

On epistemic injustice and Eurocentrism: a defence of modern philosophy and social science. Towards a South-North epistemological dialogue.

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Abstract

This article analyses and evaluates the claim made by decolonial thinkers that modern philosophy and social science perpetuate "epistemic injustice" because of their inherent "Eurocentrism" and "coloniality". I argue that the claim is far too generalizing, both about the epistemic experience of colonized peoples and the extent of their epistemic subjugation, as well as about Western/European philosophy and social science. Furthermore, the issue of "Eurocentrism" as posited by decolonial thinkers is overstated and is not a serious epistemological problem in modern philosophy or social science. However, aspects of the decolonial critique raise questions about the use of certain concepts and modes of philosophical and social analysis in and about the global South, which should be concretely addressed in a dialogue between philosophers and social scientists of the global South and North.

Keywords

Decolonial theory, epistemic injustice, Eurocentrism, modern philosophy, social science.

Modern philosophy and social science are a rich and complex set of disciplines with a variety of concerns, ideas, concepts and theories, many of which are in tension and dispute. They explicitly or implicitly incorporate different ideological standpoints and values, which in turn lead to often conflicting analyses of philosophical and social problems as well as contrasting normative prescriptions (Mészáros, 1972; Harvey, 1974; Taylor, 1994; MacIntyre, 1998). However, according to decolonial theory (Alcoff, 2017; Mignolo, 2011; Grosfoguel, 2013; Lander, 2000) these areas of knowledge are collectively guilty (both historically and currently) of propagating and legitimizing a colonialist, imperialistic and "Eurocentric" view of the world, and of denying the validity of non-European forms of knowledge and ways of knowing, which amounts to what has become known as "epistemic injustice" and the "coloniality of knowledge". Philosopher Grant Silva writes, "With all of the treatises and discourses on the nature of human knowledge that fall within it, what is modern philosophy if not a series of apologia for the epistemic injustice of European colonization?" (Silva, 2019: 117), while Linda Alcoff maintains that Eurocentrism is central to the epistemic injustice wrought by modern philosophy "by assuming the non-negotiable legitimacy of a Western measuring stick, holding Western judgments, sensibilities, assumptions, norms, and conventions in place as the gatekeepers for philosophical inclusion" (Alcoff, 2017: 397). However, neither Silva nor Alcoff provide specific evidence in support of these highly generalizing claims.

This lack of evidence in support of what are often quite audacious claims is common across the decolonial literature. For example, Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Santiago Castro-Gómez, Ramón Grosfoguel, Walter Mignolo, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, among others, have made a series of highly problematic claims about Descartes, Hume and modern philosophy's and the social sciences' alleged epistemic influence upon and propagation of colonial domination and the ongoing "coloniality of knowledge". However, many of their questionable claims have gone unchallenged and are frequently uncritically repeated within the decolonial literature (see Chambers, 2019 and 2020). The thesis about the alleged epistemic injustice committed by modern philosophy and social science draws quite heavily on these thinkers (e.g. see Kidd *et al.* 2017) and is ultimately based on the coloniality of knowledge thesis originally put forward by the Latin American thinkers of the "giro decolonial".

Dan Wood points out that "contemporary universities in the United States in many respects depend upon and reinforce US imperialism. And insofar as philosophy functions as one discipline among others within such universities, it too maintains a variety of complex relations with imperial flows of capital and concepts both nationally and internationally" (Wood, 2018: 8). However, Wood's position is more nuanced than the "epistemic injustice"/"coloniality of knowledge" thesis put forward by Alcoff, Silva and others. He observes that philosophy's involvement in imperialism and colonialism is often ambiguous, pointing out that "there are cases in which a philosopher's oeuvre cannot be considered simply 'for' or 'against' imperialism" (Wood, 2019: 9), whilst also highlighting examples of racist attitudes in philosophers like Nietzsche and Kant. However, Wood does not equate philosophy's ambiguous relationship to imperialism and colonialism with "epistemic injustice".

Epistemic injustice committed by philosophy and social science

According to Rajeev Bhargava, epistemic injustice "occurs when the concepts and categories by which a people understand themselves and their world is [sic] replaced or adversely affected by the concepts and categories of colonizers" (Bhargava, 2013: 413). In relation to this, Silva (2019: 132) maintains that "In the Americas ... one confronts a complete and thorough colonization, one of both body and mind. Throughout the Americas, colonization eliminated or denigrated indigenous cultures altogether", whilst Boaventura de Sousa Santos claims: "The epistemological privilege that modern science grants to itself is ... the result of the destruction of all alternative knowledges that could eventually question such privilege. It is, in other words, a product of ... epistemicide" (de Sousa Santos, 2016: 243). However, these are hugely problematic generalizations and very little evidence is offered by either thinker in relation to this alleged all-encompassing "epistemological" colonization and "epistemicide". Even though there is no doubt that many of the colonizers justified their exploitation and murder of indigenous people by denying their humanity, their religious beliefs, etc., it is far too generalizing to claim that "science", or anything else for that matter, destroyed all

alternative knowledges and that the end result of this barbarism was a complete resetting of the minds of indigenous people and full-scale replacement of their conceptual schemes and modes of identity. This leaves no room for epistemic agency or autonomy of the colonized and also fails to account for how, if the epistemic subjugation of the colonized was so complete, there could have been resistance to the colonizers.

