Another University is Possible: Towards an Idea of Meridian University

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Abstract: Worldwide university politics take for granted the primacy of Global-Northern paradigm. In the last decades, Higher Education policies have been shaped by global devices of neoliberal governance, such as the Competitiveness Global Index elaborated by the World Economic Forum. We examine the ever encroaching HE evaluation policies and illustrate how, in the framework of the current "Evaluative State", university has been rebuilt according to the priorities of the "neoliberal market agenda". What is at stake is a "new spirit of evaluation" that mirrors the current "new spirit of capitalism". Opposite to the neutral and disembodied models of "ideal-academic", which treat knowledge as a Northern, white, gendered, middle class monopoly, we argue that "academic quality" displays embedded/embodied features devoid of universalistic issues. Taking inspiration from Raewyn Connell (2019), we propose "another possible university", appointed with less strict epistemic instances, to rethink Higher Education in terms of some fresh "breaking" ideas: "Meridian thought" (Cassano, 1996), "slowness" (Berg & Seeber, 2016), "multi-versity" (Braidotti, 2013), "subversity" (De Sousa Santos, 2018), "decolonization" (Mbembe, 2016), "deparochialization of research" (Appadurai, 2013).

Keywords: higher education, southern theory, evaluation, global competitiveness indexes, meridian thought

1. Introduction

Higher Education (HE) seems to be currently affected by typical corporate-style management contradictions and flaws of. It is no accident that today HE is frequently analysed in negative and even pathological terms, for example in terms of "ruins" (Readings, 1996), "last professors" especially in the humanities (Donoghue, 2008), "fall of the faculty" (Ginsberg, 2011), "sickness" (de Gaulejac, 2012), "toxicity" (Smyth, 2017), and even "death" of university (Eagleton, 2015).

At the same time, critical voices are multiplying against the "Westernized University model". Those who call for the "decolonization of the University" (Tamdgidi, 2012; Alvares & Faruqi, 2014; Grosfoguel, Hernández & Rosen Velásquez, 2016; Mbembe, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Zondi, 2016; Bhambra, Gebrial & Nişancioğlu, 2018), affirm the need for a non-Eurocentric paradigm and a recovery and enhancement of the epistemological diversity of the world (de Sousa Santos, 2014; 2018). These voices are asking for a re-founding of the University consistent with this assumption, i.e. situationally grounded, committed and polyphonic (de Sousa Santos, 2017; Mayo, 2019).

Within this critical context, the perspectives of the so-called "Southern theory" (Connell, 2007) have also recently been explored in order to deal with the University's crisis and propose its "radical change" (Connell, 2019) by deconstructing and reframing the university as institution and eventually finding "exit strategies" to overcome its flaws. Today, HE is one of the sectors where the economic, social, cultural and even anthropological divide is mostly concentrated and clearly visible at both inter-national and intra-national[1] level. In her latest influential book Raewyn Connell claims that the university has become a fully-fledged "machine of privileges", claiming that "once upon a time, bishops and kings provided their societies with an ideology of hierarchy. Now, the university system does" (Connell, 2019, p. 105). Our analysis moves from the recognition of the Global-Northern nature of worldwide university politics. We highlight how, over recent decades, the main academic policies have been strongly reshaped by global devices of neoliberal governance, such as the Competitiveness Global Index elaborated by the World Economic Forum or international university rankings (Hazelkorn, 2015; Bouchard et al., 2015). As we are living ever more in an "Evaluative State"[2], evaluation is a viable standpoint to show how HE

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[1] See Viesti (2016 and 2018) about the academic divide in Italy.
[2] "The Evaluative State today is the central construct in the relationship between the university and society. In effect, it ascertains how far the former has met the priorities the latter wishes to be reflected in the nation's provision for higher learning. It also represents the termination with extreme prejudice of what was presented earlier as the historic 'concordat' between higher education and society in Western Europe, for whilst the earlier concordat was grounded in the state's acting as protector of the university, the Evaluative State re-

has been "restructured" according to the priorities of the "neoliberal market agenda" (Connell, 2019, p. 9). Looking at this specific dimension, we focus on how the recent HE changes are carrying out the process that Gilles Deleuze depicted as "the progressive and dispersed installation of a new system of domination" (Deleuze, 1990, p. 7), a process which unfolds through "continuous forms of control, and the effect on the school of perpetual training, the corresponding abandonment of all university research, the introduction of the 'corporation' at all levels of schooling" (*ibidem*).What is at stake is a real "new spirit of evaluation" (Barats, Bouchard & Haakenstad, 2018) reflecting the "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999) over the last years. Our argument then moves to exposing the universalistic paradigm of academic quality centred on the apparently neutral and disembodied model of the "ideal-academic" as Northern, white, gendered, and middle class.

We will try to dismantle the hegemonic universalism of the Global Northern dominant model of the university that sees other possible models only as unfinished forms which have to be disciplined and punished if they try to resist the dominant model's supposed "civilizing" mission. This means imposing a unique and universal "unit of measure", promoting a sterile mono-culture that, instead of levelling inequalities, risks amplifying them while erasing the spontaneous richness, vitality and creativity of cultural multiplicity. Competition rewards hyper-conformity insofar as it measures only one parameter. On the contrary, we believe that in order to defend and promote the heuristic fecundity of scientific investigation the university of the future should be intrinsically plural and non-competitive.

In the final section we take up Connell's challenge, and provide suggestions illustrating what may be considered a "good university" which we will call the "Meridian University". As Italians we think that the Mediterranean, where different peoples confront each other across a shared sea, can give dignity back to the South. "Meridian thought" (Cassano, 2005) can, above all, point towards a reformulation of the South's self-image: no longer a degraded periphery of the empire, but a new, authentically Mediterranean centre with rich and multiple identities.

