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Epistemic Violence in the Context of Digitalization

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Epistemic Violence in the Context of Digitalization

Introduction

This term paper examines the question within the framework of decolonization to what extent epistemic violence manifests itself in the context of digitalization, influenced by the persistent effects of colonialism and the myth of a violence-free science. Here, digitalization is considered as a project of modernity, while the concept of epistemic violence and its origins are elucidated. Special attention is paid to identifying epistemic violence in connection with digitalization. The aim of this paper is to draw attention to a form of violence that is discussed in the discipline of anthropology and postmodern feminist science criticism. This term paper was developed within the seminar "Current Debates in Anthropology" under the guidance of Prof. Dr. Sahana Udupa in the winter semester 23/24.

Digitalization in the Project of Modernity

Digitalization in countries of the Global South is not only part of modernization but also a déjà vu of the modernity movement with a colonial undertone. Modernity, as a project of development, has been executed through the structures of capitalism and imperial colonialism. Modernity is not completed and continues to this day, especially in the domains of science or economics. This chapter intends to (I) present the Cartesian dualism as part of the specific logic of capitalism, (II) highlight the materiality of the internet, and (III) outline the impacts and extents of (global) division of labor. (I), (II), (III) describe far-reaching elements that establish a power imbalance and material asymmetry between countries of the Global South and the West, often evading criticism in the sciences. They serve as the starting point for epistemic violence.

(I) Modernity is based on the so-called Cartesian paradigm—a way of thinking originating in Western philosophy that lays the foundation of capitalism. This paradigm is illuminated in literature from various perspectives (including Hall 1995; Latour 2000; Moore 2015; Hornborg 2014; Keilhack 2023). It includes, among other things, the dualism between body and mind, nature and culture, object and subject, thus also a separation between objects and their relationship to a moral system (see Hornborg 2014, 124). Relevant to this paper is somewhat the invention of the "object" as a material, empirically experiential, and intrinsically meaningless thing, whose mode of ob-

servation in the sciences is also known as "objectivism" (Hornborg 2014, 125). The problem lies in the object's decontextualization, rendering the capitalist economic system morally neutral (Hornborg 2014, 125, 134). The excessive consumption of resources and exploitation of human labor are denied through objectification (Hornborg 2014, 134) and transformed into a hieroglyph under the rubric of the so-called commodity fetishism (Marx 1962, 88). The Cartesian paradigm was integrated into peripheral areas of the Global South not least due to the dominance of the capitalist system and the penetration of colonialism, successfully outsourcing the evaluation and objectification of nature in resource acquisition (see Hornborg 2014, 132–33). Based on Cartesian dualism, Jason Moore considers capitalism as an ecological regime, a so-called "Capitalocene," as it organizes nature in an epistemic and ontological manner (Moore 2015).

(II) Digitalization belongs to the zeitgeist and project of modernity, referring to the development of digital information and communication technologies (DICT). It is important to understand that the internet is not immaterial, as the concept of a substanceless cloud might evoke, but is based on material pillars of DICT, DICT infrastructure, and data centers (see Grünwald and Caviezel 2022). The ecological footprint of the internet comprises resources for the manufacture of DICT and infrastructure and the energy consumption of the entire digital ecosystem (see Höfner and Frick 2019). The ecological footprint, referring to CO₂ emissions, varies depending on the geographical location and local power mix (Siddik, Shehabi, and Marston 2021; Kamiya 2020). Although energy efficiency globally increases on average (Kamiya 2020), the so-called rebound effect entails that overall consumption and energy usage also grow (Carré 2018, 110). The USA hosts 30% of all data centers worldwide (Siddik, Shehabi, and Marston 2021) and holds a leading position in the domain of digitalization with Silicon Valley (Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023). Further research is needed to demonstrate a material power asymmetry between the West and the Global South in the context of colonialism.

