



**The Project of Modernity: Epistemic Violence and its
Relationship with Essentialism and Hegemony**

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by

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Countries of the "Global South" continue to suffer the implications of colonialism with regards to their economic political and social means. In addition, civilizations in countries of the West also face some of these issues of post colonialism. The strive for "modernity" is what perpetuates these issues. According to Santiago Castro-Gomez, "modernity is an alchemy-generating machine that in the name of reason and humanism, excludes from its imaginary the hybridity, multiplicity, ambiguity and contingency of different forms of life" (Castro-Gomez 2002, 269). After the end of colonialism, countries of the West still need sought and continue to seek control over regions who are deemed unable to reach the same level of development and modernity as they have and in so feel the need to impose their beliefs and value system on them. If the strive to modernity ends, this would mean that it would jeopardize the power mechanism that constructs the Other by two-valued logic, subduing differences (Castro-Gomez 2002, 269). The capitalist system of global reorganization is dependent on the production of differences. Many scholars have taken up to challenge the modernity project by illustrating how such a project perpetuates new configurations of global power (Castro-Gomez 2002, 269). In this paper I will be looking into the ways scholars have approached and critiqued the impact of the implications of modernity which include epistemic violence and its relations with essentialism and hegemony in postcolonial societies.

Epistemic Violence

Epistemic violence was developed by Gayatri Spivak in order to identify the numerous instances in culture, history, literature and philosophy where the colonial subject has been defined as Other (Teo 2008, 57). Before getting into the details of epistemic violence, Santiago Castro-Gomez made a note to first define the project of modernity in his article, The Social Sciences, Epistemic Violence, and the Problem of the "Invention of the Other, in a deeper context as it will provide a more concrete understanding. The project of modernity is defined as the "submission of the world to complete control of man under the guide of knowledge" (Castro-Gomez 2002, 270). Castro-Gomez draws on the ideas of Hans Blumenberg, a German philosopher who explains that in order to obtain

such power, a war must be fought and won by knowing the enemy thoroughly, using their secrets against them in order for them to submit to their will (Castro-Gomez 2002, 270). Gomez goes on to explain that as a result of this victory, the victor would then attempt to establish the invention of the Other, which is a mechanism of knowledge and power which those representations are constructed (Castro-Gomez 2002, 271). This is possible through disciplinary structure which of course is defined by the constitution and with the disciplinary structure in place, allows the formation of citizens as a subject of law, in other words, homogenous identities. He provides an historical example of the 1839 Venezuelan constitution that declared those eligible for citizenship had to be men who were married and over the age of twenty-five, they had to be educated and have a profession earning four hundred pesos annually and own property (Castro-Gomez 2002, 272). Gomez explains that those who did not fit the require characteristics listed, which included women, blacks, Indians, slaves, homosexuals, the disabled and so forth were excluded from the protection of the law and the establishment of the imaginaty of civilization warranted the establishment of the imaginaty of barbarism. The imaginaty of civilization and barbarism have a materiality, Gomez says, that abstract systems of disciplinary nature which includes hospitals, law, prisons, schools, the state and social sciences. It is because of the link between discipline and knowledge that he proposes that the project of modernity is an application of epistemic violence, a concept introduced by Gayatri Spivak (Castro-Gomez 2002, 272-275).

In addition to the project of modernity, Gomez goes into the discussion of coloniality and providing his readers with an adequate distinction between colonialism and coloniality in terms of its relationship with epistemic violence. To Gomez, colonialism, which refers to an historical time, represented the start of harsh path towards development and modernization. Coloniality, however, was founded on the knowledge of the Other, representing the technology of power we see today (Castro-Gomez 2002, 276). To further elaborate, Gomez draws from the ideas of Anibal Quijano, a Peruvian sociologists who stated that "colonial depreation is legitimized by an imaginary that establishes incommensurable differences between the colonizer and the colonized" (Castro-Gomez 2002, 276).

Civilization, rationality, goodness are characteristics that describe the colonizer, while the colonized are considered to be uncivilized and barbaric and are, of course, the Other. By this distinction, the colonizers are able to justify their use of disciplinary power (Castro-Gomez 2002, 276). The author combines both concepts of modernity and coloniality in the following quotation in a way that draws an overall connection with epistemic violence.

