Confronting Academic Knowledge
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Preface

PART I: THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE

Chapter 1 ................................................................. 3
The social sciences and the oppression of the global South
Vinay Lal

Chapter 2 .................................................................... 32
A critique of Eurocentric social science and the question of
alternatives
Claude Alvares

Chapter 3 ..................................................................... 58
Islam, science, and the West: Changing relationships in
knowledge and power
Mohammad Hazim Shah

PART II: QUESTIONING ACADEMIC IMPERIALISM

Chapter 4 ..................................................................... 87
Imperialism in education: Observations on curriculum,
institutional structure, and the use of textbooks
Yusef J. Progler

Chapter 5 ..................................................................... 105
The concentration camp and development: The pasts and
future of genocide
Vinay Lal
Chapter 6.................................................................130
Bioethics and moral imperialism
Siti Nurani Mohamed Nor

Chapter 7.................................................................146
Ending academic imperialism in hard sciences: A beginning
C. K. Raju

PART III: PEOPLE-IN-COMMUNITY IS THE HOPE

Chapter 8.................................................................177
When we discover that we have been ‘cultural imperialists’ in our own homes
Munir Fasheh

Chapter 9.................................................................194
Academic imperialism and community knowledge: The way back to respect
Jorge Ishizawa
Grimaldo Rengifo

Chapter 10...............................................................217
Whose knowledge? Whose language?: Reeds crying tales of separation
Sue-san Ghahremani Ghajar
Seyyed-Abdolhamid Mirhosseini

Contributors

Index
Preface

This book is the fruit of the International Conference on Academic Imperialism held by the Center for International Scientific Studies and Collaboration (CISSC) in May 2010 in Tehran, Iran. The conference was broadly based on the concern that ways of learning and forms of knowledge are much more diverse than projected by the restricted frameworks of academia. Moreover, a main underlying theme of the conference was that despite the dominant belief in the world today, not only what is known as the West is not the most successful symbol and the origin of best knowledge, education, and progress, but in many cases it is the source of many false understandings of different aspects of knowledge, and has created the deepest and the most disastrous destructions for humanity.

The direction of the moves in academic teaching and research as well as the criteria of success, and basically the fundamental assumptions and mentalities underlying the academic processes in what has been called the Third World
or the Global South, are taken form sources other than the historical and cultural roots or transcending human goals that existed in these societies for centuries. Even more troubling is the problem that attempts under rubrics such as change and transformation in this regard (for example, in the academic contexts of Iran) tend to deal with rudiments and ignore the fundamental assumptions. Rudimentary reforms, in effect, act to perpetuate fundamental deviations by distracting attentions from the depth of the problem.

There are many – perhaps with the loudest voice in academia all around the world – who seem to believe in the neutrality and universality of academic forms of knowledge. From their point of view, higher education, research, and technology should be concerned with pure scientific issues that are not linked with local sociocultural values, especially in an era when the globalization fever has taken the entire world. However, the claim of impartiality and universality of science may well be a myth used as a strong tool to domesticate and exploit communities. This myth has to be challenged and countered, and this is not only true about humanities and social sciences but also about basic sciences and fields of technology.

Therefore, the Academic Imperialism conference was an attempt at revisiting the most fundamental assumptions that dominate higher education and research and the overall processes of *knowledging*, as well as revisiting the history of (academic) knowledge and defining new perspectives independent of dominant Western views in these areas. Further exploring the concerns raised by the speakers at the Academic Imperialism conference, the contributions to this volume address various aspects of the dominance of mainstream perceptions and practices in shaping knowledge in academia and beyond.
The ten chapters of the book are bonded into three parts. The three chapters in 'Part I' of the book invite readers to problematize the very concept of knowledge, and call for the reconsideration of the taken for granted perspectives on the development and spread of academic forms of knowledge as innocent and ecumenical factualities. In Chapter One, Vinay Lal starts with a sharp note on the concern that "many of the most intense battles in the twenty-first century are likely to be fought over the shape of knowledge" (p. 3), and puts the ways academic disciplines normally discipline understandings and worldviews at the center of his arguments. He focuses on social sciences including anthropology and, especially, history and calls for bursting the frameworks and categories deployed by modern academia.

Claude Alvares, in Chapter Two, challenges the Eurocentricity of social sciences and proposes that the academic categories of social sciences are European constructions aimed at resolving European social problems, which have come to dominate almost all other societies. He discusses Eurocentrism in specific academic disciplines, including, philosophy, sociology, economics, and anthropology. Defying a middle ground between dominant academic frameworks and alternative perspectives, Alvares also presents specific notes aimed at shaping new constructs in knowledge.

The knowledge encounter between Islam and the West both from a historical and a contemporary perspective is what Mohammad Hazim Shah explores in Chapter Three as the final chapter of 'Part I' of the book. While he observes that looking at academic Western science as true knowledge to be adopted by the East, including the Islamic communities, is not a viable agenda, he advocates a perspective that does not reject the values of the
modernist ideology of science and at the same time acknowledges the “validity of non-scientific knowledge and cultures, or of indigenous sciences with their own epistemologies” (p. 82).

