatus, sustaining indigenous self-dependence against assistentialist development programs. At the same time, it highlights the achieved character of social life, putting emphasis on one dimension of culture – its orientation to the future – that could have radical implications for supporting indigenous people's prospects in the global world.

The analysis of these perspectives shed light on notions of property, value, and wealth in native Amazonian societies. Accumulation and abundance are opposite notions in indigenous understandings of wellbeing, and wealth is self-destroying if it is not circulated through the logics of commensality and reciprocity. In a way, the only enduring wealth is *public* wealth. Such realization proved not only that the understanding of value is situational, and varies according to different regimes of value, but also that notions of value are embedded in 'orders of worth' which undo the value/values dichotomy.

IEIPWA's Impact

The creation of more sustainable alternatives to dominant development models must be grounded on the recognition of different epistemological configurations, as much as it must engage an understanding of local forms of organization through which demands for recognition are articulated and expressed.

In 195 contemporary sovereign states around the world there are more than 5000 indigenous groups. However, the perspectives held by these ethnic minorities on both the goals of, and the ways to pursue, social and economic development, are rarely taken into account. The analysis of the place of different systems of value in people's economic and social rationales and in their notions of wellbeing are particularly relevant to current debates about interculturality and plurinationality, and lay at the foundation of the definition of innovative public policies, and sustainable alternatives to dominant development paradigms.

IEIPWA results should be relevant for policy makers and NGOs working on issues of development and cultural and indigenous rights. IEIPWA potential contribution to intercultural intelligibility and emancipatory forms of indigenous engagement with modernity should be relevant to civil society and indigenous organizations as well.

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2. DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES

One of IEIPWA goals was to promote the recognition of indigenous knowledge and epistemologies in Europe, taking as a case study the People of the Center of Colombian Amazonia. At CES, IEIPWA found an opportunity to dialogue with a research group that has been working on indigenous epistemologies from a perspective of epistemologies of the South (a concept proposed and developed by CES's director Prof. Boaventura de Sousa Santos). Two specific projects (ALICE and ENTITLE) gave IEIPWA scientific input, a collaboration which multiplied IEIPWA dissemination range and impact.

IEIPWA reached different target publics: academic/scientific community; PhD students; Coimbra civic society (exhibition); basic school pupils; and general public (through press article).

Some of the activities listed below show this dynamics and proves to the relevance of IEIPWA in the European research area.

2.1. Collaboration with existing projects at Host Institution:

ALICE - Strange Mirrors, Unexpected Lessons: Leading Europe to a New Way of Sharing the World Experiences. Project funded by an ERC advanced grant (269807). P.I. Prof. Boaventura de Sousa Santos.

As invited researcher of the ALICE project I was able to discuss my objectives, findings, and methodology in internal and international seminars, ALICE's Summer School, and International Conference.

ALICE's international and multidisciplinary team includes 23 researchers, and the project also benefits from the collaboration of other researchers of CES and of an international pool of social

scientists, political decision-makers, activists, and journalists. ALICE project “seeks to re-think and renovate socio-scientific knowledge by drawing upon ‘Epistemologies of the South’, an approach proposed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos. The objective is to develop new theoretical and political paradigms of social transformation”. <http://alice.ces.uc.pt/en/?lang=en>.

ENTITLE project (PITN-GA-2011-289374), a Marie Curie Initial Training Actions initiative part of the FP7 of the European Union, coordinated by ICTA at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, with the collaboration of 8 Universities, 2 NGOs and 1 SME in the emerging interdisciplinary field of Political Ecology.

http://www.ces.uc.pt/ecosoc/index.php?id=8756&id_lingua=1&pag=8762.

Through collaboration with the ENTITLE team at CES I was able to strengthen the existing links between my project and the field of political ecology. This resulted in my application to an ERC Consolidator Grant in March 2015. My project, titled “Food Sovereignty and Community’s Evaluation of Common Goods – FOODCOMMONS”, passed the Step 1 of the evaluation process, and I attended an interview with the evaluation panel in Brussels on Nov. 10, 2015.

2.2. International conferences and seminars:

- a) International Colloquium *Epistemologies of the South*, Coimbra July 10-12, 2014. Title of the presentation: “Development Illness and an Anatomy of Dissent in Indigenous Epistemologies”.
- b) IX Sesquiannual Conference of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America. Gotheborg, Sweden, June 26-29, 2014. Title of the presentation: “Finding the Taste of Knowledge: The “Orphan in Indigenous Epistemologies”.
- c) Seminar: “[*As perspectivas indígenas e a agroecologia: uma proposta de tradução intercultural em torno da soberania alimentar*](#)” organized with Luciana Jacob (CES). Center of Social Studies, Associated Laboratory, University of Coimbra. March 31st, 2014.
- d) ALICE seminars: *Strange Mirrors, Unexpected Lessons: Leading Europe to a New Way of Sharing the World Experiences*. Project funded by an ERC advanced grant. P.I.: Prof. Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Coimbra, May 12-15, 2014. Title of the presentation: Indigenous Epistemologies and Images of Public Wealth in Amazonia.
- e) ALICE Summer School *Learning from the South: Toward Intercultural Translations*. Curia, June 30-July 8, 2014. Seminar “Indigenous Epistemologies and Images of Public Wealth in Amazonia”.
- f) II International EDISO Congress “Discursos e Sociedades em Movimento”. Coimbra, June 18-20, 2015. Coimbra, Portugal. Title of the presentation: “Orphans of *Mnemosyne*. Politics and Practices of Memory-Forgetting in Colombian Amazonia.”