In conclusion, we propose a "Meridian University" because we believe that universities should abandon any universalistic, disembodied and apparently neutral paradigm and embrace an open and explicitly context embedded "situated" model.

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states the role of the state primarily as the protector of society's interests – economic, social and developmental – vis-à-vis the university. To make no finer point, having resigned its historic role as the 'guardian of learning' the (Evaluative) State now acts as the 'overseer of higher education for the Market'" (Neave, 2012, p. 49).

Without any claim to thoroughness, or systematic exposition, we have referenced a wide range of authors to sketch the outlines of a new and innovative idea of university.

Our proposal is not a nostalgic defence of a traditional and anti-modern model of university, nor is the idea of a "Meridian University" utopian or revisionist. On the contrary, our reflections move from the will to defend the multiplicity of different multi-versities against the claim of the "winners" to stifle this multiplicity in their uni-versity of privilege.

2. The ranking power as game changer in worldwide HE

In the global economy of knowledge the academic divide traditionally arises as an unequal division of labour between "Northern theory and Southern data", namely between the imperial metropole "where data were accumulated, classified and published" (Connell, 2019, p. 75) and the colonies, generally used as "a vast data mine" to extract universalizing knowledge: "Universities in other regions generally follow US and European definition of disciplines, research methods and form of publication; their curricula and textbooks are often modelled on those in Northern universities" (ivi, p. 76).

However, the success of this model is also the reason why it can no longer work as before. The desire to produce universalizing knowledge has unleashed a struggle for academic excellence, giving rise to a competition-driven homologation rather than valorising different capabilities and enacting knowledge pluralism across the world (Nussbaum, 2011). As significant example in this regard is the first challenge to the Northern/Southern knowledge dualism which was carried out by China – a newcomer among global superpowers – for empowering its research system and reaching higher levels of academic leadership. The *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (ARWU) of Shanghai was launched in 2003 to overturn the division between the active and passive agents of research-based knowledge but ended up consolidating the rules and quality standards laid down in Northern universities.

Contrary to the well-known quotation according to which not everything that counts can be counted, the rankings system ends up legitimizing the opposite principle, namely that only that which can be counted, really counts. Because of worldwide HE "rankization", hierarchical differences result and, while equality is promoted, real inequalities are legitimated. Hence, the challenge to the Northern hegemony in HE is to produce new apparatuses of scientific evaluation that reduce differences of quality to variations in quantity resulting in the "coloniality" of knowledge being restated in different forms, and the leading status of Northern universities being maintained, reinforced and legitimized.

Since 1979, the World Economic Forum (WEF) (then named the European Management Forum) has published its *Global Competitiveness Report* to measure and rank the "competitiveness" of European countries. It was a first step towards the design of the "new way of world" (Dardot, Laval, 2009) in neoliberal society. The Competitiveness Global Index (CGI) consists of twelve pillars, of which the 12th, "R&D Innovation", is particularly interesting for the purposes of our discourse about HE because it focuses on issues such as "Quality of scientific research institutions" (12.02), "University-industry collaboration in R&D" (12.04) and "Availability of scientists and engineers" (12.06). As we can read in the report:

> Innovation is particularly important for economies as they approach the frontiers of knowledge, and the possibility of generating more value by merely integrating and adapting exogenous technologies tends to disappear. In these economies, firms must design and develop cutting-edge products and processes to maintain a competitive edge and move toward even higher value-added activities. This progression requires an environment that is conducive to innovative activity and supported by both the public and the private sectors. In particular, it means sufficient investment in research and development (R&D), especially by the private sector; the presence of high-quality scientific research institutions that can generate the basic knowledge needed to build the new technologies; extensive collaboration in research and technological developments between universities and industry; and the protection of intellectual property (Schwab et al. 2017, p. 319).

This brief presentation offers all the elements of a certain type of narrative oriented towards the global North framework, basically concealed under the cover of a technical and universalistic discourse of wealth. These include: globalization as an opportunity to integrate exogenous technologies in order to generate more value; a social environment favourable to market innovation; a deep link between HE and industry to give preference to the economic and technical impact of knowledge, the unquestioned primacy of STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) while all but eliminating any reference to the social sciences and humanities; and, above all, the self-evident value of the competition ethos.

By exploring the sense of "metric power", David Beer argues that "to encourage certain behaviours, practices, or actions, a suitable metric is needed to guide and provoke people towards a desired outcome. This is to try to anticipate the responses to metrics and to adapt them accordingly, so that they are gamed in desirable ways" (Beer, 2016, p. 153).

Particularly, WEF has prioritized the adoption and expansion of entrepreneurship principles to all domains of life, including education and scientific research, which traditionally have little to do with them. Even now,

the basic assumption, supporting this kind of across the board surveying, is that social systems must support market functioning (Davies, 2014). All this, contrary to expectations that the market, as well as private ownership, must be subordinated to purposes of social wealth and public interest, as enshrined, for example, in the Italian Constitution (art. 41)[3]. Thus, market competition has become the "site of veridiction" (Foucault, 2004) for the neoliberal governance in Europe, and its metrics act as the actual truth-making device in the above mentioned "society of control" (Deleuze, 1990).Today, the CGI, drawn up by WEF, is one of the governmental apparatuses through which competition can be achieved and spread throughout the social world. It is very well-suited for the features of a "managerial mode of domination" (Boltanski, 2009) aimed at implementing a top-down process of socio-economic changes by using the soft power of evidence-based benchmarking data[4]. In other words, the CGI is generally used to impose the "strategies" of the central power on the "tactics" of ordinary citizen in everyday life (de Certeau, 1980), generalizing the "seeing like a State" (Scott, 1998), i.e. a set of mechanism ensuring the synoptic readability of the social world both from above and from the outside, at the expense of the points of view of people who live there and inhabit it.The development of a massive "metricization" of life is a springboard to enact an ambitious process of internal colonization upon society, intended to promote global North standards, priorities and values. In fact, the CGI defines not only what is allowed, but also shapes what may be thought as possible and imagined as desirable within the mental frameworks of international political agendas. The inescapable force of so-called "capitalist realism" (Fisher, 2009) rests largely upon pillars such as this governmental device.

