

Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity. Not to become slaves of the knowledge of others[♦]

by Lewis Gordon

Director of the Institute for the Study of Race and Social Thought and director of the Center for Afro-Jews. Professor of Philosophy at the Temple University and President of the Caribbean Philosophical Association



This University¹ was founded with a business administration program. The wisdom of his administration knew that you can not live only as a businessman. Therefore, the expansion of knowledge means that students need education not to become slaves of the knowledge of others.

Now, much of my work involves bringing to life things that are right in front of us but that we often fail to see. That's weird, isn't it? Sometimes, the things that are most obvious to us are the least visible. And I devoted my work to the implications of that insight –which includes the things we need to see across the ages. That makes my work appear very new. But I hope, as I speak with you, that my work will also be very familiar.

There is too much to cover in the topic of this meeting. So I am going to talk only about some issues. My work tends to look at three themes. First, there is the

[♦] Speech held at the Icesi University in Cali at the Third Colombian Congress of Philosophy in Cali, Colombia, October 21, 2010.

¹ Editor's note: the author refers specifically to Icesi University, where he held the conference. Which was translated into Spanish by José Miguel Terán, Ricardo Adolfo Coutin, Vladimir Rouvinski and Rafael Silva Vega, members of the Editorial Board of this publication.

question of philosophical anthropology, which addresses the question of what we are. The second is the question of freedom, which asks, what do we want to become? And the third is very technical. It is the metacritique of reason, which asks how to you justify the way we talk about what we are and want to become. If we think about this program at ICESI, this question is central to the institution, which has the responsibility to think through how to become a university that is not simply a clone, an imitation of others. It also connects to the question of the role of the social sciences and human sciences in universities. Today I will focus on the third because it is about how these different positions come together.

At the center of my talk is the question of reason. When we hear about reason, we often think that reason and rationality are the same thing. But rationality requires consistency, and if you must be consistent, all the way down the line you must be consistent with that consistency. Rationality thus leads to hyper-consistency. And now the problem: Could any of you imagine going out on a date with a maximally consistent person? Would you like to live with a hyper-rational person? You see the immediate problem. If you are too rational, you are unreasonable. And what this tells us is that reason is broader than rationality. This struggle of the relationship of reason to rationality affects much of the modern thought.

Much of modern thought is an attempt to shackle reason, to change reason to rationality. But the problem is that that collapses into unreasonability and so the struggle has been how to deal with that tension. There are other ways in which this comes about. For instance, I study philosophy, and when I was in graduate school, I noticed that many great philosophers did not like black people. Yet, some of my peers were unwilling to accept this. I had to show them the exact racist passages. Disappointed, they often dismissed those passages as either irrelevant, misunderstood, or of minor consequence. But I objected: When we study great philosophers, we are taught to obsess over every single word. So why are we suddenly expected to abandon them when they betray their author's racism? I call that phenomenon of abandonment or rationalizing away the infelicities theodicy of the text. Theodicy is involves accounting for the goodness of God when God is all-powerful. If God is all-powerful, isn't God responsible for Evil? Two classic responses to theodicy are: first, that we human beings are limited and we cannot understand God's ultimate purpose. Second, God gave us freewill, we commit evil, but God remains fine. In effect, this means: something is wrong with human beings. Now, when some of my peers and professors were arguing there was nothing with the texts but with how I was reading them, they were in effect treating the authors of the texts as gods. And that is why it is a theodicy.

So, the question emerges: Why did I see those things but they did not? The answer is because of theodicy. When one reads the author as a god, one forgets that

human beings are imperfect. Books are written by people; people make mistakes; our job as active thinkers is to understand those mistakes and improve our knowledge. The error my colleagues made was that they thought what I was arguing for was the dismissal of those texts on the basis of their racist content. As with theodicy, where God becomes impossible because of evil, the authors of those texts faced a similar disavowal. But what I was in fact saying, especially as a black person who grew up in a world that did not like black people, was that I needed to learn how to understand and respect other human beings even with their hatred. I never expected to be reading the writings of gods. I expected to read those written by people.

Now, this is part of what I am talking about today. How do we have sciences, in which there also is room for people? Some critics may ask why my response was not to get rid of philosophy. Well, I am not a philosophy nationalist. And as I speak you will see that I am committed to understanding how disciplines meet. But I think there is an important question that everyone engaged in the life of the mind must be able to answer: Why do you think? There is a world of violence, poverty, and despair all around you. But you think: Why do you think?

