Understanding epistemic erasures of local & indigenous communities: Decolonizing research and re-imagining alternative partnerships in Development Studies

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Epistemic erasures continue to exist in a wide range of institutional designs at the local, national, regional, European and international level. Bringing up a debate on this topic not only opens the possibility to raise awareness on the concept, but also motivates research to shed light on alternative partnerships of resistance to these erasures. As Sharon Stein and others have pointed out, partnerships that arise collaboratively between actors from academia, civil society and politics can contribute to recognizing, repairing and re-imagining new decolonial futures.

Peña-Guzmán and Reynolds argue that "epistemic erasure functions by removing entire categories or swaths of hermeneutical resources from a communicative space where they would otherwise reside because the speaker's perceived social identity is erroneously thought to render those subjects categorically inapplicable". Miranda Fricker, on the other hand, defines two types of epistemic injustices: testimonial and hermeneutic injustice. Testimonial injustice addresses the lower credibility assigned to specific knowers due to the prejudice against them, such as women, minority groups, or other marginalized communities, including scholars in the periphery. These communities are seen as unfit to legitimately and rationally contribute to a knowledge consensus, policy, or decision-making, whereby this deficit of credibility arises from gender and race-based prejudice. Hermeneutic injustice, on the other hand, means that marginalized communities are deprived of their ability to give meaning to and intelligibly communicate their experiences to dominant groups, as their experiences often fall into a conceptual blank gap and cannot be explained through the concepts and approaches that are produced by the dominant groups.

"Every human is born into a valid and legitimate knowledge system"

Both of these injustices that arise from the Eurocentric nature of knowledge production mechanisms mean that hermeneutical resources of certain people and communities face erasure. At the same time, such erasures create recognition struggles both from non-Western communities against the domination of the West and its promotion of values, institutions and governing structures, as well as, from certain communities within the West itself, whose hermeneutical resources are facing quantitative recognition deficits or misrecognitions. Fricker also underlines that there is likely to be "some social pressure on the norm of credibility to imitate the structures of social power", and thus implies that testimonial injustice emerges when scholars in the periphery, to gain credibility and recognition as knowers, rely exclusively on the issues, concepts, theories, and methodologies that are widely believed to be valid in the center. "Every human is born into a valid and legitimate knowledge system", writes Sabelo J.Ndlovu-Gatsheni, but Eurocentric coloniality can undermine this legitimacy, causing epistemic erasures and epistemicides. Acknowledging and involving different knowledge systems require recentering knowledge in different geographies which may sometimes be embedded in local values, knowledges, and strategies of existence.

Building on these debates, we argue that there is an urgent need to engage with the local and/or indigenous knowledges, values and practices of the communities living on the abyssal lines of society. We urgently need to forge epistemic spaces for decolonial interventions and create intellectual spaces for critical thinking to document how these communities live with and address

the development challenges they face. While local communities have the ancestral knowledges and capacities to overcome many challenges facing their spaces and societies, hierarchical structures and institutions continue to enforce Western knowledge and policies to address local issues, which often makes things worse. In turn, local knowledges are pushed aside, benalized, exploited, appropriated, and stolen. In other words: their knowledges are erased and their sovereignty over their own epistemologies is shifted.

"Epistemic erasures have been the basis for imposing Eurocentric models of living"

In summary, epistemic erasures have been the basis for imposing Eurocentric models of living that are capitalist, colonial, racist, and patriarchal, and expressed through alleged "development" interventions. Instead, work in the margins inspired by post-development visions, has unveiled a pluriverse of knowledges that have been oppressed, but still survive as alternative ways of living, feeling, being, and relating to one another, showing that different societal models exist that cannot be reduced to the one that the globalized/mainstream culture has taught us.

Shedding light on epistemic erasures, we aim to understand the everyday inequalities of marginalized communities both in the Global North and South, and how they resist through collective grassroots movements. It is with the guarding of epistemologies of the South and at the margins, and plurality of epistemologies, that alternative, non-hegemonic, and non-exploitative transformations and non-exploitive developments become possible. Thus, it remains important to constantly give accounts to stories from the sites of struggles. Academic research needs to further encourage reflection not only on what epistimologies of the South are, but also on how we can understand and help to protect these epistemologies and alternative ways of knowing and living without reproducing extractivism and the abyssal modes of relationship described.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of the EADI Debating Development Blog or the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes. ***It is part of the "New Rhythms of Development" series around the EADI/CEsA Lisbon Conference, 10-13 July 2023***

Image: Yafa El Masri

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