(III) Modern technologies, such as information and communication technologies, shape and organize the form of (global) society (Hornborg 2014, 123). Digital development and progress are usually associated with efficiency in working conditions and an increase in speed in everyday life, thus saving space and time: computers are getting smaller, and digital tools shorten work steps through software applications and AI with ever-increasing interconnectivity. Hornborg argues that the saving of space and time always occurs at the expense of natural space and working time elsewhere (Hornborg 2014, 122, 130). With a Marxist approach, he holistically considers the entire value chain of digital devices, including the resources and labor times needed for the development and maintenance of digital infrastructure. The modern economic system is based on strategies to transform land and labor, which costs dif-

ferently in various parts of the world market (Hornborg 2014, 122). Imperial colonialism can thus be understood as an appropriation of space and time, where a larger quantum of production space and work hours is exchanged for a smaller one, legitimized by capitalist logic (see Hornborg 2014, 122).

Capitalism gains transnational access to labor markets in countries of the Global South where cheap labor is available. This allows for the outsourcing of simple labor. Udupa describes Arvato's online content moderation to prevent hate speech in Western social media for Facebook (Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 109 ff.). The workforce mostly consists of young, educated, multilingual, and cheap migrant workers who perform simple, repetitive, and monotonous work (Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 109, 112). Their working conditions could be described with Marx's term of human alienation; they also remain mostly opaque to outsiders (Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 112). Although the assignment of work depends on linguistic competencies and local knowledge of cultures, the division of labor creates the impression that influential elites and the digital proletariat asymmetrically congregate along the originally colonial axis (Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 108 ff.).

Concept of Epistemic Violence

The etymology of the word "epistemic" traces back to the Greek word "episteme," meaning "knowledge." It thus refers to phenomena or concepts associated with the acquisition, structure, and validation of knowledge. In contrast, epistemology as a philosophical discipline focuses on a more specific concept within the epistemic framework, concentrating on the theoretical foundation of knowledge. Regarding the distinction between epistemological and epistemic violence, Brunner notes that epistemological violence regards knowledge production as an isolated epistemological, purely academic problem (Brunner 2020, 79). While epistemological violence pertains to a specific form of violence in assessing scientificity, the concept of epistemic violence focuses on a hierarchization of knowledge by colonialism and capitalism (Brunner 2020, 78–79), as we will see later.

The concept of epistemic violence is employed in peace and conflict studies, feminist science criticism, and post- and decolonial theory, often without elaboration or theorization (Brunner 2020, 77–78). It finds its origin in feminist-postcolonial discourses by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985) (Brunner 2020, 77, 97 ff. Spivak 2003, 48 ff.). Here, Edward Said's work "Orientalism" served as a foundation for the feminist approach, and Foucault's analyses of violence through European modernity also contributed (Brunner 2020, 97, 124). In contrast to Foucault, Spivak abolishes the distinction between power and violence (Brunner 2020, 99). The feminist-postcolonial debates on the concept of epistemic violence ini-

tially aim to debunk the myth of a violence-free science: while science may seem to be the opposite of or the antidote to violence, the broader the concept of violence is understood, the more indications there are that science itself is part of the problem and violence (Brunner 2020, 13, 148).

While Spivak deals with colonialism, Vandana Shiva in her work "The Violence of Reductionist Science" focuses on capitalism. In earlier articles, I myself (albeit naively) addressed the connection between capitalism and the dominance of a rationalistic paradigm with reductionist features (Keilhack 2023), and therefore find her contribution relevant. Both colonialism and capitalism constitute a formative ideology that, among other things, governs the framework of knowledge production and thereby causes epistemic violence. In this chapter, the texts of Spivak and Shiva will be presented to locate the origin of the concept of epistemic violence before summarizing its characteristics and properties with the help of Claudia Brunner.

"Can the Subaltern Speak?"

