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**Decolonizing Higher Education: Historical Myths, Official Discourses, and University Reforms in Brazil**  
**Décoloniser l'enseignement supérieur : mythes historiques, discours officiels et réformes universitaires au Brésil**  
**Decolonizando la educación superior: mitos históricos, discursos oficiales, y reformas universitarias en Brasil**

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Article abstract

From a decolonial perspective, I propose in this paper a critical assessment of the university in Latin America as a social institution which, to fulfill its historical mission, needs to continuously recreate its institutional identity considering subaltern and peripheral economic, political and ideological contexts of coloniality. First, I provide a very brief account of the decolonial thought and its notions of 'coloniality of power', 'coloniality of knowledge' and 'coloniality of being'. Secondly, in addition to revisiting historical grand narratives, I present a very brief history of higher education reforms in the Western world, followed by some highlights on the history of university reforms in Brazil. Then I introduce three index-cases of coloniality related to the Brazilian university to illustrate the topic. The first one I call the denial of Georges Cabanis, the second one has been called by historians as the Humboldt Myth, and the third one is a strong statement of my own responsibility: we Brazilians have never been Flexnerians. The specific discussion on how to interpret these emblematic index-cases of coloniality are my closing remarks for opening further debates on strategies and actions for decolonizing the University.

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# Decolonizing Higher Education: Historical Myths, Official Discourses, and University Reforms in Brazil<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

From a decolonial perspective, I propose in this paper a critical assessment of the Brazilian university as a social institution which, to fulfill its historical mission, needs to continuously recreate its institutional identity considering subaltern and peripheral economic, political, and ideological contexts of coloniality. First, I provide a very brief account of the decolonial thought and its notions of “coloniality of power,” “coloniality of knowledge,” and “coloniality of being.” Secondly, in addition to revisiting historical grand narratives, I present a very brief history of higher education reforms in the Western world, followed by some highlights on the history of university reforms in Brazil. Then I introduce three index-cases of coloniality related to the Brazilian university to illustrate the topic. The first one I call the denial of Georges Cabanis, the second one has been called by historians the Humboldt Myth, and the third one is a strong statement of my own responsibility: we Brazilians have never been Flexnerians. The specific discussion on how to interpret these emblematic index-cases of coloniality are my closing remarks for opening further debates on strategies and actions for decolonizing the University.

**Keywords:** coloniality, history of education, university reform, Cabanis, Flexner, Humboldt

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<sup>1</sup> Notes for a keynote presentation to the symposium *A Contextual Historical Analysis of Conceptions and Practices of Education Across Time and Space from the Mid XIX - the XXI Century*, organized by the Theory and History of Education International Research Group (THEIRG), St. Michael's University College in the University of Toronto, February 16-19, 2023, and a public lecture at the Faculty of Education at Queen's University, promoted by the Theory and History of Education International Research Group (THEIRG), February 21, 2023, Kingston, Canada. Preliminary draft; text in progress. Not to be quoted.

## **Decolonizando la educación superior: mitos históricos, discursos oficiales, y reformas universitarias en Brasil**

### **Resumen**

Desde una perspectiva decolonial, propongo en este trabajo una evaluación crítica de la universidad brasileña como institución social que, para cumplir con su misión histórica, necesita recrear continuamente su identidad institucional considerando contextos económicos, políticos e ideológicos subalternos y periféricos de colonialidad. En primer lugar, ofrezco una breve descripción del pensamiento decolonial y sus nociones de "colonialidad del poder," "colonialidad del conocimiento," y "colonialidad del ser." En segundo lugar, además de revisar las grandes narrativas históricas, presento una breve historia de las reformas de la educación superior en el mundo occidental, seguida de algunos aspectos destacados sobre la historia de las reformas universitarias en Brasil. Luego presento tres casos-índice de colonialidad relacionados con la universidad brasileña para ilustrar el tema. El primero lo llamo la negación de Georges Cabanis, el segundo ha sido llamado por los historiadores como el Mito de Humboldt, y el tercero es una fuerte declaración de mi propia responsabilidad: los brasileños nunca hemos sido flexnerianos. La discusión específica sobre cómo interpretar estos casos-índice emblemáticos de la colonialidad son mis comentarios finales para abrir nuevos debates sobre estrategias y acciones para decolonizar la Universidad.

**Palabras clave:** colonialidad, historia de la educación, reforma universitaria, Cabanis, Flexner, Humboldt

## **Décoloniser l'enseignement supérieur : Mythes historiques, discours officiels et réformes universitaires au Brésil**

### **Résumé**

D'un point de vue décolonial, je propose dans cet article une évaluation critique de l'université brésilienne en tant qu'institution sociale qui, pour remplir sa mission historique, a besoin de recréer continuellement son identité institutionnelle en tenant compte des contextes économiques, politiques et idéologiques subalternes et périphériques de la colonialité. Tout d'abord, je propose une brève description de la pensée décoloniale et de ses notions de « colonialité du pouvoir », de « colonialité de la connaissance » et de « colonialité de l'être ». Deuxièmement, en plus de passer en revue les grands récits historiques, je présente un bref historique des

réformes de l'enseignement supérieur dans le monde occidental, suivi de quelques faits saillants sur l'histoire des réformes universitaires au Brésil. Ensuite, je présente trois indices de cas de colonialité liés à l'université brésilienne pour illustrer le thème. Le premier que j'appelle la négation de Georges Cabanis, le second a été désigné par les historiens comme le mythe Humboldt, et le troisième est une déclaration forte de ma propre responsabilité: les Brésiliens n'ont jamais été flexneriens. La discussion spécifique sur la façon d'interpréter ces cas emblématiques d'indice de la colonialité sont mes derniers commentaires pour ouvrir de nouveaux débats sur les stratégies et les actions pour décoloniser l'Université.