De Sousa Santos's claim that "modern science" as an entire set of complex and differing interests and practices "destroyed all alternative knowledges" is obviously historically false. Moreover, the accompanying claim made by many decolonial thinkers that Western science has universally denigrated indigenous knowledge and is based on the premise that it is the only valid form of knowledge is disproven by the views of one of the West's greatest scientific figures, Alexander von Humboldt. As Andrea Wulf points out:

Unlike most Europeans, Humboldt did not regard the indigenous people as barbaric, but instead was captivated by their culture, beliefs and languages. In fact, he talked about the 'barbarism of civilised man' when he saw how the local people were treated by colonists and missionaries. When Humboldt returned to Europe, he brought with him a completely new portrayal of the so-called 'savages'. (Wulf, 2016: 71)

Furthermore, in botanical missions in South America both scientists and colonizers depended on "Indian medical experts" (Cañizares-Esguerra and Cueto, 2002:19), which suggests they had no *epistemological* qualms, as such, about indigenous knowledge. The Spaniards were also astounded by the engineering, agricultural and artistic achievements of the Mexica (Mann, 2006), which implies they must at least have had some minimal respect for the inevitable knowledge (and different kinds of knowledge) these achievements implied. Thus, whilst "Science became central to imperial policies of economic control and exploitation", and "Western modes and styles of understanding the natural world became dominant and influenced all learned elite institutions in the region" (Cañizares-Esguerra and Cueto, 2002:19), it is important to differentiate between epistemic repression as a direct or indirect result of particular colonial policies - such as control of language and education - and epistemic repression deriving from something inherent in Western epistemological categories and attitudes.

Unquestioningly, the suppression of indigenous religious practices by the colonizers was a form of injustice (albeit carried out by missionaries and colonial administrators not scientists/philosophers), but to reduce indigenous people to their religious beliefs and practices is problematic. Whilst these beliefs and practices were often central to their self-understanding, the fact that often "the learned indigenous elite readily embraced Hispanic acculturation" (Cañizares-Esguerra and Cueto, 2002: 18-19) throws a different light on their mindset and relation to their own beliefs and practices, as well as to those of the colonizers.

Silva claims that "As epistemic injustice, colonization robbed many non-Western peoples of historically derived cognitive resources and supplanted them with either the perspective of the colonizer or a series of inferiority complexes that perpetuate the coloniality of knowledge" (Silva, 2019: 126). However, to speak for non-Western peoples in this generalizing way is to commit the same offense that modern philosophy and social science are accused of. I can assure Silva that the Nasa indigenous people of Colombia, for example, have no such "inferiority complex". However, Silva continues, "In such a predicament, colonized peoples find themselves limited to 'borrowing' from Western culture in ways that generate feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and epistemic despair, what I explain as the feeling of having little control over one's relationship to reason and knowledge production" (Silva, 2019: 122). Yet such a generalizing assertion speaks too readily for colonized peoples and ignores experiences like those, for example, of the Nasa or U'wa indigenous people of Colombia, or the Achuar and other indigenous groups of Ecuador, who have shown themselves perfectly capable of "control over [their] relationship to reason and knowledge production." Furthermore, these indigenous groups and many others are perfectly capable of engaging with certain concepts that originally were first systematically expressed and developed in Europe (such as the concepts of rights or sovereignty, which does not mean that such concepts were not already in use in some form in non-Western cultures) whilst adapting them and filtering them through their own conceptual schemes in order to resist forms of Western imperialism, be it economic, cultural or both.

This is not to say that some, maybe many, colonized people do not experience such "epistemic despair" and "inadequacy". However, we need to be careful about where we lay the blame for this. To suggest that it is due to the political and cultural impact of colonization is different to saying it is an inherent part of modern science or philosophy and Western/European modes of thinking. Of course, Western natural and social science and philosophy are part of the culture of the colonizing countries, but then so are music, literature, poetry, painting and many other things that we do not impugn in the same way or to the same degree in relation to "epistemic injustice" committed against the colonized. The hegemony of a Western lifestyle and culture around the globe is indeed, in my view, problematic and could be considered a form of cultural injustice, but I dissent from the decolonial thesis that modern philosophy and social science are complicit in this to such a degree that they need to be "decolonized".

"Decolonizing" philosophy

Silva claims:

... unless philosophy is decolonized, the type of subjectivity formation that accompanies the philosophical process can be oppressive and, in some sense, de-humanizing insofar as one has to give up the particularities of the self all the while philosophizing. In this sense, whereas Western philosophy

might not officially be in the business of colonization, the coloniality of knowledge remains ever apparent. (Silva, 2019: 121)

According to Silva, "hegemonic philosophical practice" denies individuals "the possibility to think from [their] particular lived experience, interests, affective responses, and philosophical intuitions" (Silva, 2019: 123). Yet Silva provides no evidence of how "philosophical practice" does this (beyond relating what philosopher Linda Alcoff reports about her experience as a Latina in the US academy). He provides a possible rationale for it with the suggestion that because philosophy tends to ask more abstract questions than other disciplines it has little interest in "local" or "corporeal" issues that focus on the particular experiences of individuals and groups. This is perhaps broadly true (although phenomenologists might well disagree) and I agree that philosophy, especially social philosophy, can fruitfully approach certain questions through empirical work with people from diverse social and cultural contexts. However, there seems to me nothing inherent in philosophical practice/method or its concepts and categories to prevent, say, a Gambian or a Yanomami Indian from questioning the framing of classic philosophical problems on the basis of their own experience, or for that matter from proposing new problems (although the language barrier is a problem that merits further reflection).

