

## Horizontality in Perspective: Interview with Olaf Kaltmeier and Sarah Corona Berkin

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“I was eight years old, my mother hid me there because the owner of the house ordered her to. I was the daughter of the cleaning lady. It's because there were visitors and I was very black [...] Let me see your passport, Miss Murillo, because with that suspicious skin we don't know what your intention is when coming to our country. Many times I have wanted, and still want to, conform myself. Be silent. Leave the issue alone, but it is not a unique battle, my experience is not mine, it would be poor and petty to think that. We are so many, so many.

*Nacas, indias, rateras.*

(Murillo, 2020)

In 2012, the book *En diálogo. Metodología horizontales en las ciencias sociales y culturales. “In Dialogue: Horizontal Methodologies in Social and Cultural Sciences”*, coordinated by Sarah Corona Berkin and Olaf Kaltmeier, was published almost simultaneously in Mexico and Germany, here with the title *Methoden dekolonialisieren. Eine Werkzeugkiste zur Demokratisierung der Sozial- und Kulturwissenschaften* (Westfälisches Dampfboot, Münster). The introduction of the book, written by the coordinators, as well as several of the book's chapters have been cited profoundly and have converted into key input for new theses, research projects, and novel perspectives in the formulation of objects of study. The creation of The Maria Sibylla Merian Center for Advanced Latin American Studies (CALAS) in Latin America with its central headquarters in Guadalajara combined with the center's concern for developing a line of research that addresses methodical issues (in times of multiple crises), have established these horizontal methodologies as the foundational

lenses to rethink research methodologies in the global south. And so, eight years later, we return to *Horizontalidad: hacia una crítica de la metodología*. The coordinators of this volume wish to recognize the seminal importance of *En diálogo...* and take a step back in time through an interview with Kaltmeier and Corona Berkin, who contributed to this book as well.

As we were finishing this volume, the COVID-19 pandemic radically changed, in a matter of weeks, the dynamics of social life almost everywhere on the planet (including teaching, research, field work, and, in many cases, survival itself). Apart from the serious and unknown circumstances that the global health crisis brought with it, a series of events that we have endured in a systematic way have also become critically evident, and have found in this juncture a place to express themselves and become visible: outbreaks of racism, questionings within various countries of supposedly developed GDP, and the exacerbation of poverty hidden under a mask of prosperity.

Until December of 2019, a state of affairs had, to a certain extent, become normalized: neo-extractivism, eviction of entire villages, mass sterilization practices, death by poisoning of population groups that were never forensically resolved, regular discoveries of dozens of clandestine graves with hundreds of anonymous corpses, destruction of forests, slaughter of millions of animals artificially raised for rapid and toxic consumption, refrigerator trucks filled with bodies, populations taken over by law enforcement or by drug trafficking. A dark and dangerous relationship between the United States and countries in Central and South America, openly corrupt political leaders and government coups orchestrated under the obscurity of the State of Law, as in the case of

Bolivia and elsewhere, were a part of our daily lives.

Not to state the obvious, we assumed, somewhat blindly, in the neoliberal model, which within its framework the healthcare system was practically dismantled. All of this became obvious with the beginning of the health crisis in the pandemic situation. It is as if a prominent building displayed a scaffolding built with scraps or made of patches, in other words, a structure that can no longer withstand. Today most of the region's leaders (Bolsonaro in Brazil, Piñera in Chile, Bukele in El Salvador, Añez in Bolivia) have been laid bare.

Taking into account this context, and not wishing to be another one of those thinkers who, at the last second, tries to reconstruct the future and their own theories to promote a type of tomorrow that they want to foresee and affirm (a lucky competence that is not well understood). Avoiding this, there could be two options: The first option, not considering that there was a historical break, could be easily achieved if medical science finds a solution soon. The second, looking beyond the health phenomenon and taking it as an altogether cruel pretext in which thousands of people suffered indescribable ailments, in order to observe everything that we have been dragging with us, we cannot discard the controversial option that took over the world in the last decades. What we are sure of is that in either of the options, the outlooks will no longer be the same as those that we could have had in December of 2019.

