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Epistemic violence in the time of coronavirus: From the legacy of the western limits of Spivak's 'can the subaltern speak' to an alternative to the 'neoliberal model of development'

Spivak's essay 'Can the subaltern speak', published in the widely influential collection 'Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture', is a seminal account of 'epistemic violence' (Spivak, 1988). It is also a founding text of post-colonial studies and closely links with intersectionality theory. While productively innovative in its time, Spivak's essay reflects both strengths and weaknesses of French post-structural theory and, relatedly, in her reading of Gramsci's concept of the 'subaltern'. In a way, Spivak's text itself exemplifies, but also reveals the limits of, its own argument. That is, Spivak's seminal work uncritically absorbs elements of colonial discourse in the form of French post-structural thinking in order to make her innovative argument that colonial discourse prevents the subaltern from having an authentic voice. This ambiguous inheritance also drives shortcomings of postcolonial studies and related fields that struggle to come to grips with the specific forms of epistemic violence in this present era of neoliberal globalisation and the coronavirus.

Postcolonial theory keenly appreciates, like Marx but especially like Derrida, the power of the spectre in the present. Included in this spectre is intellectual baggage brought from the past to which we remain 'attached' to, in the Buddhist sense, in the present. Following a theme of Whitehead's (1932) *Science in the Modern World*, this baggage from the past can become a set of unconscious assumptions that also prevent us from seeing what is specific and novel about the present. This short editorial contends that Spivak's work on epistemic violence and the subaltern is constrained by its post-structural perspective, which in turn constrains contemporary postcolonial theory. It follows that post-colonial studies, and a number of related fields referred to below, need to reconsider their inherited conceptual apparatuses and temporal frames, if they are to respond adequately to the forms of epistemic violence imposed on the "subaltern" by the catastrophic planetary consequences of the "neoliberal model of development" (Neilson, 2020). Further, this paper introduces an alternative approach that addresses the contemporary neoliberal forms of epistemic violence, and that seeks a path towards a counter-hegemonic alternative that integrally includes "cosmopolitan knowledge" (Neilson, 2020a).

The revisionist neo-Marxist agenda introduced here seeks to avoid repeating the "boyish" mistakes of Chibber's (2013) Marxist critique of postcolonial studies, *Postcolonial theory and the spectre of Capital* published by Verso with fanfare, which led Spivak to deploy her formidable intellectual armoury to put him in his place (Spivak, 2014). Let me be clear, I speak to the European roots of Spivak's perspective, which I contend have become baggage that has travelled with consequences into the present. I do not pretend to be able to speak seriously to the roots of Spivak's work that are outside of Europe, or to the literature that connects her works with such important histories and cultures. More narrowly, the research agenda introduced here proposes a pathway that goes beyond both the French post-structural limits of Spivak's approach and the limits of the normal science academic Marxism of Eric Olin Wright's student Chibber.

In her innovative text, Spivak creatively adapts, but also reproduces the limitations of, Gramsci's (1971) original texts on "subaltern". A key reason why interpretations of these writings can have this double nature is their unfinished conceptual specification. Gramsci's profound analyses are, after all, coded *notes* penned in prison. The "best sense" adaption of "subaltern" that Spivak deploys concerns Gramsci's theory of workers' "contradictory consciousness" that arises in the context of hegemonic forms of class struggle in capitalist democracies. For Gramsci, the prevailing mid-range hegemony is one in which the hearts and minds of the majority of the members of the "subaltern classes" have been won over to a specific capitalist accumulation project that has interlocking material and ideological dimensions. Gramsci refers to the stratum of intellectuals that construct and transmit the ideology of the hegemonic project that becomes established once embedded in the "common sense" of the subaltern classes. He also refers to the "war of [ideological] position" between the agents of hegemonic and counter hegemonic projects. Gramsci's analysis thus brings intellectuals centre stage.