Silva is right to suggest that professional academic philosophy would benefit from the incorporation of people from more diverse cultural backgrounds. As he points out:

when relying upon one's (white racial) self as a frame of reference for discussion of rights or political organization, it is quite possible that, in academic contexts where a majority of peers inhabit more or less the same circle of privilege as you, the particularity of your view is obscured and the experience of "unraced" whites becomes the norm. (Silva, 2019: 124)

This is fair enough. However, it seems to me that this issue is not related to philosophical practice or method as such. Also, the fact that from within the confines of professional academic philosophy in the belly of the current colonial beast, so to speak, both Silva and Alcoff have raised this issue suggests that ordinary people and professional philosophers in the former colonies of the global South must also be capable of perceiving this and of adjusting for it.

In respect of Western views about indigenous people and colonization within philosophy, Rebecca Tsosie (2017) rightly points out that philosophers like Hobbes, Locke and Mill saw them as inferior and effectively justified the theft of their lands. However, this is not true of all philosophers (and in any case there is often simply no evidence of what they thought in relation to this). As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy points out, "Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, Smith and Diderot were critical of the barbarity of colonialism and challenged the idea that Europeans had the obligation to 'civilize' the rest of the world" (SEP,

2017; see also Karbowski, 2014 and Williams, 2014). Also, Descartes wrote that "It is good to know something of the customs of various peoples, so that we may judge our own more soundly and not think that everything contrary to our own ways is ridiculous and irrational, as those who have seen nothing of the world ordinarily do" (*Discourse on Method*, in Cottingham et al., 1985: 113-114; hereon, CSM). Descartes also criticized philosophers for their arrogance in relation to other cultures:

... in my college days I discovered that nothing can be imagined which is too strange or incredible to have been said by some philosopher; and since then I have recognized through my travels that those with views quite contrary to ours are not on that account barbarians or savages, but that many of them make use of reason as much or more than we do. (*Discourse*, CSM: 118-119)

Although Descartes clearly shared the common prejudices of the time regarding the classification of certain groups as "barbarians and savages" (also in the *Discourse* he speaks in passing of "peoples who have grown gradually from a half-savage to a civilized state" (CSM: 116)), the use of these terms (in French and English) was common long before Descartes' time and therefore is not peculiar to modern philosophy. Moreover, the use of such words has nothing to do with Descartes' epistemology or philosophical method. In fact, his belief in the universality of reason as an essential characteristic of all human beings was seen by some philosophers of the time as an outlook that undermined the racist positions found in the works of David Hume and John Locke (Bracken, 2002: 122-126). Undoubtedly, many Europeans in that period assumed that European civilization was superior to the "primitive" life of "savages". However, as Carlos Jacques (1997) notes, this belief was not ultimately based on a racist or essentialist attitude. Rather, the idea that all human beings would behave the same way in similar circumstances (which is found in Descartes and Hume) had the implication that the difference between a "civilized" and a "savage" society was purely contingent: "No qualitative difference distinguishes the civilized from the savage" (Jacques, 1997: 205).

In relation to this, as Mark Tunick points out, John Stuart Mill is often accused of racism, yet his critics ignore the fact that the qualities Mill criticized in some societies were deemed remediable through changes in social and political institutions, which would be illogical if those perceived negative qualities were inherent to "race" (Tunick, 2006: 22). Although there can be no denying that many if not all learned Europeans thought that European society was superior to any other (more "civilized"), I cannot see how this value judgement contaminates Descartes' philosophical method or invalidates his ideas, much less the entire field of modern philosophy; the value judgement can be dismissed by using Descartes' own method.ⁱ

Nevertheless, Linda Alcoff writes: "Modern European philosophy emerged from a context of epistemic injustice toward non-European societies, and this injustice is perpetuated by legitimating ideas about intellectual superiority of European-American philosophy" (Alcoff, 2017: 400). However, the fact that philosophy "emerged from" a general context in which epistemic injustice had been committed against people in Europe's colonies does not establish very much, and although some philosophers believed in the superiority of European civilization, not all did, and those like Mill who did believe in it did so not from a racist standpoint, but a normative one based on a series of non-relativist and not necessarily "Eurocentric" value judgments (no doubt today it would be much harder to find examples of philosophers who believe in and legitimate the alleged superiority of European/American civilization and philosophy.)

Alcoff notes that only a minority of philosophers explicitly criticized empire, adding that "followers of Enlightenment ideas began to develop putatively scientific and philosophical forms of argumentation that would legitimate colonial rule on the basis of rational superiority rather than religion" (Alcoff, 2017: 398). However, again, the generalization to philosophy as a whole is untenable and unfair (we know Alcoff is imputing this to the whole of philosophy because, along with others, she is calling for the discipline as a whole to be "decolonized" and not simply for it to critique or disavow the beliefs of some philosophers). Colonial administrations would have employed any conceptual justification available for legitimizing their ongoing exploitation and rule, appealing perhaps to certain ideas found in Locke, for example, but this hardly justifies labelling modern philosophy as responsible for or equally involved in the epistemic injustice of colonialism. It is equally the case that concepts of rights and sovereignty were used by some philosophers to criticize it, as well as by those resisting their actual enslavement, as in the Haitian rebellion (see Hallward, 2004).

