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Power, Knowledge, and Epistemic Delinking

Abstract: In this paper I shall argue that radical epistemic delinking has a key role in liberation from the “colonial matrix of power” as well as the change in the existing global power relations which are based in the colonialism and maintained through exploitation, expropriation and construction of the (racial) Other. Those power relations render certain bodies and spaces as (epistemologically) irrelevant. In order to discuss possible models of struggle against such condition, firstly I have addressed the relation between de-colonial theories and postcolonial studies, arguing that decolonial positions are both historicising and re-politicising the postcolonial theory. In my central argument I have focused on the epistemic delinking and political implications of decolonial turn. With reference to Grada Killomba I have argued for the struggle against epistemic violence through decolonising knowledge. Decolonising knowledge requires delinking from Eurocentric model of knowledge production and radical dismantling the existing hierarchies among different knowledge. It requires recognition of the ‘Other epistemologies’ and ‘Other knowledge’ as well as liberation from Western disciplinary and methodological limitations. One of the main goals of decolonial project is delinking from the “colonial matrix of power”. However, delinking is not required only in the areas of economy and politics but also in the field of epistemology.

Keywords: decoloniality, modernity, capitalism, delinking, epistemology, Eurocentrism

Racialization as Extended Colonization

In order to explain the relation between historical period of colonialism and contemporary relations of power Peruvian theorist Anibal Quijano articulated the concept of “colonial matrix of power”. This colonial matrix of power designates how the hegemonic structures of power and control established during the colonial times are being reproduced and maintained in the present times. This means that after the historical project of colonialism, colonial power relations based on subordination, exploitation and expropriation of territories and resources are continuously at work in the present-day global context. Moreover, the colonial matrix of power precisely describes the set of socio-political circumstances that offer the best environment for functioning of the contemporary neoliberal global capitalism.

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As Quijano explains, global capitalism presents the culmination of the process initiated with the establishing of America and Eurocentric colonial modern capitalism as new order of power.¹ This means that coloniality is not simply a result of any kind of colonial power but has its origins precisely in the specific social and historical context of the concurring of the Americas,² when capitalism (as already existing form of economic, production and labor relations) has become firmly intertwined with mechanisms of domination and subordination, that will be then disseminated to the other geopolitical spaces.³ For establishing this new colonial capitalist order the process of racialization had a key role: “One of the fundamental axes of this model of power is the social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism. The racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established. Therefore, the model of power that is globally hegemonic today presupposes an element of coloniality.”⁴

Following Quijano, the concept of race in its contemporary sense has only been established with colonization of Americas when conquistadors created mental conception about indigenous people as the other that is *biologically different*. Based on this construction of biological difference they were placed in a *naturally inferior position*. In this way *via* the construction of the mental concept of race new model of power has been established which enabled the violent procedures in which firstly the populations of Americas and then those of the world, have been segregated in the status of domination as subordination based on the order that has been presented as ‘natural’.⁵ Through the colonization of history and the colonization of time the idea of indigenous people as ‘primitive’ and ‘undeveloped’ has been established. This monstrous conception that has prevailed over time has been based in the twofold process of racialization: at one hand it focused on the morphological differences, and on the other hand on the cultural and civilizational specificities, that typically for the colonial discourse, have not been recognized as differences but as a lower level of biological development.

All of the above has opened the space for dehumanization of racialized subjects. In other words, dehumanization was a necessary element in achieving a total subjugation and exploitation. When the racially other has been established as if on a lower level of development than a human – and for colonialists the real humans were only white Christians – it was possible to introduce new order of power based on dehumanization into the historical project of modernity.

¹ Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, 3 (2000): 533.

² Since the term America is commonly misused with the meaning of North America i.e. USA here we shall use the plural Americas in order to point to North, Central and South Americas.

³ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” *Cultural Studies* 21, 2–3 (2007): 243.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Quijano, “Coloniality of Power,” 534.

