



Conceptualizing epistemic violence: an interdisciplinary assemblage for IR

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Abstract

While many forms of violence shape the global world order, the disciplines devoted to international politics are often content with reductionist concepts of violence; knowledge and knowledge production are more often than not seen as altogether antithetical to direct and physical harm. At the same time, global entanglements of knowledge with violence have increasingly come into view in the course of the ongoing (de-)colonial turn. After more than 30 years, Gayatri C. Spivak's feminist postcolonial understanding of epistemic violence is still the preeminent theoretical touchstone for addressing this issue. By providing an interdisciplinary understanding of lesser known conceptions of epistemic violence, I open up additional routes for deploying the term in the analysis, theorization, and critique of international politics. Based on this assemblage, I frame epistemic violence along the decolonial concept of a coloniality of power, knowledge, and Being and finally consider how we can possibly undo epistemic violence while un/doing IR.

Keywords Epistemic violence · Power · Coloniality · Modernity · Knowledge · International politics · International relations

Introduction. Where do we see(k) (epistemic) violence?

According to the colonial/modern paradigm (Quijano 1993, 2010), international relations (IR) expertise is expected to provide solutions to the problem of violence in international politics. Be it in IR proper or in peace studies, development studies, security studies, conflict studies, or other fields related to questions of international politics, violence is seen as a predominantly direct and physical phenomenon. It is usually defined along three axiomatic lines: first, as something that occurs

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somewhere else (i.e., not in the Global North – and if so, it is understood to be the exception rather than the rule); second, as something that is perpetrated by somebody else (i.e., not by a rational political subject – and if so, it is done for the right reasons); and, third, violence is considered as genuinely something else (i.e., nonexistent in the academic realm – and if so, it is understood to be an unfortunate ideological aberration). It is, therefore, hardly surprising that epistemic violence seems to be an academic nonissue, and a theoretical oxymoron at that. Indeed, and while many critical voices have outlined the power of knowledge production in IR, epistemic violence is not a key concept when it comes to analyzing and theorizing international politics in the abovementioned (sub-)disciplines.¹

At the same time, post- and decolonial as well as many feminist scholars working in IR and related disciplines are well aware of the pernicious effects caused by epistemic violence. Consequently, and quite naturally, they have been making use of the term to analyze and theorize entanglements of knowledge and violence in international politics in a broader sense (Darby 2006; Grovogui 2006; Mudimbe 1994; Rutazibwa and Shilliam 2018; Woons and Weier 2017). Joining voices from global sociology and other disciplines, authors have pointed at the deeply colonial heritage not only of IR-related theory, but also of the Occidental academic system and the Eurocentric scholarly sphere itself (Bhambra 2014; Go 2013; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez et al. 2010; Phạm and Shilliam 2016). To all of them, epistemic violence is a matter of fact, which is why the term itself is never brought to the front and investigated in and of itself. Having shown how deeply embedded epistemic violence is both in real-world international politics and in the foundations of IR-related (sub-) disciplines for years, many scholars are today proceeding toward decidedly counter-hegemonic and decolonial bodies of knowledge with a view to transforming and subverting the dominant paradigm (Bendix et al. 2020, el-Malik and Kamola 2017; Scauso 2021; Shilliam 2011; Tickner and Smith 2020).² While providing groundbreaking analyses of epistemic violence in international politics and drafting ways of doing IR without reiterating and/or perpetuating its colonial core, these scholars often deploy the term without adequately unpacking it.

¹ Decolonial approaches challenge the supposed naturalness of disciplinary boundaries and practices and sometimes even call for a substantial ‘un-disciplining’ (Escobar, 2007, 190), especially of the social sciences. Since the academic system constitutes a central pillar of colonial modernity and its epistemic violence, it would be inconsistent and even counterproductive to speak of IR or any related (sub-)discipline as a monolithic block of canonical knowledge in this article. I therefore address my argument to international politics/international relations in a very broad sense. I deliberately use different terminology to point at the factual multidisciplinary nature of a field which, like any other academic discipline, constantly tries to set its boundaries with a view to claiming its monodisciplinary authority. In addition to this analytical reason, I intent to open the debate about epistemic violence in international politics to a disciplinary multitude of readers to make use of the concept for their own specific interest – within and beyond what is generally considered to be IR proper.

² Meanwhile, there are a number of volumes available, and exciting series have been established with leading publishers in the field, e.g., Kilombo: International Relations and Colonial Questions (edited by Mustapha K. Pasha, Meera Sabaratnam and Robbie Shilliam at Rowman & Littlefield) and Worlding Beyond the West (edited by Arlene B. Tickner, David Blaney and Innana Hamati-Ataya at Routledge). Publications of that kind have multiplied over the last years and are about to substantially change IR-related canons.



If scholars do take the time to explicitly define and/or conceptualize the term, they usually hark back to Gayatri C. Spivak's (1988) seminal, and by now canonical, feminist postcolonial description of what epistemic violence is – 'the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other' (Spivak 1988, 280) – which I will return to shortly. Work that is more recent also refers to Boaventura de Sousa Santos' even stronger term of 'epistemicide' (Santos 2014).³ While neither Spivak nor Santos are IR scholars, their framing of epistemic violence and epistemicide, respectively, has become indispensable for analyzing and theorizing international politics in colonial modernity. There are, however, more approaches to talk and write about the problem than we commonly cite. Between the obliviousness toward epistemic violence that undergirds hegemonic IR and IR-related expertise and the history of actively engaging with it from a post-/decolonial and/or feminist perspective, there is space to further conceptualize the term in order to promote it within and beyond IR-related fields.