Following decolonial thinkers like Mignolo, Dussel, Maldonado-Torres and others, Alcoff implies that the colonial context in which modern philosophy emerged effectively 'contaminated' (my term) its central concepts, theories and problems. She writes:

The societies that spawned our modern philosophers were not inessential backdrop but constitutive of the available meanings and conceptual repertoires, the reaches of intelligibility, and the central problematics of this tradition. Examples include debates over freedom and individual sovereignty, the sphere of legal rights and property rights, and the nature of human understanding. (Alcoff, 2017: 400)

One could respond that this is a truism; of course the social, political and cultural context in which any discipline emerges will have an important influence upon it in a variety of unpredictable ways. However, the implication appears to be that colonialism has had some particularly strong influence over philosophy that

renders it complicit in the historical and ongoing epistemic injustice of colonialism and coloniality.

Alcoff writes:

In an impressive sleight-of-hand, these new philosophical justifications established Europe as both the vanguard of the human race and as achieving a universal form of thought. The values, epistemology, and scientific methodology that could only emerge from the cooler latitudes of the conquering societies were universally true and applicable to all. (Alcoff, 2017: 399)

However, no primary evidence is provided of any Western philosopher who actually held (or holds) such views (we already know about the notoriously racist Hegel; see Moellendorf, 1992), but instead Alcoff references decolonial thinkers like Enrique Dussel and Silvia Wynter (and, frankly, Dussel makes many unsupported and highly questionable assertions about European philosophy; see Chambers, 2019; 2020).

In relation to this belief in Western superiority that supposedly undergirds modern philosophy, Silva holds that this continues to shape the field, highlighting the case of comparative philosophy:

'comparative philosophy' takes place within the confines of a specific cartographic and geopolitical imaginary shaped by modern European colonization and ideological justifications for it. This imaginary situates Europe and the North Atlantic, and more broadly "the West," as the center of not only the globe but also as the main protagonist of world history. Connected to this cartographic imaginary are forms of asymmetrical historicity, linear models of historical and philosophical progress, and the normalization of a particular geopolitical outlook (think about G. W. F. Hegel's claim that, much like Spirit's development, history travels from East to West). (Silva, 2019: 110)

However, firstly, this "cartographic and geopolitical imaginary" is not an absolute and has been criticized by many a Western philosopher and social scientist (e.g. Russell, Chomsky, Blaut, Wallerstein). Of course, there are undeniably many people who believe in the superiority of the West, which is a narrative spun by elites and propagated in much of the mass media, but this is not something inherent to modern philosophy's concepts or modes of thought. The very fact that Western-based decolonial thinkers like Silva and Alcoff can see through this narrative and critique it suggests that so-called epistemic colonization is severely limited in its power. If the problem were really an "epistemic" one, that is, one which affects the very modes of thinking and knowing of those who are exposed to the colonialist and conceptual philosophical scheme (and those born into or socialized within the colonial centres of Europe and the US would have been as affected as those on the receiving end in the colonies), then it ought not to be

possible to escape the colonialist framework. Yet, clearly, decolonial thinkers like Alcoff, Silva and de Sousa Santos *have* managed to escape it and denounce it. But *how* have they broken through the all-conquering epistemic matrix of coloniality to accurately diagnose the problem, given that they have been formed within the heart of the colonial system and, moreover, speak and think with the languages of the colonizers (English, Spanish, Portuguese)? Clearly, there must be some kind of 'epistemic rupture' and alternative set of epistemic resources they can access, which must, then, also be available to the colonized. Moreover, we can also ask with what epistemic resources decolonial thinkers gain insight into the epistemic experience of the colonized from their positionality in the North?

Secondly, why should Hegel's claim be considered representative of "modern European philosophy"? Although colonialism was a central part of their political and economic background, there were other available meanings and "conceptual repertoires" within colonial societies that were critical of colonialism, offered critical accounts of human nature, of the rights of men and women, of private property, among many other ideas potentially subversive of the background elite assumptions of European superiority, patriarchy, race, etc. (e.g. Montaigne, Diderot, Kant, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Winstanley, Blake, Shelley, Paine, Russell, Wollstonecraft). If this provides an answer to the question of how decolonial thinkers from the North manage to escape the colonial epistemic matrix, at the same time it contradicts their sweeping generalization about the coloniality of modern philosophy. Ultimately, there is no necessary causal-conceptual link between the backdrop of colonialism, the explicit or implicit justifications for it that some thinkers offered, and the method and practice of Western philosophy.

The reception and use of modern philosophy and social science in the South

Yet even supposing that one *could* muster up various examples of attitudes of superiority and arrogant beliefs in the universal validity of all ideas emanating from Europe, the question remains of exactly how this played and plays out in the use and teaching of modern European philosophy and social science in contexts of the global South. Are we supposed to believe, for example, that Latin American philosophers who teach Hegel or J. S. Mill actually uncritically believe/believed in their ideas of European superiority? Do/did Latin American and other philosophers of the South take seriously Locke's racist ideas, etc?