Spivak's concept of "epistemic violence" resonates specifically with Gramsci's notes concerning the ways that the hegemonic ideology blocks development of the authentic experiential knowledge generated by subaltern classes' everyday life. Gramsci (1971) argues that the workers' direct experience and their ideologically inherited "common sense" comprises a "contradictory consciousness". That is, their lived experience of exploitation is blocked from development by the hegemonic ideology that denies exploitation. This contradictory situation "influences moral conduct and the direction of will" in a way that "does not permit of any action, any decision or choice, and produces a condition of moral and political passivity" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 333). It follows that the task of the theoretical and organic intellectuals of the subaltern classes in the war of position is to draw out the "best sense" of their "spontaneous philosophy" and make it "ideologically coherent" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 421).

Spivak's specific adaption of Gramsci's "contradictory consciousness" argument as a mode of epistemic violence refers to the ways colonial reasoning undermines possibilities of an authentic discourse for Indian women. Their double cultural subordination to the ruling alliance of dominant local and colonizing institutions and discourses means the subaltern cannot speak or be heard. The development and expression of their authentic experiential knowledge is blocked and misrepresented in the discourses of intellectuals and researchers who are not only just second-hand observers but who are also themselves imbued with neo-colonial ways of thinking.

Spivak (2014, p. 188) explicitly sources her view of the subaltern in Gramsci's notes on the "history of the subaltern classes" (see Gramsci, 1971, pp. 52–124). However, this section of the *Prison Notebooks* demonstrates how Gramsci's lack of tight conceptual and methodological specification can also be a problem. Specifically, it provides a historical sketch that illustrates political processes linked with the formation of a "social bloc". However, Gramsci's notes specify, but do not follow through on, what he views as the first methodological step of class analysis, investigation into "the objective formation of the subaltern social groups, by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic reproduction" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 52).

Spivak is of course keenly aware that Gramsci's notes are undeveloped, but her seminal text on the subaltern reproduces this lack of development of Gramsci's first methodological criterion that is central to Marxist class-in-itself theory. However, the problem does not lie with Spivak. The best Marxist class theory available at this time (see Poulantzas (1975) Althusserian neo-Marxist class theory and Chibber's teacher Wright's (1976) version) did not offer a conceptual framework adequate for her task. Not only, as Spivak also keenly recognises, does this now normal science neo-Marxist class theory not adequately address Gramsci's implicit departure from the grand class homogeneity thesis of the *Communist Manifesto* (Neilson, 2015, 2018, 2020a). As well, neither Gramsci nor first generation neo-Marxism address what we now call intersectionality theory.

A better source, methodologically and politically, for Spivak's analysis of the epistemic violence forced upon subaltern Indian women is the Combahee River Collective's (2017, p. 15) seminal statement of Intersectionality theory. "[W]e are actively committed to struggling against

racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking”.

However, therein is raised another problem. In the traveling from its roots in the representation of the intersectional subject location of subordinated African American women to middle class white feminists in the neoliberal academy, the unconscious alignment of intersectionality theory with Weberian stratification theory has become more explicit (Salem, 2018). While this alignment is not unproductive, it speaks to another set of limits. The problem with intersectionality theory, and that finds its original expression in Weberian stratification theory, is treating class, race and gender as the status equivalent dimensions of a unilateral power structure, and correspondingly, its lack of an analysis of the “class-in-itself effects” arising from capitalism’s organic terrain of economic reproduction (Neilson, 2018).

Spivak’s analysis is not Weberian and in her seminal analysis of the subaltern and in later texts there is a Marxist edge to her discussions of the subaltern. However, because of an understandable disenchantment with Marxist class theory that fails to address race and gender adequately, by default her perspective can be incorporated into Intersectional theory that aligns with Weberian stratification theory. The Weberian aligned strength of intersectional forms of analysis, and that also characterises postcolonial theory, is concern with the ways that dominant raced and gendered discourses and institutions systematically lead to epistemic violence in terms of the allocation of subaltern groups, using Weberian terminology, to lower positions in the dominant hierarchy. However, like Weberian stratification theory generally and including Bourdieu’s brilliant neo-Weberian analysis, such analysis is weak on the “class-in-itself effects” of capitalist social relations of production (Neilson, 2018).