**Mots-clés :** colonialité, histoire de l'éducation, réforme de l'université, Cabanis, Flexner, Humboldt

## Introduction

University autonomy and academic freedom are founding myths of the postcolonial model of higher education, reinstated by several reforms along the history of the university in the Western world. In many ways, the issue of educational reform has provoked intense political debate around critical issues such as commodification of education, neo-liberalism, internationalization, and globalism, in a scenario of political dominance of euro-centric research paradigms (Bruno-Jofré and Jover, 2001). From a decolonial perspective on historical movements, I propose a critical assessment of the Brazilian university as a social institution which, to fulfill its historical mission, needs to continuously recreate its institutional identity through episodic reform initiatives without considering subaltern and peripheral economic, political, and ideological contexts of coloniality.

In 2010, centennial year of the Flexner Report, I was invited to evaluate its impact in Brazil. Abraham Flexner (1866-1959), educator and institutional leader, was the author of that famous document that marked the emergence of a scientific approach to medical practice and an active pedagogical perspective for medical education, and eventually consolidated the research university in North America. I then revisited with critical eyes the text of the Flexner Report and wrote a series of papers (Almeida-Filho, 2010; Almeida-Filho, 2014). My conclusion was that, in Brazil, academic researchers in the health field might have demonized Flexner the educator and produced a phantasmal image of the Flexner Reform. Seeking to understand the reasons and conditions for such an outcome, I analyzed two aspects of the devaluation process of the Flexner Reform: the imaginary regime of such an ideological assembly, and the political context that gave it support, contributing to the conservation and reproduction of an archaic model of university in Brazil.

Since then, I have become increasingly interested in the historical processes that gave rise to higher education institutions in Brazil, looking for signs and residues of coloniality both in the political-institutional configuration and in the curricular and pedagogical aspects. In this exploration, I found the extraordinary figure of Georges

Cabanis (1757-1808), physician, philosopher, educator, and leader of a political movement to reform the French society and its educational system after the Revolution of 1789 (Saad, 2016). While learning, almost self-didactically, to use Foucauldian archeogenealogical methodology (Vázquez-García, 2021), I went on to analyze Cabanisian work systematically, seeking correspondence scans of its structuring elements in the face of evidence and traces of its influence and presence in the processes of historical creation and pedagogical organization of Brazilian higher education. Based on this research, with the support and encouragement of Prof. Rosa Bruno-Jofré, I wrote a series of articles on Cabanis, which were integrated into a book published in the THEIRG Monograph Series (Almeida-Filho, 2022).

In dialogue with Prof. Bruno-Jofré, always interested in opening spaces and giving voice to *nosotros* from the South, I have revisited the theory of coloniality proposed by Aníbal Quijano and developed in recent decades by Mignolo, Grosfoguel and other authors. This theoretical framework has as a political agenda the decolonization of the colonial matrix of power and its derivatives, the “coloniality of knowledge” and the “coloniality of being.” This perspective was reviewed by Boaventura de Sousa-Santos, who has systematically and extensively applied it to the programmatic project of a socio-historical critique of the Western university (Sousa-Santos, 1997; 2017). From this baseline, I propose to take the official discourse of higher education institutions in Brazil, repressed memories of the history of their organization, and remnants of historical myths as potential evidence of how the coloniality of power and the coloniality of knowledge are intertwined and articulated. In this approach, silent processes, hidden episodes, and discrete events can be analyzed as representative markers of complex dynamics of denial, suppression, absorption, processing, translation, displacement, adaptation, and production of meanings and myths. Identifying and analyzing traces and scars of historical processes and events manifested in concrete index-cases can help us face the current challenges for decolonizing the university, reinforcing its role as an institutional force potentially capable of helping to overcome the “coloniality of being” dormant in the practices of its own agents.

In this paper, first, I will provide a very brief account of decolonial thought and its notions of the coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge, and coloniality of being. Secondly, avoiding revisiting historical grand narratives, I will present a very brief history of higher education reforms in the Western world that influenced university reforms in Brazil. Then I will present three index-cases of coloniality related to the Brazilian university which may be illustrative of my argument. The first one I call the denial of Georges Cabanis, the second one has been named by historians as the Humboldt Myth, and the third one is a strong statement of my own responsibility: we Brazilians have never been Flexnerians. The specific discussion on how to interpret these index-cases of coloniality will be my closing remarks for opening further debates on strategies and actions for decolonizing the University.

## Coloniality, Decolonization, and Education

The theoretical framework that came to be called "*pensamiento decolonial*" was pioneered by the Peruvian thinker Anibal Quijano (1928-2018) as part of his critique of the dependence theories that dominated the Latin American social sciences between 1960 and 1980. This perspective was influenced by José Carlos Mariátegui (1894-1930), a Peruvian Marxist philosopher who, in the 1920s, proposed an interpretation of dialectical materialism respecting the cultural matrices of indigenous peoples.