Enrique Dussel has claimed that effectively this has been the case. In his 1973 *Para una ética de la liberación latinoamericana* Dussel writes:

Latin American thinking was thus inauthentic for two reasons: [it] was at most a study and almost always a mere superficial repetition of European thought; but, and this is the most serious thing, in focusing on European thinking, Latin American reality was ignored and the metropolitan, imperial, modern, dominating reality of the centre was passed off as universal reality. The inauthentic philosopher necessarily became a sophist, a pedagogue

who domesticated his students and the people (in truth, little of it reached the people) so that they would accept the North Atlantic culture as the universal culture, the only one, the true one. (Dussel, 1973: 11)

In his *Filosofía de la Liberación* Dussel refers to philosophers of the global South in the following way:

True puppets, they repeated in the periphery what their eminent professors in the great metropolitan universities had propounded. In Cairo, Dakkar, Saigon, and Peking as in Buenos Aires and Lima they taught their pupils the *ego cogito* in which they themselves were constituted as an idea or *cogitatum*, entities at the disposal of the "will to power," impotent, dominated wills, castrated teachers who castrated their pupils. (1977: 24)

These are audacious and highly questionable claims (as well as extremely unfair to philosophers of the South). One could ask why Dussel's reliance on and teaching of a different set of European thinkers like Marx, Heidegger and Levinas, among others, is ultimately any different. Dussel's latter claim about the *cogito* is also based on a huge misreading of Descartes. Descartes' rationalist account of mind does not view humans as mere objects with no volition that can simply be manipulated. On the contrary, both Descartes' theory of mind and his philosophical method presuppose and enable critical thinking and epistemic resistance.

Although Dussel's claims are extremely problematic, they imply an interesting issue about how and which philosophical ideas influenced political elites, scientists, philosophers and popular groups in Latin America and elsewhere (the decolonial critique made by Alcoff and others does not go into specific detail about this). As Maria Teresa Uribe and Liliana López (2006) and James Sanders (2004) have shown, philosophical ideas originating in Europe about rights, sovereignty, citizenship and justice, among others, were fundamental to social and political contestation in Colombia in the 19th century (and no doubt elsewhere), both between subalterns and between subalterns and political elites. Of course, political elites were schooled in the dominant political and philosophical ideas of the age that had been transmitted from Europe, and these did not include the conceptual schemes of indigenous or any other subaltern group. In this sense, then, autochthonous ideas were invisibilized and the conceptual scheme and repertoire available for thinking about the social and political world was limited and limiting. However, this is not due to anything *epistemological* or conceptual in relation to modern philosophy and social science, but rather to politics; that is, the "epistemic injustice" involved in this delimitation of available ideas has very little to do with the epistemic foundations of modern philosophy or social science *per se*, but rather with the specific outworking and configuration of political and social power and ideology. The same delimitation of ideas about social, political and ethical possibilities also occurred in European societies and has no doubt happened in all societies,

including pre-Columbian indigenous societies that had been conquered by the Incas (Mann, 2006).

Moreover, as Alasdair MacIntyre (1973) has pointed out, social science deals in "essentially contestable concepts", which enjoy no complete consensus within the field, whether in Europe or elsewhere. If their meaning is not fixed but continually in flux and disputed, then the social sciences' ability to "colonize" is surely compromised. Of course, certain ideas can become hegemonic, but this is not due to any *epistemic* quality they have (beyond possessing, perhaps, at least in some cases, the epistemic property of being true!), but to the ability of power systems to legitimate some ideas over others.

If we are going to talk about the epistemic subjugation of the colonized and the role of philosophy and social science in this, then we need to ask *how* the application and teaching of philosophy and social science in the global South (which undeniably has centred on a European canon) has contributed to it. Of course, certain ideas and assumptions have become hegemonic, such as that capitalism is the only viable economic system, the notion that elections amount to democracy, and an anthropocentric vision of humans' relation to nature, among others. However, can teaching or the mere reading and wider diffusion in contexts of the global South of Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Locke and Mill, or Comte, Weber, Marx, Durkheim and Parsons be seen as responsible for this?

Eurocentrism

The notion of Eurocentrism is central to the argument about the epistemic injustice committed by modern European philosophy and social science. Critiques of Eurocentrism by Latin American thinkers can be traced back to Dussel's philosophical works of the 1970s, as well as to Orlando Fals Borda's sociology of the same period, a long time before Egyptian Marxist economist Samir Amin (1989) proffered the first systematic account of the term in the first French edition of his book *Eurocentrism* in 1988. Since then, Latin American decolonial theory has taken further the critiques by Amin and Immanuel Wallerstein of the alleged Eurocentric characteristics and implications of social science and its underlying epistemology.

Whilst both Amin and Wallerstein see the social sciences as imbricated in Eurocentrism, unlike decolonial theory their critique does not extend to the underlying epistemology of the social or natural sciences. As Gregor McLennan (2000: 278) points out: "Writers such as Amin and Wallerstein are ambivalent about ranking faith in scientific reason as a criterion of Eurocentrism, since they themselves rely on some notion of universal cognitive progress in both accounting for and overcoming the dire effects of Eurocentric ideology." According to Amin, Eurocentrism "is rather a prejudice that distorts social theories. It draws from its storehouse of components, retaining one or rejecting another according to the ideological needs of the moment" (Amin, 1989: 166). Amin's and Wallerstein's

view is that the social sciences have often served as ideological supports for capitalist interests, especially in historical accounts of the rise of capitalist modernity, but they stop short of labelling reason and its epistemological adjuncts as Eurocentric. In his book *Eurocentrism* Amin does not explicitly discuss epistemology, whilst all Wallerstein has to say about it in his article "Eurocentrism and its Avatars" is that in social science "the choice of subject matter, its theorizing, its methodology, and its epistemology all reflected the constraints of the crucible within which it was born" (Wallerstein, 1997: 24-25), something which can probably be said of every discipline and system of knowledge.