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[3] "Private economic initiative is free. It cannot take place in contrast with social utility or in such a way as to damage safety, freedom and human dignity. The law determines the appropriate programs and controls so that public and private economic activity can be addressed and coordinated for social purposes".

[4] The pressure put by the soft power of benchmarking on individuals and institutions epitomizes the current social change, and effectively illustrates its new art of government. "Mobilizing, motivating, 'inducing to do': benchmarking transforms the agents into 'ascetics of performance'. Some resign themselves, others refuse, but they are all engaged - in one way or another - in technologies of 'governing the self', that inspire a culture result by means of indicators, a ranking-driven competitive spirit, an appetite of 'best practices' through indefinite cycles of comparative assessment" (Bruno & Didier, 2013, p. 13). The devices stimulating performances by benchmarking not only undermine the activities of workers and pervert their professional autonomy (Vidaillet, 2013), but they determine a radical transformation of *State*, which is no longer something *stable* but tends to assume the role of what becomes and which, in turn, pushes to becoming: "it is no longer, and it has to be no longer the instance that *establishes* and which endures - in a word, which is, as its etymology indicates - but a dynamic entity aligned to an ever changing society in perpetual motion" (Bruno & Didier, 2013, p. 11).

Rankings both measure and create a sense of normality in the social world, because the social world, unlike the natural world, reacts to these metrics and becomes part of the functioning of ordinary life itself, measured by the same metrics. A typical condition of "double hermeneutic" emerges in the relation between the power of rankings and the reactivity of social life (Espeland & Sauder, 2007). To paraphrase Anthony Giddens:

> The development of [metrics-based knowledge] is parasitical upon lay agents' concepts; on the other hand, notions coined in the [categories of the metrics] routinely re-enter the universe of actions they were initially formulated to describe or account for. But it does not lead in a direct way to a transparent social world. *[Metrics-based knowledge] spirals in and out of the universe of social life, reconstructing both itself and that universe as an integral part of that process*» (Giddens, 1990, pp. 15-16).

This phenomenon occurs systematically in academic environments. As Wendy Brown pointed out, "broadly accessible and affordable higher education is one of the great casualties of neoliberalism's ascendance in the Euro-Atlantic world" (Brown, 2015, p. 175). Indeed, even the self-government of scholars is now being distorted under the influence of academic entrepreneurship and perpetual alertness to business opportunities: "the best university scholars are characterized as entrepreneurial and investment savvy, not simply by obtaining grants or fellowships, but by generating new projects and publications from old research, calculating publication and presentation venues, and circulating themselves and their work according to what will enhance their value" (Brown, 2015, pp. 36-37). Over the last years a real "metric tide" (Wilsdon et al., 2015) has affected HE through the flooding of rankings.[5] These rankings use their specific methodology, criteria and indicators, which are not always clear, but often value-laden, as well as methodologically arbitrary and controversial (Marginson, 2014). As is well-known, according to the so-called Thomas theorem, a false collective perception becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy since it becomes true because the individuals believe that it will occur. Hence, university rankings (as do horoscopes) produce transformations and distortions that "imbalance" the HE policies (McNay, 2016), and can negatively impact the lives of university students, families and, in particular, faculties members.

Undoubtedly, "the highest-ranking universities of the global North [are only the most] recent development in a long historical continuity" of the university capitalism (de Sousa Santos, 2018, p. 272). Nevertheless, "in the

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[5] Not only by the rankings about "R&D Innovation" set out in CGI, but especially by the university rankings such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) of Shanghai since 2003, the Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings since 2004 and Times Higher Education World University Rankings since 2010.

case of the lower-ranking universities, and particularly the universities of the global South, the new university capitalism represents a significant break with the past and, as regards the future, almost a death foretold" (*ibidem*). Not surprisingly, Ellen Hazelkorn (2015) considers university rankings as crucial game changers in the HE current policies because they profoundly affected the meaning, the role and even the functioning of the university today. These classifications function as a barometer of international competitiveness, and this has clear geopolitical implications. Hence, imuch of the current debates, and national policies dealing with quality in the university, derive to a large extent from the reaction to international rankings, since individual countries seek direct management of this delicate and sensitive issue. Attention has systematically addressed the easiest indicators to be identified and standardized (i.e., essentially, to bibliometric data). However, this does not mean that these indicators are necessarily the most suitable and effective to account for different academic contexts within specific cultures. On the contrary, as it has been argued, "one size is unlikely to fit all: a mature research system needs a variable geometry of expert judgement, quantitative and qualitative indicators. Research assessment needs to be undertaken with due regard for context and disciplinary diversity. Academic quality is highly context-specific, and it is sensible to think in terms of research qualities, rather than striving for a single definition or measure of quality" (Wilsdon et al., 2015, p. viii).

Both scientific research, and intellectual life in general, will be evermore disciplined to comply with the highest quality standards (or alleged highest, according to the rankings). For this reason, they run the risk of being less and less exercises in imagination of the possible or symbolic activities that lead to the invention of new paths of thought.

Indeed, international rankings have inevitably exerted strong pressure on organizational and cultural HE models, and, as Ellen Hazelkorn claims, have pushed governments to the "abdication of national sovereignty and/or institutional autonomy" (2015, p. xvii). Moreover, the principle that inspires the search for academic excellence (the so-called "world-class university", Cai Liu, Wang & Cheng, 2011) is the exact same principle on which the neoliberal trickle-down dogma of wealth is based, namely, that investing more resources only in universities of excellence results in making a trickle-down of better-quality knowledge available to society. However, innovation in the industrial, cultural and scientific sectors, is generated from interactions within a network of several actors, and it is rarely the result of single companies or of single research centres, however excellent these may be.