To conceive decolonization as a political epistemological endeavor, Quijano (1992; 2014) proposes to distinguish coloniality from colonialism and colonization. "Colonialism" refers to the regimen of economic exploitation and political, social, and cultural domination of Europeans over territories and peoples conquered during the initial expansion of mercantile capitalism. "Colonization" is the process of historical construction of relationships of exploitation and domination, in the economic, social, political-ideological dimensions and, mainly, in the ways of life of subordinate social formations, in the context of colonialism. Quijano (2015) proposed to designate as "coloniality" the matrix of power and the patterns of action resulting from colonization and colonialism. The notion of "coloniality of power" is central to the model of domination of globalized capitalism. In the contemporary world-system, the coloniality of power is defined by three instances—labor, race, and gender—in relation to which social relations associated with the complex exploitation-domination-conflict are organized (Quijano, 2014). Of the three instances, labor is configured as the central and permanent sphere of exploration/domination. The other two are primary instances of control and domination, which make exploration and domination feasible.

Coloniality of power implies a symbolic, imaginary, subjective space, as an introjection of naturalized oppression in the worldview of dominated societies (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel, 2007). The superiority attributed to European knowledge in all dimensions of life was an important aspect of coloniality in the world-system of modern capitalism (Quijano, 2015). In this paradigm, only the knowledge generated by the scientific and philosophical elite of Europe would be considered true, since it presents itself as natural, impartial, rigorous, and universal (Grosfoguel, 2007). During the colonial era, with the leading role of the Jesuits and other religious orders, the metropolises employed ideological and symbolic strategies in the educational systems and legal structures to privilege Western culture over all others. With the Enlightenment, the idea of cultural superiority was legitimized with the argument that knowledges of colonized people always represented primitive, premodern, local, and pre-scientific belief systems (Walsh, 2005).

The idea of coloniality of knowledge implies the introduction of rationalist epistemologies in Western modernity, crucial for the production-reproduction of colonial knowledge and thought in postcolonial contexts (Lander, 2000). Therefore, it refers to the epistemological dimensions and correlates of the coloniality of power. In

this perspective, a geopolitical approach to knowledge brings light to the complex relationship between historical locations, economic and social formations, and ideological production of epistemologies (Escobar, 2000). Several authors have postulated critical approaches toward geopolitics of knowledge: Walter Mignolo's influential concept of "border thinking" (Mignolo, 2017), Milton Santos' territorial approach to epistemology (Santos, 2003), the ideas of abyssal thought and "Southern epistemologies" by Boaventura de Sousa-Santos (2022).

These critical theorizations based on the notion of otherness emerged as possible and timely responses to the imposition of salvationist rhetoric of Eurocentric epistemology. To offer epistemological consistency to counter-colonial thinking, Portuguese social thinker Boaventura de Sousa-Santos proposes a critical theory based on an intellectual project of decolonization of history, having as reference what he calls epistemologies of the South (Sousa-Santos, 2017). Considering knowledge as the main economic asset of contemporary society, he analyzes the viability of cognitive democracy, justifying the university institution as the main political attractor in the processes of emancipation of the subjects. To promote counter-hegemonic strategies and operate synergistic political strategies for decolonizing history, Sousa-Santos (2022a) deconstructs what he calls "abyssal thinking," defined as a perspective complacent with the inequities that generate hierarchies, subordination, and oppression that sustain neocolonialism, hidden by a rhetoric of economic integration that fosters the internationalization of totalitarian policies. In this line, he recognizes the value of non-scientific knowledge transgressing conceptual and methodological boundaries, especially providing the modes of production of knowledge and practices that are more integrative and respectful of the complexity of the world.

To complete this understanding of the complexity of the historical processes that generate and foster the coloniality-modernity of the world-system of global capitalism, some authors have proposed the concept of "coloniality of being." In Maldonado-Torres's synthesis (2005), the coloniality of being results from the subjective introjected experience of colonization and its impact on the ways of life of all subjects involved in the colonial reference, both oppressors and subaltern subjects, which takes place, above all, in the deepest planes of intersubjective communication, by language. Traversing the plane of culture, language "overdetermines" not only the economy, but the entire social reality in the colonized context. In this perspective, the elucidation of the coloniality of being needs to consider the way the existential apparatus of the human subject oppressed by coloniality/modernity incorporates the existential expressions of colonial subalternity, especially in relation to experiences of racism. Undoubtedly, this is a reference to Fanon's insights, particularly his description of the trauma of the encounter of the racialized subject with the other, in the constitution of the subaltern subjectivity.

Arguing that Eurocentrism comprises a matrix of thought not unique to Europeans, Quijano (2014, p.285) states that such an ethnocentric cognitive perspective applies to "*los educados bajo su hegemonía*." This accurately implies, in

all its levels and forms, coloniality in education, taken as a crucial process, decisive to ensure the hegemony and racist structural biases of the cognitive perspective of Eurocentric colonized modern capitalism. With varied degrees of analysis, some representatives of *pensamiento decolonial* have cited Paulo Freire as an inspiration and precursor of the analyses of coloniality-modernity, especially in the aspect of the coloniality of knowledge (Walsh, 2019). Thus, it makes perfect sense to reconsider the emancipatory Freirean perspective of the oppressed subject also as equivalent to the concept of coloniality of being. Referring specifically to the field of education, Luiz Alves (2023),<sup>2</sup> a close collaborator of Paulo Freire, summarizes this analytical possibility: “the best decolonizing praxis I know is Freirean, made of a linguistic-semiotic fabric that makes the new "generations" of thought and discourse of people in communion the way out and the leap to overcome the inherited framework of coloniality, in all its evident forms. Education does not decolonize outside of movements for coping and overcoming the sexist, racist, prejudiced, mannerist accumulation etc.”