This critique had already been made by Fals Borda, who recalls having reservations about the use of concepts and theories emanating from Europe and the US before 1970:

Although it was in 1970 that fieldwork among Colombian workers, peasants and indigenous people was formally conceived in the form of action-research, theoretical and methodological difficulties had been experienced even before then: the frames of reference and principal categories in the dominant paradigms of sociology that had been received from Europe and the United States were unsatisfactory. Many of us found them largely inapplicable to existing reality, ideologically flawed because they defended the interests of the dominant bourgeoisie, and too specialised or fragmented for adequately comprehending the phenomena encountered on a daily basis. (Fals Borda, 1979: 257)

This way of understanding "Eurocentrism" is clearer and more plausible than what we might call the "deep epistemological" account proposed by decolonial theory. Fals Borda's view is similar to the view that "the inadequacy of the dominant Eurocentric paradigm is alleged to consist in the very fact that its theories cannot capture the position and experience of marginalized groups, hindering a proper understanding of the global order" (Posholi, 2020: 292). However, we need to ask whether decolonial scholars have seriously engaged with "marginalized groups" and asked them if certain theories and concepts help them to understand their reality or not. I can only say that my own experience of engaging with and researching marginalized groups in Colombia suggests that, contrary to what some decolonial thinkers hold, certain concepts from within the Western philosophical and sociological traditions do indeed illuminate certain aspects of their experience and help them to interpret and critique it.

However, given that, as with Fals Borda's experience of carrying out sociological research in Colombia, there may very well be problems with certain concepts and theories for analysing and explaining social phenomena in the global South due to their initial formulation in the European context, we need to ask exactly *why* they are inadequate for this task. We need to inquire as to specifically which

concepts and theories are problematic. Is the concept of "state", for example, problematic? Does its use automatically mean 'buying into' certain ideological perspectives about the global order? Does the fact that the concept of human rights initially emerged out of a European context mean that it can only be interpreted and used in a "Eurocentric" way? Surely the answer to both of these questions is no, in which case we might ask: what exactly is the problem? If a concept does not fit, or a theory does not explain, they can be changed, refined, rejected, reformulated, reinvented, etc., by people across the global South. However, this does not mean there are not problems with other concepts, categories and theories. What it does mean, though, from the position I am defending, is that the identification of problematic theories and concepts, and their refinement, reformulation, etc., is based on the broad set of epistemological assumptions that underlie all general inquiry (Haack, 2014).

For Fals Borda, the concept of "development" was a prime example of a so-called "scientific" notion that in reality was based on an ideological construction imported from the US, and thus "Eurocentric", given that US social science was modelled on the European canon. However, unlike Dussel and current decolonial thinkers, Fals Borda does not appear to see the problem of Eurocentrism as *epistemological* in the sense of having something to do with formal modes of truth seeking and categories like "subject" and "object", "objective" or "universal". Clearly, Fals Borda accepted the validity of certain categories deriving from a European context, such as the concepts of the "bourgeoisie" and "capitalism". Hence, Fals Borda's critique of Eurocentrism seems to be the more straightforward one of warning against the blind application of concepts, ideas and theories that have originated in other contexts. However, Fals Borda did believe that an overestimation of the knowledge deriving from Europe could play a role in this:

Such a high regard for knowledge originating in Europe, in the face of the natural, cultural and social realities of that continent, prevents us from perceiving the negative consequences of transferring it and trying to use it to explain such different realities as those of the complex and fragile tropical environment, and above all, so different from those of the temperate zones of the planet. (Fals Borda and Mora-Osejo: 2004: 2)

However, the issue of the overestimation of European knowledge and theory is different to the much more radical claims about Eurocentrism in Latin American decolonial theory. For example, Venezuelan sociologist Edgardo Lander claims that the social sciences are Eurocentric for the following reasons:

Firstly, there is the assumption of the existence of a universal meta-narrative that leads all cultures and peoples from the primitive, the traditional, to the modern. Liberal industrial society is the most advanced expression of this

historical process, and is therefore the defining model of modern society. (Lander, 2000: 21)

Comte is of course the founder of this way of conceiving and characterizing social evolution, but to what extent and precisely how this framework operates as a hidden epistemological and normative assumption in all "positivist" social science is an open question. Clearly, there are European and American thinkers who do not see modern industrial society as "progress" and are therefore not, in this sense, "Eurocentric". Lander continues:

Secondly, and precisely because of the universal character of the European historical experience, the forms of knowledge developed for the understanding of that society become the only valid, objective, universal forms of knowledge. The categories, concepts and perspectives (economy, state, civil society, market, classes, etc.) thus become not only universal categories for the analysis of any reality, but also normative propositions that define what ought to be for all the peoples of the planet. (Lander, 2000: 21)

However, here we must ask *who* believed/believes these forms of knowledge were/are universally valid? Lander appears to ignore the fact that there were and are dissident thinkers within Europe who did not and do not share these epistemic and normative assumptions. Also, this claim seems to assume that social thinkers in the global South were and are entirely uncritical about the use of the concepts mentioned and simply assumed/assume the validity and desirability of the European way of life and its political systems. Although Lander raises an important question about how certain concepts, categories and perspectives within the social sciences are used to analyse the social and political worlds, and the way certain non-neutral normative assumptions are embedded within them, it seems to me that this problem has little to do with "Eurocentrism" as such. Rather, it seems an inevitable general problem in an unavoidably ideological field such as the social sciences. Moreover, how does the use of, say, the concept of the state for analysing political formations in the global South imply any particular normative prescription for what type of state a people ought to aspire to?

