



The Future Today/Yesterday/Tomorrow: Visions of the Future in the Americas – International Conference at the University of Bonn 12 to 14 June, 2019

Can the future be researched?

In July 2018, we began to announce a conference with this question. The central thesis was that an understanding of the future and future-oriented actions are culturally influenced at every point in human history. The response to the call were highly varied and consistently positive. In the end, it proved to be an international and interdisciplinary three-day conference with 360 participants from the disciplines of anthropology, archaeology, history, (developmental) sociology, political science, (human) geography and linguistics. Languages spoken at the conference were English, Spanish and German.

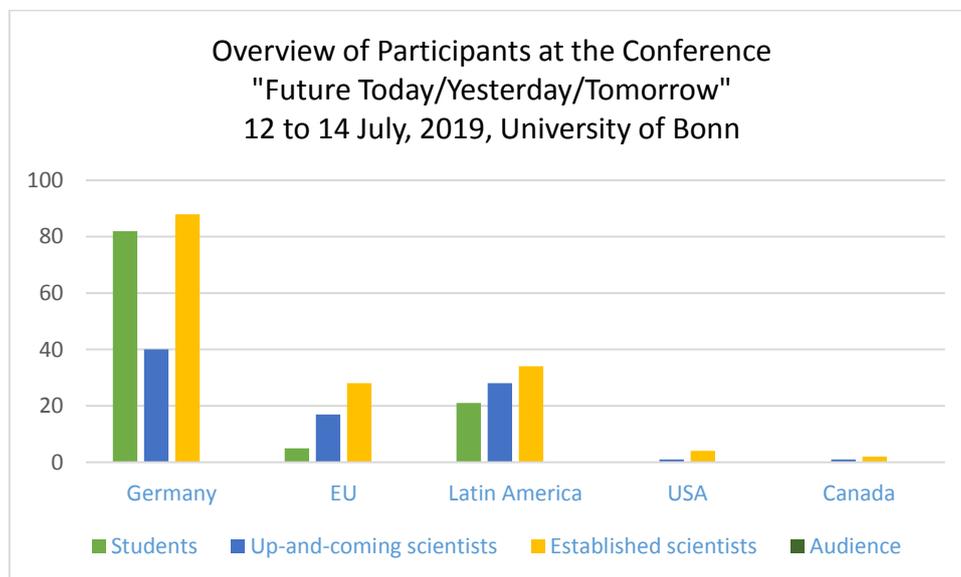


Figure 1: Distribution of participants in accordance to countries and disciplines (Table: Maria-Angelika Eckl)

Of the submitted proposals, 32 thematic panels were chosen for the conference. They were organized into five major topics so that they formed the basic structure of the event. In the following, we introduce these topics as well as the invited guest presenters.

The opening ceremony of the conference was initiated by the contributions of the University's rector, Professor Dr. Dr. h.c. Michael Hoch, and the vice-dean for research and international affairs of the faculty of philosophy, Professor Dr. Ulrich Ettinger. During the introductory panel discussion, a common relevant topic relating to 'future' already became apparent: the necessity of decolonizing current forms of research.



Figure 2: Introductory panel discussion with moderator Karoline Noack, Nicholas P. Dunning, David Jabín, Eduardo G. Neves, Genner Llanes Órtiz, Iván Velásquez Gómez, Juan Villanueva Criales, Maïke Powrozniak, Xóchitl Leyva Solano and moderator Nikolai Grube (Photo: Daniel Graña Behrens)

1. Future Perspectives: Research on decolonization or decolonizing research?

The subject of the first central topic was the dismantling of global power disparities as a principal of future international research collaborations. The question was how decolonized epistemological standards can be designed in the future. It was agreed that established paradigms of knowledge must be questioned in order to facilitate a ‘horizontal’, global dialog in the sciences in which indigenous knowledge in all of its forms is heard and recognized.

The ethnologist Genner Llanes Ortiz from Yucatán, Mexico (University of Leiden, Netherlands) emphasized the necessity of strengthening indigenous languages in order to teach indigenous epistemologies and in doing so expressed an opinion shared by many conference participants. During the conference, these issues were discussed in view of the associated challenges, such as in national and international handling of indigenous cultural heritage and the preservation of indigenous languages, for example, in the panel on “Defining Indigenous Epistemologies in Mesoamerican Research” organized by Genner Llanes Órtiz and Frauke Sachse (University of Bonn). The focus was on projects aiming to document indigenous knowledge cultures as well as the possibilities of strengthening indigenous knowledge cultures, such as in school lessons. Opportunities for the recognition of indigenous languages were specifically dealt with in Panel 23 by Catherine J. Letcher Lazo and Igor Vinogradov (both of the University of Bonn) based on current policies for the promotion of languages in universities and schools, such as dissemination through social media like Instagram and radio.

