

## Book Reviews

CLAUDIA BRUNNER, *Epistemische Gewalt. Wissen und Herrschaft in der kolonialen Moderne*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020. 336 pages, €35,00. ISBN: 978-3-8376-5131-7 (available in an open access e-book version)

In her book *Epistemische Gewalt. Wissen und Herrschaft in der kolonialen Moderne* (“*Epistemic Violence. Knowledge and Domination in the Colonial Modernity*”), Claudia Brunner examines the ways in which (scientific) knowledge is connected to violence. The book is a critique of Western Eurocentric academia and seeks to break with the idea of the absence of violence in science and modernity (p. 12–13). She raises awareness of the existence of epistemic violence to enable researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the multiple ways in which “violence is inherent in knowledge itself” (p. 31) and the role that researchers and academic institutions play in the global epistemic violence system. The author aims at creating a transdisciplinary concept of epistemic violence where the prefix “trans” is intended to be understood as not only between disciplines but also as going beyond the academic field (p. 28).

The book is structured along five chapters. In the first chapter, “Thinking Violence Further”, Brunner outlines her research project and methodology. As intended by the author, the book does not seek to expound a clear, unchangeable definition of epistemic violence. It is rather “a decolonially inspired and transdisciplinarily informed traversal of heterogeneous approaches to epistemic violence” combined with a “confrontation of already established broad concepts of violence with a condensed understanding of epistemic violence” (p. 29). She also criticises other disciplines that are largely centred on the analysis of violence in societies (e.g. Peace and Conflict Studies, International Relations, Political Science) (p. 9) for their limited use of the term “epistemic violence”. With her criticism of other neighbouring disciplines and her methodological approach defined in the first chapter, Claudia Brunner positions herself within the realm of decolonial theory, which she continues to describe in the chapter that follows.

Chapter Two introduces the reader to the wide spectrum of post- and decolonial theory. Readers with or without prior knowledge of research from the Subaltern Studies Group and/or the Modernidad/Colonialidad Group will benefit from the reading of this chapter, as Brunner presents different theoretical ideas in a limited space (e.g. differences between post- and decolonialism; the concept of coloniality of power, knowledge and being; modernity/coloniality; the four genocides/epistemicides). The chapter also offers a linkage between decolonial theory and materialist-feminist theory by acknowledging the contri-

butions that feminist scholars such as Silvia Federici or Maria Mies have brought to the field, while also directly criticising the limited referencing of these and other scholars by the authors of decolonial theories.

“Conceptual Landscapes of Epistemic Violence”, the third chapter, is devoted to three disciplinary fields – peace and conflict studies, feminist research and post- and decolonial research – in which the term epistemic violence is occasionally used. Brunner continues to trace arguments and lines of interpretation of epistemic violence rather than searching for a deterministic definition. It is also here that Brunner describes her decision to use the term epistemic violence rather than epistemological violence, as the latter restricts the concept to scientific knowledge (p. 78).

In Chapter Four (pp. 147–269), the author practices a rereading of different violence concepts to analyse how they already include aspects of epistemic violence in their concepts and how these can be made useful to her own theory. She discusses such terms as the structural and cultural violence of Johan Galtung (pp. 152–185), Pierre Bourdieu’s symbolic violence (pp. 186–245) and Judith Butler’s concept of normative violence and the power of frames (pp. 246–269). What these authors share in their approaches towards violence is the belief that knowledge and science participate in violent processes. Yet none of the authors directly uses or defines the term epistemic violence. While the chapter is important for creating the link to existing violence concepts, the sub-chapter on Galtung’s concept of structural and cultural violence loses the thread of argumentation that is otherwise maintained throughout the book. The reader is confronted with an extensive – albeit legitimate – criticism of Galtung’s most famous concepts, which only partially contributes to the establishment of Brunner’s concept of epistemic violence. Readers might further be disappointed to see that Brunner dedicates the entire chapter to the analysis of concepts of white, Western scholars, without greater reference to violence concepts outside of this realm.

The final chapter of the book goes beyond a summary of the chapters and interlinks decolonial theory with aspects of epistemic violence found in the violence concepts of Butler, Bourdieu and Galtung. By refocusing on the research question “What is epistemic violence and how does it operate?” (p. 277) Brunner connects these findings to her own understanding of violence within knowledge production. She constructs a three-level concept of epistemic violence, which I regard as the key message of her work. The first level, coloniality of being, functions here at the micro-level, in which epistemic violence is particularly seen as experiences of violence. Brunner describes the experience of epistemic violence on this level as follows: “That which is not said, that which is said but not heard, that which is heard but not understood, that which is understood but not recognised are recurring articulations of epistemic vio-

lence that can by no means be justified on the micro-level alone, but which become effective precisely there in the concrete experiences of people” (p. 278).

At the centre stage of her concept stands the coloniality of knowledge – the meso-level – which shows how knowledge (science) is used for the normalisation of violence. She argues that this is central to understanding “the fact that – and the way in which – the formerly religious-theological Christian knowledge system has secularised and naturalised itself in the process of Europe’s colonial expansion and has become the basis of the enlightened modern paradigm of science” (p. 284).

At the third level, the macro-level, is the coloniality of power. The macro-level indicates how knowledge (science) contributes to the robustness of the order of violence. For a better understanding of this level, the author gives the example of the spread of the “formation of the European-Eurocentric state” (p. 293) throughout the world, to which the social sciences have greatly contributed.

The analysis of the concept across the three levels does not aim to create a defining meta-concept but rather to point out the different elements that make up the concept of epistemic violence (p. 273). Supporters of narrow definitions of violence will not be satisfied with this concept, as the conceptualisation is not straightforward. Yet, what Claudia Brunner demonstrates is that narrow definitions of violence “suggest that the question of legitimacy has already been clarified” (p. 289), a preconception challenged by her transdisciplinary concept of epistemic violence. While the concept is intended to go beyond academia, Brunner falls short in elaborating this further.

Although the book directly addresses researchers from the fields of Political Science and International Relations, as well as Peace and Conflict Science, Brunner’s conception of epistemic violence is certainly useful beyond the scope of these disciplines. Especially researchers within the field of Area Studies could profit from the inclusion of the epistemic violence concept in their research, to become aware of those knowledge systems suppressed by Western academia and to reflect on how their own work partakes in this process of violence.

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