Consequently, I am going to introduce a variety of approaches from outside IR in the next but one section: besides a few contributions from peace studies and critical geography, it is especially feminist strands of the humanities and postcolonial global sociology that are most rewarding.

This interdisciplinary assemblage then lays the groundwork for outlining the contours of epistemic violence as framed along the lines of the coloniality of power (Quijano 1993, 2010), knowledge (Lander 1993, 2000), and Being (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 2008). In conclusion, I discuss how we can potentially transform and attempt to undo epistemic violence, while keeping in mind that we are all operating within 'modernity's epistemic territory' (Vázquez 2011). Before unpacking my conceptual assemblage, however, let me locate my argument by way of semantically breaching the 'epistemological monoculture' (Bennett 2015) of Euro-American academic discourse, to which this text must comply as well.⁴

³ Given the quantity of voices who have emerged in the field of post- and decolonial IR in the past decade, I can only cite a few book-length examples in this article to locate my own argument. I owe a lot of inspiration concerning the issue of epistemic violence to the initiators of and colleagues within the colonial/postcolonial/decolonial working group established within the British International Studies Association in 2013. The European International Studies Association is another place where phenomena rather than concepts of epistemic violence in IR are debated.

⁴ This text is based on previous writing during my perennial research project *Theorizing Epistemic Violence* (Brunner 2018, 2020), see also www.epistemicviolence.info. I want to thank Robbie Shilliam for asking – and during the review process constantly encouraging me – to (re)write this text, Helmut Krieger for commenting on a previous version, Sonja John for research assistance, Stefan Rabitsch for proofreading, and the anonymous reviewers for valuable comments and critique.



Violence or Power? *Gewalt!*

Leveraging the more ambiguous albeit pertinent notion of *Gewalt* in the German language, I seek to contribute to the somewhat ‘epistemicidal’ (Bennett 2007) theorization of epistemic violence in the Anglosphere.⁵ In order to do so, I make use of my own geopolitical and intellectual location as a white feminist professor of peace studies and political science based in Austria, where IR, just as in Germany, is not a fully established discipline, but rather a subfield of political science. My interest in epistemic violence has grown at the intersection of political theory, sociology of knowledge, gender studies, peace studies and IR, which I have studied and contributed to in Austria, Germany, and France, while necessarily trying to keep up with the so-called international debates in English. To speak and write from this location, which I consider somewhat liminal and certainly privileged at the same time, engenders referencing non-English and/or non-IR-related literature. Moreover, and due to my epistemic location, I am aware of the fact that I am not overlooking all the available work on the issue in critical strands within the IR canon.

Violence might not exactly be the opposite of power, but it is commonly considered as something that is distinct in nature and its attendant connotations (Arendt 1969). While this distinction is semantically mirrored in dominant (post-)colonial languages such as English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian, the German notion of *Gewalt* simultaneously denotes power *and* violence. This is neither coincidence nor semantic imprecision, and certainly German used to be and to some extent still is a colonial language itself, e.g., toward subnational minorities within Austria, such as Slovene, Croatian or Hungarian. It is all the more interesting that, only seemingly blurry, the German notion of *Gewalt* accurately circumscribes the historical heritage and political foundations of the international political system, as they are based on the model of the modern nation-state. To point out this subtext of the concept of *Gewalt* vis-à-vis the state’s monopoly on the use of force allows us to recognize both the political and the epistemic premises of the international political system. The term encompasses both the foundation of political order (*Ordnungsbegründung*) and its destruction (*Ordnungszerstörung*) (Imbusch 2002). While the former denotes institutionalized power and its attendant legitimacy, the latter quite automatically suggests the illegitimacy of substate violence.

This ambiguity of *Gewalt* does not necessarily constitute an obstacle or disadvantage to the analysis and theorization of (epistemic) violence – quite the contrary. As Étienne Balibar (2009) shows in his work on the oeuvre of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in German, *Gewalt* effectively unites two key constituent elements of politics that were presumed to be antithetical to each other. In a latent dialectic, the term refers to both the negation of law and its institutional realization. According to Balibar, we would not conceive of politics as a compensation for violence, had we not previously eliminated all ambiguities of violence from our understanding of politics.

⁵ I read English, German, French, and a little Spanish. While all of these languages carry the colonial heritage, referencing texts in their original languages is a first step of un/doing epistemic within the present ‘epistemic monoculture’ (Bennett 2015).



Consequently, while we tend to separate all phenomena designated as violence from the sphere of politics, we classify them in degrees of tolerability (Balibar 2015). This is where the epistemic obviously and prominently takes the stage.

Knowledge is intrinsically linked to the naturalization and legitimization of both visible and invisible forms of violence. As Walter Benjamin (1965 [1921]) has pointed out a century ago, knowledge is constitutive of the political foundations and the epistemic prerequisites of violence. Feminist and post-/decolonial theory in particular is well aware of this dialectic polymorphism, which we have to keep in mind when conceptualizing epistemic violence. By assembling existing approaches to and definitions of epistemic violence in the following section, I take the next step toward that goal, while keeping the dual meaning of *Gewalt* in mind.

Conceptual landscapes. What is epistemic violence?

Assuming a synoptic vantage point, the following assemblage is aggregated into five ways of how epistemic violence is either explicitly or implicitly defined and addressed as a problem across a broad spectrum of disciplines: (i) miscellaneous nonexplanations, (ii) liberal imaginations, (iii) materialistic groundings, (iv) feminist postcolonial perspectives, and (v) decolonial state-centered approaches.