For Lander, modern social science is a "Eurocentric construction, which thinks and organises the totality of time and space, the whole of humanity, on the basis of its own experience, placing its historical-cultural specificity as a superior and universal standard of reference" (Lander, 2000: 21). Again, the problem with this account of Eurocentrism is its overwhelmingly generalizing nature, for which no specific evidence is provided. Without doubt, as Edward Said (1979) has shown, attitudes of cultural superiority abounded in European academic circles (and surely still do), and certain accounts of the Orient that were deemed to be "objective" and "scientific" were in reality ideological constructions. Said demonstrates how these ideological lenses projected an image of the Orient

amenable to colonialist and imperialist ventures and interests. In Latin America, Arturo Escobar (2007) has shown how Eurocentric notions of "development" problematically construed the region and other parts of the global South as "poor", "backward", etc., which has served to legitimise the imposition of the neoliberal "development" model. However, precisely because there are plenty of thinkers in the global South but *also* in the US and Europe who both understand this ideological strategy and critique it (e.g. Renán Vega Cantor, Abadio Green, Vandana Shiva, Arundhati Roy, Edward Abbey, Paul Kingsnorth) this suggests the problem is not "Eurocentrism" as such. That is to say, the dominant notion and practice of development is not problematic because it is based on the arrogant assumption that the US and European way of life is the best there is and what people in the global South should aspire to, but because it incorporates other questionable, often dangerous assumptions about the beneficence of continued economic growth, consumerism, etc. and drives actual policies. Furthermore, whilst what Said and Escobar highlight is an epistemological problem insofar as ideology, understood as a distorted way of viewing the world (Eagleton, 2007), is an obstacle to obtaining genuine knowledge, it is not epistemological in the sense that decolonial thinkers claim; that is, as deriving from something inherent in the "European paradigm of rational knowledge" (Quijano, 2007: 172).

However, the idea that ongoing economic and cultural exploitation is driven and perpetuated by the epistemological/ontological assumptions of modern philosophy and social science is propagated by the highly influential Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos. For example, he writes: "... all Western thinking, whether critical or not, is grounded on the Cartesian idea that nature is a *res extensa* and, as such, an unlimited resource unconditionally available to human beings" (de Sousa Santos, 2016: 43). To put it kindly, this is a hugely problematic reading of Descartes that is actually an ideological projection that reads contemporary economic and environmental issues and ideological problems back into Descartes. Enrique Dussel effectively does the same in his attempt to link European conquest to the epistemological roots of modern philosophy in Descartes' *cogito*. For Dussel, Descartes inaugurates the individualistic subject of European colonial domination and nascent capitalism:

That pure machine would not show skin color or race (it is clear that Descartes thinks only from the basis of the white race), and nor obviously its sex (he equally thinks only on the basis of the male sex), and it is that of a European (he doesn't sketch nor does he refer to a colonial body, an Indian, an African slave, or an Asian). The quantitative indeterminacy of any quality will also be the beginning of all illusory abstractions about the "zero point" of modern philosophical subjectivity and the constitution of the body as a quantifiable commodity with a price (as is the case in the system of slavery or the capitalist wage). (Dussel, 2014: 21)

However, whilst Descartes does indeed believe the human *body* is a machine, he does not believe that human beings are machines; on the contrary, humans are exceptional in their use of language and thought, which differentiates them from mere automata. Putting this to one side, though, it is implausible in the extreme to suggest that such evils as slavery and other forms of social exploitation can be derived from Descartes' clearly delimited aims in undertaking the thought experiment that leads to the *cogito*. Nevertheless, Dussel simply asserts that there is a conceptual-causal relation between cultural, economic and political conquest and the subject and mode of thinking of modern philosophy as inaugurated by Descartes: "Before the ego cogito there is an ego conquiro; 'I conquer' is the practical foundation of 'I think'" (Dussel, 2013: 3). Yet elsewhere Dussel inverts this thesis, claiming that "The ego cogito establishes ontologically both the 'I conquer' and the phallic ego, two dimensions of domination of person over person, but now of one class over another class, of one nation over another nation" (Dussel, 1985: 83); now it is the *cogito* that is responsible for the conquest and the conquering subject! Clearly, the thesis is a muddle and far from convincing in either of its versions, yet these ideas of Dussel's, among others, are esteemed by decolonial thinkers and have influenced the "coloniality of knowledge" thesis, feeding into claims about the alleged Eurocentrism and epistemic injustice perpetrated by modern philosophy and social science.