Thus, not only do international rankings produce a single model of global research and education, but also push universities to avoid the specific social, educational and cultural needs of their territories at the national lev-

el. The flaws of these rankings from the perspective of official approval are clearly outlined by Raewyn Connell:

> All ranking systems assume that they are comparing like with like, that all universities are doing the same kind of job in the same kind of environment. That may be true of football team but it is emphatically not true of education. Nevertheless, the rankings have a powerful ideological effect. They construct a fantasy of a homogenized, corporatized world in which each university is a separate firm, competing all the others. Serving distinctive local needs counts for nothing in the rankings (Connell, 2019, p. 85).

Indeed, in HE systems that rely on competition for international rankings, faculty members are encouraged to respond to global academic elites and align themselves with the priorities of mainstream research rather than consider more local cultural issues and environmental demands. Moreover, when the allocation of public funds is linked to the quality of scientific performance, research itself will be considered as nothing more than an individual reward for previous research, i.e. as a private issue and no longer as a public good for the collective interest. Ellen Hazelkorn denounced the paradox in which all this contributes to increasingly produce universities that are "unresponsive to society" (Hazelkorn, 2015, p. xxi), while one of the goals of the evaluative State would be a university that is less self-referential and less dissociated from the social milieu.

3. Deconstructing the new spirit of evaluation

In this scenario, a "new spirit of evaluation" (Barats, Bouchard & Haakenstad, 2018) reflecting the "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999) has been developed worldwide under "academic capitalism" (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) and currently underpins the HE systems of accountability and performance-based research funding (Butler, 2010). As pointed out by the above-mentioned anthropologist James Scott, it constitutes a typical move by which the modern art of government carries out "a project of internal colonization, often glossed over, as it is in imperial rhetoric, as a 'civilizing mission': the builders of the modern nation-state do not merely describe, observe, and map; they strive to shape a people and landscape that will fit their techniques of observation" (Scott, 1998, p. 82).

In addition to the "internal colonization" in terms of academic governance, we need to consider the process of "extraversion" with regard to researcher subjectivity (Hountondji, 1997). According to the Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji, "extroversion" consists in being oriented by and towards external sources of authority. Such as, for example, African scholars, who usually travel to the United States and Europe to train, learn the

intellectual structures of the North, try to publish in Northern journals and seek international recognition. The result is that they usually do research that is less oriented towards local colleagues or society and more towards a foreign, "Northern" audience.

As pointed out by Raewyn Connell, the term "extraversion" is better suited than "academic dependency", because it "indicates not only accepting intellectual authority from the metropole, but also that this is an *active* response, a way of participating in the economy of knowledge. The response concerns the practical details of research, teaching, and academic careers, as well as conceptual frameworks" (Connell, 2019, p. 77).

The combination of "internal colonization" and subjective "extraversion" explains the adoption, over the last years, of evaluation agencies (sometime termed *QUANGOs, Quasi Autonomous Non-Governmental Organizations*), to implement devices of quality assurance in HE (for example, AERES and then HCERES in France, ANVUR in Italy, HEFCE and QAA in Great Britain, ANECA in Spain, NVAO in Holland). These evaluation agencies have assumed great importance in academic life thereby encouraging scholars to recognise them as sources of authority. It is a peculiar form of "extraversion", linked to that Hountondji describes. In fact, due to one unique model of the "Westernized University", all these agencies assume parameters of "quality" which are posited as objective, disembodied and universal. Briefly, the new spirit of evaluation has led to a strategy of internal colonization supported by market logic[6].The evaluation of research, as currently practiced by the evaluation agencies, is in fact not about the normal and necessary critical activities typical of scientific communities, since, more than knowledge, this evaluation really gives rise to a sort of "plus-knowledge"[7], concerning a form of power or, as has been argued, "a power supposed to know" (Zarka, 2009). This is obviously something new and unprecedented in scientific communities, so much so that the philosopher Claudio La Rocca has proposed to call it "neo-evaluation":

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[6] As pointed out by the philosopher Valeria Pinto, this kind of evaluation simply stands for "a practice of truth aimed at establishing administered regimes of competition, i.e., quasi-market academic regimes producing market constraints despite the absence of products and conditions specifically applicable to the market as such" (Pinto, 2012, p. 55).

[7] As highlighted by Michel Foucault (1972), behind knowledge it is worthwhile to look for "something completely different from knowledge itself. Something completely different with respect to which the knowing subject and knowledge are effects. It is something else that needs to be inventoried. What lies behind the 'form' of knowledge, the subject of knowledge, the open field of what must be known, the corpus of acquired knowledge, what lies behind all this are the power relations, are inserting forms of power that create knowledge into the game, and which, in turn, increase power itself. This is an infinite game of formation, displacement, circulation, and concentration, in which the supplements, the excesses, the strengthening of power, and the increase of knowledge, more knowing, and surplus knowledge, are unceasingly produced. This is the level of "power-knowledge"" (ivi, p. 232, our translation).

> Contemporary neo-evaluation is not the continuation by other means of traditional methods and multiple ways of assessing the quality of 'scientific' knowledge that always accompanied its production. Neo-evaluation is something specifically different, which is defined by its specific aims and realized by subjects, in principle different, and in any case subjects who are not those who are called to operate in the research itself (La Rocca, 2013, p. 75).

Of course, it follows that neo-evaluation is carried out exclusively for governmental purposes concerning the differential allocation of public funds to HE. Hence, neo-evaluation stands as "aleturgy" (Foucault, 2012) because of its pretence of alleged neutrality and objectivity. In fact, power relationships are established and maintained through a justification and naturalization of a ranking mode imbued with "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu, 1998), since it induces even those who are subordinates within a relationship of domination to understand themselves in terms of patterns and models of thought that are an internalized product of those classifications.