"Modernity is a project of governing the social world which emerged in the 16th century. Its constructions of power and knowledge are anchored in a double coloniality: one directed inward by European and American nation-states in their efforts to establish homogenous identities through politics of subjectification, the other directed outward by the hegemonic powers of modern/colonial world-system in their attempt to ensure the flow of primary materials from the periphery to the center. Both processes are part of the same structural dynamic" (Castro-Gomez 2002, 277).

Santiago Castro-Gomez's approach to issues of epistemic violence by defining and applying the concepts of modernity and coloniality to illustrate how epistemic violence is a form of control, rising from the project of modernity leads me to look at scholars who feel the same sentiment, which would be touched on throughout the course of this paper.

To continue, Thomas Teo in his article entitled, From Speculation to Epistemological Violence in Psychology: A Critical Hermeneutic Reconstruction, he looks at epistemological violence from a psychology point of view. He notes that epistemic violence was introduced to identify negative consequences for the Other, even though there is data available to suggest an alternative way of interpretation. The interpretations mentioned are considered 'knowledge' when actuality harm is inflicted through these interpretations (Teo 2008, 47). The negative impact of the 'knowledge' inflicted on the Other, according to Teo can range from distortions, inferiority, infringements, misinterpretations, and the absence of their voices (Teo 2008, 57). Teo provides an example of women and how the interpretations that have described women as inferior have been presented in the form of expertise and knowledge, while there is data available to provide a more equal interpretation he defines as epistemological violence (Teo 2008, 59). He provides another example with regard to the speculation that Blacks have been proven to be genetically less intelligent than whites and that the negative effects

of this 'fact' has resulted in consequences in areas such as identity, funding for preschool, support for higher education and the overall expectations and attributions of those who are of colour (Teo 2008, 60). Living in a society where one is told that because their race they are less smart¹; will have long term psychological affects because this 'fact' or knowledge impose on those people will become internalize and blacks or any other race for that matter who have fell victim to epistemic violence in this manner would feel no need to strive towards their full potential because there is a system made to keep them intellectually inferior. Of course, there are individuals who are against the system and are fully aware of the potential they seek, however, in the same instance; most of those people will face discrimination in the education system, workplace and so forth. With that being said, Thomas Teo provided his readers with a psychological perspective to epistemic violence and how such implications will continue to have a long-term effect on the people who fall victim to it. Just as Teo illustrated a contemporary example of epistemological violence, authors Kevin Ayotte and Mary Husain provide a contemporary example in their article, Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism Epistemic Violence, and the Rhetoric of the Veil. Ayotte and Husain argue that the representations of the burqa made by the United States gave the image of Afghanistan women as gendered slaves who are in need of being saved by the West. This representation only increases the insecurity of Afghanistan women by perpetuating neocolonial violence (Ayotte and Husain 2005, 112). The security Ayotte and Husain refer to is the lack of security women have within the state. They are constantly affected by economic, social, political turmoil as well as war and forced migration (Ayotte and Husain 2005, 112). In addition, the authors note that both structural and physical violence inflicted upon women should be a central aspect of feminist criticism and theory; the war on terror in Afghanistan illustrates the West's appropriation and homogenization of women in the third world voices, and epistemic violence that should be addressed in conjunction with other forms of oppression. The violent knowledge of third world other eliminates women as subjects with regard to international relations (Ayotte and Husain 2005, 113). The objectification of Afghan women only justifies the military intervention of the United States, with the

purpose of 'liberalization', which ironically is the initial cause for the structural violence taken place in Afghanistan. Of course, Ayotte and Husain incorporate Spivak's argument that "women is important, not race, class and empire. The conditions experienced by women in the third world cannot be reduced only to gender and biology: exploitation by multinational capital, the deeply etched racism not only among some indigenous populations but also in the legacy of colonial relations between first and third worlds and a host of other factors all conspire to oppress women" (Ayotte and Husain 2005, 114). One of the issues is that homogenized illustration of women in the third world that essentialize this region as if it were one. This homogenization, Ayotte and Husain explain, eroticize the Other, followed by a sense of pity for the conditions faced by those who are oppressed (Ayotte and Husain 2005, 114). The burqa has become the symbol of oppression of women in Afghanistan, with the interpretation that the Taliban is responsible for implementing the burqa to be mandatory for all Afghan women (Ayotte and Husain 2005, 115). Another issue that was addressed in this article was the ventriloquism of Afghanistan women by the discussions being spoken on behalf of them by those from the outside. An example of Vivki Mabrey, who is a reporter on *60 Minutes* conducted a segment that the Taliban's power had become the symbol of the veil for the women of Afghanistan. The authors made sure to suggest that this claim was not completely incorrect, for it may hold some truth to it, however the main idea for introducing this example was to inform the readers to be skeptic of the adequacy of the United States' representation of the issues faced by third world women. Although women from Afghanistan have been interviewed for the segment, Ayotte and Husain explained that there is an already existing narrative that these women have already been ventriloquized to by the media. Their accounts are edited and also prompted by a particular line of questioning. "This is not to suggest that the women's stories are false, but rather that even their indigenous natives are inflected by their representation in an inevitably Western discourse" (Ayotte and Husain 2005, 116). Assuming the veiling of Afghanistan women is a universal indication of oppression, in which the consequences of such homogenization is a paternalistic logic that is intrinsic to the United States' objective of liberating Afghan women in