Implicit understandings and nonexplanations

When explicitly used as a key term in IR-related articles, epistemic violence is either hardly explained at all (Ayotte and Husain 2005), deployed as a catch-all that denotes the legitimization of other forms of violence (Gebrewold 2008), or not referenced at all (Cremin et al. 2018). The same is true for approaches to epistemic violence in educational studies (Fredericks 2009), linguistics (Branson and Miller 2000), criminology (Kitossa 2014), psychology (Held 2019), area studies (Menski 2016), environmental studies (Vermeulen 2019), social movement studies (Brisette 2018), intercultural studies (Gaitán-Barrera and Azeez 2015), or labor studies (Meléndez-Badillo 2019).⁶ Remarkably, this also applies to a comprehensive Postcolonial Studies Dictionary (Nayar 2015), where one would expect to find a substantial entry on one of the field's key terms; instead, it only contains a brief reference to Spivak and Foucault. As long as the term does not belong to the standard vocabulary of academic and public discourse, we have to put more effort in explaining what we mean by it. The concept must be well-established and well-understood if it is to make any contribution to our understanding of what is going on – and also going wrong – in international politics.

⁶ This assemblage of references constitutes an illustration of database and additional desktop research for explicit uses of the term epistemic violence, be it in titles or abstracts of journal articles and book chapters. The following, more explicit uses of the term were more difficult to find. I have assembled them throughout a perennial research project and process, looking for the use of the term in English, French and German sources.



So how do scholars not only name and blame, like the ones mentioned above, but also frame epistemic violence with regard to issues in international politics? In the following, I assemble more explicit and substantial explanations of epistemic violence. Unsatisfied with the abovementioned (non)references to Spivak, my reading strategy has been deliberately multidisciplinary and eclectic. The following examples depict dominant lines of thought in what is otherwise a heterogeneous and scattered debate about what we can understand by epistemic violence, taking place across many fields of interest in the international domain. While many of them stem from outside IR proper, all of them can tell us something about what epistemic violence means in the respective specific fields of knowledge production.

Deviance and deficiency

Among the few conceptual approaches to epistemic violence available, several authors describe the phenomenon as a lamentable exception to an otherwise enlightened academic realm of rationality and nonviolence. An early example of this liberal approach is Hans Saner's (1982, 73–95) understanding of the epistemic within a relational understanding of personal, structural, and especially symbolic violence. Actually curtailing Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the latter, the Swiss philosopher and peace scholar compares science⁷ and academia to the arts. In both domains, he argues, the symbolic realm can be (ab)used to legitimize other forms of violence, injustice and inequality. Due to their self-reflexivity and methodologies, however, Saner considers the sciences and the arts as privileged domains of knowledge production in the service of nonviolence. Epistemic violence would then only occur when the sciences consider themselves as the only legitimate source of knowledge, or when threatened by ideology. To Saner, the latter constitutes an exogenous problem that somehow infiltrates the academic and epistemic sphere from the political outside – a perspective that keeps the imagined nonviolent nature of academic knowledge production intact. This is a very common framing of the problem. While aware of the entanglements of knowledge and violence, it remains locked in the tripartite imaginary of violence as something else that happens somewhere else and is committed by somebody else, which I have described in Introduction of this text.

The same is true for the approach formulated by the Belgian political scientist and sociologist Luc Reyckler (2010), who offers a predominantly psychological explanation of epistemic violence. By creating mental barriers – either intentionally or unintentionally – scholars would inhibit alternative 'knowledge and know-how that could be used for furthering international cooperation and sustainable peace-building' (Reyckler 2010, 5). Referring to Vandana Shiva's (1990) Marxist understanding of epistemic violence in the context of global capitalism, he strips her feminist post-colonial definition from its materialist substance and highlights an individualized psychological dimension of the problem. As a result, the former chairperson of the

⁷ It is impossible to translate the German notion of *Wissenschaft*, which includes every field and discipline of academic knowledge production. In contrast, the supposedly neutral English term science(s) has a strong bias toward the natural sciences.



International Peace Research Association considers the problem to be surmountable by way of practicing international solidarity and cooperation between scholars from the Global North and South. Reychler's empathic call for responsibility among privileged scholars and for international solidarity with their disadvantaged colleagues counts on the efforts of individuals to overcome a systemic problem.

Thomas Teo (2010) locates the problem primarily within scientific procedures that involve processes of Othering – explicitly quantitative ones. Interestingly, he conceives of these operations as resembling direct and personal violence. While the Canadian psychologist see(k)s epistem(olog)ic(al)⁸ violence in the relationship between data and their potentially problematic interpretation, however, the origin and quality of figures and data themselves remain unchallenged. Further, he singles out the superior status that is attributed to (quantitative) science in contrast to 'theoretical criticism expressed by a marginalized Other' (Teo 2010, 299). This Other, however, is not situated in any specific (geo)political context, but merely serves to illustrate the problem – just as the universalized scholarly Self remains unmarked of any social position. For Teo, too, epistem(olog)ic(al) violence is a predominantly ethical problem that calls for an increase of scholarly responsibility while leaving systemic and structural dimensions of knowledge–power relations untouched.

Nonetheless, Teo's definition reminds us of an important issue with regard to exploring epistemic violence in the sphere of international politics: the primacy of quantitative research in IR, which has always been an efficient tool for dividing and ruling territories, peoples, and knowledges in the service of the modern nation-state. The roots of this paradigm reach back to the 17th century, when the emerging English/British model of modern natural sciences started to turn into a *pars pro toto* for any scholarly knowledge production. In fact, this 'predatory discourse' (Bennett 2007) is co-constitutive of the global colonial expansion and its attendant teleology of linear progress, enlightenment, and civilization. Moreover, the specific scholarly division of labor that undergirds IR-related knowledge production – data from the Global South for theory production in the Global North – maintains the imperialist nature of academia (Galtung 1971) which, in turn, constitutes the structural, cultural, and symbolic background for epistemic violence.