## Decolonizing the University

Dozens of books and hundreds of articles and academic events bear in their title or content the expression "decolonizing the university" or equivalent. On the web, there are thousands of references in the main modern languages. In this voluminous bibliography/webometry, great hope is placed in the historical transformation of the university as an institutional place that, once decolonized, could serve, in different ways, as a potential source of innovative and, in many cases, revolutionary social ruptures, fostering the decolonialization of nations, societies, groups and subjects.

The world-system of higher education comprises a transnational network of universities that, since the several post-Enlightenment reforms, has been closely linked to the reproduction of coloniality of knowledge (Castro-Gómez, 2005). This coloniality consists of policies and strategies of classification and hierarchization of human knowledge, where only one type of knowledge appears as valid, authentic, and relevant, while others are expropriated, devalued, and silenced, to the point of being considered as invalid and irrational knowledge. Thus, the coloniality of knowledge subordinates all knowledge to rationalized thought in the name of economic value and specific technological skills, but the perspective of colonized knowledge goes beyond the limits of scientific rationality by sustaining the racialized Eurocentrism constitutive of the West as a totalizing and universalist worldview (Grosfoguel, 2007).

Among the proponents of decolonial thinking, I see two opposing, contradictory or, perhaps, dialectical views of a historical role of the university regarding coloniality. On the one hand, there is virtually unanimity regarding the central role of higher education in the reproduction of coloniality in contemporary societies. On the

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication on 17/01/2023.



other hand, an optimistic (but not uncontroversial) viewpoint places education as one of the potential progressive change forces for challenging the colonialities of knowledge and being, and the university as a powerful instrument to overcome coloniality and promote countercolonial practices in higher education. Both approaches converge toward the liberation of human subjects from exploitation, oppression, and alienation due to the coloniality of power in modern globalized capitalism.

Castro-Gómez (2007, p.79) summarizes the two solutions for such a positive expectation: On the one hand, institutions located in specific geographical and cultural territories, such as the *Universidad Intercultural de las Nacionalidades y Pueblos Indígenas Amawtay Wasi* in Ecuador (Vargas-Moreno, 2014) and the *Community University of the Amazon Rivers* (Cohen, 2019), among others, and, in parallel, official institutions created in the gaps of university reform processes, as is the case of emerging universities in Brazil (Genro, Zitkoski and Arenhaldt, 2021).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, we should make special reference to diffuse mobilizing initiatives, such as the *Universidade Popular dos Movimentos Sociais*, a network of knowledge organized at the 2003 World Social Forum, an initiative led by Boaventura de Sousa-Santos.

Sousa-Santos brings a radical and politically referenced critique of the university's missions in societies derived from colonialism and marked by imperialism. His main contributions on the subject are in *Decolonising the University: The Challenge of Deep Cognitive Justice*, first published in 2017. For him, the medieval university was created as a device for the protection and conservation of the dominant Roman-Christian culture, and assumed a role of historical agent inducing gradual changes in society. However, although latently (perhaps part of an institutional unconscious), the university has been reluctant to fulfill its role as an institution by principle committed to the radical, deep transformation of society (Sousa-Santos, 2017).

From the perspective of what he calls an “ecology of knowledges,” Sousa-Santos proposes to review the concepts of the university as practiced today, enabling us to consider new transformative praxis through productive interactions beyond mere interlocution. Emerging from the promotion of dialogues of scientific, artistic, and humanistic knowledge with local practical and ancestral knowledge, the ecology of knowledges can be defined as, “so to speak, a form of extension in reverse, from outside the university to within the university” (Sousa-Santos and Almeida-Filho, 2008, p. 53). Thus, the ecology of knowledge will be the way to bring the distinct, the different, the local, the traditional (of ancestry), the popular (of the people) into the University. And to accomplish the opposite of the extension, it is necessary to bring the community into the university also in the epistemological, pedagogical, and political planes. In this approach, extension in the university comprises a domain of action and social responsibility that needs to be deeply

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<sup>3</sup> My own experience in the creation of a decolonized university in the state of Bahia, Brazil, may be considered here. See Almeida-Filho & Coutinho (2019).

rethought and redefined for the transformation of the different fields of knowledge involved.

In sum, for Sousa-Santos (2017), the decolonization of the university will be realized only with the empowerment of society in the instances and processes of democratic participation, and not only as a mere adornment in the formatting of the collegiate organs of the institution. This will take place both from the point of view of planning and administration, of strategic projection of the institution, as well as in the discussion of courses, contents, formats, modalities, pedagogical methods. After all, the university exists to fulfill a social and political mission directly related to the territory, its society, its communities, and its social segments; therefore, nothing more than just to create and experiment with forms of dialogue with those who constitute the institution's reason for being.

## **A Very Brief History of Higher Education Reforms**

Contemporary historians of education often replicate a persuasive (although problematic) account of the formation and transformation of universities resulting from the emergence of the capitalist mode of production and the advent of modernity, backed up by colonialism. According to this grand narrative, since medieval times, the Western university has had a great potential to cultivate colonialities and to educate people capable of operating the incipient nation-state in European territories (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012).

After the Renaissance, the use of military force and the political control of knowledge and subaltern subjectivity was part of the imperial matrix of power in the emergence of a new mode of production (Sousa-Santos and Almeida-Filho, 2008). For two centuries since the Protestant Reform, in the period that Foucault called the classical era, the university began to have as its main mission the secular formation of human subjects as professionals for the new governments, industries, and markets, modeled according to individualistic, emancipated, and sovereign bourgeois principles (Charle and Verger, 1994). The mercantile expansion of the first wave of globalization, the formation of colonies in the Americas, and the invention of the modern state, found in higher education an effective response capable of generating and controlling the knowledge technologically relevant to the initial stages of primitive accumulation (medicine, agriculture, cartography, metallurgy, military engineering, civil construction, economics).

