The inevitability of difference in global higher education

Boston College Center for International Higher Education

*2023 Philip G. Altbach Lecture*

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**[Introductory slide – The inevitability of difference]**

Thank you . I am deeply touched by the honour of delivering this lecture. It is also a pleasure because I know many people here. Small world isn’t it, international higher education? A warm and mutually supporting community. Phil and CIHE have helped with that. Yet international higher education is also big, and ever-growing: a quarter of a billion students; many millions of faculty, administrators and other workers; three or four thousand research universities, depending on the definition, and many more institutions. Phil and CIHE have also helped with that, opening up the larger higher education world for all of us.

**[The world is always changing, emergent]**

Nothing stays the same. Some researchers see international higher education as a freeze-frame picture, susceptible to linear measures and predictions. I see an open Heraclitan ontology in which higher education and its settings are always changing, always becoming, ultimately in non linear fashion. Now the future seems more open, and more troubled. Post-1945 higher education, framed by the United States as senior partner and Europe as junior partner, is giving way to greater complexity. Worldwide power is pluralising. Differences between countries, and civilisations or ‘traditions’, are more insistent. This is the certainty in uncertainty. The inevitability of difference. This is not a bad thing, because it begins to free up the world, multiplying our vision and practice. It is difficult for Western nations and universities to share power, but global difference was always there. What has changed is that it is now obvious.

**[Geo-politics, unilateral nationalism]**

This is happening at a challenging time. Certain challenges arise where the pluralisation of power meets unilateral national interest. Consider the geo-political tensions. A rogue Russian state is devastating higher education in Ukraine and Russia. A US government determined to maintain global supremacy is transforming American engagement with China from mutual cooperation to mutual strategic threat and the decoupling of technology. The decoupling of economies and higher education may follow. China talks of a shared future. As Henry Kissinger remarked to *The Economist* recently, nothing in China’s tradition suggests a desire for world domination. But China wants respect for its civilisation and world role. It wants unchallengeable sovereignty and to shred the century of humiliation. It wants authority on its borders and in its region. This is incompatible with US hegemony, especially in Asia.

Meanwhile other nations and higher education are dragged into the vortex. Cross-border academic mobility is under pressure. Research collaboration is being over-determined by national security. AI and machine learning generate a shared set of problems but could become tools of geopolitical rivalry.

**[Higher education and its dilemmas]**

Higher education also faces existential questions at its core. Inequalities between countries have decreased, as state building and economic modernisation have spread, but neoliberal policy worsens inequalities *within* countries. This blocks widespread social mobility - and higher education is blamed. Perhaps governments focused on ‘employability’ are losing faith in education, whereby students form themselves via immersion in complex knowledges, over several years, a process more cultural than economic. Meanwhile, climate science is being ideologically undermined by big capital.

We cannot solve geo-political tensions, inequality, faltering capitalism and ecological destruction solely from higher education. Yet higher education and knowledge, and international educational cooperation, are sources of hope. We incubate critical thinking and creativity. We generate and codify new knowledge. We know technology. We foster international understanding. We can build reflexive graduate agency touched by inclusion, multiplicity and justice. We could expand epistemic diversity. Research by the Centre for Global Higher Education in eleven countries has found common support for the role of higher education in furthering public good, despite the neoliberal times. Building higher education capacity across the world is a win-win for all.

**[Philip Altbach and CIHE]**

Enter Philip G. Altbach and the Boston College Center for International Higher Education. CIHE was founded in a conviction about building higher education on a worldwide basis, especially the autonomous research university with its teaching/research nexus. CIHE is the world’s leading centre for information and discussion about higher education not just because of the acumen, energy and range of its directors, Phil, Hans, Rebecca and Gerardo, and the work of all who have spent time at the Center, but because of its foundational commitment to higher education everywhere. And also, I think, a keen understanding of and empathy for relations of power and inequality in higher education.

Phil is without question the world’s leading scholar in international higher education and has been for most of his career. You only have to look at the Google Scholar citation count, and listen to the people from all over the world who say – I have so often heard this – ‘Dr Altbach spoke at our conference *and he understood our situation*’. He understood.

