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Decolonisation and Violence: What It Takes to Decolonise IR

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MEINDERT BOERSMA, APR 9 2022

In his 1961 *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon forcefully argues, “whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon” (Fanon 2001 [1963], 27). Now that most parts of the world have achieved juridico-political decolonisation, decolonial scholars are calling for another kind of “decolonisation”. These do not just call for the decolonisation of political, social, or economic power structures, but for the decolonisation of *knowledge* as a whole. This call is embedded in the notion of “coloniality”, as developed by Anibal Quijano (2000; 2007). For Quijano – and other decolonial theorists such as Walter Dignolo and Ramón Grosfoguel – coloniality is the darker side of modernity, a structure that continues to condition international politics long after formal decolonisation (Quijano 2000; Dignolo 2007, 2011). Together with postcolonialism (e.g. Said 1978; Spivak 1988), decolonial ideas have propelled a thrust towards decolonising academic research, teaching, and other knowledge practices. As decolonisation has turned its target towards the academy and knowledge production, the term “decolonisation” evokes less the image of wars of independence Fanon envisioned and more academic conferences and classroom discussions.

But to what extent does Fanon’s statement apply to the kind of decolonisation we endeavour in (or at least, try to endeavour in) today? In other words, can we understand decolonising our knowledge practices as something necessarily violent? To understand what is at stake, we may want to rephrase this question in a slightly more provocative way: is violence *necessary* for decolonising knowledge? In this short essay, I will address this question in the context of the discipline of International Relations (IR). Despite a growing interest in the question of decolonisation more broadly amongst IR scholars (e.g. Capan 2017; Tickner and Smith 2020), this question has never been explicitly addressed to my knowledge, and perhaps rightly so. In its popular usage, “violence” is commonly considered ambiguous at best and morally wrong at worst. Associating decolonisation with a concept like “violence” may thus seem like reputational suicide for those advocating for the deeply politicised idea of decolonisation. As academics advocating for decolonisation, we reserve a concept like “violence” for the practices we seek to challenge, rather than applying it to our own (proposed) practices.

Yet, I consider this question is worth posing in at least two ways. First, it speaks to the relationship between coloniality and decolonisation as a whole, not just in the context of IR. Second, questioning whether decolonisation necessitates violence points to an important moral consideration: what sort of decolonisation do we envision for IR, and what does it take to realise this vision?

This essay is structured into three sections. First, I will discuss what decolonisation entails, elaborating on what we are exactly seeking to challenge. In this section, I will argue that epistemic violence is inherently constitutive of modernity/coloniality, and that efforts at decolonisation should thus aim at challenging the way in which we engage in knowledge production as a whole. In the second section, I will discuss three different avenues for decolonisation within the discipline of IR. Arguing that the third approach is necessary for a decolonial thrust that challenges and provides alternatives to the coloniality of knowledge, I will discuss whether this approach can be understood as “violent” in the third section. I will argue that this approach constitutes some type of violence, but different from the epistemic violence of coloniality in both degree and kind.

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The coloniality of knowledge and epistemic violence

Quijano considers coloniality as inherently constitutive of European modernity, rather than just a product or anomaly to it (Quijano 2000; 2007). For Quijano and other decolonial scholars, coloniality and modernity are two sides of the same coin, and as long as our world will be marked by modernity, it will be marked by coloniality (Mignolo 2007). Quijano distinguishes coloniality from earlier forms of domination as a mode of thinking that classifies colonised and colonisers according to the logic of race (Quijano 2007). This racial dividing line intersects with other binaries, together constituting an “intersectionality of multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies (“heterarchies”) of sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation” (Grosfoguel 2011).

Parallel to these lines between coloniser and colonised runs a line between those who *know* and those who *are known about*. Quijano and Mignolo refer to this dividing line as “the coloniality of knowledge” (Mignolo 2007). Within the frame of modernity/coloniality, Western scientists are the subjects of knowledge, and racialised “others” the object of study. European knowledge is universal, “other” knowledge is particular (Mignolo 2009).