In the New World, the colonial matrix of power developed during the sixteenth century under the Iberian forms of government and economy reserved education to religious orders for their evangelizing mission (Weinberg, 1981). Thus, Catholic religious-oriented colleges were created in virtually all colonial domains, with curricula composed of the medieval system of *trivium* (rhetorical arts) and *quadrivium* (the proto-sciences), governed by the Jesuit guideline of the *Ratio Studiorum* (Wright, 2004). With Salamanca as a late paradigm of medieval university in the Hispanic world, universities governed by religious orders were installed in Santo Domingo, Mexico, Peru, and Argentina in the first century of colonial

conquest. Interestingly, authors of coloniality theory disregard that, on the contrary, in Brazil, the main Portuguese colony, the Crown discouraged and soon prohibited higher education in the colony, sending potential graduates to the University of Coimbra and other European university centers (Cunha, 2007).

With the emergence of modern capitalism, during the eighteenth century, new university models were created in Europe to meet the demands for industrial, mining, and war technologies based on the natural sciences and, on the other hand, to operate the bureaucracies of modern states (Charle and Verger, 1994). In France, denounced as niches of aristocratic dilettantism, universities were extinguished after the Revolution of 1789, and their functions assumed by other types of higher education institutions. In the turbulent post-revolutionary context, Georges Cabanis and his fellows—*les idéologues*—systematized a set of principles and guidelines in a national education reform, with a higher education model founded in *facultés* and *grands écoles* without the institutional figure of the university. In this proposal, in line with a Cartesian approach, higher education was then carried out in specific vocational schools, with a tendency to specialization and reduced autonomy before central bodies such as ministries of state or university bodies (Almeida-Filho, 2022). Initially restricted to higher education, Cabanis's proposal inspired the Bonapartist educational reform, which became a model for social formations derived from mercantile capitalism, subjected to the powerful French cultural influence, mainly in Mediterranean countries and their former colonies (Almeida-Filho, 2022).

In parallel to the "Imperial University" established in France, a distinct and, in a sense, antagonistic conception of research university was created in Germany, also at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For this grand narrative, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) and his associates outlined a new model of university, taking the Kantian Enlightenment as a philosophical reference (Morozov, 2016). This new model promoted academic autonomy, defined as freedom of research, teaching, and learning, and was based on the notion of general education (*Bildung*), with primacy of scientific training versus professional training (Terra, 2019). The Kantian-Humboldtian university represented a utopia of academic freedom and autonomy that guaranteed the production of scientific truth in an atmosphere of solitude and freedom. In practice, however, it assumes an elitist character, caricatured as the "ivory tower." The structural elitism of such a model of university was crucial to the higher education project for controlled training of economic and social elites through tradition, scholarship, cultural refinement, and strategic technological knowledge (Ash, 2006).

The expansion and transformation of industrial capitalism in the early twentieth century promoted the conditions for the spread of the Humboldtian university throughout Europe (Shils & Roberts, 2004). However, it was in the United States that such a model of research institution found the best conditions for hegemony in the beginning of the twentieth century (Muller, 1985). This resulted from the work of Abraham Flexner (1910; 1923; 1968), who has been recognized in the history of higher education as a key reformer of medical teaching and, indirectly, as responsible for the consolidation of the research university in North America

(Ludmerer, 2010). In 1908, he was commissioned to prepare a study on medical education that, published under the title *Medical Education in the United States and Canada*, became known as the Flexner Report (Flexner, 1910). Between 1915 and 1926, as director of the Rockefeller Foundation general education board, Flexner expanded his reforming activities also to secondary education (Flexner, 1923), funding programs for educational innovation in universities and experimental schools, inspired by the philosophy of pragmatism (Bonner, 2002). After World War II, the agenda of medical education reform was resumed, highlighting a little-known side of the Flexner Reform—preventive medicine (Arouca, 2006). As a mobilization strategy, several events were held in the U.S. and Latin America under the sponsorship of international foundations and PAHO's support, as a starting point for extensive reforms of medical curricula (Paim and Almeida-Filho, 1998).

In Europe, in the post-war era, important changes were introduced in the tradition of the research university, according to Tlostanova and Mignolo (2012, pp.189-190). On the one hand, in complicity with the expansion of globalized capitalism, economic vectors began to intervene in the transformation of the university, particularly in the last decades of the twentieth century; on the other hand, the division between the two cultures (sciences and humanities) was consolidated, and the applied social sciences dominated the world university scene, vying for being protagonist with political decolonization movements. Such vectors converged to the most ambitious university reform transnational project, the Bologna Process, derived from the consolidation of the European Economic Community (Bergan S. and Matei, 2020).

## Higher Education in Brazil

After Independence in 1822, Brazil adopted the French model of education, emulating its system of primary school, high school, normal school, polytechnic school, and faculties. In 1832, when schools of surgery founded in 1808 were transformed into medical schools, they strictly followed the guidelines of the Paris Medical School (Machado et al., 1978). During the rule of Emperor Pedro II (1841-1889), French influence on Brazilian higher education remained strong. In terms of teaching methods and educational resources, the entire body of material (books, methods, regulations, programs, readings, tools, even furniture) was imported from France (Almeida-Filho, 2022).