The starting point of the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) is the suicide of the sister of Bhubanesware Bhaduri's grandmother, known as widow self-immolation in the context of colonial India, as an expression of resistance for national liberation (Spivak 2003, 58; Brunner 2020, 98). Spivak observes a hegemonic correlation between knowledge and violence, in which patriarchal, colonial, and local elites dominate knowledge production and science (Brunner 2020, 99). The widow self-immolation, as a sign against British colonial rule, was reinterpreted in the colonial knowledge hegemony by trivializing it as "the women wanted to die," undermining even the last protest attempt by women (Spivak 2003, 48–54). Spivak questions whether and ultimately argues against the idea that subalterns and women generally have the ability to speak for themselves (Spivak 2003; Brunner 2020, 100). A subaltern (Latin: *subalternus*, "subordinate", "of lower rank") is a person "without the flight line of social mobility" (Spivak 2003, 42), thus trapped in societal structures without upward mobility opportunities. In feminist criticism of Eurocentrism, the subaltern is involuntarily elevated to an autonomous subject capable of representing themselves (Brunner 2020, 100). The assertion of the subaltern's ability to speak for themselves is a romanticized notion and would ignore imperialism, racism, and discrimination in historical as well as contemporary situations (see Spivak 2003; Brunner 2020, 100).

According to Spivak, epistemic violence is the conscious exclusion of socially disadvantaged individuals from knowledge production under the repressive system of colonialism, the consequences of which persist to the present day (see Spivak 2003). Colonial knowledge hegemony especially results in the erasure of certain subjects, their invisibility, and the production of the social, while simultaneously aiming at the

reproduction and normalization of violence and oppression (Spivak 2003, 48, 50; Brunner 2020, 98–99).

"The Violence of Reductionist Science"

In her work "The Violence of Reductionist Science" (1987), Vandana Shiva examines the material aspect of epistemic violence arising from the system of capitalism (see Shiva 1987; Brunner 2020, 101 ff.). Epistemic violence is brought about by a scientific reductionism that correlates with capitalism as a form of economic organization and promotes exploitation, profit maximization, and capital accumulation (Shiva 1987, 246; Brunner 2020, 102). This reductionism refers, on the one hand, to humans' ability to perceive nature, disregarding alternative ways of knowledge; on the other hand, it pertains to nature's ability to recover and regenerate, treating nature as an inanimate object (Shiva 1987, 244; Brunner 2020, 102). Capitalism, through its paradigm of efficiency, would conceive a universal, value-neutral knowledge system (Shiva 1987, 246; Brunner 2020, 102). Shiva problematizes the dualism between natural sciences and politics, i.e., between material facts and values; she finds the origin of dualism in the Cartesian paradigm (see Shiva 1987, 245–46). In the context of imperialism and knowledge monopolies geared toward war, epistemic violence manifests in such a way that bearers, objects, recipients, and knowledge itself are harmed (see Brunner 2020, 103; Shiva 1987, 243–44). The epistemic and ontological influence of capitalism on the perception of nature is also a form of epistemic violence, even without a focus on war.

Coloniality of Being, Knowledge, and Power

Brunner divides epistemic violence into three levels: At the micro level, she analyzes the coloniality of being (Brunner 2020, 145 ff.). Concrete and clearly identifiable examples of this are racism and sexism (Brunner 2020, 132). Epistemic violence here particularly targets the bodies and physical beings of individuals who experience and/or perpetrate this violence because "[c]ategorizations such as gender, sexuality, and 'race' are inscribed into the body" (Brunner 2020, 275, 277, 278). At this level, epistemic violence is articulated through the "[1] unsaid, [2] said but unheard, [3] heard but not understood, [4] understood but not acknowledged," with conscious or unconscious intentions of suppression, invisibility, ignorance, and indifference (Brunner 2020, 278). Brunner embeds the maxim of the Enlightenment "Cogito, ergo sum" into the imperial and colonial project of modernity and understands the phrase as "I destroy, therefore I am" with the flip side "I am destroyed, therefore I am not" (Brunner 2020, 283).

At the meso level, she examines the coloniality of knowledge, which encompasses the nature and changeability of knowledge under the influence of capitalism and co-

lonialism (Brunner 2020, 145 ff.). This level of analysis deals with both the nature and effects of knowledge, as well as the modes of production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge (Brunner 2020, 285). Science plays a role in defining, legitimizing, and naturalizing violence (Brunner 2020, 275). The meso level also includes scientific reductionism, as named by Shiva (Brunner 2020, 287). An example is the hierarchization and universalization of languages, modes of speech, and written expressions (Brunner 2020, 145). Brunner also identifies globalized standardizations, such as in (digital) communication, as a strategy of universalization with the potential for epistemic violence (Brunner 2020, 286).