Colonial knowledge production is based on the conception that the world can be studied as a totality, and that rational knowledge can thus be applied universally (Quijano 2007). This “universalist rationalism” casts a veil over the experience of the colonised, which has never been homogeneous and certainly not equal to that of the coloniser. Furthermore, the locus of enunciation, the “geo-political and body-political location of the subject that speaks”, remains hidden (Grosfoguel 2011). The epistemic location of the researcher is deemed irrelevant to the knowledge production at stake, an assumption that Santiago Castro-Gómez terms “the hubris of the zero point” (2007). The Western man is assumed to be neutral, and the knowledge he produces universally applicable (also note the gendered aspect). Equally, knowledge from the perspective of the colonised (or from the perspective of women, sexual minorities, and other historically marginalised groups) is considered inherently particularistic, impossible to be applied outside of its context. These deeply rooted assumptions effectively conceal the power imbued in knowledge production.

This dual blindness to both the experience of the colonised and the situatedness of the coloniser creates what Gayatri C. Spivak has termed “epistemic violence” (1988). She describes how epistemic violence attempts to eliminate knowledge possessed by certain groups through damaging their ability to speak and be heard (Spivak 1988; Dotson 2011). Rather than a sorry exception to modern knowledge production, decolonial theorists acknowledge that violence is rooted in modern knowledge itself. Emphasising the destructive nature of the coloniality of knowledge, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) aptly invokes the notion of “epistemicide”.

With regards to ways in which epistemic violence is exactly violent, I draw on Brunner (2021), who distinguishes between the “first-order” and “second-order” violence of the coloniality of knowledge. First-order violence is a violence of silence. Theories developed in the Global North are applied universally, only showing modernity while leaving coloniality in the shadows (Mignolo 2007). This universalism creates a psychological violence in and of itself: “The tragedy here is that we [the colonised] ... have been what we are not, what we never should have been and what we never will be. And because of it, we can never catch our real problems, much less solve them, except in only a partial and distorted way.” (Quijano 2000, 222)

However, first-order violence also engenders, hides, and legitimises second-order violence, i.e., the direct and structural kinds of violence (Brunner 2021). In this respect, epistemic violence constitutes a kind of “normative violence”, which “can both be violent in themselves and be used to normalise violence against those who are derealised” (Butler 2004; Varman et al. 2021, 646). Second-order violence both creates and necessitates material power. Without material power imbalance, violent norms do not necessarily have to translate to physical violence. Hence, we can understand epistemic violence within the coloniality/modernity framework as *the silencing of a certain group of people that, if wedded with power, allows for and legitimises both direct and structural violence against this group*.

Decolonising IR

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Knowledge production within the discipline of IR has been deeply permeated by the coloniality of knowledge, reproducing a “geo-cultural division of knowledge production” (Shilliam 2011, 13). IR has historically been insensitive to the differences and hierarchies underpinning the global fault lines of modernity/coloniality, while in turn masking this very blindness through its universalist pretences (Anievas et al. 2014; Capan 2017). As such, coloniality has effectively rendered IR “double blind”. Inspired and informed by decolonial, postcolonial, and broadly critical critiques, there have been several initiatives to challenge this blindness within the discipline. This section will lay out two of these initiatives. I will argue that these approaches cannot challenge coloniality to a high enough extent to amount to “decolonisation” in and of themselves, although they may contribute to the struggle in important ways. This sets the stage for the final section, where I will highlight an approach necessary for decolonisation, and discuss the question of violence.