In 1878, an educational reform was proposed by the physician Vicente Figueira de Saboia (Almeida-Filho, 2022). Princess Izabel's obstetrician, Saboia made several trips to France and Germany between 1871 and 1875, sent by Emperor Peter II to study the models of medical training in force in Europe. Approved by the Parliament the following year, the Saboia Reform was inspired by the model of German universities. This reform failed to overcome the rhetorical education of French-oriented faculties. With the opening of law schools in São Paulo and Recife, as well as mining, agricultural, and polytechnic schools in other provinces, an odd

system of higher education without universities lasted until the twentieth century (Cunha, 2007).

Between 1909 and 1912, three institutions of higher education were established in the states of Amazonas, São Paulo, and Paraná—each named as a university—but they proved to be short-lived (Cunha, 2007). State legislation integrated local faculties of medicine, law, and engineering, leading to the formation of the University of Rio de Janeiro in 1920 and the University of Minas Gerais in 1927. Despite this, internal resistance from the faculties and opposition from the federal government hindered these institutions from operating as full-fledged universities (Cunha, 2007; Fávero, 2010). The first university in full operation in Brazil was the University of São Paulo, created in 1934 through the incorporation of pre-existing institutions. Its creation, organization, and consolidation, which took place between 1934 and 1945, received support from foreign missions, mainly coming from France and other European countries. The text of Ana Paula Tavares Magalhães, “*Scientia vinces: Power, Science, and Project for Society at the Origin of the University of São Paulo*,” presented at the Toronto symposium, deals with the history of USP’s original project.

After the Revolution of 1930, the Francisco Campos Reform instituted the Statute of Brazilian Universities, further reinforcing the elitist and fragmenting institutional modeling characteristic of the Cabanisian model (Rothen, 2008). With the end of the Vargas dictatorship in 1945, most federal universities followed the same process of aggregation of traditional preexisting colleges, conducive to institutional isolation as well as symbolic and political autonomy. The only exception was the University of Brasilia (UnB), conceived in 1960 by Anísio Teixeira (1900-1971) and Darcy Ribeiro (1922-1997) in the Humboldtian-Flexnerian model of research university. This institutional experience was severely repressed by the government that followed the military coup of 1964 (Salmeron, 2007).

During the military dictatorship (1964-1985), the country’s public university system suffered greatly from the state of censorship and political repression (Cunha, 2007a). In 1968, the military dictatorship promoted a university reform financed by international loans, generating an eccentric version of higher education that overlaps, without further integration, the Anglo-Saxon system of departments with the Franco-German system of the lifetime chair. Harshly imposed, this reform, on the one hand, was boycotted both by the conservative right within the university structure and by the leftist student movements (Cunha, 2007a). After the re-democratization of the country, with the economic and political crisis that accompanied the process of democratic opening, came years of underfunding, administrative chaos, and social devaluation, especially for the federal system of higher education (Vechia, 2020).

With the end of the military dictatorship, the 1988 Constitution established education as the right of all and duty of the State, and granted “didactic-scientific, administrative, and financial and patrimonial management autonomy” to universities. Never regulated, university autonomy remains, even today, in a mythical plan, as a fiction endorsed by the official discourse. In the 1990s, during the Collor de Mello and Fernando Henrique Cardoso governments, there was little investment in public

universities, and strong growth in the opening of slots in higher education, especially in the private education system. The Administrative Reform Plan of Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government intended to regulate the "special legal status" provided for in the National Education Guidelines and Bases (Law No. 9.394/96), turning federal universities into "non-state public entities." Faced with the reaction of the university community, rejection of student union leaders and lack of political support in general, the government retracted the reform proposal (Almeida-Filho and Souza, 2020).

The governments of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010) and Dilma Rousseff (2011-2015) expanded access to higher education in social segments previously excluded from public universities, as well as affirmative action programs, such as quotas for poor, black, and indigenous students. In the first Lula da Silva government (2003-2006), several studies, proposals, and preliminary projects of reforming the university were prepared under the leadership of the Minister of Education Tarso Genro. For various reasons, the Tarso Genro Reform provoked powerful resistance and was never implemented. At the academic level, the criticisms of the time covered a broad spectrum of contrary arguments, contesting the thesis of the university's responsibility for social inclusion (Genro, 2005). A policy of massification of the university with increased enrollment, expansion of night activities, and offers of quotas for territories and excluded segments was considered undesirable for the supposedly inevitable loss of academic quality. The announced possibility of curricular flexibility and induction of greater commitment to teacher training for basic education were denounced by teacher labor unions and student organizations as aggressions to university autonomy (Almeida-Filho and Souza, 2020).

After the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, Brazil experienced a deep economic, social, and political crisis. In 2019, a populist far-right government, led by Jair Bolsonaro, came to power, promoting an ultra-neoliberal economic policy. In that government, fortunately recently finalized, public policies were suspended or reduced, environmental protection strangled, individual freedoms threatened, and secular Enlightenment values such as education for citizenship and university education as a possibility of human emancipation, were contested. The Bolsonaro government, in a context of legal, political, and financial siege to the federal universities, presented a poorly drafted proposal for university reform, entitled "Future-se." The many objectives in the proposal would not in themselves be problematic, but the biggest problem was the suggested instruments for its viability: investment funds managed by financial institutions and outsourcing of administration and execution of universities' end-activities. The weak points of this university pseudo-reform, in addition to its irrelevance from the academic point of view, were sufficient to make it totally forgotten (Almeida-Filho and Sousa, 2021).