‘Part II’ comprises four chapters that further question more specific aspects of constructing and disseminating as well as embracing and reproducing structures of knowledge in specific disciplines, nowadays mainly directed by academia as well as mass media. Yusef Proglar, in Chapter Four, as the first chapter of this part, discusses academic imperialism in education by exploring the curriculum of a prototypical program of the academic filed of ‘education’ itself. He also specifically highlights the role of textbooks in reproducing and perpetuating mainstream conceptions and understandings in many social arenas.

Chapter Five, which is Vinay Lal’s second chapter in the book, invites a fundamental reconsideration of normalized understandings of global political and socio-historical notions predominantly viewed from a Eurocentric perspective of world history. Referring to several landmark events occurring in different corners of the globe within the past century, he illustrates interpretations and conceptualizations other than the dominant Eurocentric ones.

In the sixth chapter Siti Nurani Mohamed Nor considers bioethics “and how it has been disseminated indiscriminately and has in turn challenged traditional value systems” (p. 130). She raises the concern over ‘moral imperialism’ in the education of bioethics; exemplifies how it has been tackled in Malaysia; and finally, touches upon the idea that Islamic sources of knowledge may be a resource of encountering the related moral dilemmas.

Chapter Seven by C. K. Raju is the only chapter in this volume that extends the discussions on the dominance of
Western perspectives to the domain of hard sciences, which are usually more convenient candidates for claims of neutrality and universality of forms of knowledge and more easily accepted as ideologically neutral and culture-proof. Nonetheless, Raju sees these areas as more important areas in terms of the functioning of imperialism of knowledge because the majority of people know too little science or mathematics and because scientists themselves are too inclined towards ‘proof by Western authority’. He investigates concoctions in the history of science and suggests a number of steps for the process of dismantling Western soft power exercised in hard sciences.

In ‘Part III’ of the book, bearing a title suggested by Munir Fasheh, the chapters attempt to highlight the twinkles of hope, still detectable amidst all the fabricated and imposed understandings of knowledge, within the three contexts of Palestine, Peru, and Iran. Munir Fasheh focuses, in Chapter Eight, on the educational dimension of colonization that is founded on forming perceptions, particularly regarding the perception of the sense of lesser worth through measures that highlight weaknesses and ignore sources of strength in societies. Referring to the inspiring and never-repetitive story of his discovery of his illiterate mother’s mathematics, he explains how he managed to recover from the role of a ‘cultural imperialist’ at home. He also presents personal ideas on overcoming such cultural imperialism, including attempts at healing from measurement and co-authoring meanings.

In Chapter Nine, Jorge Ishizawa and Grimaldo Rengifo write about community knowledge in the Andean highlands. They discuss how the development project galvanized the minds of university graduates of these Latin American areas along with other parts of the world and how
the ways of life of indigenous communities of the central Andes have remained invisible to ‘the colonizing gaze’. They also tell their readers about the agricultural research and training activities of The Andean Project for Peasant Technologies (PRATEC) and its challenges in the context of the dominance of imported academic knowledge of agriculture.

Finally, in our own chapter, we illustrate a quick image of learning and teaching traditions in Iran and the ownership of language in the practices within these traditions. Specifically considering literacy education in the historical context of Iran, we also review the modernized forms of literacy education and the discrepancy between the two trends in terms of the construction, reproduction, and ownership of the language that shapes basic understandings of knowledge. We also present examples of the dominance of the mainstream global language of academia over apparently alternative academic movements, and finally touch upon sources of hope that may still be sought in the Iranian culture.

Many people have worked within the past year to make the Academic Imperialism conference and this book a possibility: Hossein Mohammadi Doostdar, the president of CISSC, played a crucial role in bringing the conference speakers together in Iran, and later in bringing their writings together in this volume; CISSC staff worked hard throughout the process of inviting and hosting the guests as well as running the conference; the Iranian Higher Education Association offered its help and Alzahra University provided the conference venue and gave its administrative and executive support in holding the conference; the authors of the chapters have obviously had the most important role in giving life to this book, and we do remember the thoughtful
presentations of conference speakers whose writings do not appear here for various reasons; and, *Markaz-e Nashr-e Daneshgahi* (Iran University Press) has helpfully agreed to publish the book. Our thanks to all.

_Tehran, April 2011_

*Sue-san Ghahremani Ghajar*  
*Seyyed-Abdolhamid Mirhosseini*_
Academic Imperialism and Community Knowledge: The Way Back to Respect

Jorge Ishizawa
Grimaldo Rengifo

As a result of the excessive cold... none of the lands of the high sierra can be used to grow fruits and vegetables... Because of the composition of the soil, there are lands which, although they have a good climate, are yet unsuitable for cultivation... because some of these mountains have numerous crags and rough, brambly ground covering many leagues. Other mountains have good soil, but they are so rugged and lofty that they cannot be worked. All of these causes make most of these Indies impossible to cultivate or live in...

Bernabé Cobo, Historia del Nuevo Mundo (1653), book I.