The sociologist Xóchitl Leyva Solano (CIESAS, Chiapas, Mexico) focused on other forms of knowledge organization and their research according to European and non-European standards. In a not only scientific, but also creative exchange process between presenters and audience members, power relations of language, theories and paradigms of western science were illustrated on the basis of scientific studies and artistic contributions. Their core demand was the recognition of other knowledge categories, such as the depatriarchalization and decolonization of science as well as bodies and souls.

2. The ambivalent future of European ethnographic museums: Between critical studies of provenience and the struggle for legitimization

Ethnographic museums in Europe today are faced with the task of critically researching the origin of their collections as most of the objects and documents were collected in colonial contexts and transferred to museums. This topic was introduced by two museum representatives from different regions and perspectives. Maïke Powroznik from the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich spoke of the need for the decolonization of European museums. Colonial acquisition practices had the goal of using objects to demonstrate the “primitive nature” of the societies of origin. This colonial attitude and its translation into a museum context has caused lasting damages to indigenous societies. Therefore, a correction of these colonial readings must be carried out today and in the future. The approach in Zurich strives to present these objects as archives of human knowledge and as testimony of human talents and capabilities. Juan Villanueva Criales of the Museo Nacional de Etnografía y Folklore from La Paz, Bolivia emphasized in his closing statement that the future of museums must exist in a new kind of respect: respect in the face of diverse forms of understanding of the past, respect in the form of a horizontal willingness to discuss and respect through recognition as many agents have not only a diverse interpretation, but also tension.

What the paradigm shift of museums must look like was presented and discussed in multiple panels using examples. Accordingly, the decolonization of the museum landscape on both sides of the Atlantic begins with critical research on provenience, but may not remain there. In the future, European museums must not only open their inventories to the societies of origin, but also make their current practices of collection and presentation available to scrutiny through the involvement of indigenous communities in the museal presentation of their culture.

3. Indigenous imaginaries of the future

Yolchicahua: “strengthening the heart”. With this Aztec concept, the ethnohistorian Justyna Olko (University of Warsaw, Poland) began her talk on the cross-sectional topic of “future from the indigenous perspective”. She used the poetic expression from Náhuatl in order to illustrate how the introduction of present-day Nahua speakers to their cultural heritage in the form of colonial-period documents contributes towards a strengthening of cultural identity and indigenous agency. She referenced her workshops on indigenous communities that she has held since 2015, which she understands as a possibility for the decolonization process. The task of ethnohistorical research must give indigenous people the opportunity to independently learn about the histories of their ancestors in order to establish a connection with the past and to use these strategies to develop their own individual and collective resilience.

Additional conference panels concentrated on the current state of research on indigenous future perspectives both in the colonial past and present. These included, for example, visions of the future expressed in indigenous literary and historical works of the colonial period (Panel 13), but also present-day indigenous demands for the independent use of ruins against national legislation for the protection of cultural heritage (Panel 26).

In addition to studies of indigenous societies, Claudia Rauhut and Moritz Heck took up the topic of “Afrofuturos”. In contributions on Columbia and Peru, Afro-American perspectives of the past, present and future were examined.

With the University of Bonn’s newly established research focus “Beyond Slavery and Freedom. Agency within Asymmetric Structures of Individual and Group Dependencies in Pre-modern Societies” opens a new perspective on the phenomenon of slavery in indigenous societies of the Americas. For this the ethnohistorian David Jabín (Univeristé Diderot, Paris) was invited to present his research on slavery and dependency conditions under the Yuqui, an indigenous society of Bolivia. His contribution was divided into two aspects: firstly, a look at the history of research in order to explain why the phenomenon of slavery in indigenous societies has been rationalized for such a long time and lastly, the analysis of complex social relationships between the free and unfree in the Yuqui society. The talk was followed by a panel with further examples of dependency research in pre-colonial indigenous societies as well as the debate over the history of Afro-American slaves in Cuba and Jamaica in light of museums and reparations today.

4. New approaches in the study of the past: “Future” as a broader topic for the understanding of past’s presents?

Can archaeology be a science of the future? This question was clearly answered with “yes”, as archaeological research contributes to the understanding of how human societies reacted to resource scarcity and climate change in earlier epochs. However, it must change its research structures by working much harder than before in a multidisciplinary and integrative manner by involving the natural sciences and humanities, which was argued by Nicholas P. Dunning of Cincinnati University (Ohio, USA). Dunning researches human adaptation to environmental changes through the example of water management in the settlement areas of ancient Maya societies due to overpopulation.