For Connell, most paradigms, classifications, and perspectives included in the new spirit of evaluation are, in fact, developed and "calibrated" on the white, male, middle class, global Northern academic. This "extraverted evaluation" suffers from a reductive epistemology, where the gendered, race centred, and sexualized southern contexts are reduced to a case study, and, a "non-virtuous" model to avoid (Connell, 2018). These interpretative perspectives only provide data that reaffirm or modify Northern conceptualization.

In fact, while the management of quality is increasing globally, it has shown different problematic effects, especially for the "Global South" universities (Connell, 2007).

Of course, the momentum to enhance participation in HE is laudable, but it does not seem to be informed by the decades of research into equality and social justice in the academy (Morley, 1999). Hence, gender, race and social class are often seen as background variables, rather than constructs embedded within evaluation processes and politics themselves. While titanic and expensive efforts aim to ensure quality and standards, questions also need to be formulated about whether the same forms of "measurements", justified through the "comfort of numbers", have different values and effects for different social groups coming from different global contexts (Morley, 2003).

Paradoxically, in policy discourses and associated practices, emphasis on quality, efficiency, performance and accountability have often been counterproductive in their effects, and have also been inequitable, especially along the axes of class, race, geography and gender. In fact, despite the ostensible "feminisation" and consequent democratisation of academia, new technologies of research assessment are reproducing inequalities by reconfiguring old disciplinary hierarchies into research assessment that benefit academics

from STEM fields, and, in particular, those transnationally mobile and entrepreneurial fields of study from the Global North. Ironically, as the academic profession is becoming feminised (i.e. there are more women), control over who judges quality of research is moving into Northern male-dominated, technologically managed fields, outside the academic field, that determine research standards, priorities and possibilities (Blackmore et al., 2010).

In this sense, the new spirit of evaluation is a perfect example of the modernist, rationalist, Northern, construction of the universal subject, whereby teachers, researchers, managers and learners are created as disembodied subjects, limited to cognitive, socially and geographically decontextualized entities. This emerges, for example, from the "portrait" of the "ideal academic" traced by Thornton (2013), which the author views as the model of an ideal academic constructed by new discourses of the performative university. Despite the rhetoric of the neutrality of merit, the model does not appear to be gender-neutral at all. The ideal academic is first and foremost a *Benchmark Man*: "the normative masculinist standard which favours those who are white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle class, not elderly, espousers of right-of-centre politics and a nominal mainstream religion …" (Thornton, 2013, p. 1).

In sum, the liberal myth that merit is calculable and objective resists with tenacity. The new ideal academic shows a distinctively masculinist footprint compared to the less-than-ideal academic: "humanities or social science teacher with large classes, who is more likely to be both casualised and feminized" (ivi, p. 127).

Morley (2003) argues that the act of inspection itself is saturated with gendered and colonial implications. The lack of accountability of reviewers – mainly men from Northern countries – suggests that quality audits are a one-way gaze, reminiscent of over-exposure and colonial objectification. On the one hand, in fact:

> The continuous improvement discourse is reminiscent of the cultural pressure on women in general to strive for perfection. It is like diets and exercise regimes. It also echoes another regulatory force, that is original sin. Women enter the academy as flawed and imperfect academics and they have to struggle to redeem themselves (Morley, 2003, p. 157).

On the other hand, we would add, this perspective legitimizes a mainstream idea of research that is itself colonial and gendered because it is based on an "external gaze" requiring complaisance. Like *Sherazade* in the *Arabian Nights*, academic life feeds on the production of words to please external assessors, to ensure their indulgence, and to be appreciated for what is written, researched and generated in anxiety, rather that intellectual curiosity (Morley, 1995). Complaisance of the researchers make them even less inter-

ested to the "quality" of their scientific work than giving a good impression. As pointed out by Mats Alvesson, the resulting effect is a general "triumph of emptiness", where doing something that gives a good overall impression becomes the priority:

> Such images [of quality] are independent of, or loosely linked to, what is actually happening at a more substantial level. Pseudo-events, pseudo-actions, and pseudo-structures are all example of illusion tricks. These concepts allude to the way in which activities and developed structures focus less on a substantial practice or quality (behaviour, results) than on signalling what is positive, impressive, and fascinating - or is at least legitimate and anticipated. There is a strong demonstration element, which claims to indicate substance or quality, but which is weak or non-existent and is hence misleading, at least in part. This representation is out on a limb - it is a signifier without actually signifying much" (Alvesson, 2013, p. 15).

This is a very effective and suggestive representation of all the procedures of quality evaluation: a signifier that does not really mean much, an apparently universal and neutral subject to be measured and which is deliberately constructed as a "winner" in the game of academic capitalism.

In this context, every level of responsibility is totally delegated to the individual actor, because performance is presented as virtuousness without considering otherness. Virtuousness is defined by a phantasm that "suggests" adhering to sequential stages, to the linearity of the journey, to vertical cognitive maps and to the finalization and optimization of academic times and spaces (Borrelli et al., 2018; Fassari & Spanò, 2019). Neo-evaluation imposes a stable and univocal meaning, mortifying freedom, abolishing "moments of pleasure" (Henderson et al., 2015), the desire intrinsic to the scientific *Beruf* (Weber, 1919), and promotes academic practices that privilege and encourage a "depersonalized", "disembodied" and "de-contextualised" researcher[8].

4. Another University is possible? Some suggestions

Most of the recent discussions of university reform have focused on one country at a time, usually taken from the global North (Connell, 2019). But all universities are embedded in a "global economy of knowledge" (*ibidem*) and shaped by its inequalities. As such they need to be radically rethought as a global interdependent system.