In the remainder of this Lecture today I will reflect on a remarkable part of the Phil’s foundational vision, his early work on neocolonialism, in the context of the changing higher education world. I do so as a critical friend, sharing the issues and dilemmas, while seeing the terrain a bit differently. I hope you will agree that in a common field, difference is no bad thing. It is a collective resource. Diversity is more than individual rights of inclusion and more than systemic justice. When we see the world with the eyes of the other, so that the vision of the other is in conversation with our own, we learn and grow.

**[Early Phil on neocolonialism – racist map]**

Out of the vast corpus of Phil’s work, I will draw your attention to three articles. The first are two papers prior to CIHE. These studies of neocolonialism were path-breaking in Euro-American (that is, Western) higher education studies. In 1914 more than 90 per cent of the earth’s surface was occupied, controlled or shaped by Euro-American powers and Imperial Japan. This is fundamental to understanding modern higher education, and international higher education. While other scholars took Western control for granted, Phil problematised it.

**[Early Phil on neocolonialism – article titles]**

In 1971 Phil’s ‘Education and neocolonialism’ in *Teachers College Record* explains how Western powers sustain themselves in their former colonies through the shaping of education and intellectual life.

**[It would make sense to provide much of the money to scholars from developing areas]**

In the colonial period, he says, ‘indigenous cultures, in many cases highly developed, were virtually ignored by colonial educational policy’ (p. 545). After independence, ‘the political and cultural biases of Western education remain, and … impede the creation of national consciousness’. Phil discusses English and French as languages of instruction, West-subsidied textbooks, scholarships that bring students to the neo-imperial centre and focus their attention on the international scholarly community not home, subsidised institutions that are clones of foreign models, and Western teachers and advisers. Research on emerging countries is mostly done by Western scholars, who treat those countries merely as ‘mines’ for data. Local scholars should play a larger role.

**[It is only when an adequate understanding of modern neocolonialism in its many facets]**

‘Educational assistance is generally linked to an underlying political or ideological tenet’ (p.548), Phil states. He concludes by calling for equity, an end to Western domination, and recognition of global interdependence.

**[Indigenous patterns of education remain undeveloped in almost all Third World nations]**

1977 saw Phil again in *Teachers College Record* with ‘Servitude of the mind? Education, dependency, and neocolonialism’. The paper expands on the earlier discussion. There is also a new strand, a realpolitik, in which educational inequality reflects larger structures. However, the conclusion is more agentic, calling for a break from the ‘servitude of the mind’, ‘independent sources of intellectual power’ that can ‘serve indigenous needs’. Phil’s courage in making this early critique should not be forgotten. Many in the West who were disturbed by colonialism saw it as secondary, more in the past than the present. I did myself for much of my career. Phil rightly saw it as primary.

**[Research universities in developing countries]**

The third Altbach article I want to draw to your attention is the 2007 paper ‘Peripheries and centres: Research universities in developing countries’. Here Phil advocates capacity building in emerging countries, while again positioning it in a centre-periphery realpolitik.

**[While there will always be centres and peripheries]**

Research universities are rare outside the global ‘centre’ but vital. Otherwise, knowledge will remain a monopoly of the rich countries (pp. 1-2). Research universities link emerging countries to global science and scholarship and are essential to economic and social development. The article explains the how of building research universities. While ‘research universities must … function in the international language of science and scholarship’, states Phil, they should also ‘disseminate research and knowledge in local languages’ (p. 20).

But how high can emerging countries go? Most, states Phil, can at best aspire to ‘second-rank but quite distinguished’ universities on par with Indiana in the US, York in England, or Amsterdam in the Netherlands. The article was right to foreground emerging research universities. Yet it now seems somewhat pessimistic –not only about Amsterdam! - constrained by the realpolitik.

**[Frameworks used to explain inequality]**

In these papers Phil advances three explanatory frameworks for understanding global inequalities. One is neocolonialism. The other two are dependency, and centre-periphery. Phil sources his use of centre-periphery to Johann Galtung and Edward Shils. The main theorist of the model is Immanuel Wallerstein.