Appealing to "contextualism," which, according to Stuart Hall, is the crucial methodological condition for thinking about the social world, we wanted to open the debate in this sense because we consider that the text cannot completely omit those that traverse us. In times of a pandemic, of a clear political movement towards the right by a large part of the American continent, of the obscene accumulation of capital in the hands of a small portion of the population, together with a growing depauperization of the majorities on a global scale, and a notorious weakness of the State of Law to meet the minimum guarantees of justice and equity, the concerns about horizontality seem ever more urgent.

*Horizontalidad: Hacia una crítica de la metodología*, edited by Inés Cornejo and Mario Rufer, can be downloaded for free from the CALAS library at CLACSO: [https://www.clacso.org.ar/biblioteca\\_calas/detalle.php?id\\_libro=2245](https://www.clacso.org.ar/biblioteca_calas/detalle.php?id_libro=2245)

### In dialogue with Olaf and Sarah

**First question:** *In her text included in the volume *Horizontalidad: Hacia una crítica de la metodología*, Sarah states that, having recently understood that in addition to the dimensions that dialogical texts acquire between Wixaritari professors and Western academics, there is an even more obscure viewpoint, at least what she considers a "blind spot of shared text." This blind spot can be seen as the difficulty in referring to the ominous, to the unpleasantness that researchers prefer not to ask, see, or write about: that which questions the very certainty of our academic and even political profession. In his turn, Olaf tells us in his text that currently in Latin America, "with the crisis of the progressive governments [in the cases of Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Chile, and recently Uruguay], there is an ending of the conjuncture of decolonization and a renewed conjuncture of colonization promoted by sectors of the white-mestizo elite." After several years of reflection, both Sarah and Olaf seem to view horizontal methods from a more critical standpoint. Sarah, from the subjective perspective (the collaborator's own resistance in dialogic production); Olaf, from the structural perspective (the turn towards conservatism and the elite that impose new perspectives on research). Why do you think that both the "blind spots" of knowledge and the return of the "right-wing" need more research that benefits from horizontality?*

**Olaf Kaltmeier:** In many discussions on horizontal methodologies, questions arise as to whether they are also applicable in contexts of various inequalities and in social spheres of power. Is it possible to apply horizontal methodologies, for example, to hedge fund managers? If we want to answer this question in methodological terms, we can affirm that it is possible to define the topic and the research

design together. We can also imagine dialogical relationships, a “founding conflict.” In the same way, we could “write with two hands” and jointly publish. In other words, if we understand horizontal methodologies as such an instrument, this could be possible. But Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno have already warned us against such instrumental reasoning. In this sense, we have never imagined these horizontal approaches as a method, but rather as a methodology. This is an important difference, as methodology implies defining the application area and defining whether or not certain methods are adequate and relevant. More than this distinction, horizontal methodologies not only have the objective of democratizing the research process, but also of contributing to the decolonization of the academic field. It is a field that is deeply marked by colonial projects, not only in the global South, but also in the West. This is evident in the murder of the wise-women in Europe during the Inquisition. The epistimocide and the homogenization of knowledge according to Western criteria is a global process. Vis-à-vis this historical gap in the academic field, horizontal methodologies aim to contribute to the decolonization of knowledge, including its institutions and habitual practices.

This implies a deconstruction of the idea of the subject-researcher, who investigates the Other in an instrumental way. It seems to me that, despite all the criticisms facing the subject in the practice of social research, the idea of the subject has been preserved, almost understood as genius in a romanticized way. It must be acknowledged that such imaginings play into the researcher’s vanity, which, more than just a personality trait, is essentially a requirement in the academic field. In all applications for academic positions and scholarships, we evaluate the excellence of the subject-investigator. Thus, the imagination of a hyperreal subject-researcher does not correspond to the reality of knowledge production that takes place in rhizomatic networks of exchange and dialogue.

It is an explicit objective to recognize and make visible this invisibilized part of the production of knowledge in order to change the ways of generating and exchanging knowledge. Instead of an extractivism of knowledge, horizontal

methodologies lean in favor of mutualism. And I think this is of particular importance in an era of growing and immense social inequality. Niklas Luhmann, but also to a certain extent Pierre Bourdieu, think of these fields as functionally separate areas. Researchers such as Néstor García Canclini have emphasized that in Latin America, this supposed logic of separation does not work so discreetly. And I think this is also true for Europe. There are homologies between the different social fields. And if in the academic field we manage to change practical logic, this may also have an impact on other fields. In this sense, the decolonization of knowledge through the horizontal production of knowledge implies a mutual logic that is ready to face the logic of individual accumulation, whether of capital or knowledge.

