

Colonialism, Epistemic Injustice and Global Justice: A response to ‘Overcoming the Epistemic Injustice of Colonialism’ Rajeev Bhargava*

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Colonialism, Epistemic Injustice and Global Justice – a Response to Rajeev Bhargava

When reading Rajeev Bhargava's article "Overcoming the Epistemic Injustice of Colonialism" (Global Policy, 2013 vol:4:4 ,pp 413 -417) I was reminded of one of my master's students from Pakistan. In a class on global justice I raised the question whether colonialism had left any morally relevant traces in the present. She spoke out and explained, not without some anger in her voice;

"Yes, certainly! Everything Pakistani is today considered of less worth compared to the West: we consider our own history as shameful and we feel that we are still slaves under the British rulers. These feelings have also a cultural impact today; to be beautiful is to have blond hair, not black, to be civilized is to eat with knife and fork, not to eat in our traditional way, and our traditional languages are superseded by English."

Bhargava elaborates on the epistemic ground of this experience. Epistemic injustice is according to Bhargava a kind of cultural injustice and means that "concepts and categories" providing self-understanding and orientation is replaced and marginalized by a dominant power, in his case the colonizer. It was, Bhargava writes, "...important to conquer not only the land and goods of the colonized but also their culture and minds."

Bhargava's contribution is well-argued and convincing, but also challenging. However, his argument is in certain respects quite brief and general and in need of some further clarifications and distinctions:

1. Bhargava begins with the following statement: "The current conjecture in the world is witness to a dramatic, almost irreversible breakdown of the hegemony of mainstream intellectual traditions of the west. Ideas and practices associated with the modern west have been long criticized...". This kind of generalization of "western ideas" seems to be less helpful for the analyses. Among western ideas one finds neo-liberalism, as well as Marxism, fascism as well as egalitarianism. What is the point of lumping together so different ideas in this way? Is it really helpful to categorize ideas in "western", "eastern" etc.?

2. Bhargava argues that "indigenous cultures" were inferiorized, marginalized and anonymized. My question is if this analysis is equally valid for all kinds of cultural manifestations; academic, religious, literary, folkloristic etc., or if there are cultural "zones" that are more, or less, affected.

3. Bhargava writes further that an epistemic framework is the way "...a group understands and evaluates its individual and collective life". What constitutes according to Bhargava a "group"? Obviously, a colonized people is such a group, but does his analysis also apply to other groups like workers, women, Catholics...?

4. Bhargava argues that each group has its own "...system of meanings and interpretations..." That could be interpreted as implying a kind of relativism because if each group has its own epistemic framework it is hard to see how they could communicate with each other. However, that strong interpretation does not seem to be Bhargava's view because he also argues for the possibility of "biculturalism" which means a "potentially common tradition". Yes, he even foresees "...the renewal of western traditions by nonwestern people..." This more universalistic view is in agreement with, for example, Amartya Sen's argument that different cultures and religions share some common values, for example freedom (Sen 1999). Interestingly, both Bhargava and Sen use the example of 3rd Century Indian Emperor Asoka in their arguments; Bhargava for the need to recapture lost or marginalized perspectives, Sen for his aim to show that universal views of freedom and tolerance are internal to Indian tradition.

5. Colonialism led to epistemic injustice, Bhargava argues. In this respect, colonialism did not only imply political and economic suppression but also suppression of the colonized peoples' world views and ideas. This constitutes indeed a historical injustice! But Bhargava introduces the article with a hopeful comment: "...the world is witness to a...breakdown of the hegemony of mainstream intellectual traditions of the west". But where are the evidence and examples of this? I think one with good reasons can argue that the present global structure in many respects still mirrors the colonial world order. Former colonial powers (including the US) are also the dominant powers today and former colonies are the present nations at the bottom, "the bottom billion". There is thus – with some exceptions - a persistent economic and political dominance, and - as one could argue in line with Bhargava – also a persistent epistemic dominance!

My final point takes me to both Bhargava's and my own conclusions. At the end of his article, Bhargava argues that the concept of global justice would benefit from "rejuvenating" from the "outsiders". He does not explain what this would imply, but from his article one can assume that he has in mind that the voices of the "wretched of the earth" should be listened to, and that ideas and concepts of global justice should be reinterpreted by scholars from the South. I agree that our understanding of global justice would benefit from their experiences and views. However, the discussion on global justice can also benefit in other ways from Bhargava's perspective. Colonialism implied, as Bhargava spells out, not only economic exploitation and political domination for hundreds of years, but also a changed mindset of the colonized subjects implying a loss of cultural means for identity formation and self-respect. What should the colonial powers do to repay this huge debt? How could the previous wrongs be rectified? How should we globally overcome the enduring relations of dominance, epistemic and others, and establish relations characterized by equality and mutual respect. Justice is a manifold concept, referring to distribution, rectification and retribution. So far the discussion on global justice has mainly focused on global *distributive* justice. When the legacy of colonialism is taken into account, we could foresee a turn to global *rectificatory* justice (Collste 2010).

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