Expanding the Combat Zone: Sex-Gender-Culture Talk and Cognitive Militarization Today

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In reconsidering the paths that have led me to (as a student) and through (as a scholar) academia, research and the university, I realize that three issues have haunted me from the very beginning: violence, knowledge, and an explicitly critical perspective towards the entanglements between the two. Brilliant feminist teachers, especially in Vienna and Berlin, provided me with the appropriate glasses to view the world, and more recently, post- and decolonial scholars from across the globe sensitized me to further complications, especially when it comes to analyzing political violence and power relations. It is therefore not by coincidence that the topic of epistemic violence has gradually become the overall interest of my research and teaching in the field of Peace Studies and beyond.

My socialization in the German speaking world may have sensitized me for the issue long before I came across the concept of epistemic violence, since the German term Gewalt means both power and violence. It refers both to the destruction of societal order and to the discursive processes that establish it in the first place. This linguistic and conceptual ambivalence provides inspiration to think out of the box and create new words, terms and concepts for truly transdisciplinary critical thought – as feminist theory has always done.

Thanks to feminist postcolonial theory and related fields of critical work, we can today name and frame what has preoccupied me since I was a student: the silent, but powerful, links not only between power and knowledge, but also between violence and knowledge. The title of my article in this current issue of IFjP (18.3), “Expanding the Combat Zone”, speaks of an ongoing cognitive militarization that potentially renders everybody into a warrior for peace and democracy by way of an intensified discourse about culture, sexuality and gender.

I start my article with my long-lasting discomfort with what I had called genderism in the first place: when feminist issues are taken up for what I consider the wrong causes of politics, or when gender is devaluated as a mere variable (and not a powerful category) of knowledge, or vice versa. Looking through my feminist lenses at the crossroads of Peace Studies and Political Theory and trying to grasp the phenomenon of epistemic violence from different angles, I felt that gender and feminism are being put in the service of imperialist power politics in a tricky, neo-culturalist way today – and sometimes even by feminist and queer voices themselves.
Of course, the problem at stake is not new, and postcolonial feminists especially have argued for decades along the same vein. But what may be a commonplace in these debates can be difficult to explain to other audiences. Thinking of my efforts in teaching as well as of my limited success on both the merits and the pitfalls of feminism in political debates with friends and family, it came to my mind to start from Gayatri Spivak’s famous quote about “white men saving brown women from brown men” and to conjugate/declinate its intellectual grammar across more recent and more complicated settings of sexualized and gendered epistemic violence. Anti-militarist feminism today must not content itself with criticizing only white male imperialists. It needs to take a closer look at various sexed-gendered positions in the discursive and cognitive processes of legitimating military interventions abroad and political violence at home. Many feminist and queer scholars provide useful concepts for that work, which I refer to in my article while diversifying what I call an expansion of the combat zone.

While we must certainly defend the impact of feminist and queer thought in International Relations (as a scholarly field) and in international relations (as a political field), we have to be aware of the dynamics that may come along with these achievements, when a deeply orientalized and occidentalist sex-gender-culture talk becomes normalized. Step-by-step linking Spivak’s quote with more recent feminist and queer theorizing, I show how issues of sexuality, gender and feminism are explicitly or implicitly entangled with imperialist policies that may claim liberation, progress and peace in the name of sexual liberation and gender politics, while they continue to foster highly asymmetric power relations and large-scale political violence. I speak of cognitive militarization not because the policies that are brought about through gendered and culturalized knowledges are said to be non-physical and therefore less harmful, but just because they are not while pretending they are. Epistemic violence is not only a question of knowledge, a soft issue compared to what IR scholars and political scientists commonly understand by political violence. Depending on who and where you are in the global setting of power relations, epistemic violence may be a question of life or death, too.

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