**Sarah Corona Berkin:** You are basically affirming that viewpoints are imposed on knowledge from macro-political and micro-political places. We do not see a way to transform these dominant structures without modifying the micropolitical mechanisms of knowledge production. Without neglecting the economic foundations of social order, we assume that social relations are not directly and immediately detached from economic relations. Feminists have already said that “the personal is political” to explain that the experience of women is the result of a social structure of oppression and exploitation. However, personal and political choices are indistinguishable and, therefore, changes should come first from personal practice and then defended as political changes. I add that in respect to the field that concerns us: the construction of new knowledge begins with the decisions and practices of researchers. When choosing horizontality, knowledge is built from a critical viewpoint capable of exposing the power relations that prevent the creation of new forms of knowledge, thus producing new knowledge and new relationships between people.

In the horizontal proposal, the classic subjective/political or theory/practice oppositions are dissolved. Any research that does not superimpose among its goals the insubordination of the subjects who participate in the construction of knowledge, we believe, is doomed to repeat

forms of micro and macro-political oppression, and is bound to produce knowledge that has already been exhausted.

However, there are also obscurities that subjectivity does not always recognize and, therefore, do not allow the problem to be widely evident. The title of the famous Pink Floyd album, *The Dark Side of the Moon*, suggests to me an apt reflection regarding horizontal methodologies. When we refer to the dark side of the moon as a metaphor, we are talking about a face of our satellite that is never observed from Earth. This is because the moon, in the time it takes to complete its movement around our planet, is actually rotating upon itself, so we always see the same face. Here, the interplay between visibility and the existence of a zone hidden from our view caused by its self-rotation makes us think about the horizontal production of knowledge. There are also places of darkness that make social phenomena even more difficult to understand. If we continue to see only one face, the one we know because it is the one we are doomed to look at only from a single place, we lose the opportunity to construct WITH others who see from other places, who bring new “faces” and new answers to social questions. From here, the main axes arise that define horizontality for me: the *conflict generator*, *discursive equity*, and the *autonomy of voices*.

Nonetheless, social structures and political order can oppose our position, as a product of our belonging, of our language. But the choice is not individual, it is not neutral, and it always carries historical ties. That is why the gaze of another, a peer researcher, can modify blind loyalty to a single response, to a single social structure, and to a given political order. The various voices that observe from multiple places, academic and non-academic, together can build a “third text” that will be new, different, and that will show “another face of the moon.” Addressing the darker side of horizontal research involves not avoiding blind spots, recognizing and trying to understand them together with, and thanks to, peer researchers.

**Second question:** *It becomes inevitable to think, as Stuart Hall would say, “contextually.” The pandemic caused by Covid-19 that continues to*

*haunt us is presented as an absolute, as a kind of vertical and violent magma that confounds everyone. Could it be that if we view separately each of the aspects that shape it—medical, biological, political, social, collective emotion, and economic—we could clear up the confusion and, from here, possibly achieve a horizontal and diligent conversation with the other?*

**O.K:** The first image that comes to mind when hearing this question is Foucault’s famous interpretation of Borges’ text on the animal encyclopedia of the emperor of ancient China. It seems to me that, in a certain way, social differentiation—and in academia with the emergence of different disciplines—has made us aphasic. Obviously, there is an order in each of the discourses. But they are different, opposing, and incompatible discourses that intersect and sometimes intertwine.

I am skeptical of reaching a total, absolute truth—also in the case of Covid-19. But it seems to show that within academia we have to overcome the great gap between the social sciences and humanities, on the one hand, and the natural sciences, on the other hand. The pandemic shows that—if we want to channel Latour—the virus is an actant with a higher power in social assembly. In the era of the Anthropocene - the crisis of climate change, overexploitation of natural resources, acidification of the oceans, transformation of landscapes into garbage dumps, sixth extinction - we can no longer ignore these types of actants whether they be a virus, hurricane, or neobiota. Therefore, it seems to me that the challenge goes beyond entering into a transdisciplinary dialogue between academics and other knowledge producers. In fact, I believe that one of the great challenges for the social sciences and humanities—as well as for horizontal methodologies—is how to enter into dialogue or exchange with these actants of the biosphere. I believe that here we can learn a lot from indigenous knowledge without falling into exoticism.