In this quote, Father Bernabé Cobo, a seventeenth century Spanish chronicler and a remarkable naturalist, puts in writing, perhaps for the first time in history, one of two possible reactions at considering life in the Andean highlands. From this viewpoint, the extraordinary ecological diversity present in such lands (eighty percent of life zones in the planet) is seen as an obstacle not only to progress and well being but even inimical to life itself. Rather, it was the

abundant presence of minerals in the Andean mountain range that attracted the attention of the invaders and made the country known in Europe through the expression ‘It’s worth a Peru!’ to refer to a wonderful bounty of gold and silver. Thus, during the time of the Spanish colony, the central Andes were mining areas. A flourishing civilization was thwarted in its development and replaced by a colonial rule that decimated the native population in the territories of the Americas. It is reported that one out of ten survived in the central Andes, while one out of twenty five in Mexico and Brazil. This colonizing gaze has persisted during the past five centuries and has become the official view held by governments even after Independence from Spanish rule in the early nineteenth century down to our days.

As a part of Latin America the central Andes have been a generous continuous provider of means for the development of capitalism since its inception. They still are. More recently, the development project, led and globalized by the US during the second half of the twentieth century, enthused and galvanized the minds of university graduates all over the globe, including ours. What had remained invisible to the colonizing gaze is the continuing existence of indigenous communities that managed to support themselves and the masses of successive invaders based on their own tradition of nurturing plants, animals, and the wild spaces in the exacting circumstances of life in high mountains. The reason is probably that this gaze also focuses on fertile plains as appropriate to agriculture. Plain fertile areas are scarce in the Peruvian Andes and restricted to the narrow coastal valleys formed and irrigated by the 52 rivers – of which only one is permanent during the year – that cut as oases into the desert starting in the high mountains and fertilizing the Pacific Ocean. In the highlands there are three fairly large valleys: the Sacred Valley of Cusco in the southern Sierra, the Mantaro
valley in the central sierra, and the Cajamarca valley in the northern sierra. To the colonizing gaze, it was also invisible that the indigenous agriculture, with all its diversity and variability of species, varieties and ecosystems, and the sophisticated tuning of diverse communities to this reality, took place in the steep slopes of the Andean mountain range.

**PRATEC and cultural affirmation in the Andes**

The Andean Project for Peasant Technologies (PRATEC) is formally an NGO, based in Lima, Peru. It is not an educational institution, but has been involved in research and training since its inception in 1987. PRATEC was founded recognizing that the colonizing gaze had installed itself at the universities where knowledge in agriculture and related rural development studies was imparted under what Ward Churchill called a ‘White Studies’ regime. In Peru, this was disseminated from Europe, specifically the prestigious agricultural school at Gembloux, Belgium, wherefrom the founders of the first agricultural school in Peru came at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since the 1950’s, the source changed to the US, and droves of agronomists were formed and joined the Green Revolution to carry out the modernization of Peruvian agriculture, based on the knowledge proper to cultivating the plains, and neglecting the specific characteristics of the Andean highlands. Before the military government’s agrarian reform in 1969, the coastal and highland haciendas hired professionals to exploit the privileged stretches of land where modern agriculture could thrive. Thus, export crops like sugar cane and cotton came to be cultivated in the coastal haciendas, and modern husbandry for wool, milk and meat

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was installed in the highland *haciendas*. Crops for sustenance were left for cultivation in the Andean slopes considered as marginal lands.

During the period of the agrarian reform, with the recovery of the lands in the highlands by the indigenous communities, and the demise of the *hacienda* system, the demands for technical personnel in the rural development professions changed in nature. Development projects required technical personnel knowledgeable in local agricultural practices. The agrarian universities were not prepared for this change. In spite of the fact that the enrollment of the Faculty of Agronomy included mainly young people from highland communities, the curriculum did not include courses on peasant Andean agriculture. In 1989 PRATEC was asked by authorities of the National University of Cajamarca to propose a postgraduate course seeking to have university staff knowledgeable in *campesino* agriculture. During the decade 1990–1999, PRATEC offered annual courses on Andean Peasant Agriculture in agreement with local universities for the training of university teachers and personnel of rural development NGOs. The first course on Andean *campesino* agriculture was offered in 1990 in agreement with the Universidad Nacional San Cristóbal de Huamanga, and was attended by 14 participants, including mostly university teachers and a few experienced NGO workers. The latter were to provide their rich field experience and their willingness to reflect on them. In an interview, the late Sergio Cuzco, an agronomist from Cajamarca, in the northern highlands, gave testimony to the challenge that confronted the course:

*When we left the University, we tried to introduce all the innovations we had learned in the work we carried out with an NGO… The peasants accepted all of it saying ‘It’s OK’. Soon we realized that all the common work achieved was ruined by the *campesinos* themselves. We were*
distracted a little and what we had done was no longer there... Having left the NGO in frustration, we visited the campesinos and then they said very frankly that we were wrong. I learned that they had to decide how they were going to improve the chacra [cultivated field]. So what followed was an extended effort to learn from the campesinos. To engage in a relationship of equivalence with the campesinos... we got a chacra and we established a different relationship with them, based on reciprocity [and involvement]: we help them, they help us... We do not propose blueprints, because we are very much aware that the chacras are not the same, because the campesinos conduct them according to their own understanding and possibilities.¹

From the beginning, it became clear that it was not a matter of methodology and contents in the agronomist’s formation. It was its impertinence, an acute case of ‘misplaced concreteness’ in Whitehead’s telling expression. The native source of the knowledge appropriate for good living in the place and circumstances had been rendered invisible.