## **Index-Cases of Coloniality in Brazil**

To overcome coloniality in the university and promote countercolonial practices in higher education, it is important to deconstruct the rhetoric cultivated in historical

narratives and in the establishment of official discourses. With this aim, I would like to highlight three index-cases regarding higher education in contemporary Brazil, which might comprise my possible personal contribution to this topic: (a) the suppression of institutional memories of the Cabanis Reform; (b) the mythification of the Humboldt Reform in the Brazilian university; (c) the Flexner Reform being treated in a ghostly way in the field of higher education. The first one I call the denial of Georges Cabanis; the second one has been called by historians the Humboldt Myth; and the third one rests on a strong statement of my own responsibility: we Brazilians have never been Flexnerians.

### *Denial of Cabanis*

As mentioned in the introduction, looking for signs and residues of coloniality in Brazilian universities, I have tracked down traces of the Cabanis Reform, affecting thought models, institutional patterns, and curricular matrices (Almeida-Filho, 2022). In Brazil, the Cabanis Reform was immediately assimilated into the institutional mimicry observed in the organization of medical faculties established by the Regency (1831-1840) and consolidated throughout the Second Empire (1840-1889). Cabanisian ideas contributed to politically block proposals for the installation of universities in the country throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, Cabanis's contributions to education have been ignored or forgotten, even repressed, in the world and in Brazil. The archaeogenealogical analysis I have conducted sought to understand why and how that happened (Almeida-Filho, 2022). First, regarding the sensitive issue of free education as a condition for democracy, Cabanis' books were the target of open political repression and systematic censorship by the Bonaparte government, as well as by conservative religious movements in the Mediterranean countries and their colonies abroad. In colonial Brazil in 1810, Cabanis's clinical writings were submitted to a *Comissão de Censura* [Commission of Censorship] before being cleared for printing (Magalhães, 2017). Second, the relevance, depth, and timing of Cabanis's physiological and clinical contributions, summed up in his masterpiece *Rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme*, prevented historians from focusing upon his pedagogical insights and proposals, missing the opportunity of recognizing his role as a leading thinker and education reformer. In its original formulation, distinguishing from the *Idéologie*, Cabanis' thought implicitly reveal some skepticism, and even irony, which may have caused waves of forgetfulness in the formation of the hegemony of western Eurocentric cultural matrices (Saad, 2016). Finally, Humboldt's institutional work as a pioneer of education reform in the Kingdom of Prussia took place almost at the same time as the Bonaparte Reform, eventually preventing historians from recognizing Cabanis as one of the leading thinkers and reformers of education in the post-Enlightenment era.

The delayed institutionalization of higher education in nineteenth century Brazil replicated French culture, philosophical schools, and academic traditions. Nowadays, Brazilian universities are still operating on a rigid curricular regime, with

an outdated organizational structure heavily influenced by the reforms triggered by the French Revolution and consolidated by the restoration policies. Remnants, traces, indices, and structural marks of institutional elements and curricular patterns engendered by the Cabanis Reform for medical education reform can still be found from the system of higher education in most Brazilian universities. The anachronic format of the “empire of the faculties” still prevails, with separate faculties of medicine, law, engineering, and other schools, in universities that exist only nominally, quite similar to the model that arose from the Liard Reform of 1896 in France. Applying an archaeogenealogical approach (Almeida-Filho, 2022), I found that Brazil’s higher education system has failed Cabanis’s original political project in its mission of social justice, cultural advancement, and human development, because it has reinforced a pattern of individualism, rigidity, and specialization in its curricular and organizational structure. Is the obscuring of the Cabanisian influence in the elitist, alienating, and fragmented structure of the Brazilian university a hidden sign of the coloniality in subaltern higher education?

### *The Humboldt Myth*

In the official history of education, as seen above, the so-called Humboldtian reforms have taken German universities to a new level of universalist modernity, under the model of the University of Berlin, created by Humboldt in 1810. Recent analyses dismantle such a narrative that, until then, had proved convincing and efficient as a post-hoc political and ideological construction, brought by Sylvia Paletschek (2001) and complemented by other historians (Ash, 2006; 2008; Morozov, 2016), who regard the idea of the Humboldtian university as a mythical narrative—the *Mithos Humboldt*. In this argument, several German *universitäten* (Goettingen, Halle) were already oriented by modern science, well before the University of Berlin (Ash, 2008). Moreover, taking as reference the entire nineteenth century, there is no historiographic evidence to indicate any association of von Humboldt's name to the science-oriented laboratory university education model that came to be named (Ash, 2006). Finally, the memorandum written by Baron von Humboldt—*On the Internal and External Organization of Higher Scientific Institutions in Berlin*, which became known in the histories of education as the primeval project of the modern research university—was never completed or published, having come to light only after 1890 when Bruno Gebhardt discovered it in the personal archives of the great intellectual, scientist, and diplomat (Paletschek, 2001). In the intricate geopolitics of the *belle époque*, the centennial celebration of the University of Berlin in 1910 served the purposes of placing Germany as a military power and world center of science and technologies applied to industry.