Territorialization, naturalization, embodiment

Two texts from critical geography stand in stark contrast to the abovementioned approach to the problem. They explicitly link epistemic violence to political territories (Korf 2006) and racialized bodies (MacDonald 2002). According to them, the phenomenon is grounded in the human experience of struggle within asymmetric power relations in a postcolonial present. A German scholar based in Switzerland,

⁸ While most authors speak of epistemic violence, the term epistemological violence, which more specifically refers to an academic context of knowledge production (Mayneri 2014), is only occasionally used. Since I consider the realm of an academic culture of knowledge as part of the globally entangled social and the political sphere at large, I do not speak of a specific (purely academic) epistemological, but of an epistemic violence in a more comprehensive understanding.



Benedikt Korf's work on Sri Lanka exemplifies epistemic violence in that so-called conflict experts rationalize, indeed naturalize territorial claims. He recognizes the academic creation of geographical imaginaries, which turn into naturalized truth claims; these are closely entangled with the direct and physical violence of conflict and warfare in a region that is still struggling with its colonial heritage. However, while the author problematizes the colonial question through the concrete example of conflict transformation in postcolonial Sri Lanka, he neglects the ways in which academic knowledge production itself – usually far removed from regions of conflict – plays a part in the ongoing colonial condition.

Kenneth MacDonald's analysis of mountain tourism in the Karakorum region of Northern Pakistan goes further in that he maps 'the linkage between globalization, institutionalized violence and the interaction of bodies differentially situated in power relations' (MacDonald 2002, 10). Specifically, he problematizes the gap between a globalized discourse of human rights and economic empowerment among predominantly (white) European and US-American adventure tourists, and the disastrous living and working conditions of the local porters. The Canadian geographer locates epistemic violence in this material and cognitive gap, arguing that the very specific understanding of distance – both physical/geographical and mental/moral – upholds the abyss that separates the privileged from the exploited. Contrary to what the liberal progressive narrative propagates, this kind of tourism does little to reduce or bridge this gap. Instead, these encounters with the Other, he argues, not only rely on, but also perpetuate social, material, economic, and epistemic asymmetries based on race and class. MacDonald does not provide a substantial definition of epistemic violence either, but rather anchors the problem in the colonial condition of the present. He is one of the very few authors who explicitly includes class as a category of analysis vis-à-vis a concept that is predominantly based on race. Considerations of sex and gender, however, do not inform his argument.

Drawing on a long feminist tradition, the Brazilian sociolinguist Joana Plaza Pinto (2017) includes the latter into her equally body-centered approach to epistemic violence. While the racialized and sexualized body constitutes a permanent 'battlefield' (Pinto 2017, 173) of scientific activities in an ongoing colonial condition, she argues, it is constantly excluded from academic debates.⁹ Eurocentric scholarship, she argues, in fact not describes and analyzes languages, but rather invents them in the first place by differentiating bodies from each other, based on very specific ideas of nationality, gender, race, geopolitical location, and age. That said, colonial markers used for the hierarchization of bodies apply to the invention of languages, while languages in turn become markers of bodies themselves. This is where Pinto sees Santos' 'epistemicide' (Santos 2014) at work. As a result, certain bodies are listened to because their languages are considered understandable and reasonable, while others are turned into 'epistemic outcast[s]' (Pinto 2017, 181) whose articulations are exoticized, devaluated, ignored, or even eliminated altogether with the substantial help of distinguished scholarship. Divya Tolia-Kelly, a UK-based geographer, provides an impressive example in her analysis of the British Museum, which she

⁹ The distinction between *Körper* and *Leib* in German helps to better understand this ambivalence.



understands as ‘a site of materialising the pain of epistemic violence, the rupture of genocide and the deadening of artifacts,’ ‘a mausoleum for the European eye, [...] which petrifies living cultures [...] along racial lines’ (Tolia-Kelly 2016, 896).

These spatialized, embodied, and materialist approaches to epistemic violence show that the phenomenon is not an abstract problem at all; its causes and effects are in many ways entangled with IR issues. Starting from a corporeal dimension of epistemic violence, it is obvious that colonial modernity is literally embodied in what Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) calls the ‘coloniality of Being,’ to which I will return below.

Representation, reductionism, resilience

Rooted in social and political movements as well as in anticolonial, postcolonial, and decolonial theory, feminists have sharpened their tools, conceptualizing violence, for decades in order to challenge dominant orders. Understanding violence as procedural and relational, they have tended to its epistemic layers, too. Unsatisfied with abstract and/or individualized definitions of epistemic violence, they have highlighted its social, material, and global dimensions. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that a feminist postcolonial scholar (Spivak 1988) coined the most widespread definition of the term already in the mid-1980s. In her canonical text, the famous US-based Indian literary scholar addresses epistemic violence both in the colonial past (British colonial rule in India) and in the imperial present (French leftist intellectual discourse in the 1980s). Spivak outlines various ways of how both mainstream and critical voices silence (post)colonial subjects, while othering marginalized women in the Global South in particular. By linking Foucault’s notion of epistemic violence to the colonial condition, she exposes his Eurocentrism; she then goes on to harness the term for a postcolonial critique of multiple violent power relations that are based on the pernicious colonial heritage of intersectional racism, sexism and classism, past and present. She offers a feminist reading of Marx’ understanding of representation – distinguishing between *Darstellung* (speaking about) and *Vertretung* (speaking for) – allowing her to show how both Western and Southern patriarchal elites and androcentric thought heterarchically feed into each other by way of epistemic violence when it comes to securing claims and privileges. For Spivak, epistemic violence is always already entangled with other forms of violence, including direct and physical violence.