More generally, the limits of post-colonial studies today reflect the paucity of Marxist political economists that constructively interact with Gramsci or French post-structural thinking. The post-colonial perspective is very powerful around Derrida’s post-structural theme of the spectre, i.e., the legacy of the past that lives on beyond its time through dominant institutions and persisting epistemes, and that continues to inflict real violence on the social life of subaltern social groups in the present. However, the post-colonial perspective lacks well-developed class and political economic analyses of the contemporary political economy of neoliberal-led global capitalism. The problem lies with key perspectives that align with post-colonial studies and the French academy that are constrained by seeing the present world through the lenses of paradigms that, though importantly identifying elements of continuity of the present with the past, remain limited by the discourse and practices of a previous era.

Postcolonial theory connects with theories of uneven development that articulate the subaltern post-colonial experience occurring on capitalism’s periphery with the western Marxism of the metropole (see Amin, 1976) and as similarly expressed in Wallerstein’s ‘world capitalism’ reading. However, they are constrained by their pre-neoliberal Empire mode of analysis that does not simply accord with this neoliberal present world. Similarly, exponents of French Regulation School (FRS) mid-range political economy who produced innovative work on the post WWII “Fordist model of development” are constrained in the present by their “attachment” to first generation assumptions and analysis. That is, they view the present as “after-Fordist” and without “regulation” or a “model of development”, thus reflecting their “attachment” to the past and, correspondingly, their resistance to revising their most potent concepts for deployment in the vastly different contemporary world driven by the neoliberal project, and beyond (see Neilson, 2012, 2020). In addition, although paying “homage” to Gramsci’s pioneering work on “Fordism”, the FRS seem unaware of the disjuncture between French post structural thinking, especially as driven by Althusser’s seminal Marxist version, and Gramsci’s (1971) view of Marxism as the “Philosophy of Praxis”. The problem is that Althusser’s “rebel sons” in the FRS are not that rebellious at all insofar as they remain hamstrung by their attachment to Althusser’s Marxism without praxis.

Althusser's theory of the "epistemological break" effectively removes subjectivity and agency from Marxism. That is, he dismisses Marx's early work that brings in subjectivity centrally including praxis and, correspondingly, celebrates Marx's mature work as a "science" because it outlines a "process without a subject" (Neilson, 2017). Especially significant is how Althusser and his followers absolve intellectuals from taking responsibility for playing their part in the making of history. The spectre of Althusser's denial of the subject in his theory of an epistemological break in Marx's writings reverberates in the absence of conscious projects that can overcome epistemic violence to this day.

First, Althusser's Marxism does violence in the present because of its denial of Marx's praxis approach. Although "the past weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living in circumstances not of their choosing", Marx is still clear that "people make history" (Marx, 1973). In a number of places, and not just in the early writing, Marx makes this kind of statement, and also brings in the role of intellectuals and their knowledge for making history. The original thesis eleven statement of praxis is that the "the point of knowledge is to change the world". In the *Communist Manifesto* he with Engels exhort "communists" to point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat" (Marx & Engels, 1969, p. 61). In *Capital* Vol. 1's "bees and architects" tale, Marx (1976, pp. 283–284) offers a profound sketch of a trans-historical ontology that makes the intentional form of the human intellect central to the whole trajectory of human civilisation.

Althusser's denial of the subject in Marxist science also aligns it with the epistemic violence implied by western social science's general denial of its own subjectivity, while inversely, with its claim of the non-objective subjectivity of non-western forms of knowledge (Held, 2020, Neilson, 2020b). Moreover, by denying the causal role of intellectuals and knowledge in the making of history, Althusser has effectively blocked advancement of the knowledge needed to make a "social bloc" and integrally, to design of a counter-hegemonic project. More specifically, the French Regulation School's inheritance of Althusser's denial of the subject has removed from its legitimate consideration the possibility of intentionally designing a blueprint for a "counter hegemonic model of development".