The first strand revolves around exploring “non-Western” IR theories (Acharya and Buzan 2007, 2010; Shilliam 2011; Tickner and Wæver 2009). Acknowledging the heavy bias towards theories of Western men based on Western experiences, these studies set out to recover “non-Western” theories to expand the canon of IR. However, this approach fails to seriously challenge the coloniality of knowledge – and may even reinforce it – in at least two ways. First, in searching for “non-Western” theories, it maintains the binary of West/non-West, while reinforcing the particularity of the non-West as opposed to “*our* understanding of IRT [IR theories]” (Acharya and Buzan 2010, 10, my emphasis; Ozkaleli and Ozkaleli 2021). Second, this literature generally focuses more on the *geographic* rather than epistemic locus of enunciation. This leads to situations where scholars from the Global South are considered to “represent” the non-West, even though they have been educated in the West and trained in Western IR theories. Hence, Capan is right to point out that “[i]t is the search for an ‘alternative’ non-West that also continues to reproduce the power of the West.”, and that “[t]o ‘decolonise’ as a strategy for change has to take into account not only adding more perspectives but also the practices of knowledge production.” (Capan 2017, 8–9; Hutchings 2011).

The second strand focuses on existing practices of knowledge production within the discipline, uncovering the way in which IR has been bound up and complicit in the history of colonialism and coloniality. This includes writing disciplinary history (Bell 2009; Jones 2006), critiquing the international thought that underpins it (Hobson 2012), and reflecting on our current academic practice (Van Milders and Toros 2020). These de-naturalisations of disciplinary assumptions and critiques of practices within the field are a necessary basis for decolonising IR. However, critiquing currently existing practices in IR is only the first step. Ultimately, decolonisation is something we need to do through building new practices of knowledge production (Krishna 2012). To draw on Fanon’s revolutionary dialectic, we need to move from realisation to action (Roberts 2004, 142).

Epistemic disobedience

Decolonising as a strategy for change has to challenge and provide alternatives to the core practices of knowledge production within IR (Capan 2017). I argue that this approach would entail what Mignolo calls “epistemic disobedience”, which entails delinking knowledge from coloniality, and overhauling the binaries it is predicated upon (Mignolo 2009). At the core of this approach is an effort “to liberate the production of knowledge, reflection, and communication from the pitfalls of European rationality/modernity” (Quijano 2007, 177). It targets coloniality as a whole by searching not only for alternative knowledge but also for alternative knowledge practices – e.g. “epistemologies from the South” (Santos 2014) and “border thinking” (Anzaldúa 1987; Mignolo 2000). This brings to the foreground other epistemologies, creating an alternative totality based upon a “pluralist universalism” (Mignolo 2009).

Compared to the two approaches discussed above, epistemic disobedience is not yet widely practiced in the field of IR, at least not explicitly. However, with disobedience rather than critique, carried out at the level of knowledge practices rather than knowledge, I argue that this approach is necessary for decolonisation of knowledge production within IR as a whole.

I argue that this is also the strand of decolonisation efforts that has the most potential to be violent. In seeking to bring to the fore “epistemologies from the South” (Santos 2014), epistemic disobedience necessarily entails relegating Western epistemologies to the background. The pluralist universalism of decoloniality cannot coexist with the

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exclusivist universalism of coloniality. Because the “default” of knowledge production is total Western domination, any assertion of knowledge from a locus of enunciation explicitly embedded in the “epistemic South” invariably negates Western knowledge and Western subjectivity. In this way, epistemic disobedience constitutes first-order violence to some extent: it undermines the ability of those in the epistemic West to turn their experience into universal knowledge, and even demolishes the myth of rationalist universalism altogether. This is not to say that this effort necessarily *aims* at “silencing” those speaking from the centre of power: both of these facets do not entail a wilful silencing, but rather a *relative* silencing as a side-effect of de-linking from colonial knowledge and centring the marginalised.