PRATEC gradually gave shape to a curriculum by complementing the reflection on the industrial approach to agriculture. In fact, all participants including the members of the teaching team were learners and teachers as well. The vision was to form people who could accompany campesino communities as Sergio did. For this reason, it was altogether clear to PRATEC that participants with their field experience were to provide the anchor for all of the course endeavors. But that experience had to address the question each participant brought to the course: how do I start? Néstor Chambi, an Aymara participant who pioneered cultural affirmation in the Altiplano area (‘re-etnification’, he called it) started in the later years of the 1980’s conversing with his

¹. Afirmación cultural Andina, Lima: PRATEC, 1993, pp. 140–141.
parents and with community elders on their customs and knowledge. Néstor remembers his visits to don Pedro Toque from the community of Japisse in the district of Conima, his hometown:

I took coca leaves, bread, and we spent the whole day conversing... He said: How have I longed to tell these things and no one has listened. My children do not care, my grandchildren even less... I said I will just die with all I know.... He asked: who has sent you? Surely someone has sent you. I always remember that he said that I was being like a balm, a medicine, helping him get rid of a load that prevented him from speaking. I felt likewise... We talked for three days, but I thought that I was somehow bothering him. I proposed to come back later. He replied: Now I can die in peace. I was deeply moved and his words have always given me strength and determination.4

Thus, it was very clear from the beginning that we had to build the course on the wisdom of the communities’ elders and to recognize that it was not an adventure of the intellect that we were involved in. It was not an academic affair, even though the course implied intense intellectual work, navigating between formal university coursework and the adoption of modalities of knowledge regeneration according to the communities’ educational culture. This is the probable explanation for the failure of the PRATEC course to fully meet the request of the university authorities in Cajamarca. The course was not designed for direct adoption in the regular host university programs. Instead, the PRATEC annual course tried to circumvent the tension between educational cultures by basing the course on community knowledge and cosmovision while respecting formal requirements.

Curriculum development: The chacra at the center

The challenge for the annual course’s curriculum design took the form of finding a core idea that could host the rich field experience of people like Sergio Cuzco, accompanying communities of campesinos with the intention of improving their chacras based on their own knowledge and practices. In 1986, Grimaldo Rengifo and Eduardo Grillo, PRATEC’s founders, came upon an interpretation of the Andean conception of agriculture with specific topics on which contrasting views of the relationship nature-society in the Andean cosmovision and the modern Western cosmology could be developed. The identification of common themes had the purpose of making possible a contrast between cosmovisions. What is central in this early formulation is the place of the chacra or cultivated field as the base of all conceptual developments, and the obligation to present a contrasting view of both cosmovisions in all course sessions.

The centrality of the chacra or ‘cultivated field’ is expressed pithily in the expression ‘The Andean world is agrocentric’, and obeyed to a demand for pertinence. It was the daily life of the campesinos and its regeneration that became the main focus of the course. The focus lent the course its transformative power in the lives of the participants. The early curriculum was then developed according to different aspects of Andean life: agriculture, plants, soils, water, landscape, social organization, education, religion. The PRATEC members constituted a teaching team in charge of the elaboration of the presentations to be discussed at the classes. Owing to the geographical dispersion of the participants and their institutional commitments, the annual course was imparted in three academic units consisting in getting together for ten-day workshops each, where intensive debate of the topics was undertaken. In the workshops each
topic was presented by a member of the teaching team and put to debate during the whole day, a written presentation having been read the previous evening. Evaluation was made in the early part of the following morning.

By the fourth version of the course in 1993, a basic curricular structure had emerged which arranged itself around the avatars of the communities in the Andean world. The first academic unit was devoted to the *chacra* (cultivated field) and the *sallqa* (the wild), the biophysical components of the *pacha* (local world). The topics of agriculture, soils, water, plants, animals, landscape, climate, were occasions to contrast the modern Western understanding of them taught in the technical universities with a basic framework of a subject-object hierarchical relationship with one (dominant) knower in one pole and the (passive) known in the other pole. Nature was reduced to resources. In contrast, in the Andean conception, all entities, natural and sacred, were persons and their relationships of mutual nurturance were explored based on the testimonies of the participants. The second academic unit dealt with the communities of *runas* (humans). The topic of the *ayllu* (the extended family of deities, humans and natural entities present in a given locality) as contrasted with the Western notion of society was prominently taken up. Other topics treated in a contrasted way included education, the economy, agroastronomy, and work. The third academic unit included topics relating to the communities of the deities: *Pachamama* (Mother Earth), the *Apus* and *achachilas* (mountain deities): religion, art, and language.