The Western model is in a crisis that some, like Edgardo Lander, have called a crisis of civilization. I, in particular, am not a fan of the concept of civilization, due to its historical burden from the 19th century and the disqualification of



“barbaric” antagonism, but the description of a fundamental rupture in the global capitalist system, in Western epistemology and its planetary limits, is for me an obvious constellation which we have to face. Perhaps we can learn from the Covid-19 crisis that we need a different conduct, one of solidarity, based on ethics of caring.

**S.C.B:** I think that horizontality should go through the whole process. The different disciplines on their own, as raw material for dialogue, must also contribute their knowledge that is built on horizontality. Because it is not just about expressing what is known and exchanging ideas, not even attentively listening to the other person, it is about constructing something new. Conflicts are not resolved by adding points of view, but by generating together new responses that cannot be built in solitude and disciplinary isolation.

And it is not just about inviting different disciplines to the table to form a group with interdisciplinary intentions, but that they are building with the knowledge of everyone, non-academics as well. That is why we say that the horizontal production of knowledge produces new knowledge and new relationships between people.

In a problem that needs solving, such as Covid-19, it is necessary to construct a “third text” together with the disciplines that have something to say and with the non-academic voices that also have something to say. In this way, I think that we could go down a path that dialogically solves a problem through a collaboration with those involved with scientific thinking and, at the same time, solves the political problem of representation for those who have not been heard in order to solve problems of this magnitude.

There is another actor that is not heard and that we know that with all our strength we cannot control, which is nature. Modernity brought the separation between nature and society—can we return to building bridges to get to know each other? García Canclini wonders how to change the relations between people and animals. Would the solution be to invite all living beings (perhaps other non-living beings as well) to the *conflict*

*generator*, with *discursive equality*, to develop new solutions? What is clear to us today is that the scientific and technological developments that in the past gave us certainties and answers that we trusted. Today, rather, we see that this same blind development has brought greater insecurity and a feeling of unease. For example, today we have discovered that when it comes to health, we know less than what we thought we knew.

**Third Question:** *One of the most fruitful axes of horizontal methodologies is found when placing self-reflexivity at the center of the scientific method. Social or cultural sciences would not exist without a political gaze and without a radical theory of difference. This brings up some criticisms and warnings of the “classic” sectors, let’s call them, of social research: criticism about the romanticization of otherness that horizontal, decolonial, or perspective knowledge proposes; romanticization of poverty or of the indigenous world; criticisms of binary visions of pure or “savior” knowledge (can be of capital, destruction, extractivism, etc.); warnings about the dangers that these methods can bring to objectivity and the “gap” that needs to be “narrowed” to do “good science.” What can be said today, in the context of profound uncertainty, for what horizontal methodologies offer to this discussion?*

**O.K:** Horizontal methodologies do not promote exoticism, but rather democratization. I begin with the idea that we are living in a common world, a global capitalist system, in which we have experiences, conditions, and exchanges that we share, although we share them from unequal positions in the Global North and the Global South. I understand these concepts in epistemological, and not geographic, terms—since in Mexico City and Buenos Aires there are many neighborhoods of the Global North. This shared reality—created by colonialism, capitalism, ecological crisis and the movements against them—is to me the basis for entering into a dialogue based on horizontal methodologies. This is why I am critical of separate methodologies—some for the “North,” others for the “South”; some for “Westerners,”

others for “the indigenous.”

And I think that this perspective of intertwining also helps us to avoid falling into exoticism or a construction of the hyper-real indigenous. We know that many communities have incorporated western elements, starting with the horses from the plains in North America and Patagonia, to *sombreros* in the Andes. Many who have worked closely with indigenous communities already know that not everything lends itself to idealization. This is present in the experience of intercommunal violence, especially against women, as well as ecological degradation and extreme poverty. In this sense, I do not believe that the solution lies only with indigenous peoples or other marginalized groups. However, without dialogue and self-determination for these groups, there can be no solution for the global problems we face.

**S.C.B:** Horizontal methodologies offer the opportunity to deploy all of the democratic tools that we researchers possess in order to act within scientific and political horizontalities. We need to understand that horizontality means listening to all participants involved in the problem to take a step beyond the answers that we have already reached with our particular gaze—western, white, and masculine. The search is for a new knowledge that only through dialogue with others will we be able to learn (What reflexivity/self-reflexivity is this? What mirror or which objectivity is achieved when we understand the world and ourselves with the unique words of our discipline, learned from our social belonging and our history?).