This brief historical recapitulation precisely exposes that contemporary racism is direct consequence of historical colonialism. Therefore we can conclude that racialization is directly inscribed into the present day global capitalism which is firmly entangled with the colonial matrix of power. This reveals the world order where human life is understood as a social relation which is not outside of the capital but is a part of a global process of exploitation. The capital is entangled with political power and political power is entangled with capital or as Marina Gržinić elaborated: “We are in the middle of a voracious, unrestrained capitalism (that is again called ‘late capitalism’, as it was in 1984 when F. Jameson started his discussion about postmodernism and multinational capitalism) – a financial capitalism, that is more than just a cultural condition, it is our reality. But what is the relation between capitalism and reality? Santiago López Petit, in his online essay published in Spanish ‘Reivindicación del odio libre para una época global’ (2008)⁶ argues that reality has gone totally capitalist.”⁷

As explained by Gržinić, the reality of global age relates to globalization as a total process which has created a network of interconnected functional relations, connecting the simultaneous reterritorialization and deterritorialization, i.e. integration and fragmentation. In other words: we are living in a world where capitalism is equaled with the reality. In this context decolonial approach opens the possibility for imagining different possible presents, through the call and struggle for de-linking the reality from capitalism.

Epistemic Delinking

The first step towards a decolonial thinking requires epistemic delinking from the Eurocentric knowledge. It is important to understand that this is not some kind of empty theoretical move: on the contrary, it is a concrete political struggle against the colonial epistemic violence. Colonialism connected the concepts of knowledge and science with the authority of power and race by establishing the hegemony of western Eurocentric model of knowledge as the only valid one. This hegemony has survived the historic colonialism and maintained till present day.

Through a set of simple but precise questions Grada Kilomba, Afro-Portuguese theorist, psychoanalyst and writer, reveals how the mechanism of epistemic violence functions: “What knowledge is being acknowledged as such? And what knowledge is not? What knowledge has been made a part of academic agendas? And what knowledge has not? Whose knowledge is this? Who is acknowledged to have the knowledge? And who is now? Who can teach knowledge? And who cannot? Who is at the centre? And who remains outside at the margins?”⁸

⁶ Quoted by M. Gržinić from Santiago López Petit, “Reivindicación del odio libre para una época global [Claiming free hate for a global age],” 2008, <http://sindominio.net/spip/espaenblanc/Reivindicacion-del-odio-libre-para.html>, accessed February 10, 2017.

⁷ Marina Gržinić, “Subjectivization, Biopolitics and Necropolitics: Where do We Stand?,” *Reartikulacija* 6 (2009): 22.

⁸ Grada Kilomba, *Plantation Memories. Episodes of Everyday Racism* (Münster: UNRAST, 2010), 27.

These questions reflect the critique of white hegemonic academic discourse and rhetoric that pushes the other knowledge back to the margins, by recognizing it as some kind of deviant 'non-scientific' knowledge as opposed to the white normative 'scientific' discourse that remains at the (academic) center. Grada Kilomba locates the dichotomies – through which this rhetoric of hegemony and hierarchies is being established – between the so called scientific discourse on the one hand and the negative designation attributed to the colonized subject on the other. She presents this epistemic conflict schematically, in the following way:

universal / specific;
objective / subjective;
neutral / personal;
racional / emotional;
impartial / partial
they have facts, we have opinions;
they have knowledge, we have experiences.⁹

In these dichotomies Kilomba recognizes the epistemic violence that supports the white supremacy (in the academia as much as outside of it) and serves to maintain the established colonial hierarchical positions which determine who can speak and whose speech is rendered as irrelevant and / or of lesser importance.¹⁰

Therefore, the demand for epistemic delinking is the demand for fundamental rupture with the modernist universalist concept of totality. In this regard, decolonial positions do refer to the radical emancipatory ideas such as Marx's idea of proletarian revolution and Michael Hardt's, and Antonio Negri's concept of multitude, as well as different post-structuralist, postmodern and postcolonial theories. However this theoretical formation is not enough for the radical delinking from the coloniality and modernity, therefore it needs to be updated with the decolonial project. According to Walter Dignolo the concept of delinking designates the practices that tend to overcome the limitations of Marxist universalistic project which does indeed offer radical emancipation, but nevertheless remains within the rhetoric of modernism and logics of coloniality.¹¹ In other words, Marxist political and economic approach to delinking would not be conceptualized enough, because it does not penetrate the fundamental level of thought – it fails to overtake the epistemic power. On the other hand, postcolonial theories developed by thinkers like Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha and others includes the epistemological questioning of the idea of totality and critique of modernity. However their intensive epistemological reflections stay somewhat too abstract. Dignolo's polemic critique emphasizes that those

⁹ Ibid, 28.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Pheng Cheah, *The Limits of Thinking in Decolonial Strategies*, <http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/article10.shtml> 12/09/2006.

theories still remain all too embedded in poststructuralism (Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, etc.) and as such still belong to the European project of transformations within the academia. In other words, we could say that the challenge is how to escape the vicious cycle of Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism i.e. how can we imagine a new epistemology? In this regard decolonial theories offered a new contemporary standpoint for repoliticization and historicization of decolonial studies.