accordance to the liberal model of Western feminism. This assumption is a contemporary example of the European colonial discourse where the "subjugated, unenlightened Other as opposed to the liberated, independent and enlightened Western self" was used as a moral prop to legitimize colonial power relations" (Ayotte and Husain 2005, 118). Ayotte and Husain draw reference from the chair of the feminist Majority Foundation campaign for Afghanistan women, Mavis Leno, in which she stated that women in Afghanistan had lived an equivalent contemporary American life prior to the Taliban. The American way of life was therefore made to be ideal in which women in Afghanistan can aspire following their liberation. Furthermore, when approaching the issue of epistemic violence scholars would of course make reference to Gayatri Spivak's work when making their argument. However, for Michael Marker in his work, *Indigenous Voice, Community, and Epistemic Violence: The Ethnographers "Interest" and what "Interests" the Ethnographer*, Marker looked at the work of Rigoberta Menchu, a person who Spivak had looked at when she developed the term epistemic violence and the backlash she received from her *testimonio* as his way of illustrating the ways in which epistemic violence has been inflicted on the indigenous people. Rigoberta Menchu was a Guatemalan Indian woman who gave accounts of the cruelty of the military made against her people in which author David Stoll had warned readers to take the account as a grain of salt, for the indigenous narrative have a pre-existing agenda in which some may be a part of a movement trying to prevent "United States corporate-backed military thugs from murdering their people" (Marker 2003, 361). Michael Marker therefore argues that indigenous people have tried to tell their stories, but colonizers often dismissed these stories as being irrelevant "ramblings" of the uncivilized mind. Marker goes on to explain that unnatural dualism is enforced on Indigenous people, which in a sense they are permitted to be traditional only if they continue to be an exotic artifact of the past, or, they can as a modern citizen, participate in language and society as long as they keep their traditions private (Marker 2003, 363).

In addition to the discourse of Indigenous people and epistemology, Lester-Brabinna Rigney, discusses in his work the scientific implications of epistemic violence and determining the validity of

indigenous accounts. Rigney argues that science as a social institution, markets, produces and consumes a knowledge economy. Science is widely accepted as constructing the truthful realities of Western societies (Rigney 2001, 2). And that the inclusions of indigenous people were only as an object to be studied. Rigney explains this further in the following quotation.

"Western ontology and epistemology are based on principles of 'validity', 'reliability', and the authority of positivism that view the nature of 'reality' as mechanistic. The notion that science is 'autolitative', 'neutral' and 'universal' privileges science. It gives science the status of a standard measure against which all other 'realities' may be evaluated and judged to be either 'rational' or otherwise. Indigenous peoples as objects of scientific human understanding. Scientific development of the constructs of race and the other are prime sites to examine Indigenous participation in science" (Rigney 2001, 3).

Science determined the colonial belief that the differences in race were natural and biological and therefore they are unalterable. This idea is similar to that of Thomas Teo, in which I have mentioned in the earlier sections of this paper that with regards to the psychological aspect of epistemic violence on people who were forced to believe that their intelligence was based on their race. Those who were non-white, 'scientifically' were less intelligent. In Rigney's work, he states that the cultures of indigenous people were perceived as uncivilized. If the racial superiority of a race could be legitimized through science, then the scientific methods used in other cultures to express knowledge was therefore ruled inferior and inadequate (Rigney 2001, 4).