**[Dependency …‘is “normal” in the sense that it reflects the prevailing patterns of power]**

Phil sees dependency and the centre-periphery structure as ‘normal’, in that they reflect ‘the prevailing patterns of power and wealth in the world’ (p. 188). In that context not all Western aid is coercive or exploitative, it simply reflects this inevitable inequality. But here questions arise.

First, as Phil’s work has already shown, the key to the colonial mindset is not bad intentions, violence or unequal economic transfers. These are symptoms and not confined to colonialism.

**[The claim to Western superiority is at the roots of colonialism]**

The key to colonialism is the conviction of Western racial or cultural superiority and the ‘othering’ of the colonised. It is the claim to superiority that suborns non-Western agency and culture. From that claim all else follows: the idea that there is one path to modernisation, the Western or American path, that all must follow; the belief that Western higher education is wiser and the science more creative; the belief non-Western persons can be managed, manipulated and coerced for their own good.

Second, of the three concepts, dependency, centre-periphery and neocolonialism, only Phil’s neocolonialism provides an historicised explanation of global inequality, a causal narrative that leaves room for resistance and change. It calls up the agency and responsibility of both coloniser and colonised.

**[Centre-periphery models naturalise inequality]**

In contrast, the realpolitik ideas of dependency and centre-periphery make inequality inevitable. These are static descriptors that say nothing about cause and effect, or agency and responsibility. Using them as an explanation, rather than an illustration, entrenches global inequalities. Ironically, rather than mirroring so-called ‘natural’ inequalities, the centre-periphery model in fact naturalises the global inequalities inherited from colonialism.

In short, Phil is right about colonialism but I am less comfortable with centre-periphery. Wallerstein saw the centre-periphery structure as set in stone. He said it was very difficult to move from the periphery to the intermediate semi-periphery or to the global centre. The West would command the global centre for the foreseeable future. This implies that higher education will always rotate around an American global centre with secondary partners in Europe and Japan and outliers in Israel, Australia, etc. But the problem with judgments based on realpolitik is that Heraclitus was right. Everything changes. In higher education, the centre-periphery model is already obsolete.

**[The world is pluralising]**

Economic and political power are pluralising. The world will not return to the American hegemony of 1945 or 1995. The US is overwhelmingly dominant only in the military sphere. Large and middle-sized non-Western countries are gathering strength – not only China and India but Iran, South Korea, Brazil, Indonesia and others. It is now apparent that there are many paths to modernisation. The US retains global leadership in institutional higher education, in some fields of science, and in research norms. But more than 60 countries enrol half their young people in tertiary education and the same number of countries have self-reproducing science systems.

**[Growth of science papers in Scopus by country]**

One place to see this diversification is global science. Note that ‘global science’ refers to selected English language science, not all knowledge. It excludes other languages and traditions. The real diversity in knowledge is *much* greater than in Scopus. I use bibliometric measures here simply to show that centre-periphery has collapsed amid pluralisation.

Since 1996 global science papers have grown by more than 5 per cent per year. By joining the global networks new researchers and science countries gain access to immense resources. Growth in China, India and the rest of the world has been especially rapid. Output in China now exceeds the US. India has passed Germany, UK and Japan to become the third largest producer.

**[Established and slow growing science systems**

The next two charts make the point. They show national science output (the size of the ball); the annual growth in papers between 2000 and 2020 (the vertical axis); and national income per head (the horizontal axis). The dotted line is world average income per head. The first chart shows science systems that after 2000 grew *more slowly* than the world average rate of 5.15% per annum. These are mostly established systems in wealthier Western countries.

**[Emerging and fast growing science systems]**

The second chart show systems where science output is growing *faster* than the world average. Mostly new science powers. Some growth is spectacular – almost 20 per cent per year in Iran, almost 25 per cent in Indonesia. And look at the diversification in economic terms. Half these countries have income per head *below the world average*. Global science has spread to middle-income and some low-income countries.