It is worth pointing out that, like liberationist theory before it, current decolonial theory is ultimately based on the epistemological assumption that there is a true/correct way of explaining and liberating/decolonizing the ecological and social worlds. Furthermore, if certain discourses are *really* ideological tools for legitimating certain interests at the expense of the interests of other social sectors, then we are implicitly making an objective and effectively universal claim that this is a *true* account of one aspect of the communicative dimension of the social world. This applies even though the concept and theory of ideology was first formulated in a European context (Williams, 1976). As David Gomes argues:

Undoubtedly, any theory is strongly determined by its context of genesis. Theoretical formulations do not emerge from nowhere, from the vacuum of thought radically disconnected from the world. On the contrary, theoretical formulations are always responses to concrete problems that are experienced in the contexts in which the respective theories emerge. But the strong connection of a theory with its context of genesis does not entail the restriction of its validity only to that specific context in which it has emerged. (Gomes, 2020: 429)

Nevertheless, it seems to me an open question as to what extent a scientific theory about, for example, the orbit of the planets is "strongly determined by its context of origin". Regarding social theories, the influence of context is much greater, but I agree with Gomes that a theory's contextual origin does not necessarily render it invalid for other contexts. The provenance of philosophical or social scientific

concepts and theories does not preclude the possibility of discovering or affirming something universally true and valid about the general human condition and humanity's modes of being and thinking.

In relation to this, Okeja (2017: 4) states that, in relation to problems of global justice, "one of the most viable starting points would be to investigate the theories deployed to explain this situation by the agents who bear the brunt of the impacts of the unequal and unjust world at the center of global justice discourse." This is a fine and fair idea and also relates to what some social researchers refer to as the "co-production" of knowledge (Pearce, 2010). However, firstly, this starting point does not impugn the use of concepts that were originally formulated and applied in a European context. One cannot make an *a priori* judgement that the use of theories or concepts formulated outside the context of study is invalid or imperialistic or colonizing, etc. Secondly, those suffering the brunt of the problems might benefit from looking at them in ways unfamiliar to them or from the perspective of those who are not so close to the issues. In any case, one cannot prejudge the issue of which theories and concepts might provide a better analysis or explanatory account of a particular social problem, or a more fitting normative prescription. Of course, if anyone were to assume that *just because* a theory comes from Europe it is therefore valid by definition for any social and cultural context, they would be opening themselves up to ridicule. However, decolonial thinkers insist that theories emanating from Europe *have* been based on the arrogant assumption that they are automatically valid for all contexts, although they provide no evidence of actual philosophers and social scientists who think this way.

Conclusion

In conclusion, firstly, the claim that modern philosophy and social science are collectively complicit in the epistemic injustice wrought by colonial domination is far too generalizing and not supported by the scant evidence provided. Whilst there are examples of modern philosophers and social scientists making ideological justifications for colonialism based on judgements about the inferiority of non-European peoples and the superiority of European civilization and knowledge, the claim that this is something undergirding and running through the entire fields of modern philosophy and social science and, in another variant (what I call the "deep epistemological claim"), that this is because of something inherent in their methods, concepts and categories, is implausible and not warranted by the evidence or arguments provided by the decolonial thinkers analysed here. Ultimately, their case amounts to an accusation of guilt by association.

Secondly, their claims about the epistemic experience of non-Europeans who experienced colonization are also too generalizing and ironically commit the same offense of universalization that they accuse modern philosophy and social

science of committing. Moreover, decolonial thinkers in the North do not explain why they have the epistemic authority to speak for all colonized peoples or how they are immune from Eurocentrism.

Thirdly, Eurocentrism is not an especially serious epistemological problem in philosophy or social science; *any* perspective is inevitably limited, partial and liable to error.ⁱⁱ Nevertheless, there are interesting and important issues implied in the decolonial critique that would benefit from being concretely addressed in a dialogue between philosophers and social scientists of the global South and the North. These include:

- The issue of which concepts, categories and theories are actually or potentially problematic in philosophy and the social sciences for analysing philosophical and social problems in the South.
- The under representation of voices and experiences of non-Europeans in these disciplines and the way this limits social analysis and philosophical reflection. This also raises the question of what we might call the "epistemic authority" for analysing social problems in a range of contexts, which in turn is related to what might be termed the implicit "epistemic representation" of particular communities and social problems by social researchers in their methodologies and modes of analysis.
- The question of what "critical" thinking is and the conditions under which it can flourish. Decolonial thinkers like Dussel and de Sousa Santos, for example, claim to be "critical", yet are arguably highly ideological thinkers who, like other decolonial analysts, make sweeping generalizations that are inimical to critical thinking.

I suggest that through the philosophical practice of a dialogue between philosophers and social scientists of the global South and North, these issues can be worked on in a collaborative and concrete way, avoiding the pitfalls of the hugely generalizing level that decolonial thinkers tend to operate on.

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ⁱ On the thorny issue of alleged views about European superiority, as Tunick (2006) argues, J. S. Mill's paradigmatic notion of "civilization" and the difference between "civilized" and "uncivilized" societies was not based on the assumption that European society (including Britain) was superior in an absolute sense. Of course, Mill's non-relativist assumptions are unpalatable for many with postmodern sensibilities.

ⁱⁱ However, there *is* a type of "coloniality of knowledge" manifest in the uneven power relations between the global South and North; for example, in the academic ranking system of universities and journals that is based on an unrealistic and unfair comparison in which the unnegotiable measuring stick is modelled on the universities of the North, which is a form of "Eurocentrism".