In addition to the idea of epistemic violence and science being a legitimizing factor in determining the reliability of the other, it also resulted in essentialism as well. Because particular characteristics are 'scientifically' determined, this allows the belief; when looking at topics such as race, that everyone who is a part of the same race possesses those same characteristics. For example the universal stereotypes of blacks. In a more contemporary illustration would be the events that had taken place in the United States in the past year and half in terms of Ferguson, Missouri and Florida, where black teens are gunned down due to their perceived threat to society. In the case of Florida, an African American teen was gunned down by a member of the community because he was accused of 'being up

to know good' based on the clothing he was wearing and the colour of his skin. Baggy clothing symbolizes a 'thug' lifestyle. Despite being told by authorities not to take action, that member of the community proceeded to approach the teen and the confrontation ended fatally with the death of that teen. Another example in general is that most blacks are unable to enter a store without being followed, or enter a community without being watched for they are constantly perceived as criminals. Other stereotypes of course include brashness, being unintelligent and so forth. Author Rolando Vazquez in his work, Translation as Erasure, noted that race is fundamental to the structure of power in regards to the distribution of the roles in society and that these classifications are imperative in expanding modernity's epistemic territory. (Vazquez 2011, 34-35).

Epistemic Violence and Hegemony

The implementation of epistemic violence is connected to the assertion of power over the Other. Recalling Rigoberta Menchu's story, Michael Marker proposed that David Stoll challenging her accounts and identity as a voice for indigenous people was a hegemonic move which denies all other identity and places (Marker 2003, 368). Elaborating on Marker's ideas, George Gugelberger and Michael Kearney explains that political domination is dependent on the construction of cultural and social differences among individuals, for with the absence of such differences, there would be no distinguishing factor between those who have power and those who are subjected to such power (Gugelberger and Kearney 1991, 3). These differences are naturalized which therefore asserts and justifies domination. They pervade various areas such as education, law, literature and religion. Literature, they note, is created by those in the dominant classes and represent the naturalized differences perceived from the cultural point of view. Authors who write from this point of view tend to write for subaltern people who they deemed powerless to represent themselves, this is therefore epidemiological misrepresentation (Gugelberger and Kearney 1991, 3). Gugelberger and Kearney state that testimonial literature is created by the subaltern people in an attempt to connect the Western form of truth to their discourse, in which they envision a transformed society.

In addition, Liu Kang in his article, *Hegemony and Cultural Revolution*, he uses Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony and subalternity, where it was mentioned already in this paper that hegemony is the perpetuation of normality, where individuals are convinced that the existing status quo is normal and one should conform to it. And in doing so, the denial of native voices is necessary to maintain such control of non-Western countries (Kang 1997, 72). Jeffery Guhin and Jonathan Wyrzten, used Edward Said's ideas to critique their views on the relationship between epistemic violence and hegemony. One of Said's contributions to the discourse is his insistence on the relationship between knowledge and power (Guhin and Wyrzten 2013, 233).

" Said's use of the word power draws, at different moments, from Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony and Foucault's understanding of power as rooted within discourse. Both Gramsci and Foucault ably demonstrate how power is essentially about violence, particularly if violence is understood as the coercion of body and mind. Much of Said's and other postcolonial theorists' attention has focused on the latter. what Bourdieu refers to as 'symbolic violence' "

(Guhin and Wyrzten2013, 234).

Guhin and Wyrzten explain that Said's work reveals the epistemic and essentialist levels of this symbolic violence which is involved in the production of knowledge and the relationship between the observed and observer (Guhin and Wyrzten2013, 234). The issue the authors touched upon in their article was that the knowledge about culture and so forth was not necessarily inaccurate, but the violence of apprehension that occurred through this knowledge was used to create indications of native identity, with the main goal of reinforcing the hierarchy between European colonizers and the colonized which then led this apprehension to result in epistemic violence and essentialization both in and between western and third world countries (Guhin and Wyrzten 2013, 244).

Conclusion

To conclude, through the various approaches and ideas made by the scholars mentioned throughout this paper, the strive towards modernity comes at the expense of the Other in so it denies them the freedom of having their own stories told, instead those stories or written for them by Western countries to maintain the superior and inferior relationship. The coloniality of power and epistemic violence is what fuels the expansion of modernity (Vazquez 2011, 29). The use of modern science was

imperative in suppressing the Other and the subaltern social groups whose social life were a result of this knowledge produced. For Spivak, those who cannot speak is not because there is a lack of contribution to the academic elite forms of writing, but it is due to the fact that their way of voicing themselves and providing understanding has been changed by those in power, particularly y the countries of the West (Guhin and Wy•tzen2013, 235).

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