At the macro level, Brunner examines the coloniality of power, which includes value systems and tendencies such as Orientalism, Eurocentrism, Occidentalism, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and universalism (Brunner 2020, 145 ff.). The coloniality of power refers holistically to the project of modernity and the accompanying worldviews and self-understandings of division, order, and domination (Brunner 2020, 292). Drawing on the concept of "genocide," Brunner introduces the term "epistemicide" (see Brunner 2020, 292). All three levels are intertwined and cannot be thought of independently from each other.

Regarding whether this analytical triad would reproduce a traditional, Eurocentric order perspective in the sciences with regard to Christian dogmas, this triad would explore existing points of connection within scientific disciplines and reflect on them in terms of decolonization, according to Brunner (see Brunner 2020, 276).

In its execution against recipients, epistemic violence encompasses a repertoire of specific rhetorics: (1) Not being heard or not being listened to has already been addressed by Spivak as an issue where subalterns receive no voice, are simply invisible, and cannot participate in knowledge production (Spivak 2003, 42). (2) Silencing is a repressive method, among others, to disregard and erase subaltern knowledge in its production, distribution, and consumption (see Brunner 2020, 98, 125). (3) Ignoring the conditions of the emergence of (Western) knowledge fails to acknowledge the context of colonial rule and racism; instead, works from the colonial era are honored and celebrated in their disciplines (see Brunner 2020, 125). (4) Normalizing and justifying different forms of violence and prejudices lead to a constant reproduction of structural and cultural power dynamics and epistemic violence (see Brunner 2020, 16, 134, 144).

Globally, there is no uniform distribution of epistemic violence or power across structures, institutions, actors, and discourses (Brunner 2020, 274). Science and knowledge are related to asymmetrical inequalities, power, and domination (Brunner 2020, 9). Imperial colonialism and its ongoing consequences in the present form the ideological vehicle for material and intellectual asymmetry (see Brunner 2020, 274). The con-

cept of modernity as a colonial project of development was not only exported as knowledge in the form of (Western) content, epistemology, and ontology; modernity also manifested the West as the discursive and structural center of sciences, that is, Eurocentric knowledge production, while also serving the infrastructure of colonialism (see Brunner 2020, 274). The scientific discourse is often still led by white men, colonizers, and local elites (see, among others, Brunner 2020, 99; see Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 96; see Spivak 2003, 52).

Lastly, epistemic violence is based on a broad conception of violence (see Brunner 2020, 10, 148–50), which many readers likely primarily associate with physical violence. Now the normative question arises of whether hegemony in science should be referred to as violence. Brunner responds that, on the one hand, the determination of the concept of epistemic violence should be made from the perspective of the affected victims and, on the other hand, that more attention should be paid to the socioepistemic circumstances of the dynamics of concealment (see Brunner 2020, 97). Dissolving the differences between power and violence opens up opportunities for a new sensitivity in examining epistemic relationships (see Brunner 2020, 15).

Epistemic Violence in the Context of Digitalization

This chapter identifies forms of epistemic violence within intranational and international power dynamics using the example of digitalization, particularly in postcolonial India. For this purpose, I utilize the above-defined concept of epistemic violence and exclusively examine it in the literature of Sahana Udupa and Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan in the context of digitalization.

Intranational Power Dynamics

The process of digitalization was understood at the turn of the century under the rubric of democratization, not least because the internet and information & communication technologies enabled all users to participate, even giving them a voice, and propagated Western values. Regarding digitalization in the People's Republic of China, the West expected the autocratic state to bow to freedom of expression through the media landscape. On the contrary, the Chinese government managed to control the internet and media in their country through the so-called "Great Firewall," censoring content, among other things (Franz et al. 2022; Knödler and Dér-Hörmeier 2023). Similar tendencies can also be observed in postcolonial India: The Hindu nationalist, conservative Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is accused of using digital practices for propaganda purposes against religious minorities and also censoring certain content (see Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 97 ff.). A sad irony is that the Indian government, for political reasons, drew inspiration from colonial practices and replicated

them to provoke the homogenization of the Hindu community on one hand and to exclude Muslim minorities on the other hand (see Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 120, 122).

The introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019 legitimizes the deportation or imprisonment of illegal immigrants in India but guarantees certain accommodations for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians; however, it discriminates against Muslim minorities without sufficient residence permits or documentation (BBC News 2019; Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 119–20). In addition to censoring, for example, topless men, smoking, etc., in Indian media to maintain cultural norms, the visibility of protests against the CAA in December 2019 was also reduced and eventually censored (Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 120). Disinformation campaigns and fake news during the Covid pandemic and social media campaigns by political parties exacerbate the problem of increasing Islamophobia in India (Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 121). These digital practices aimed at discriminating against a marginalized population fall into the category of epistemic violence, provided that colonial power structures are considered as the starting point. Epistemic violence is a contentious term, particularly with a focus on the West in the context of colonialism.

International Power Dynamics

While the application of the concept of epistemic violence in the political framework of India is complex, this violence persists within colonial structures through international economic relations. Digitalization, as part of the project of modernity or modernization, taps into deep structures of colonialism and encompasses epistemological and ontological dimensions in the form of digital practices of data processing, such as the way data is categorized, classified, and ordered through Western taxonomies for the purpose of predicting consumer behavior (see, e.g., Ali 2016; Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 105–6). Critics of colonialism might argue that the efficient practices of capitalism, reflected, for example, in the commodification of personal data or the universality of programming languages, do not solely belong to the West but are voluntarily adopted by countries of the global South to benefit from the advantages of consumer economy. This assertion would be justified if there were no economic or material asymmetries between the West and countries of the global South, which manifest in the form of data relations. With the concept of "captur[ing]," Udupa portrays not only an economic power imbalance induced by capitalism but also a structural problem of current data relations reminiscent of historical colonialism (see Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 97 ff.). Given Silicon Valley's position as the center of digital development and research, Udupa exposes parallels between the historical colonialism and the current situation in the practice of appropriation: While colonial

powers appropriated objects and displayed them in museums, today Western corporations systematically collect personal data without users' knowledge or consent (Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 98–100). Below, I discuss some levels of epistemic violence in the context of digitalization:

(A) There is no need for sophisticated argumentation to understand surveillance, i.e., the seizure of human experiences by big-data corporations through digital technologies, as epistemic violence: Personal data is precisely used as "proprietary behavioral surplus" to feed machine intelligence, analyze, predict, and modify consumer behavior of individuals and groups (Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 99). This capitalization of life as "reality mining" (Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 100, 102) targets the individual body of users at the micro level, reproduces and normalizes itself in science and economy at the meso level, and simultaneously propagates an ideological value system at the macro level. This one-sided surveillance causes epistemic violence through indifference and ignoring the conditions of dependency.

(B) The capitalist system serves global (labor) markets, which, from a historical perspective, are materially asymmetric due to the influence of imperial colonialism, among other things; access to cheap labor in countries of the global South allows for a differentiated division of labor between simple and complex tasks. Capitalism without political restrictions led to exploitation, the emergence of a digital proletariat, and the reproduction of a white, male tech elite (see Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 96). Considering the latent correlation between race on one hand and work, hierarchy, and (labor) risk on the other hand (Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 108), epistemic violence arises through division of labor, where a white elite forms the moral center and subalterns remain in poverty. Here again, division of labor attacks the individual body at the micro level, naturalizes global labor relations through a capitalist logic at the meso level, and confirms structural racism, among other things, in a material way at the macro level. On all three levels, workers are exposed to this epistemic violence without protection, especially since their objections and protests are not heard.