Unlike the postcolonial studies, decolonial positions focus on various sources from Africa, Latin America and Asia that could entail a radical political epistemological turn.¹² This means that the experiences of decolonisation and anti-colonial struggles of the subjects that Franc Fanon named The Wretched of the Earth (*Les Damnés de la Terre*) need to be situated within a new epistemological frame. In this regard Mignolo offers a rather unusual understanding that epistemological needs to have a material dimension which is not the same as the materiality of the structures of political economy. This materiality of epistemological is precisely the embodied experience of those who have been excluded from the process of knowledge production throughout the modernity by colonialism and racialization.¹³ This means that epistemic delinking is related to geopolitics as well as to a specific embodied knowledge. How is the place of power understood in such epistemology?

The problem of epistemic delinking is connected to the logocentrism of power and governmentality. This is the logic of coloniality which needs to be confronted and contested by decoloniality. Delinking from colonial matrix of power does not mean that we need to dismiss the modernity as a widespread concept, but suggests a new kind of border thinking and border epistemology. This means that the project of epistemic delinking recognizes the western corpus of knowledge (which is inevitably present and often relevant), but at the same time recognizes its limitations which become dangerous when places in the epistemic power relations where it is established as universal and the only valid model of knowledge. Moreover, coloniality with its universalism and its blindness for vast majority of knowledge outside of the western canon can be seen in terms of a failure of knowledge, thought and logic. The modern/colonial understanding of history as well as of the present global relations is embedded in a model of thinking that is dangerous and / or wrong. Therefore the logic of modernity needs to be 'fixed' through the intervention by other logics originating in multitude of diverse subjects that have been excluded and / or conquered by colonialism. Decoloniality presupposes the shift in the geopolitics of knowledge that would lead to establishing epistemic pluri-versality. This concept supposes the world in which many worlds co-exist, opening the possibilities for inter-epistemic and intercultural dialogues based on experiences of modern-colonial societies. It calls for abolishing of the hierarchies between different epistemologies, where other formation of knowledge with its specific sources and methodologies are not less valid of

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Walter Mignolo, *The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference*, 2003, http://www.unice.fr/crookall-cours/iup_geopoli/docs/Geopolitics.pdf, accessed May 5, 2016.

‘not scientific enough.’ The world in which epistemologies include material embodied knowledge as a lived historical embodied experience.

However, this process is not easy and still faces strong resistance on different levels and instances. Contemporary knowledge is controlled by the reproduction of the colonial matrix of power in the name of development, technological advancement and the privileges of economic and military progress. It is the knowledge based on the Eurocentric model of the observer that cannot be observed. Nevertheless, instead of pluri-versality we are offered the neoliberal concept of pluralism, compliant with free market, new-age esotericism, and repetition of grand colonial gesture *via* cultural appropriation. According to Walter Mignolo: “The naturalized belief that is now spread around the world is that progress and development is good for all; the more you produce and the more people consume, the happier they – the consumers – are. Within that structure, those who are in it live to work; live to consume. Success is the final horizon.”¹⁴

A society in which people are taught from an early age through education, family, media and social environment that personal success is the ultimate goal and are encouraged by all means to accumulate wealth and prestige, which becomes the final purpose unto itself, is a sick and dangerous society. The system of values promoted by this kind of society consists of living and doing better than others instead of doing to live well with the others.

What I want to emphasize here is the fact that these mechanisms are by no means hidden, but on the contrary, are made as obvious as possible in order to produce the general climate that living to work and consume is the only alternative. It appears that the problem is not in the dim awareness of the exploitation, but in the fact that it is perceived as the only alternative. As long as we act as if there is “only one game in town” – and that’s how the colonial matrix of power has taught us to think – no matter how radical a critique we endure, we’ll still be trapped inside the system. Therefore, we need to re-think the way that capitalism controls subjectivities and explore the possibilities of how to de-link from the forms of life that it imposes.

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¹⁴ Marina Gržinić, conversation with Walter Mignolo, “De-linking Epistemology from Capital and Pluriversality,” *Intersections* (Wien: Locker, 2009), 88.

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