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[8] Even in order to adequately face the process of revision expected for publishing this article we had, in some way, to "veil" our individuality, our background and our positioning. This happened paradoxically even if we were proposing a topic – such as the Southern perspective – whose main objective is trying to dismantle this Northern paradigm based on the de-individualization, presumed neutrality, disembodiment, and de-contextualization of knowledge and, as a consequence, of researchers.

It is time to de-centre the "global North" as privileged producer of knowledge and try to imagine "another possible university". In her work, Raewyn Connell (2019) challenges us to reconsider the fundamentals of what universities do. Drawing on cases proposed by ground-breaking universities and educational reorganizers around the world, Connell outlines a useful vision for how our universities could become both more involving and more creative spaces, driven by social good rather than profit, and help to build better societies.

In the chapter "Universities of hope", she makes a powerful case for universities to break away from the current neoliberal business model and reject neoliberal management. She argues for the pursuit of research that is responsive to social needs and not the directives of wealthy private interests. Such research would include, for example, issues concerning global justice, war and peace, the environment and the fate of the planet, emancipating research and knowledge production from the accelerating urgency required by neoliberalism and the associated tyranny of algorithms, making universities accessible to all and not an advantaged few, and finally, creating a system that is "cooperative rather than antagonistic and competitive".

Finally, and most notably, she argues that the "good university" should be "plural" and "local": embedded in what is around it.

> No single knowledge formation exhausts the human possibilities of knowing. Societies have many needs for knowledge and generate an enormous range of temporary and local knowledge projects, as well as elaborated ones. Universities produce and hold knowledge, but also need to learn from what is around them (Connell, 2019, p. 141).

Starting from these suggestions we now propose an "exercise" in sociological imagination (Mills, 1959), imagining a university embedded in our history and territory: a "Meridian University" able to connect and strengthen the production and transmission of knowledge in and from the Mediterranean basin countries.

Since this exercise cannot lead to design a complete model of "possible good university", our imaginative effort will involve only two main levels: epistemic and organizational.

From an epistemic point of view, we do no more than provide some "food for thought", starting from the suggestions of different authors. Rather than building a real paradigm, we will argue around some central tenets of a new, possible university. We collect some "breaking ideas" from the following authors: Cassano's (2005) notion of "meridian thought"; Berg and Seeber's (2016) notion of "slowness", which challenges the culture of speed in the academy; Rosi Braidotti's (2013) reference to the need for a "multi-versity" adapted to the dynamic post-humanistic predicament; Mbembe's (2016)

claim for a "decolonization"[9] of the university, Appadurai (2001; 2013) to highlight the opportunity of a "deparochialization of research"; and the idea of "subversity" promoted by de Sousa Santos (2018). Referring to Franco Cassano's (2005) idea of "meridian thought", we propose a radical rethinking of the neoliberal university. In other words, not presenting the university as an institution of rational conquest of the world of knowledge through the reduction of knowledge to purely quantitative parameters according to a model that turns out to be perfectly in line with the process of capitalization leading to the unlimited exploitation of human and natural resources. In this sense, the reference to a meridian perspective becomes an expression of a precise political and epistemological position that calls difference as a value into question and reaffirms the importance of a "slow thought".

Challenging "the corporate ethos of speed" (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p.11), a "Meridian University" could be, in fact, a "Slow University" (Treanor, 2006), a university that thinks in a slow way, walking and not running, opposing the slow time of research to profit driven fast consumerism: "This slow thought is the only thought. The other is thought that serves to make the machine work and increase speed. It gives the illusion of being able to do so repeatedly. Slow thinking will offer shelter to the refugees of fast thinking, when the machine starts shaking more and more and no knowledge is able to stifle the tremor. Slow thinking is the oldest anti-seismic construction" (Cassano, 2005, p. 14).

From a purely quantitative perspective, legitimized by the "comfort of numbers", the entire knowledge system is equivalent to a market where any good, regardless of its intrinsic value, can be exchanged, consumed, and evaluated as a commodity. In a global, fast, quantitative and standardized logic, "difference" is usually interpreted as an unjustifiable and outrageous "delay", and the South of the world is typically accused of being a stubborn and resolute "latecomer".

The "Global North" matrix that unifies most of our universities today is probably rooted in a truly ancient history which traces back to the European "clerisy" in XV century (Burke, 2000), namely to the humanistic roots of

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[9] The notion of decolonization could be appropriate to a Mediterranean "Meridian University" referring to Michael Herzfeld's notion of "crypto-colonialism", which he uses about Greece (Herzfeld 2002). This dynamic is a claim to national independence grounded in an idiom of cultural and territorial integrity largely modelled on Western exemplars and restricted by the practical needs and intentions of the Western colonial powers. Herzfeld defines crypto-colonialism "as the curious alchemy whereby certain countries, buffer zones between the colonized lands and those yet untamed, were compelled to acquire their political independence at the expense of massive economic dependence, this relationship being articulated in the iconic guise of aggressively national culture fashioned to suit foreign models. Such countries were and are living paradoxes: they are nominally independent, but that independence comes at the price of a sometimes-humiliating form of effective dependence" (Herzfeld, 2002, pp. 900-901).

Western culture, and to its normative conception of the human itself.[10] As Rosi Braidotti pointed out, the human of Humanism is "a historical construct that became a social convention about 'human nature'" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 26). It ended up transforming a specific pattern of being human into a generalized standard, conceived as qualitatively different from sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others. In this sense, we could consider the evaluation devices currently used in HE as a long-term humanistic "systematized standard of recognizability – of Sameness – by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location" (*ibidem*). To defy this paradigm we need a new pattern of university understood as a "posthuman" community, "without steady identity or fixed unity, for a people and a multi-versity to come" (ivi, p. 181). To ensure that *research* is effectively disruptive and open to the future, and not simply *re-search*, reaffirming the authority of the past, we need to abandon the evaluation systems that reproduce the colonializing power of Sameness by judging on the basis of what is purportedly ascertained as true and relevant in the present. To really achieve "an-other university", we need, first of all, Otherness, in every sense of the word.