**[Leading universities in science paper output]**

Now let’s look at the 16 individual universities that produced the most papers in 2017-2020. This is a size dependant measure. Surprise surprise. 11 of the 16 are in China. China has large universities but also large science. Note also Sao Paulo in Brazil in 12th position, and Korea’s Seoul National at 16th.

**[Leading universities in high citation science]**

What about highly cited science? Here the Anglophone universities still lead. In the top 16 there are eight from US, four other Anglophone and four from China. But China is rising. Five years earlier there were 12 from US and none from China. On current trends Tsinghua will soon be second to Harvard. Further, in high citation papers in physical sciences and engineering alone, Tsinghua is number one with 988 papers. MIT is the top American with 633. Ten of the leading 14 universities in those disciplines are from China, two from the US. US science has not declined. Rather, China’s science, fed by accelerated state funding, has moved up. On the other hand, in research in biomedicine and health, 11 of the first 14 universities are American and all are Anglophone.

So has an American hegemony been replaced by a US-China duopoly that is going through divorce? I don’t think so. You’ve seen the growth in newer science systems. Europe is also becoming stronger in leading science because of EU funding. There is more diversification of research capacity to come. Epistemic and organisational diversification will follow. In future there will be various fusions of Euro-American models with different indigenous elements.

**[Implications]**

What are the normative implications of all this? If we retain Phil’s anti-colonial sensibility, decentre US hegemony, and accept the inevitability of difference in an open future?

**[Decoupling with China: wrong way go back]**

I see three implications. First, decoupling be damned. Wrong way go back. We don’t have to do it in higher education, and it is imperative that all engage with higher education in China because its global importance.

But we non-Chinese people need to change how we understand China. We need to stop seeing China through Western lenses. After two years in China, John Dewey, returning to Phil’s alma mater the University of Chicago, stated that China can be understood only in terms of itself, not when using a Western frame of reference. Likewise the Harvard historian of China John Firbank states ‘Our first requirement, if we are to understand China, is to try to avoid imposing a European scale of judgment’.

There are many similarities between Chinese and American universities. Yet China will not become Western. China has a long tradition, combining Imperial scholarship and statecraft, Confucian self-cultivation, Sinic families and *guanxi*, and Western influences including Marxist-Leninism, US culture and neoliberalism. All affect higher education. When many Westerners see China they see the party-state as a subtraction from freedom. But the state, not the market, has always been central in China, and the state is productive as well as reductive. There is deep grass-roots agency and initiative in higher education, within the frame of top-down control. Paradoxical in the West but not in China.

**[Universal ‘internationalization’ is a fiction]**

Second, we should abandon the long effort to bolt down a worldwide definition of ‘internationalisation’. I refer to the Knight and related concepts, internationalisation as ‘the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension’ into post-secondary education. This now commonplace wording conceals many problems. The mantra ‘internationalisation good, globalisation bad’ is questionable geography, and inadvertently ties higher education to regressive geo-political and commercial agendas.

**[Within the contemporary context of Western dominance]**

The universalising definition also reinforces the global hierarchy. It is non-relational, focusing on qualities and activities of the self without regard for the effects on others. Hence when used in Euro-American systems, it automatically becomes Western or Northern centric. The sharpest criticism of the definition comes from the global East and global South where Western internationalisation often negates rather than enhances local agency.

**[Neo-colonialism in higher education]**

Third and finally, we should honour Phil by elevating neocolonialism to the top of our concerns. This means also focusing on racism and White supremacy; and the remedies, which are decoloniality, global equity and reparative justice.

**[Just as colonization is an ongoing practice rather than a singular event, so is decolonization]**

Coloniality and racism have been as important as nations, class and capital in shaping higher education. They are as present today as at any time in the past, though we are now more able to tackle them.

What we lack as yet in international higher education is a shared moral order and a consensus about the global common good, based in equality of respect and epistemic diversity, that can unites us across the colonial divide between the West and the rest. The essential starting point is the conscious rejection of Western superiority and coloniality.

Thank you for your attention. Like you I look forward to hearing other voices!