An internationally renowned Indian feminist and a postcolonial thinker herself, Vandana Shiva’s approach to epistemic violence is far less prominent. A trained physicist, a philosopher of (natural) science, and an environmentalist, she might speak to a different audience than Spivak, but her perspective is equally international, political, postcolonial, and profoundly radical. However, unlike Spivak, who defines epistemological violence in terms of discourse and representation, she situates her approach in materialism. She puts capitalist exploitation, the maximization of profits, the accumulation of capital, and imperial militarism at the heart of her definition (Shiva 1990). These factors, she argues, lead to a profound reductionism of scientific knowledge and significantly reduce the human capability of



understanding the world by excluding and destroying all other ways of knowing (Shiva 1995). For her, the problem is not an ‘epistemological accident’ (Shiva 1990, 238), but rather ‘related to the needs of a particular form of economic organization.’ The entangled knowledge monopoly, embodied and executed by so-called experts, encompasses four tiers of (epistemological) violence: ‘violence against the subject of knowledge, the object of knowledge, the beneficiary of knowledge, and against knowledge itself’ (Shiva 1990, 233–234). Last, but not least, the epistem(olog)ic(al) violence of modern scientific reductionism deprives nature’s ability to renew itself since it regards nature as an inanimate and exploitable resource – with disastrous effects on indigenous populations and women, and, in fact, a threat to the survival of humankind and the entire planet, she argues. Seen from this vantage point, epistemology is anything but irrelevant to international politics, and violence is anything but alien to the discipline(s) that claim to explain what is going on in the world. Both are constitutive of the capitalist world system.

One of the most comprehensive albeit less materialist theorizations of epistemic violence can be found in Kristie Dotson’s (2011, 2014) work. Like most feminist authors, the African American philosopher puts the relation of (not) speaking, (not) listening, (not) understanding and (not) silencing, as outlined by Spivak (1988), at the center of her analysis. Eliminating knowledge, damaging a given group’s ability to speak, being listened to and being heard, and unequally distributing intelligibility are some of the central aspects of epistemic violence in Dotson’s account. More precisely, she distinguishes between two epistemic practices of Eurocentric, race–sex–class-based silencing: (i) (exogenous) ‘testimonial quieting’ as an active practice of unknowing, and (ii) (endogenous) ‘testimonial smothering’ as a form capitulation or self-silencing (Dotson 2011, 242–244). While Dotson defines epistemic violence as a ‘failure, owing to pernicious ignorance, of hearers to meet the vulnerabilities of speakers in linguistic exchanges’ (Dotson 2011, 236), she emphasizes that the problem is ‘less about the victim [...] and more about the socio-epistemic circumstances of the silencing’ (Dotson 2011, 251). She unmistakably locates these circumstances within the colonial heritage of what Ramón Grosfoguel (2013) calls ‘epistemic racism/sexism.’ Epistemic violence, to her, is deeply sedimented into dominant orders of knowledge and, therefore, constitutes a global political problem. Epistemic violence, she argues, is deeply enshrined in the resilience of the epistemic systems at our disposal. Challenging and changing these orders of epistemic oppression requires becoming aware of the persistent resilience of one’s own epistemological system, while relying upon that very system for creating alternative epistemologies and fostering sociopolitical change (Dotson 2014).

Eurocentrism and the modern nation-state

Without referring to the concept of symbolic violence, Dotson’s conclusion is reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1998), who mapped the entanglements of epistemic violence with the state’s monopoly on symbolic and direct physical violence. Focusing on the colonial dimension of this entanglement, many post- and decolonial theorists, too, see the modern nation-state as a privileged producer and perpetrator



of epistemic violence. In contrast to Eurocentric state theory, however, they explicitly locate the state in the colonial condition. According to Immanuel Wallerstein (1991), the social sciences have co-constituted both the state's and modernity's political and epistemic foundations in a complex division of labor, i.e., 'a geopolitical distribution of scholarly tasks in function of their pertinence to Western modernity' (Boacă and Costa 2010, 13). From this perspective, the domain of academic knowledge production is more than a side stage of epistemic violence in international politics. In fact, it is intrinsically linked to what Johan Galtung (1969) has called structural violence half a century ago. While structural violence cannot be separated from direct and physical violence, international politics and state-centered IR persistently disregard broader concepts of violence even though they profess to explicate and solve violent conflicts.