(C) In the system of data processing, there is no uniform, equal influence on people; on the contrary, algorithms, such as search engines and other information infrastructures, perpetuate discrimination and racism (Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 105–6). Algorithms and artificial intelligence are never neutral but products of social, technical, and political decisions and training data (O'Neil 2017; Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 105–6). For example, marketing campaigns directly target black populations through advertisements featuring black actors to tap into new markets and/or create a "hip" image; yet, through the deliberate use of race, ethnicity, and gender, they create, replicate, and confirm enduring, constant characteristics that can be measured, traded, and sold (Udupa and Dattatreyan 2023, 106). Racism and discrimination ad-

dressed at the individual body on the micro level are inscribed into a code on the meso level without the possibility of change by subalterns, confirming an outdated value system on the macro level, naturalizing it, and distributing it again for consumption.

However, I perceive a general dilemma regarding the representation of and dealing with minorities: Should minorities be treated "not despite their differences the same but because of these differences differently" in line with multiculturalism (Kymlicka 1990, 327 ff.), or should the enduring characteristics of race, ethnicity, and gender be artificially ignored through a so-called "woke washing" (see Joe 2023)? In both cases, these characteristics emerge. Unfortunately, this issue is not reflected in the economy. Racism or discrimination induced by algorithms causes epistemic violence by fixing and naturalizing racism, which subaltern individuals cannot influence retroactively. Often, discourse is conducted about minorities rather than with them.

(D) Online communication platforms are often used to spread hatred and violence (Udupa and Dattatreya 2023, 118). In AI-assisted content moderation, it is currently not possible to adhere to the standards of protective mechanisms and measures for minorities for the detection and prevention of extreme speech on social platforms (Udupa and Dattatreya 2023, 117). AI assistants are limited to economically influential languages due to their training data and therefore bring unwanted side effects of many blind spots in the digital communication space, so that "not all hate speech is treated equally" (Udupa and Dattatreya 2023, 114, 117). Social platforms also cause epistemic violence where they lose control over their functions; as partial responsible parties on the meso level of knowledge production, they provide a distribution basis for hate speech. Epistemic violence particularly establishes itself against vulnerable minorities on the micro level when they are exposed to it and cannot defend themselves due to their position. Social platforms that mediate intranational conflicts bear partial responsibility for effects such as the confirmation and naturalization of racism and discrimination on the macro level. Less problematic in the situation of powerlessness is the ability to silence, as the effect that minorities are not heard in digital discourse and experience disadvantages in effectively reporting grievances (see Udupa and Dattatreya 2023, 117).

Conclusion

By using Marx's concept of ideology (Bluhm and Bohlender 2010) to describe imperial colonialism, its dynamics can be reassured: colonialism aims at the reproduction, legitimization, and naturalization of unequal power relations (Brunner 2020, 274–75). Capitalism, alongside colonialism, serves as the instrument of execution, following an internal logic where, among other things, a rationalistic mindset (Keilhack 2023)

reduces nature to an inanimate object for efficiency reasons (Shiva 1987) or objectifies it as worthless matter (cf. Marx 1962, 55); this objectification process as an evaluative moment is outsourced through division of labor to countries in the Global South (Hornborg 2014, 132). Capitalism thus influences perception of and relationship with nature. Colonialism and capitalism together form an infrastructure of extraction and imposition; they are at the center of feminist, post-colonial criticism, and debates on the concept of epistemic violence (Brunner 2020, 144).

Epistemic violence occurs in the context of digitalization, both in intranational and international power relations as a colonial project of modernity. It encompasses (A) surveillance and knowledge monopoly for commercial use of personal data, (B) division of labor through a capitalist logic and exploitation of the historical consequences of colonialism, (C) discrimination and algorithm-induced racism, (D) lack of protective measures for minorities. The coloniality of being, knowledge, and power can be analyzed using Brunner's theorization of the concept of epistemic violence on the micro, meso, and macro levels. Epistemic violence harms the bodies of those affected, contributes to the nature of knowledge, and creates a persistent value system. The rhetoric of violence operates through (1) not being heard, (2) silencing, (3) ignoring the conditions of its emergence, and (4) normalizing and justifying violence.

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