

Interview

Eliseo Colón Zayas on Critical Thought

Eliseo Colón Zayas is a professor at Porto Rico University and the director of international relations at ALAIC. He was interviewed by Fernando Oliveira Paulino, professor at University of Brasilia and ALAIC's board member.

-In regards to the critical thought school, could we say that there is an European approach or a Latin American one? At what levels are they different and similar (theory, method, etc.)? What are their differences?

The critical thought tradition is embedded into Europe's and Latin America's epistemology theories in search for meaning, knowledge and understanding. For me, the notion of a Latin American critical thought refers to a category which, like many others, represents the works, writings, theories and ideas of a number of intellectuals whose work seek to forge not only an understanding of Latin American societies, including their utopias and dystopias, but pursue social change and transformations. As a category, critical thought is tied with processes of modernity. Europe's long philosophical tradition comes together as the set of ideas we call Western canon, out of which much of Latin American critical thought developed. As it happened in Europe, there are various temporalities to Latin American critical thought. Europe's critical thought tradition spans from the Greco-Latin philosopher, the Medieval Latin tradition, Renaissance and Baroque thought to the founding fathers of Modernity, Descartes, Kant, Adam Smith and the Scott empiricism tradition, Hegel, Marx and Engels, the Vienna School, the Frankfurt School, Gramsci and much of the 20th century structuralist and marxist traditions, along with the Cultural Studies tradition and the French thought. Latin America's critical thought had an ongoing dialogue with the European tradition from the first decades of the 19th century to the early 20th century. The ideas of Toussaint Louverture, Bolívar and Miranda, Sarmiento, Echeverría, Alberdi, Bello and Martí proved fertile for revolutionary movements all through the 19th century. Mariátegui's marxist-indigenous tradition opened an entire new way to understand Latin American realities, while Vasconcelos, Paz and Fanón, Cardoso, Furtado and Freire, among many others, provided insights to rapid developments during the 20th century. Recently, the works of Jesús Martín Barbero, Néstor García Canclini, Aníbal Ford, Eliseo Verón, Muniz Sodré, Renato Ortiz, Rossana Reguillo, Calos Monsiváis, Alejandro Grimson, and José Joaquín Bruner have changed the way to look, to read and speak about Latin American critical thought. These researchers have changed the paradigm of Latin American critical thought with a powerful voice in the concert of international research and thought based on their own vision, while sharing methods, and fields of common interest such as sociology, anthropology, economics, linguistics, semiotics, and communication studies understood as the production, circulation and reception of signifying practice.

- How do you evaluate the relationship between Europe and Latin American researches?

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At institutional level, there is much to be done. At the personal level, researchers have been getting together in professional gatherings and meetings, which have proven beneficial for both.

- What was different in the past? What has changed? How the technology can change and help this interchange? What is the perspective of the future?

Latin American universities are more willing to work with their European counterparts. Latin American universities and research centers have to achieve full recognition from their European counterparts in order to foster and promote scientific interchange. Technology will help at a personal level, but work needs to be pursued at an institutional level.

-What can both regions learn from each other? What are the gaps and the opportunities?

Learning from each other is always an ongoing process of sharing and exchanging of ideas. Each side should avoid skepticism, which in the majority of cases is mere prejudice and resistance arising when different research and academic cultures work together.

-How do political realities impact the communication and media studies?

Critical thought in communication and media studies in Latin America has called into question the hegemonic forms of understanding the neoliberal capitalist market, the colonization of power and certain Eurocentric assumptions, while arguing for the development of democratic political forms. Research on communication and media studies bring to the forefront the social movements, especially those of the peasant, the indigenous, ethnic groups and the urban unemployed movements of the 21st century, as well as the landless workers, zapatistas and the piqueteros, class fractions, sexuality and gender issues.

On the other hand, the expansion of the European Union, the economic and financial crisis in many European countries, long term unemployment in the Eurozone, immigration, the rise of xenophobic discourses, the rise of nationalism, as well as many other social-political, cultural and economic issues during the first two decades of the 21st century have made European critical thought provide answers to problems being discussed and researched in Latin American for a long time.

-How do the economic realities impact the communication and media studies?

Economic realities cannot be discussed separate from the political reality. The current economic crisis and transformation of capital affects both regions. What can be said of the impact of the political situation in critical thought in communication and media studies applies to the economic realities since both affect democracy and the process of democratization.

-How does research produced in different languages impact the communication and media studies?

Multilingual Europe, with a plurality and diversity of national and regional languages, has taken English, with few exceptions, as the language for science and research. Bilingual Latin America, Spanish and Portuguese, has begun slowly to dismantle its distrust of English in research and science. A new and young generation of researchers has taken English as their language for scientific transfer of knowledge.

-What about the colonial heritage? What about reverse colonization?

Colonialism and neocolonialism are 19th and 20th century forms of world order; globalization and the new world order can be seen as their offspring. However, the new globalization opens the possibility of dialogic in a decentered, heterogeneous and fragmented world order which can be seen as an alternative to colonial and neocolonial domination. The new globalization allows for new boundaries, recodes, reformulations, and new linguistic and cultural transfers.

- Is it possible to compare the relationship between Europe and Latin American with other continents? What is similar? What is different?

Instead of comparing, what is important is learning from what is being done in other areas. Also, one might pay attention to the close ties and interchanges of Latin American research traditions with the United States, especially the Caribbean basin, Central America and México, and the way they have influenced communication and mass media research.

- How can IAMCR or ICA stimulate the interchange and dialogue between regional perspectives and approaches?

Latin American researchers should join both associations individually, while ALAIC should join them institutionally to promote and pursue a constant dialogue with communication and mass media researchers from diverse research traditions.