In order to conceptualize epistemic violence, Santiago Castro-Gómez (2002) examines the role of the social sciences within colonialism, state formation, and the global rise of capitalism. Drawing on Foucault and Spivak, the Colombian philosopher links the former's concept of *gouvernementalité* to the latter's problematization of *Darstellung* and *Vertretung* with a view to framing the present crisis of the modern narrative of rationality, development, progress, and democratization. The modern nation-state, he argues, 'not only requires a monopoly on violence, but also uses it to rationally "direct" the activities of its citizens in accordance with previously established scientific criteria' (Castro-Gómez 2002, 271). The state thus functions as the central node 'from which the mechanisms of control over the natural and social world are distributed and coordinated' (Castro-Gómez 2002, 270). The social sciences provide and permanently refine these mechanisms of adjustment of human life to changing modes of production and governing, which are rooted in the early stages of European colonialism in the Americas. According to Castro-Gómez (2002, 277), 'the colonial imaginary permeated the entire conceptual system of the Social Sciences from their inception.' Instead of providing the theoretical and epistemological framework to dismantle the global imposition that is the Eurocentric paradigm, they supply politics with the tools for putting this paradigm into practice – a practice that post- and decolonial scholars poignantly call 'genocide/epistemicide' (Grosfoguel 2013; Santos 2014). Rather than being a supplementary element in the formation of the modern state – which, after all, undergirds the international political system – scholarly knowledge production plays a key constitutive part in it. Consequently, we must look at the social sciences' contributions to the 'invention of the other' (Castro-Gómez 2002, 275) from a geopolitical perspective based on the concept of coloniality/modernity. IR and related disciplines such as development and peace studies, conflict and security studies, terrorism and war studies, to name but a few, are deeply involved in this invention of the Other, i.e., in the processes of epistemic violence. While we can separate epistemic violence from other forms of state and substate violence along typological lines, we must acknowledge their deep entanglements in real-world politics.

In the following, I sketch a multidisciplinary conceptual approach that builds on the preceding assemblage by condensing some of the aforementioned elements of epistemic violence into a well-established social scientific matrix, i.e., the figure of the micro-, meso-, and macrolevel. I am well aware that this may seem contradictory



from a perspective that otherwise calls for decentering, deconstructing and decolonizing concepts and canons. As I will argue in the next section, however, re-signifying the customary toolbox is a crucial next step toward that broader horizon.

Re-signifying the micro-/meso-/macro-approach. How can we reconsider first- and second-order violence entanglements in colonial modernity?

Epistemic violence is not external or alien to the academic realm. It is rooted in knowledge itself, in its genesis, formation, organization, and effectiveness (Brunner 2020, 274). However, we must neither dilute epistemic violence by deploying it for any arbitrary correlation of violence and knowledge nor mistake the term for anything and everything. In order to make it a powerful concept for IR and related fields, we should not refer to epistemic violence in a liberal Euro- and androcentric habit of abstraction and generalization, but rather consistently link it to colonial modernity's underlying 'epistemic racism/sexism' (Grosfoguel 2013). As post- and decolonial scholars have been arguing for years, we need to insist on locating epistemic violence in a specific origin (Europe) and contextualize it within a specific history (colonialism and capitalism) and specific operating modes (racism/sexism, separation, hierarchization and naturalization). Epistemic violence is a component and product of modernity itself, both undergirding and bringing forth its multiple asymmetries. Numerous forms of violence characterize modernity, connecting its colonial past with its remnants in the present. Even though they did not explicitly use the term, feminists (Merchant 1983; Mies 1986) have been arguing for decades that the chief outcome of epistemic violence is the separation of the material and social spheres from the epistemic and cognitive spheres. It lays the groundwork for the construction of an epistemic and ontological 'abyss' (Santos 2014, 119–120), along whose rim social inequality and power relations, and, hence, exploitation of human and natural resources is organized, legitimized, and naturalized. Finally, we must acknowledge that epistemic violence creates specific subjectivities and political subjects, who are heterarchically positioned within colonial modernity and, therefore, involved in its multiple violent characteristics to very different degrees (Brunner 2020, 275).

Instead of simply deploying the term without further considerations, the field of international politics must learn not only to acknowledge epistemic violence, but also understand its workings within its own domain. Referring to the twin dimension of *Gewalt*, I argue that we should do so for two reasons. First, epistemic violence is key to the legitimization of various phenomena of violence in the political sphere, the analysis of which is an explicit issue of IR and related fields. Even if we limit our analysis of international politics to so-called second-order violence (i.e., visible, direct, physical), we can make use of the concept with a view to gaining a deeper understanding of observable phenomena of violence as procedural and relational. Second, the coloniality inherent in the disciplines that deal with international politics is central to the methods and methodologies, which we make use of for analyzing and theorizing what is going on in the world. Moreover, it influences



our everyday behavior and practices as researchers, teachers, experts, or simply colleagues. We should therefore pay significantly more attention to first order – epistemic – violence since our ways of thinking and un/doing IR are complicit in it by default. Looking at our own cultures and practices of knowledge production through the lenses of epistemic violence will not only deepen our theories of international politics, but also sensitize us to the underbelly of ‘doing academia.’

Manuela Boatcă and Sérgio Costa (2010) suggest tracing the colonial turn of a given discipline back to its origin in order to identify the reasons for and mechanisms of its resilience against decolonization. Re-signifying the conventional conceptual toolbox of the social sciences is one way of doing so with regard to dominant methodologies, re-signifying theories is another. Both are necessary for a significant epistemic shift to take place beyond the conventional methodological and epistemological nationalism of IR and related disciplines. In this spirit, I will outline the contours of a multidisciplinary concept of epistemic violence along the tripartite concept of a ‘coloniality of power’ (Quijano 1993, 2010), a ‘coloniality of knowledge’ (Lander 1993, 2000) and a ‘coloniality of Being’ (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 2008).