Organizing committee:

- g) “(Re)commoning Democracy: A Workshop with Scholars/Activist”. ENTITLE Project, Centro de Estudos Sociais, Coimbra, Oct. 16th, 2014.
- h) Working group: GT 89 – “*Materialidades, Cosmovisões e o lugar do sagrado nas outras Economias*” organized with Luciane Lucas (CES). XII Conlab Congresso Luso-Afro-Brasileiro (I Congresso AILP, XII CONLAB), Associação Internacional de Ciências Sociais em Língua Portuguesa. Lisbon, February 1-5, 2015.

2.3. Outreach:

- a) Workshop for school student and presentation of a shadow theater piece based on indigenous oral tradition. Escola Básica de Almedina, Agrupamento de Escolas Coimbra Centro, Coimbra, Portugal. June 12th, 2014.
- b) Participation to the Terra Madre Meeting, Turin 22-27 October 2014, as part of the Colombian Delegation. Terra Madre is a network of producers and consumers spread over 150 countries, launched by the Slow Food movement to defend food biodiversity.
- c) Visiting scholar position at the Center for Amerindian, Latin American and Caribbean Studies of the University of Saint Andrews, Scotland, during the first trimester of 2015.
- d) Exhibition "*Curar o Mundo: Cosmovisões em diálogo*". The exhibition featured works of Colombian artist Hernán Gómez and Angolan artist Hamilton Francisco, photographs, songs and texts of indigenous oral tradition. The exhibition also featured the documentary "Palabra de Amanecer" (<https://vimeo.com/25557597>) by Juan Gabriel Soler, about the process of intercultural organization of the indigenous peoples who produced the texts. Ocupação Tropicana, Coimbra, Aug. 27-29, 2015.
- e) Video on the exhibition: youtu.be/_crkQsGn8wo

2.4 Popular press:

- a) *As Beiras*, August 19 2015, "Exposição sobre indígenas para ver em Coimbra", Patrícia Cruz Almeida.
- b) *Missionaria – Outra visão do mundo*, August 25 2015. "Exposição sobre indígenas em Coimbra", Juliana Batista.
- c) *Esquerda.net*, August 28 2015, Exposição Curar o Mundo: consovisões em diálogo.
- d) *O Campeão das Províncias*, August 28 2015, "Coimbra: Exposição Pop-up na Rua Fernandes Tomás".
- e) *Agenda7*, Coimbra, "Curar o mundo: cosmovisões em diálogo.

2.5 Publications:

- a) Giovanna Micarelli (2015), *Indigenous Networks at the Margins of Development*. Bogotá: Editorial Universidad Javeriana. ISBN: 9789587168198
- b) Giovanna Micarelli (2015), "Finding the Taste of Knowledge: The "Orphan in Indigenous Epistemologies", *TIPITI, Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*, Vol 13, No. 2, Article 6, pp. 74-90 (Digital Commons @ Trinity San Antonio, Texas, USA) ISSN: 1545-4703
- c) Giovanna Micarelli (2015), "Divine Banknote: The Translation of Project Money into Public Wealth", in Fernando Santos-Granero (ed.) *Images of Public Wealth or the Anatomy of Well-being in Native Amazonia*. Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, pp. 222-260
- d) Giovanna Micarelli (2015), "La enfermedad del desarrollo y una epistemología del cuidado. Visiones indígenas desde la Amazonia colombiana", in Proceeding of the International Colloquium "Epistemologies of The South: South-South, South-North And

- North-South Global Learnings" – vol. 3, "Outras Economias". Ed by Teresa Cunha and Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Coimbra: CES, pp. 449-464. ISBN: 978-989-95840-3-7
- e) Giovanna Micarelli (forthcoming), "Development illness' and the indigenous pursuit of the good-life: A view from Colombian Amazonia", in Boaventura de Sousa Santos (ed.), Coimbra: CES.
 - f) Giovanna Micarelli and Luciana Jacob (eds.) (2018), "Soberania Alimentar: práticas e saberes locais para um movimento global contra-hegemônico", special issue of *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, CES, Coimbra. ISSN: 0254-1106