The participants were required to do fieldwork, a requirement that was not so difficult to meet for NGO development workers but not for the university teachers whose duties did not include, in general, activities outside the classroom. For the first intermediate period participants were asked to collect five local practices of cultivation, transform-
oration or use of native agricultural products, or practices of nurturance of native animals. Later, the elaboration of the agrofestive calendar for the dominant cultivar in the community was required. Apart from its contribution to documenting the rich lore of Andean campesino wisdom, the calendar and the practices, presented in the form of technological booklets, had the educational objective of giving the participants the experience of learning to listen, a complete reversal from what they had been taught at the university. This practice of listening, recording and documenting the knowledge of the communities they were accompanying, prepared them to obtain testimonies in daily conversation, on which a monograph was required to be written for presentation in the third academic unit.

The tension between a disciplinary approach and the holistic character of community life centered in the chacra was circumvented by the deliberate choice of the chacra as the referent for academic rigor. In practice, participants were asked to share their field experience based on yachaqs’ or elders’ testimonies. Thus, when in 2001 the curriculum for the Masters’ program on Biodiversity and Andean Amazonian peasant agriculture was presented to the Universidad Agraria de la Selva (UNAS), there was a decade’s experience in delivering the material of the annual course on Andean Amazonian peasant agriculture and its actualization through the experience of accompaniment in actual projects with communities.

The program structure was quite orthodox from the academic point of view, and its saving feature was the permanent recourse to the realities of the campesino life with the PRATEC team taking care of the unity and coherence of the whole through the emphasis that the contents be agrocentric. The presentations by our guest lecturers enriched
a core set of topics that provided the program’s backbone to prepare ourselves for conversation in a wider context.

In the brief experience of the Masters program (2002–4), the addition of a fourth academic unit devoted to global issues was not meant to be a simple thematic aggregation. It would imply the recasting of the presentations to make the treatment of issues grow from a contrast that threatened to become dualistic to an opening up to conversation with different cosmovisions, especially the modern Western one. In the PRATEC course the agrocentric emphasis was the anchor to approach the Andean life world in its own terms, trying to provide an understanding with concepts proper to it. This emphasis has been central to the effort at decolonization of the mind by the teaching team and the participants of the course. It constitutes the basis for our criteria in cultural affirmation when accompanying local communities. However, the contrasting mood that appears in such undertaking inexorably leads to exercising a dualistic thinking based on opposition and a stance of criticism quite contrary to the temper of nurturing care that we find in the Andean Amazonian communities of nurturers of diversity. It contradicts the most important lesson from local communities.

The probable explanation is the concentration on the strengths on which an autonomous life world has survived in the Andes despite ruthless colonization. Against a demeaning colonizing attitude it seems almost natural. As a result, the conceptual framework included concepts that make inevitable a contrast between the Andean and the Western cosmovisions, in which the characteristics of the Andean life world result in direct opposition with those of the modern Western cosmology as presented by critiques of modernity and the
development idea. An explanation for this situation is that we were formed on the conceptual framework of the literate Western tradition, while Andean peoples belong to a basically oral tradition, and the task of going beyond translation required more articulation than was then available on our part. Our saving factor was that some of the course participants were intent on going back to their own communities to revitalize their agriculture and mode of life based on the communities' own knowledge. This fact provided a unique opportunity to circumvent the traps that we had encountered in our previous participation in the development and modernization projects of the Peruvian countryside.

Andean Amazonian Cultural Affirmation (NACA)

Instead of its avowed goal of mainstreaming peasant indigenous agriculture in universities, the course provided the impetus for the formation of community-based local NGOs throughout the country (sixteen, at the latest count). A two-tiered approach gradually developed in which these local community-based organizations or Nuclei for Andean Amazonian Cultural Affirmation (NACA) undertook the accompaniment of the communities in their agrocentric cultural affirmation while PRATEC took over the technical coordination and management of joint projects oriented to the strengthening of rural communities which practice traditional agriculture. Coordination consisted in convening periodic

meetings for the exchange of experiences among the NACAs and for periodically sharing reflections on a common theme of pressing interest in the projects. These reflections were put together, edited, and published by PRATEC. The other centralized activity was the annual course on Andean campesino agriculture. There has been a synergic relationship between the activities in the two tiers. Over the years, PRATEC has exercised an intellectual coordination that initially consisted in the circulation of an essay on the theme of the year inviting the NACAs to converse on the issues that were involved with the communities they accompanied. Later on, the coordination has consisted of the identification of community processes that elders consider worth reinforcing.

Something that appeared very early in this setup is the importance of follow-up as a close mutual accompaniment which goes back to the inception of the annual course, that is, before the formation of NACAs. The course was only the beginning of a long-term involvement. The impacts of the PRATEC courses can only be appreciated in this context. The mutual nurturance could be actualized in occasions when shared projects provided the space and topic for joint reflection and further mutual enrichment. Until July 1995, PRATEC accompanied two local NGOs integrated by former course graduates who had returned to their communities of origin and animated the revival of their tradition of Andean agriculture and governance. The NACAs were formed to provide accompaniment to communities in their cultural affirmation. PRATEC encouraged their autonomy both from the administrative and financial points of view. The annual course provided not only the formation of the NACAs' personnel but was also a space of reflection and actualization of what was being learned in the accompaniment of the Andean Amazonian communities of nurturers of the diversity of plants and animals. There has been a constant feedback
between the course and the projects. Participants of the early classes have accompanied the course to continue their reflections on what they were learning in the field helping nurture the new course participants. At the same time the course provided space for reflection on the place of local efforts in the global context of alternatives to development based on the wisdom of our Andean Amazonian communities.