Epistemic disobedience is distinct from colonial knowledge production in at least two ways. I argue that these two differences mean that epistemic disobedience is violent to a lower degree than the epistemic violence it seeks to undo. First, epistemic disobedience is not predicated upon universalist rationalism, and thus does not have universalist pretences. While it does seek to rebalance, it is important to reiterate that decolonisation does not seek to get rid of Western knowledge altogether but rather to challenge the practices that underpin it: to “change the terms and not just the content of the conversation” (Bleiker 1997; Mignolo 2007, 459). Decolonial scholarship is proposing a universalism to the extent that it can create a “radical universal decolonial anti-systemic diversity” as a project of liberation (Grosfoguel 2011). Furthermore, in doing away with rationalist universalism, this pluralist universalism entails being explicit about the locus of enunciation, i.e., where particular knowledge comes from. Rather than turning the West into the “object” of knowledge, this relocating of the locus of enunciation entails doing away with the subject-object duality altogether, and facilitating a genuinely horizontal dialogue among different epistemologies (Anzaldúa 1987; Grosfoguel 2011).

Second, epistemic disobedience does not engender second-order violence like the epistemic violence of coloniality does. The first-order violence of epistemic disobedience does undermine the centrality of certain experiences in empowering others, but this “silencing” is not wedded to power. Those groups that are to be “silenced” are those groups that have profited – and continue to profit – from modernity/coloniality the most. Hence, relegating the experiences of these groups to the background to give centre stage to the historically marginalised has the potential to *counter* rather than engender the second-order violence of coloniality.

I wish to highlight one more difference between the violence of coloniality and the violence of decolonisation, not in degree but in the objects and objectives of violence, i.e., violence to whom, for whom, and for what. This highlights a clear difference: to the extent that epistemic justice does constitute violence, it is *emancipatory* rather than *oppressive* violence. To adopt the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy of revolutionary theorists such as Paulo Freire and Frantz Fanon, it is violence to the oppressor, for the oppressed, and for emancipation for all – including the oppressor. It is worth quoting Paulo Freire at length here:

Whereas the violence of the oppressors prevents the oppressed from being fully human, the response of the latter to this violence is grounded in the desire to pursue the right to be human. As the oppressors dehumanise others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanised. As the oppressed, fighting to be human, take away the oppressors’ power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression. (2017 [1970], 30)

Conclusion

In this short essay, I have argued that a response to the epistemic violence of the coloniality of knowledge that intends to challenge coloniality at its core can be understood as “violent”, but that this violence is different both in degree and in kind. This argument rests on two earlier points I developed in the first half of the paper. First, I have developed the decolonial idea that epistemic violence is an inherent consequence of the practices of knowledge production under coloniality/modernity, and that an adequate attempt at decolonisation should thus aim at directly challenging these practices. Second, I have reviewed three potential avenues for decolonisation of the field of IR, out of which only one of them – epistemic disobedience – has the potential to transform these knowledge practices.

Because of the short nature of this essay, this argument has several limitations. Most importantly, I have

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predominantly analysed the potential for decolonisation in IR through the lens of decolonial scholarship more broadly at the expense of focusing on the discipline in specific. My categorisation of decolonial literature in IR is a simplification, and there is certainly literature that does not neatly fall into just one or even any category at all. I focused on debates within decolonial scholarship in general because these are relevant for all of the social sciences (and, arguably, all of modern science), but further research would do well to more closely engage with the literature within the discipline in specific. Furthermore, the concept of second-nature violence has been employed as a “catch-all”, encompassing both direct and structural violence. Further research would do well to break this term apart and analyse ways in which first-order violence engenders some forms of violence more than others.

I end this essay on a normative note. As decolonial scholars, our scholarly practice is fuelled by a normative impulse to advance “justice against epistemicide” (Santos 2014). I have argued that epistemic disobedience can constitute first-order violence, but that this violence (1) does not seek to overtake but rather to deconstruct rationalist universalism, (2) does not engender the kind of second-order violence that has caused so much of the suffering we seek to challenge, and (3) is of an emancipatory rather than oppressive nature. Also this wave of decolonisation may entail violence – not with guns but with pens, not against human colonisers but against colonial knowledge practices – but this should not withhold us from building towards a decolonial and emancipatory future for all.

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