> A university that looks like the world of today can only be a 'multi-versity', an exploded and expanded institution that will affirm a constructive post-humanity. As such it cannot support education for the sole purpose of integration into the labour market, but also for its own sake. We do need to embrace non-profit as a key value in contemporary knowledge production, but this gratuitousness is linked to the construction of social horizons of hope and therefore it is a vote of confidence in the sheer sustainability of the future (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 184-185).

A post-humanistic and Meridian multi-versity needs autonomous thought. For a long time, the voices and the dissent of southern scholars as subalterns have been silenced in many powerful ways. Moreover, many elite intellectuals have substituted the voices of their southern colleagues and claimed to represent the subaltern. As Connell argues, "Decolonizing our gaze and history is essential, but not easy" (Connell, 2018, p. 65).

The most serious damage, in fact, which affects the universities of the southern hemisphere is assuming the validity of a single model of knowledge (techno-scientific one) of university (neoliberal one), of language (English), and of governmentality (new spirit of evaluation) etc. Paradoxically, countries that are excluded from this mono-culture end up perceiving their difference as a limit to be overcome. This is the phenomenon that Serge

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[10] However, we should not forget that we owe the institution, in 859 in Fes in Morocco, of the oldest existing, continually operating and first degree-awarding educational institution in the world, to a Moroccan woman Fatima El Fihriya (therefore not Western).

Latouche has defined as "de-culturation" (Latouche, 1989), a risky process of cultural impoverishment arising from prolonged contact – without contamination - between a dominant and a subaltern culture. For Connell, this means regressing into a new form of provincialism:

> Contrary to neoliberal doctrine, market logic does not lead to creativity and diversity. In education it normally leads to convergence on the market leader. In the university world this is a very strong effect: everyone would like to look like Harvard [...] Market pressures produces [...] provincialism – i.e. extraversion – and prevents genuine originality. The 'Bologna Process' [...] intended to make European higher education competitive with the United States, became the largest exercise in standardization that the university world has ever seen (Connell, 2019, p. 136).

In this respect, a "Meridian University" should necessarily be a "decolonized university". As outlined in the discussion from earlier paragraphs, universities today are large systems of authoritative control, standardization, gradation, accountancy, classification, credits and penalties. Moreover, through evaluation, the essence of the research profession, the very social meaning and values it is based on, are under attack: "the standard ways of measuring performance and incentives peculiar to the new management make it a terrible war machine against the forms of professional autonomy and value systems adhered to by wage-earners". (Dardot & Laval, 2009, pp. 271-272).

Achille Mbembe explicitly states that "we have to decolonize university because it is deterring students and teachers from a free pursuit of knowledge. It is substituting this goal of free pursuit of knowledge for another, the pursuit of credits. It is replacing scientific capacity and addiction to study and inquiry by salesman-like proficiency" (Mbembe, 2016, p. 30).

This also means a distancing from a dominant academic model based on a Eurocentric epistemic canon which attributes "truth" only to the Western way of knowledge production. Furthermore:

> Western epistemic traditions are traditions that claim detachment of the known from the knower. They rest on a division between mind and world, or between reason and nature as an ontological a priori. They are traditions in which the knowing subject is enclosed in itself and peeks out at a world of objects and produces supposedly objective knowledge of those objects. The knowing subject is thus able to know the world without being part of that world and he or she is by all accounts able to produce knowledge that is supposed to be universal and independent of context (ivi, pp. 32-33).

Finally, we need to remember how Arjun Appadurai highlighted the need to "deparochializing research", as it is conceived and performed in the North-

ern academic and scientific tradition. From an anthropological viewpoint, he recognizes that this mode of acquiring new knowledge "transformed Western intellectual life perhaps more completely than any other single procedural idea since the Renaissance" (Appadurai, 2013, p. 271), while at the same time pointing out its intrinsic strangeness and paradoxicality. Modern scientific research is represented as "a systematic means for discovering the not-yet-known" based on its criteria of value-freedom, replicability, controllability of sources and transparency of research protocols. However,

> (h)ow can you have a systematic means for getting to what you do not know? For example, what you do not know might be so profoundly unsystematic that systematically getting to it is logically impossible. Or it may be that your systematic way is not suited to the most important object that you do not know, but ought to be thinking about (ivi, p. 275).

Appadurai's critical attention is, above all, devoted to the essentially professional, elitist, and specialized character of research in Northern science. In its more genuine sense, research cannot be considered as only a pursuit of new knowledge for profitable economic activities (as it is now normally defined in academia) but must be recognized as the capacity to increase the one's possibility to act, inquire and be in the contemporary world, in relation to those things people need to know but do not know yet. Thus, Appadurai claims the right to research for all the people, especially on the peripheries of global world, because "to improve the capacity to document, inquire, analyse, and communicate results has a powerful effect on people's capacity to speak up as active citizens on matters that are shaping their city and their world" (Appadurai, 2013, p. 281).

Even more so, research must not be confined to a handful of capital-intensive HE institutions but must become a common asset of everyday life and democratic citizenship as a whole when seen from the perspective of the less developed countries in the South. According to Appadurai, it should be part of "capacity to aspire", understood as "the social and cultural capacity to plan, hope, desire, and achieve socially valuable goals" (ivi, p. 282).

> Without aspiration, there is no pressure to know more. And without systematic tools for gaining relevant new knowledge, aspiration degenerates into fantasy or despair. Thus, asserting the relevance of the right to research, as a human right, is not a metaphor. It is an argument for how we might revive an old idea—namely, that taking part in democratic society requires one to be informed. One can hardly be informed unless one has some ability to conduct research, however humble the question or however quotidian its inspiration. This is doubly true in a world where rapid change, new technologies, and rapid

> flows of information change the playing field for ordinary citizens every day of the week (Appadurai, 2013, p. 283).