A program for the *in situ* conservation of native cultivated plants and their wild relatives, originating in Peru as world center of biological diversity, started in January 2001 with PRATEC coordinating a network of ten NACAs. The program results attest to the existence of an extraordinary repository of biological diversity in the Peruvian Andes and Amazonia and the inextricable link between this diversity and that of the communities of Andean Amazonian nurturers of biodiversity. The program documented the traditional knowledge on the nurturance of native plants and wild relatives, including the governance systems that promoted the regeneration of agrobiodiversity. What has become clear from our conversations with community elders throughout the Andes since 2000 is that the school has been instrumental in furthering generalized loss of respect in the communities: towards nature subverting its ways and towards deities to which rituals had been neglected and among themselves contesting the respect due to traditional authorities. When asked if the school should help promote the urban kind of knowledge in the rural areas or their own knowledge, the answer was: *Iskay Yachay* (both kinds of knowledge, in the Quechua language) or *Paya Yatiwi* (in Aymara). There seemed to be a radical demand for cultural diversity.⁶

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UniVida: The university for life

In our lands it is a common experience to meet very capable people with no academic formation. For various reasons, formal respectability had eluded them in making their life according to their calling. When asked where they acquired their marvellous skills, they would respond that they ‘did it in the University of Life’. Be it in the handicrafts, agriculture, industry, cooking, music and dance, sciences or techniques, life demanded of them to be canchis oficio, to exercise the community’s seven skills. We have learned that it is not a quantitative matter, ‘seven’ could mean three or eleven: they are the skills that helped you to ‘pass life’, to be able to be in the minds of the community when something was to get done. To ‘pass life’ requires the attitude of someone who is ready to ‘command by obeying’ in the telling Zapatista expression.

UniVida was prompted by demands of the young Quechua community members in the Upper Amazon region of San Martin, eager to form themselves in the affirmation of their traditional culture while opening themselves to learning from a world characterized by cultural diversity. They feel that the present demands the acquisition of a diversity of skills and knowledge based on their own culture. Inspired by Mexico’s Uniterra or Earth University, UniVida provides a space where teachers and learners meet. No bureaucracy, classrooms, supervisors are present; only those who have a taste for sharing what they know and those who want to acquire a skill that the community values in workshops, chacras (cultivated fields), forests and rivers. Learning happens when one does what one wants to learn from someone that guides the hand, not ‘putting chains to the spirit, but holding a hand’, as Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentinian writer, expressed it.

UniVida is not created to institutionalize the spontaneous
forms of learning in life, nor for schooling or deschooling society, but to accompany the existing urban and rural communities’ initiatives strengthening the relationships of those who want to learn and those willing to teach in a personal, disinterested relationship. UniVida sees itself as an indigenous project. The characteristics of a good community member are embodied in Gustavo Esteva’s account of a XVIII century Quechua leader Juan Chiles as a wise man who knew how to unknot the Quechua language to plow using a cord (labrar a cordel). This expression means that one should know the web of life and unknot it, communicating with other peoples through the Quechua language; should know the ideas, laws, and thought of other peoples; and should know how to do things well, rightly, and so that it is useful for life.

UniVida is an agrocentric proposal, making of indigenous peasant nurturance of the diversity of plants, animals, and ecosystems, the privileged space for life and learning. It reaffirms the vocation of these lands for agriculture and the priority that rural life should have in the understanding of good living in the planet. By focusing in the chacra UniVida opens up to the diversity of options of good living making of Iskay Yachay / Paya Yatiwi an educational reality.

Schools for living diversity

In UniVida, school does not mean classrooms. The schools for living diversity are places for the regeneration of the modes of thought, action and innovation of the Andean Amazonian peoples and for acquainting students with other cultures. They are ‘spaces for intercultural confidence’ or places for intercultural mutual nurturance. Their objectives
are: to affirm community youth in their own cultural values, by reflecting on their role in the nurturance of the Andean Amazonian territories and the cultures they shelter; to provide the space for the understanding from their position as young community members of the challenges brought about by modernization of the Andean Amazonian region; and to recreate *in situ* an experience of intercultural relations with young people from other cultures.\(^8\)

Three such schools have been designed thus far: the school of biodiversity and food sufficiency, the school of community skills, and the school of intercultural dialogue. The school of biodiversity and food sufficiency takes place as visits to communities, short or extended stays in forests and by rivers. It is learning by doing in forests, rivers, and *chacras*. It is oriented to experiencing biodiversity and the local indigenous cosmovision as lived by the organizations of women and elders, nurturers of *chacra*, rivers and forests. Four kinds of activities take place in this school: the learning