When some people find out that I am also a philosopher – I am not only a philosopher; I also do sociology and anthropology – they often claim to prefer the practical over the theoretical. Some people say they want experience. But there is a problem with experience. Every one of us in this room has had an experience of trying to figure out our experience. We have had an experience of something happening to us and we cannot figure out what it is or was. And what we end up doing is going and talking to someone, a friend, for example: In doing so, we are trying to understand our experience. And what we are doing there is bringing about a theory, meaning, and understanding to our experience. If we rely, however, on others to tell us what our experience is, then we become dependent on their meanings, their experiences, on them telling us what is right or wrong with our life. I call that “epistemological colonization”.

There is another type of epistemological colonization. There is colonization on the level of methods. It deals with not only colonization of what one thinks but also with how one thinks. So we find these practices alive in the scenarios of what I call disciplinary decadence. This is when a discipline turns away from what gives it life. This is what it means to decay, to die. One form of that decadence is methodological fetishism and fetishizing methods. This is where a scholar or a student may study something, work hard on it, bring it to a community of scholars, and the others are only interested in the methods. They are not interested in whether the findings or argument is true or have any bearing on reality.

The other term is disciplinary solipsism. This is when we think our discipline covers all reality. Examples of this are when a sociologist criticizes a historian for

not being sociological, when a literary theorist criticizes a sociologist for not being a literary critic, when a natural scientist comes in and say both are not being scientific.

So, what is going on? Well, let's speak of human beings. The African-American philosopher and sociologist W.B. Du Bois noticed a problem when many researchers study people of color. They ended up making the people into problems instead of studying the problem faced by the people. When their methods did not fit the lives of the people, they asked what was wrong with those people? They did not ask what was wrong with their methods. The fallacy of a Godlike approach to methods is that it is premised on the presumption that the given method already covers all reality. But human beings produce methods, and to my knowledge no human being covers all reality. This can be called the colonization of methods and there is an author who advocates a de-colonial reduction: Nelson Maldonado-Torres. He argues for the de-colonization of thought. I have a technical, ugly word or, rather, set of words for it. To respond to disciplinary decadence requires a teleological suspension of disciplinarity. What this means is to be willing to go beyond one's discipline for the sake of reality. If people do not fit one's theory or discipline, one should have to change one's theory, discipline, and method.

Some researchers in the social sciences and the humanities may think when I say this I mean interdisciplinarity, but the problem with interdisciplinarity is that each of the disciplines treats itself as complete. If they were complete, they would not have to communicate with other disciplines because they already address all reality. So, I argue for transdisciplinarity, this is where disciplines communicate for the sake of reality. This may mean creating new disciplines. Many of us forget that the disciplines we have studied did not always exist. We created them. And it is up to us to take responsibility for the knowledge we produce through them.

Two questions of transdisciplinarity bring us back to my opening remarks. One of them is social reality. In many countries, people actually do sociology but they are not interested in the social world. This is very weird. Similarly, the human sciences face the problem of human reality. Why is social reality important? Social reality brings together communication, inter-subjectivity, and collaboration. It is what it means to share a world in which evidence is needed to assess science. But the word collaboration comes from the Latin word *colabi*, which means to fall together. So what it tells us is that we depend on each other to build knowledge, but when we fail we all fall down. The question of human reality becomes even more complicated because human beings are always more than the rules we place on ourselves. If I were to tell each one of you what you will do next, you will look at me and do something else. And that is because the human world is governed by questions of freedom. But the human world is also created by human beings for their sake. Sigmund Freud put it this way: the human word creates a prosthetic god

and that prosthetic god is culture. Now, what does culture do? Well, its purpose is to alleviate sources of misery. The first is nature. Culture offers us protection from its contingencies. While reality, as that which is bigger than us, threatens our existence; culture offers us a world for us.

The second thing is our bodies. Many of you are vibrant and young now but there is the future of back pain, arthritis, and other realities of aging. In nature, this simply means dying. But with culture, we have created a world in which we can age meaningfully and fulfillingly. And the next source of misery is other people. I remember a student once came to me who lived in a coop. He said he was against privacy and wanted always to be amongst other people. I smiled, looked at him, and said: "You want Hell." In order to love human beings, we need some timeout from each other. But a complicated thing is that we always have human beings around in a symbolic world of culture we have created.

So, I give you now a short version of how culture is related to transdisciplinarity. Although many of us talk about culture all the time, what we are actually talking about are customs. Customs are part of cultures, but culture is more radical. Culture is the world of meaning. It is the dimension in which human beings live. It is a human world. And this means that culture is always reaching beyond itself, just as human beings are reaching beyond themselves, just as disciplines reach beyond themselves, and just as I argue that living thought, living ideas reach beyond themselves. So the subjects are built on culture that we must understand but not squeeze into a decadent model that turns us from reality.