In sum, the ability to do research at all levels is even more vital for the exercise of informed citizenship than boosting the competitiveness of countries (Musselin, 2017).

The idea of "subversity" (de Sousa Santos, 2018) is also inspired by the same requests to open the university to the needs of the social world as a whole, and in particular to ones of the subaltern social groups beyond the traditional fences of the academy. Boaventura de Sousa Santos promotes this concept as a part of a larger project of political and cultural emancipation founded upon the epistemologies of South. In his words, "there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice" (2018, p. 276). Hence, the idea that redesigning the social role of the university should proceed according to a "pedagogy and sociology of absences" aimed, first of all, to give visibility and recognition to the modes of being and knowing excluded from the dominant epistemologies of the North. The mission of subversity is to build a "polyphonic university", that exercises its commitment not just in terms of substantive contents but also in institutional and organizational terms. It does not aim

> To valorize knowledges according to abstract criteria founded on intellectual curiosity but rather different knowledges born in struggles against domination or, if not born in struggle, likely to be productively used in struggles. The aim is not to dilute time-spaces into abstract, cosmopolitan nonidentities, without space or time, without history or memory. It is rather to render different ways of knowing more porous and more aware of differences through intercultural translation. […] Given the social isolation of the university, the self-reflexivity of academics will never succeed as long as it remains indoors as a university issue to be dealt with exclusively by academics. Without external allies, non-market-oriented academics will be easily overpowered by market-oriented academics (ivi, p. 275, 279).

Being equipped with these epistemic issues also means imagining "another university" open to cooperation and collaboration. This step appears even more necessary today as southern universities are "harassed" by the request for homologation to the competitive and "Darwinian" model of the Northern university. From an organizational point of view "another university" system is cooperative rather than antagonistic and competitive, and "slow" and inclusive rather than fast and ruthless. Is a "university of hope" rather than a hopeless "privilege machine" (Connell, 2019). Whatever the level of resources, the university system should be organized for cooperation rather than competition and for collective work rather than for exacerbated individualism. In fact, "only a system organized for cooperation will allow

specialization, division of labour, regional and institutional diversity and sharing of facilities, without institutions having to fear they will lose status or money" (ivi, p. 175).

In a "Meridian University", the indifferent fluidity of the market can be countered by the slow construction of an academic self that does not accept being reduced to a number. Here it becomes clear that the rankings and parameters of the global research global market are not universal, as is currently believed, but the result of a very precise neoliberal Anglo-Saxon matrix that unifies knowledge markets on a global scale. Finally, against extreme performance, of the "empty signifier", of virtuousness without otherness, of univocal meaning, and of the "Sameness", researchers discover that their identity is intimately linked to the Other.

Hence, a "Meridian University" should try to build up research resources and challenge epistemic and economic hegemony through South/South cooperation: "there are increasingly numbers of South/South connections, in research fields, from climate to human sexuality. We [need] to draw on powerful intellectual work based on cross-fertilization (ivi, p. 166). Furthermore, the whole system of fund allocations through global competition, based on the new spirit of evaluation, is no longer working, not only in Italy, but worldwide as well. Its methods and results are flawed, as well as its government objectives and political and cultural assumptions. Moreover, the direct consequences of this model place a negative burden on the lives of those who work in it and has indirect effects on the cultural and social life of countries too. Indeed, rethinking the university also implies rethinking the allocation of public funds linked to the quality of scientific performance: "the great issues about university funding are the source, and the distribution; a good university system is marked by equality among universities" (ivi, p. 176).

Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed the perspective of the "Southern theory" (Connell, 2007) as a powerful antidote to face the global crisis of universities and to propose their "radical change" (Connell, 2019). Firstly, we analysed global rankings as crucial "game changers", that is as the key-factors that have changed the meaning and role of the university today. Rankings have inevitably exerted strong pressure on organizational and cultural models in HE, pushing the governments to the abdication of national institutional autonomy and transforming scientific research and intellectual life in general. Secondly, we conceptualised the new spirit of evaluation as a dangerous complex strategy of self-inflicted internal colonization supported by the market logic, what we discussed above with the concept of extraversion. We then

looked at the new approach to evaluation as a perfect example of the modernist, rationalist, Northern construction of the universal subject, whereby teachers, researchers, managers and learners are constructed as and reduced to a-gendered, disembodied, cognitively, socially, and geographically decontextualized entities.

Finally, we did an exercise in "sociological imagination" to describe "another possible university" equipped with different epistemic instances, according to some "breaking" ideas as: "Meridian thought" (Cassano, 2005), "slowness" (Berg & Seeber, 2016), "multi-versity" (Braidotti, 2013), "decolonization" (Mbembe, 2016), "deparochialization of research" (Appadurai, 2013), "subversity" (de Sousa Santos, 2018).

Thanks to their intellectual stimulation, we begin to see an idea of a plural, situated, embedded university, attentive to heuristic needs, slow research times, and inclusiveness in learning, intent on defending and promoting difference, respect for individuality, openness to the Other, and leading to creativity and diversity based on cross-fertilization, collaboration and cooperation.

In our view, rather than a nostalgic and revisionist closure looking at the past, the first and foremost criterion for "another" university system is its deep diversity, engaging with a whole ecology of knowledge development rather a monoculture – and with a strong aspiration towards inclusiveness and social justice. We sum up and conclude with Raewyn Connell's words:

> We need to end Northern hegemony, Southern dependency, and the marginalization of alternative knowledge formations. We need to break down race, class and caste exclusion, patriarchal privilege, and the link between universities and cultural power. Within universities, we need to end managerial control, the selling of access, the commercialization of knowledge, and the culture of lying (Connell, 2019, p. 187).

Acknowledgements

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