All these limits are reflected in an inadequate reading of the latest and most devastating version of epistemic violence that has been imposed on the world by western capitalist reasoning that takes the form of the "neoliberal model of development" (Neilson, 2012, 2020). By pushing its intentionally designed national regulatory template on to the countries of the entire planet, the agents of the neoliberal project have effectively created a single global market regulatory architecture for the capitalist mode of production. This neoliberal model of development has institutionally facilitated the planetary dominance of globally networked capitalist production and into which all national localities are integrated and made dependent. Further, in this world of zero-sum competition due to the growing scarcity of capital implied by the growth of a "relative surplus population", nation states have been transformed into "competition states" (Marx, 1976, Neilson & Stubbs, 2011, Neilson, 2012). Generated by this aggressively global form of capitalism's "coercive whip of competition" (Marx, 1976) amongst "warring siblings" (Marx, 1969) are not only global market dependence, recurring economic crises, a zero-sum competition logic of intensifying uneven development, impending ecocatastrophe, and "regressive nationalism" (Neilson, 2020, 2020c). Inscribed in its logic is also the virus that is spreading to the four corners of the planet as I write.

In this world all people and places are linked to and dependent on their place within a globally networked system of capitalist production and exchange. This global system is a lot like the old inflexible Fordist system of mass production where the single purpose machine locations of each worker are the mutually dependent elements of a single moving mechanism, and when one link in this chain breaks down then the whole system breaks down. Under neoliberal-led global capitalism, a "third international division of labour" of specialised production includes the segmentation of labour processes across the world just to produce a single commodity.

Nation states across the entire planet have become locked into and dependent on the smooth functioning of this single integrated system of capital accumulation, and on finding a competitive location within it. The dependence of nation states on global capitalism thus extends to both production and trade. However, like with the Fordist system of mass production, a local dysfunction can imply the breakdown of the whole system. Further, like the Fordist labour process, systemic breakdown also implies local breakdown everywhere because each location is system-dependent and unable to sustain itself autonomously.

The present viral-led breakdown that developed in a single location has spread across the entire planet. In turn, because of their global market capitalist dependence and corresponding lack of local self-sufficiency, nation states struggle to break from this system, but they must do if they are to avoid the worst of the contagion. Further, because it is also a system that drives deepening uneven development within and across countries, the least competitive countries and usually implying the least developed national health systems, will in the end be hit worst. The coronavirus pandemic is engulfing the whole world in an uneven process of a “specular”-like (Derrida) diffusion. It is already a large scale human catastrophe. Integrally, it reveals the deeply unstable and inflexible nature of this form of the capitalist mode of production, and simultaneously signals the onset of the deepest and most comprehensive economic crisis of human history. This time, the death knell of neoliberal-led global capitalism really does ring, but without a counter-hegemonic project, it only spells the continuation of a steady march to the abyss. Further, continuing denial of what this crisis really means by the agents and benefactors of neoliberal globalisation, and their continuing attachment to this “way of life” regardless of its devastating consequences for ordinary people, further intensifies the urgency to make an alternative.

However, there is no future in imagining a counter-hegemonic project in the form of a world of even development of the western industrial system appropriated by the global proletariat. This imaginary depicts a final triumph of modern western industry that integrally involves the triumph of western models of knowledge, science and truth over non-western ways of living and thinking. Beyond the epistemic violence of western knowledge that appropriates and suppresses non-western forms of knowledge, the democratic socialist project of the 21st century needs to imagine a complementary articulation of different forms of knowledge driving a march to a democratically cosmopolitan socialised knowledge (Neilson, 2013, 2020a, 2020b). More directly practical, such a counter hegemonic model of development requires a global project to create the conditions of a cooperative nationalism based in the global facilitation of flexibly self-sufficient sustainable local modes of economic reproduction. Such a model of development resonates with Sub Commandant Marcos’ vision of “a world within which many worlds can fit”. It also expresses a project of “glocalisation” where “thinking globally” means the democratic socialisation of cosmopolitan knowledge, and “acting locally” means the establishment of locally self-sustaining systems of production and distribution (Neilson, 2020, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

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