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8. The ‘spaces of intercultural confidence’ (ECI), in contrast to iatrogenic spaces that generate distrust, fear, disease and distance, are places where people – in this case, youth, teachers and parents – that belong to different cultures promote intercultural relationships finding in them a hospitable environment where affection and confidence, promote the development of skills and attitudes that belong to their original culture and, at the same time, invite them to opening up in their desire for getting to know, understanding and appreciating the forms and codes of another culture. For ECIs to exist, an attitude of mutual nurturance is crucial in such a way that all feel being nurtured and respected. Such an environment allows one to have confidence, so that one opens her heart to others and vice versa. In these spaces, children are at ease because they feel that there is cultural continuity between their knowledge and that of others. There also the tongue and the body acquire a relaxed rhythm and tone. An ECI is above all, an environment of respect and consideration for what is our own and what is foreign. Then what one does there, be it a technique or the method for the transmission of contents, is a matter of agreement between those who learn and those who teach.
by living the biodiversity in forest and *chacra*, the practice of hunting understood as trimming the forest, the trimming of the river by fishing and the learning about medicinal plants and the spirits of the forest.

The school of community skills (crafts) is offered under the modality of workshops conducted by elders, men and women in the local skills: medicine, weaving, pottery, basket weaving, cooking, music, singing and dancing. It takes place in the community, the forest and other appropriate places where the *yachaq* or community elders gather to share their knowledge with the young generations. Workshops invite to hand-on experience, connecting the young with the elders with the purpose of developing the manual skills of the young, to deepen the intergenerational exchange, and to produce culturally useful things for the communities. The school for intercultural dialogue is oriented to generate a space of reflection on the Andean Amazonian cultures and peoples, and the role that the Andean Amazonian young community members have in the maintenance of ecological harmony, particularly the relationship of respect between humans and nature. The purpose of the school is to affirm the young in their culture while stimulating their understanding of globalization and its challenges to attain community’s good living.

Intercultural dialogues take place in a meeting center, schools or places appropriate for reflective dialogue. It consists of three modules: Andean Amazonian culture and agriculture; the cultural specificity of indigenous youth in the maintenance of ecological balance; and the effects of extractive industries on indigenous populations and territories, and the rights and duties of indigenous peoples and Earth Jurisprudence. Contents are developed through group discussion, lectures, presentations, visioning audiovisual material, and plenary sessions.
The ‘stays for intercultural learning’ constitute a modality of learning by living for urban and rural young people based on the relationship of intergenerational respect between yachaq and youth. They take place in the chacra, the forests, the rivers and lakes, and in the communities where members of different generations meet to learn the peasant crafts and the secrets of conserving biodiversity. In general, those who learn stay in the home of the yachaq. This is the privileged modality in the schools of biodiversity and crafts.

Workshops for intercultural learning constitute a privileged modality in the school for intercultural dialogue. It includes a sequence of interaction that generally starts with a short presentation on the proposed subject, a previous reading of summaries, video presentation, group work and plenaries to present the results of the group work and debate. The use of audiovisual material is privileged. Readings are kept short – not exceeding two pages – but non-trivial, with a format combining written material with drawings and graphs to make the text meaningful in an oral tradition. Two functions for the written material are: the familiarization of the young with the official language – Spanish – in which dialogue with state and corporations are being carried out; and to meet the communities’ demand that the young must be familiar with two kinds of knowledge: their own and the official one taught at schools. Familiarity with the modern requires mastery of the written word. Analysis of selected texts is done in workshops where youth recreate the intercultural dialogue with others. Enacting the texts is a presently privileged way of doing it. Our brief experience thus far attests the young people’s ability to elaborate dialogues on diverse subjects with a pertinent intercultural content.

The three schools (crafts, biodiversity and intercultural dialogue) are closely interwoven. In the schools of crafts and biodiversity, one learns by doing but at the same time learning
offers examples for the reflection on cosmovisions that takes place in the IC school. Theory and practice go along together in a relationship of conversation. The schools lead to a UniVida diploma as ‘intercultural promoter’ (or ‘conmoter’ in Gustavo Esteva’s expression⁹). It is expected that the initiatives of youth organizations in their regions may modify the present course of their participation in the regeneration of nature in two aspects: in the affirmation of their identity as indigenous peoples and peasant communities; and in the contents of their demands as ethnic groups in dealing with the state and corporations. The objective is to influence on the regional and national public policies regarding rural youth and on the destinies of indigenous and peasant communities in the Andes and Amazonia. However, and independently of these impacts, what is crucial in UniVida is the regeneration of the human communities in consonance with the rhythms of nature, and the role that elders have in the regenerative dynamics of the peoples of primordial culture.