The experience of direct and physical violence in the colonial context lays the groundwork for Nelson Maldonado-Torres’ (2007) framing of a ‘coloniality of Being.’ Linking this individual dimension of both the suffering and the perpetration of violence to the colonial condition subverts the dominant microperspective that IR privileges when it comes to explaining phenomena of violence in international politics. According to Maldonado-Torres, and quite in contrast to conventional IR, violence and war are in fact not the exception in the modern political order; they are the norm, and an everyday experience for racialized and sexualized Others. What is going unnoticed in conventional perspectives of violence (as outlined at the beginning) – as occurring somewhere else, perpetrated by someone else, and constituting something else – is the suffering of the victim and the agency of a very specific perpetrator of violence, i.e., the ‘*Imperial Being*’ (Grosfoguel 2013, 77). The presumably disembodied, but politically, socially, and epistemologically privileged perspective of the latter has become a universal epistemic norm – expurgated from any trace of violent agency during its *mission civilisatrice*. On such a microlevel of colonial and imperial experience, epistemic violence refers to the embodied dimensions of the epistemic racism/sexism that is constitutive of colonial modernity’s abyss, with regard to both epistemology and real-world politics. From this perspective, it is impossible to reduce the microlevel analysis of violence in international politics to an individual issue of deviance from an otherwise supposedly nonviolent international order.

On the mesolevel of what Edgardo Lander calls the ‘coloniality of knowledge’ (Lander 1993, 2000), the mechanisms that normalize multiple forms of violence come into view. Key to this concept is the argument that the former religious (i.e., Christian) epistemology was in fact not replaced by modern secularism. Rather, the latter successfully integrated key elements of the former, while claiming to have overcome it. Rethinking international politics with regard to the coloniality of knowledge urges us, on the one hand, to call into question existing institutionalized knowledge about the nature of international politics, and its attendant epistemological premises and consequences. On the other hand, we have to dismantle



conventional forms of rationalizing and legitimizing different forms and modes of violence and inequality – be it through dominant classifications and hierarchizations, through the monopolization and universalization of, in fact, very particular and privileged knowledge claims, or the very concrete everyday practices of doing academia and scholarship in IR and related fields. From this vantage point, we can understand the terrain of knowledge as a transfer point for relations of power, domination, and violence of all sorts. Taking the entanglements of first- and second-order violence into account, we have to link the modes of legitimization and the foundations of violence to each other – and to the international political system at large. Epistemic violence, then, is more than a question of how to organize systems and nurture cultures of knowledge. Rather, it is about how these systems and cultures have co-constituted colonial modernity. What is more, epistemic violence posits in what ways, if at all, we can contribute to undo the ongoing coloniality of international politics from within academia. Considering epistemic violence on this mesolevel means to acknowledge the colonial heritage of the domain of academic knowledge itself.

Conceptualizing epistemic violence on the macrolevel does certainly not content itself with mainstream theorizations of international politics and its attendant methodological nationalism that tries to bring order to the assumed chaos of an irreversibly globalized world. Rather, it addresses the geopolitical and epistemic space of global colonial modernity itself. It is in this space that the Eurocentric and Occidental paradigm of classification, hierarchization, separation, and exploitation has come into being over the course of five centuries of colonialism; today, it has become quasi-naturalized. According to decolonial theory, processes of mass violence, organized and rationalized by political, religious, and intellectual European elites in the long sixteenth century, have paved the way for the colonial-capitalist world system that constitutes our lifeworld in the present. From this perspective emerges a genuine imperative to acknowledge how racialized and sexualized exploitation and extinction were entangled in the early period of European colonial expansion, and how they have become constitutive of dominant orders of Eurocentrist and Occidental knowledge. According to Grosfoguel (2013), the *Reconquista* on the Iberian Peninsula, the conquest of indigenous populations in the Americas, the abduction, shipping, and exploitation of Africans, and, as Silvia Federici (2004) shows, the pursuit and killing of so-called witches on the European continent, are co-constitutive of the colonial/modern paradigm. What interconnects these four ‘genocides/epistemicides’ (Grosfoguel 2013) is the religious-turned-scholarly epistemic racism/sexism that laid the groundwork for the legitimization of multiple forms of violence in the service of colonialism and capitalism. This is what decolonial scholars call the violent ‘colonial underside’ (Dussel 2013, 23) of the supposedly nonviolent, progressive, and enlightened modernist paradigm that came into being over the past two hundred years. Re-signifying the macrolevel of IR analysis from this perspective allows us to focus on the global order(s) of violence, which is inherent to the supposedly nonviolent international political system as such – including related systems of knowledge.

Based on a recoded understanding of micro, meso and macro in the domain of international politics, I suggest to address epistemic violence along three trajectories. First, as a phenomenon, we have to investigate its entanglements with other



forms of violence in international politics (how does epistemic violence work?). This is what many post- and decolonial IR scholars have been doing in the past decade, and whose work has been very inspiring at the outset of my own considerations about theorizing epistemic violence. Second, as a theoretical concept, epistemic violence has yet to become intelligible in the discipline (how can we define epistemic violence?). It is especially in this respect that I see the contribution of this article by introducing a variety of approaches to epistemic violence. Drawing on Spivak's and Santos' key contributions, I have sought to initiate a polyvocal conversation about the term with a view to fostering a broader understanding of the underlying problem – and thus make it accessible to many strands of IR-related theory and practices. Considering epistemic violence from this vantage point makes a difference in how we conceive of international politics in a broader sense, and it makes more complex the debate over how we analyze distinct phenomena, processes, and relations of violence in international politics. Third, we must understand epistemic violence as the prevailing *modus operandi* in academia (how can we deal with the dialectics of un/doing epistemic violence while un/doing IR?). I argue that we can use a deeper understanding of epistemic violence in order to change the terms of academic and political conversation itself.

Un/Doing epistemic violence. Where should we go from here?