We can see that these problems are connected: the virus, the economic debacle, the power of authority and the administration of justice, racism, hunger, dispossession, human communication, coexistence, and more. Everything becomes visible and debatable. We also see that technocratic nostalgia for numbers as a basis for objectivity is only part of the diagnosis and answer to the problem. Bourdieu, an eternity ago, quoted Pareto to reproach numbers as scientific proof: How can we say that older people do not exist since we do not know at what point in life old age begins? Neither childhood nor poverty, for that matter.

Today we see the limits that numbers have when explaining reality. Recently we found out about classifications based on numbers that only betray the ideology of scientists, such as when a code of ethics based on numbers was implemented in order to decide who has the right to a respirator during the pandemic’s hospital saturation. Not to mention the war of numbers between continents and political systems that are only useful to boost already disreputable news broadcasts.

The solutions to these problems—the very conception of the problem—cannot advance and improve the world if we do not enlarge the concepts as researcher/researched, scientist/user. The reality, we are seeing, is more complex and has more variables that go undetected in a laboratory, survey, interview, or observation.

In another text, Olaf Kaltmeier and I spoke about the malicious use of dialogue, such as in advertising and politics, and we demarcated ourselves from them. We clarified, in our case, that we were looking for mutual knowledge in dialogue and, as a first condition, the conscious affirmation of the horizontal situation during research.

**Fourth question:** *We formulated this question thinking, on the one hand, of the recent demands of indigenous peoples, the #MeToo movement, the movements for self-defense of young women such as Ni una menos, recognition for new gender identities, movements of mass migrations, and the presence, despite the circumstances, of public education in various countries as a possible alternative for more disadvantaged sectors; on the other hand, we thought of the increasing speed with which devastating neo-extravism has been imposed on Latin America. We are interested to know if the gap between interviewer and interviewee has changed or not. Has it become narrower? Has it become wider? Or has it become zigzagged, meaning, has it become narrower and wider at the same time?*

**O.K:** Horizontal methodologies are greatly enriched by these movements because, for one thing, they are articulators of other knowledge, however they have the intercultural capacity to

transport it to other social fields, especially to the political field, the field of cultural production, as well as the academic field. I do not believe that it is the task of horizontal methodologies to be a spokesperson for social movements. The movements can speak for themselves. But for the production of knowledge, dialogue can be fruitful for both activists and researchers.

I believe it is important to underline here the conflict of horizontal methodologies. Dialogue does not mean that we need to have the same opinion. If we all think the same, the dialogue ends. In this sense, what you call a zigzagging movement is a good way to describe the communicative situation of dialogue. This mixture of closeness and distance seems to be the key to the research process. However, I want to emphasize that in recent years perhaps it has become more accepted – especially outside the discipline of anthropology – to accept the horizontality of the other and its production of knowledge. But I do worry about academic trends. Working with indigenous peoples is no longer in fashion: neither politically, after the turn to combative protesting within the indigenous movement and its repercussions in international forums, especially in the UN; nor academically, where the topic of the indigenous is already viewed with boredom. Rethinking academic trends would be, for me, another necessary self-reflective task.

**S.C.B:** Zigzagging! Yes. There is no one size fits all for everyone to wear the same jacket. Horizontality does not imply rigid methods. Scientific categories are transformed and the axes that guide research are expanded. What is in the center is the coming and going (zigzagging) between the “expert” and the *peer researcher*, based on the *conflict generator*, in *discursive equality*, and with *autonomy of gaze* to produce a “third text.” The new actors that have become visible today are the basis for the scientific understanding of reality and implementation of change. I believe that the horizontal production of knowledge has two merits: first, to build and incorporate the knowledge of all those involved in the problem and, second, to build a common world where no one is superior (Jacotot/Rancière *dixit*) and where we are all *peer researchers*.

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Sarah Corona is currently a professor at the University of Guadalajara, a position she previously held at the Metropolitan Autonomous University at its Xochimilco campus. She has conducted research on written and visual communication in different social groups, intercultural education and communication, indigenous education, the history of books published by the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP), as well as reading in distinct social groups. She is the author of books and articles designed to train adults in media education. She belongs to the National System of Researchers (SNI, level III).