In Brazil in the mid-twentieth century, Antonio da Silva Mello presented a proposal to reform Brazilian medical education, starting in the Faculty of Medicine of Rio de Janeiro, on bases very similar to the Germanic model of the university (Silva Mello, 1937). Silva Mello was trained in Germany at the beginning of the century, having worked as a doctor in Switzerland (Kemp and Edler, 2004). The reform



proposed by Silva Mello was convergent with several points of the ideal model attributed to the Humboldtian university, but it was not successful as a modernizing proposal for the newborn Brazilian university with such strong Franco-Lusitanian roots (Teixeira, 2005). Wouldn't the absence of the Kantian-Humboldtian model of university in Brazil be a symptom of the same coloniality that distorted and displaced contributions arising from the enlightenment reforms?

### *We Have Never Been Flexnerians*

The Flexner Reform had a delayed impact in Brazil. In the mid-twentieth century, the Brazilian medical schools offered rhetorical pedagogical models and, where there was some scientific dynamism, they cultivated ties with two antagonistic European traditions: the French school, with a strong focus on the clinic, and the German school, marked by laboratory research. In the context of a program funded by the Rockefeller Foundation during the 1930s, a few professors in the USP School of Medicine tried to implement curricular and institutional reform, but their proposals triggered the reactions of the clinical and surgical chairs (Faria, 2007). The resistance of Brazilian medical education against the Flexner Reform was gradually overshadowed by the rise of clinical specialties, particularly after the implementation of the first teaching hospitals in the 1930s and 1940s, again with the financial support of the Rockefeller Foundation (Marinho, 2001). In the 1970s, there was an intense production of theories to fuel the ideological resistance against the military dictatorship in Brazil which, in the health reform movement, ended up rejecting Flexnerian ideas regarding higher education (Pagliosa and Da Ros, 2008) and demonizing Flexner by judging him responsible for formulating a reductionist and dehumanized biomedical model (Almeida-Filho, 2010).

With the fall of the military dictatorship in the following decade, the country began a process of political redemocratization and reorganization of its institutions. At the interface between education and health, this movement was both positive and negative. On the one hand, positive by rescuing themes of health education combined with the then-incipient active pedagogies (Freire-inspired), a training model oriented to service called Teaching-Care Integration was proposed. On the other hand, negative in the context of Brazilian universities. The omission that general education was one of the main axes of the Flexner Reform indicates a displacement or distortion in the imaginary dimension (Almeida-Filho, 2014). Could the failure of Flexnerian reform in Brazil be a signal of a different sort of coloniality, one that displaced contributions arising from philosophical pragmatism, from which Flexner himself became militant?

### **Final Comments**

From a long-range historiographic perspective, the global history of colonialism comprises local histories of massive and systematic educational enterprises of

religious catechesis, especially in Africa and Latin America. Different forms of coloniality resulted from successive, gradual, and cumulative transformations, with events of rupture and discontinuity in which social and political practices have changed according to needs, demands, conditions, and vectors in the spheres of economics, the state apparatus, the biopolitics of bodies (survival, health, sexuality) and, above all, what mostly interests us, in the field of education of subjects (knowledges and subjectivities). In Brazil, in the dawn of colonial times, higher education was born already colonialized, and the Brazilian university gained its political-ideological status and social legitimacy very late in a regime of coloniality (still in force, I insist, in postcolonial and post-imperial times) that remained (and remains) alive and active in racism, patrimonialism, inequalities, submission of subjects, under the ideological framework of subalternity.

In its recent history, the University, as a social institution, has been suffering a profound crisis of legitimacy throughout the world, in many places under attack by the retrograde forces of populist obscurantism that seek to demoralize the university institution. Almost everywhere, the University has discovered its complicity with coloniality and reclaimed for itself a transformative mission of society, as a promoter of ethnodiversity and of a newly recognized epistemodiversity. In this sense, it should become an open, socially responsible, politically committed institution capable of promoting ecologies of knowledges, to transform subjects with a critical and politically engaged profile—very different from what has been done so far. In Brazil, this is not an easy task, to the extent that the Brazilian higher education system inadvertently remains Cabanisian (in its most corrupted version, reduced by the Bonapartist reform) both in curriculum structure and institutional organization, with a hidden pattern of elitism, structural racism, rigidity, fragmentation, and specialization.

My intention in this text was to explore the coloniality of the Brazilian university through understanding its colonization and re-colonization processes to recognize its impact on the present situation of the higher education system. This understanding-recognition is a precondition for decolonizing institutional environments. By exploring local histories of denial, dysfunctions, and displacements in the realm of countercoloniality of being, I hope to contribute to offer viable options for deep changes in the political-institutional scope of higher education in specific contexts of the Global South. The index-cases presented here are representative, respectively, of the main ideological strategies for enhancing coloniality in institutional environments such as the university: denial, projection, displacement, repression. Denial or induced absence from the ideological forefront, as in the suppression of institutional memories of the Cabanis Reform, can be understood as part of a “history of absences” proposed by Sousa-Santos (2022). Mythification of the Humboldt Reform can be interpreted as a projection in the Brazilian university of a significant icon of the colonizing history of the North-Eurocentric matrix of knowledge. And finally, to mystify or repress the Flexner Reform as dysfunctional in the field of professional health education has ended up displacing or preventing the consideration of its disruptive dimensions for university reform in general.

The critical knowledge of such contradictory (and perhaps collectively unconscious) denial processes, which produce historical myths disguised by official discourses, can provide a glimpse of the connections between this elitist and alienating university and the ideological, political, and institutional historical forces responsible for reproducing inequalities, privileges, and social inequities; signs of the coloniality of power in our countries. In this way, we hope to contribute to a “decolonial turn” of conservative institutions of coloniality-modernity such as law, art, science, politics, and, directly responsible for the formation of intellectuals, the University.

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