The academic system – and our own scholarly thinking – may be very resilient when it comes to addressing, challenging, and transforming epistemic violence. Broadening and deepening our understanding of epistemic violence especially in the vein of Spivak, Shiva, and Santos, however, can provide a powerful tool for doing IR differently while constantly reframing and refining the concept across disciplinary boundaries. Ultimately, it even provides inspiration for undoing it.

Xavier Guillaume (2019) identifies an economy of epistemic violence in IR, which is deeply entrenched in the colonial condition. Through a political economy of (the English) language, he argues, authors commodify their work and themselves to the global marketplace. Since this marketplace becomes more and more monopolized by a few US- and UK-dominated global players in the publications industry, scholars from all over the world conform to the Euro-American global academic infrastructure, which maintains the colonial condition in an imperial world order. By way of a hermeneutic economy, the Swiss IR scholar, who is currently based in the Netherlands, refers to the tricky, often erroneous and sometimes even paradoxical movement of concepts between different languages and cultures of knowledge. As a result, concepts are not only enriched, but also become distorted, or occasionally, they disappear altogether. Hence, academics have to comply with an intersubjective economy of a very specific IR *habitus*, which the scholarly 'imperial Being' (Grosfoguel 2013) knows well but hardly reflects on critically.

That said, while trying to challenge coloniality from within academia, it is impossible to completely cease reproducing epistemic violence in our everyday academic, political, and social practices. Even as critical, feminist, postcolonial, decolonial, or indigenous scholars, we cannot entirely remove ourselves from 'modernity's



epistemic territory' (Vázquez 2011), and we are involved in the capitalist world system that shapes this territory (and *vice versa*). Leaning on Audre Lorde, Dotson's (2012, 42) call to 'never leaving our pen in someone else's blood' is thwarted by the 'passive voice of White supremacy' (Dozono 2020), which is part and parcel of the coloniality in academia and of capitalism itself. 'The end of the cognitive empire' (Santos 2018) may indeed not yet be in sight in IR and related disciplines, but the number, volume, and commitment of feminist, post- and decolonial voices that problematize epistemic violence with a view to minimizing its hold on international politics has been steadily rising.

To conclude, I suggest a four-tiered approach for how scholars in the field of international politics can undo – read: un/do, because we cannot fully undo it without at the same time reproducing it – epistemic violence. In this approach, I link the abovementioned decolonial scheme to voices from the Eurocentric canon of critical social theory, who have, explicitly or implicitly, taken the entanglements of first- and second-order violence into consideration in their own work. While I am fully aware of the problem of partially reiterating an already privileged white canon, I believe it is useful to un/think it from both ends in a Spivakian sense. This includes epistemic resistance from outside a given canon or community as well as reflecting its hegemony and starting to unlearn privilege from within. In line with Judith Butler's concept of normative violence (Butler 2009), which she has drawn from Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, we first have to wean ourselves from the normative distinction between violence and nonviolence that undergirds modernity, while simultaneously recalling the genuine link between first and second order violence. By decentering and re-signifying conventional Eurocentric assumptions about where (non)violence occurs in the international political system, especially along feminist, post- and decolonial lines, we can contribute to subverting the dominant paradigm of colonial modernity. Second, borrowing Bourdieu's early conceptualization of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977), it is imperative that we constantly dismantle the symbolic and epistemic monopoly on violence if we aim to transform its domination and supremacy. Making use of his approach for a post- and decolonial understanding of epistemic violence, we must not forget the origins of his oeuvre, which was influenced by anticolonial struggles and their combatant intellectuals. Consequently, we must meet the challenge of directing head-on the delicate question of the (il-)legitimacy of violence at the dominant capitalist world order instead of camouflaging it with scholarly euphemisms or evasive maneuvers. While scholars and academics will certainly not be the 'vanguards' (Santos 2014, 11) in social and political struggles, we must exercise our responsibility to work along epistemic breaches in the dominant paradigm. Third – and perhaps paradoxically – in order to undo epistemic violence we are called to subscribe to normativity and subsequently position ourselves unequivocally with regard to the given issue and debate at stake. Instead of perpetuating the powerful illusion of the scholarly 'god-trick' (Haraway 1988, 581), undoing epistemic violence while un/doing IR implies to take the risk of enduring or actively pointing at existing epistemic and political contradictions and conflicts in order to bring them to the forefront and open them for transformation (Jackson 2015). In addition to that, it is high time we started to unlearn privileges of geopolitical location, race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and other categories



that circumscribe who and where we are in the academic field. Understanding epistemic violence is a prerequisite for initiating this process, both for the marginalized and for the privileged voices in the field, and for all of those who, along different categories, potentially happen to find themselves in both groups. As a fourth way of undoing epistemic violence, scholars have therefore to learn to listen to and learn actively from what Foucault, while eschewing the colonial dimension, has called the ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’ (Foucault 1978, 58), and Santos has further specified as ‘rearguard theory’ (Santos 2014, 11). Academic efforts of ‘delinking’ (Mignolo 2007) from the dominant paradigms cannot succeed without taking these knowledge(s) into account, while keeping in mind that knowledge beyond the dominant paradigm is neither pristine nor innocent *vis-à-vis* coloniality. Continuing to rethink international politics from coloniality’s underside will force IR-related scholars, practitioners, and students to take epistemic violence into account. Starting to think about it in the twofold sense of *Gewalt* reminds us of how both violence and power are always already entangled as a precondition of the colonial/modern capitalist world system. That said, we have to consider epistemic violence both as a phenomenon and as a concept; both for our analyses of violence in international relations and for our own involvement in what is going on and going wrong in this world.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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