The conference showed how in recent years research of the past and present of hunter-gatherer societies in the Amazon region has been intensified. As a result of the politics of the current Brazilian president, this branch of research has experienced an explosion of interest that was the subject of numerous panels. In this context, the Amazon expert Eduardo G. Neves, an archaeologist of the Museo de Arqueología of the University of São Paulo in Brazil, pointed out that it is not sufficient in archaeology to simply have the newest technical analytical methods at one’s disposal. This must be more strongly connected to social theories

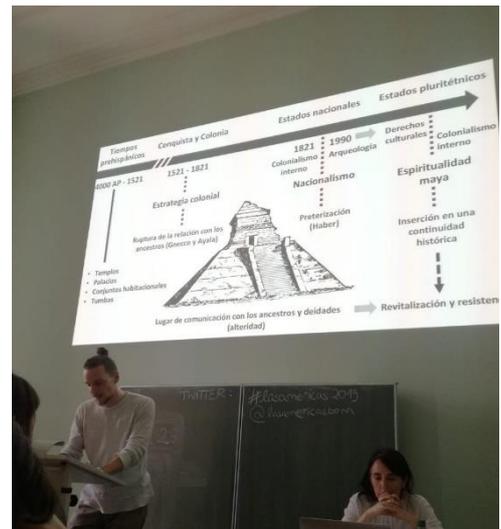


Figure 3: Mathieu Picas during his presentation on indigenous cultural heritage at the conference (Photography: Sophia La Mela)

and react to current politics. He advocated for research into the recent history of the “peoples without history” (after Eric Wolf) and for the establishment of modern centers of analysis in the countries of the south. The aim should be to decolonize archaeology, whose collection and research practices are rooted in colonial origins. With regard to climate change, the future of archaeology lies not only in the research of human impact on the earth, but also in the research of the natural spaces as repositories of knowledge and witnesses of long-term changes in living conditions throughout the world.

Structures of Pre-Columbian streets and large evidence of domestication of both trees and fruits show large human interaction in Amazonia. But there is deep history of forest transformations even before humans arrived. Forests are knowledge!

Eduardo Neves am 12.06.2019

5. Future worth living: Reclaiming social, political, economic and human rights in urban and rural contexts in the Americas

La construcción y consolidación del estado de derecho supone la existencia de una cultura de legalidad que implica el respeto y cumplimiento de las normas, haciendo la realidad del principio democrático de que nadie está por encima de la ley.

Iván Velásquez Gómez am 13.06.2019

The major “works in progress” of Latin America—such as corruption, security, peace and development—were dealt with in the fifth thematic complex of the conference. How to learn from past mistakes and weaknesses of the past and present, and what societal and political challenges will arise in the future, especially in countries like Guatemala, Colombia and Brazil. Iván Velásquez Gómez, the current head of the UN-based International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, spoke to this. The Colombian lawyer stressed that in addition to exposing the links between politicians and paramilitaries and drug cartels, strengthening the justice system and civil society is necessary.

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An end to “state capture” can only be achieved through the simultaneous transformation of state institutions and the development of a culture of equal opportunity for all citizens.

Stephanie Schütze (Freie Universität Berlin) and Felipe Fernández (Freie Universität Berlin) organized the panel “Aspirations of the future and urban infrastructure in Latin America”. With their colleagues, they dealt with two topics that have recently gained an enormous relevance in anthropological research: future and (urban) infrastructure by example of the importance of sport infrastructure in urban Brazil, homelessness in Chile and the formal and informal urban infrastructure for water supply using the example of the Colombian port city of Buenaventura.

A bridge between inclusive and exclusive models of society and the horror of fascism in Germany and Brazil was spanned by Enrique Mayer in his contribution on the migration history of his German father. He used diary entries to illustrate the pressures and experiences that drove his father to flee to Peru in 1935. From reflections on personal statements and their connection to his own experiences in Brazil today, the renowned Peruvian historian presented a constructive form of discourse with discrimination and populism and the cyclical experiences that every country goes through from which important lessons and principals for the future can be learned.

In a closing panel discussion, guest speakers and the public discussed common paradigms of future research, the identification of gaps in research and their related challenges and limits. The core demand remained the decolonization of research. Research subjects must be more involved than they have been until now and included as coauthors in projects and thus help to shape research topics, methods and theories. Academic research should also provide added value to research subjects that has been negotiated beforehand instead of unilaterally extracting data and resources and presenting them at international forums. Excerpts of the closing discussion are available on the Uni-Bonn.tv YouTube channel.



We are grateful to the many sponsors that financed the conference. The Deutsche Altamerika-Stiftung made it possible to advertize travel grants for young scientists from Latin America, while the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft provided the travel funds for guest speakers. The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie, the Bonner Universitätsgesellschaft and the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Bonn contributed to the conference with grants. Local organization was handled by the Department of Anthropology of the Americas and the Interdisciplinary Latin America Center of the University of Bonn.

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Additional information and film documentation of the more than 250 conference contributions can be found at: <https://www.americas2019.uni-bonn.de/> and https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=%23LasAmericas2019

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