The way ahead: Making wisdom walk

The regional program Titikaka (2008–10) named after the region around Titikaka Lake in the border between Bolivia and Peru is oriented to the recovery of the intercommunity relationships that wove the federation among the communities that settled around the sacred Titikaka Lake. The region is recognized as the one with the highest agrobiodiversity on the planet both in terms of species diversity and intraspecific variability of cultivated plants. This diversity is closely

interlinked with cultural diversity. They go together with a millenary culture of nurturance of this agrobiodiversity, embodied in communities of its peasant nurturers. They are ancestors of the present *Suma Uta* network, bearers of an ancient knowledge that secures the sustainable enjoyment of such agrobiodiversity. The program's general objective is to revitalize the multiple and changing paths that seeds have followed in the Peru-Bolivia altiplano since times immemorial carried by communities of nurturers of agrobiodiversity that have exchanged visits weaving harmonious ways of living in their places while learning from each other. Succinctly expressed, the program concept is 'Making wisdom walk'.

It is the cosmovision of affection and respect between all entities in the local world or *pacha* that conserves agrobiodiversity. The loss of a cultivar is, according to *campesino* testimonies, due to the lack of affection and respect towards the seeds. This feeling of not being cared for makes them look for other more welcoming places, where they are well received. The local space of seed regeneration is the *ayllu*, the Andean extended family that includes deities and natural entities along with the human community living in a locality. This is a space of affection and respect that is nurtured in ritual conversation. The organicity of this dynamics is expressed in the system of traditional authorities of the *chacra* or cultivated field and the *sallqa* or wild giving expression to local forms of governance for keeping the harmony of the *pacha* or locality. The extension of this organicity to other places follows the seed paths, which are, viewed over time, ritual regions where seeds nurture the communities and are nurtured by them. Within these temporarily delimited ritual

spaces a dynamic order is established in which local governance is exercised with affection and respect.

The connections effected by walking the seed paths result in a living web made by the visits that the communities from different *pachas* exchange in the course of the agricultural cycle. They traverse these paths carrying their seeds and their knowledge and bringing back the knowledge of the host community to be recreated at home. Characteristic of promising processes is that the *yachaqs* of the participating communities undertake the commitments of a process of cultural affirmation, in particular and foremost, the recovery of their governance system based on the traditional conception of authority. In such processes, skilled cultural mediators accompany the process of cultural affirmation in the communities and promote the interlinkage of communities. Moreover, external resources are made available to the community groups involved to facilitate the recreation of previously existing customs no longer practiced in the community but proved vitally important in host communities.

The program rests on the conviction that the wisdom underlying the Andean nurturance of plants, animals, and the local landscape as expressed in the communal governance system has a planetary reach and its exploration may provide valuable suggestions regarding the achievement of good living elsewhere. Such wisdom is still vital and has been maintained in spite of colonization that in its latter incarnation took the form of attempts at modernizing agriculture through the application of technical innovations during the past half-century. The program is based on the wisdom of the peasant communities, bearers of the millenary Andean cosmovision whose permanence is a guarantee of sustainability. Also, the agrobiodiversity found in the *chacras*, or cultivated fields of the peasant communities, is proof of the pertinence of such knowledge in providing an exemplary resilient way of life.
What has become clear from PRATEC’s process since its beginning of collecting traditional community practices in the Andes, and the inception of the Course on Andean Peasant Agriculture in 1990, is its intellectual character. At first it took the form of developing a coherent discourse on the Andean cosmovision based on the testimonies of its bearers; the peasant nurturers of agrobiodiversity. This endeavor was necessary for us, technical people trained in the respect of disciplinary pertinence, since the practices could not be understood as techniques by themselves but within the context of a life world. They involved the whole community life, and this was as diverse as communities exist. Very early on, this implied the simultaneous suspension of: the division of intellectual areas of expertise based on the rigorous practice of disciplines. This was understood as a process of deprofessionalization; and the dominance of the scientific method as the sole criterion of academic rigor which amounted to a decolonization of the mind. This led to the development of the contents pertinent to the cultural affirmation of the Andean Amazonian peoples but deferred the question of doing it in equivalence and conversation with the Western technoscientific tradition.

It is no longer possible to continue without taking on this crucial question. Iskay Yachay/Paya Yatiwi, the communities’ radical demand for cultural diversity means the nurturance of two kinds of knowledge. The hopeful side of the challenge is that the yachaqs are not saying: ‘you technical experts solve this for us’. They are doing their own dealing with it daily in the many forms that colonization in the garb of globalization takes in our lands. The identification of the root cause of the climate crisis as the loss of respect towards nature, deities and among humans is one example of their approach to setting up an intellectual agenda. For us, it is an invitation to go back to basics, to debating the uncontested ideals of modernity by
reminding ourselves of the meaning of good living for each culture while facing a global challenge that calls for respecting and nurturing diversity. It is an invitation for a decolonizing attitude that accepts the place of the intellectual exercise in a holistic undertaking.

The climate crisis appears to be a wonderful opportunity to see Iskay Yachay/Paya Yatiwi in action. Technoscience is able to say what we have been doing that is not right and should not do, but local or traditional knowledge is saying what the root driver of the situation is and suggesting what should be done to revert it. Building bridges between levels (global to local) and epistemologies is the formidable academic challenge for accompanists. And yet, that will not be enough. The specific question for us is whether we will give up our part of academic imperialism that five centuries ago made Erasmus of Rotterdam refer to professors in the harshest words: “almost all professors of the arts and sciences are egregiously conceited, and derive their happiness from their conceit”.11