



Epistemic Islamophobia and Colonial Social Sciences

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Abstract: This article explores how epistemic racism shapes contemporary discussions on Islamophobia. Epistemic Racism is an underestimated aspect of racism. The first part is a discussion about epistemic racism in the world-system. The second part is on the Western male hegemonic identity politics and the fundamentalist responses to it. The third part is on epistemic Islamophobia and the social sciences.

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EPISTEMIC RACISM IN THE WORLD-SYSTEM

Epistemic racism and epistemic sexism are the most hidden forms of racism and sexism in the global system we all inhabit, the “Westernized/Christianized modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system” (see Grosfoguel 2008a). Social, political, and economic racisms and sexism are much more visible and recognized today than epistemological racism/sexism. However, epistemic racism is the foundational

form and older version of racism in that the inferiority of “non-Western” people as below the human (non-humans or sub-humans) is defined on their closeness to animality and the latter is defined on the basis of their inferior intelligence and, thus, lack of rationality. Epistemic racism operates through the privileging of an essentialist (“identity”) politics of “Western” male elites, that is, the hegemonic tradition of thought of Western philosophy and social theory that almost never includes “Western” Women and never includes “non-Western” philosophers/philosophies and social scientists. In this tradition, the “West” is considered to be the only legitimate tradition of thought able to produce knowledge and the only one with access to “universality,” “rationality” and “truth.” Epistemic racism considers “non-Western” knowledge to be inferior to “Western” knowledge. Since epistemic racism is entangled with epistemic sexism, Western-

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centric social science is a form of epistemic racism/sexism that privilege “Western” male’s knowledge as the superior knowledge in the world today.

If we take the canon of thinkers privileged within Western academic disciplines, we can observe that without exception they privilege “Western” male thinkers and theories, above all those of European and Euro-North-American males. This hegemonic essentialist “identity politics” is so powerful and so normalized—through the discourse of “objectivity” and “neutrality” of the Cartesian “ego-politics of knowledge” in the social sciences—that it hides who speaks and from which power location they speak from, such that when we think of “identity politics” we immediately assume, as if by “common sense,” that we are talking about racialized minorities. In fact, without denying the existence of essentialist “identity politics” among racialized minorities, the hegemonic “identity politics”—that of Eurocentric male discourse—uses this identitarian, racist, sexist discourse to discard all critical interventions rooted in epistemologies and cosmologies coming from oppressed groups and “non-Western” traditions of thought (Maldonado-Torres 2008). The underlying myth of the Westernized academy is still the scientificist discourse of “objectivity” and “neutrality” which hides the “locus of enunciation” of the speaker, that is, who speaks and from what epistemic body-politics of knowledge and geopolitics of knowledge they speak from in the existing power relations at a world-scale. Through the myth of the “ego-politics of knowledge” (which in reality always speaks through a “Western” male body and a Eurocentric geopolitics of knowledge) critical voices coming from individuals and groups inferiorized and subalternized by this hegemonic epistemic racism and epistemic sexism are denied and discarded as particularistic. If epistemology has color—as African philosopher Emmanuel

Chukwudi Eze (1997) points out so well—and has gender/color—as African-American Sociologist Patricia Hills Collins (1991) has argued—then the Eurocentric epistemology that dominates the social sciences has both color and gender. The construction of the epistemology of “Western” males as superior and the rest of the world as inferior forms an inherent part of the epistemological racism/sexism which has prevailed in the world-system for more than 500 years.

The epistemic privilege of the “West” was consecrated and normalized through the Spanish Catholic monarchy’s destruction of Al-Andalus and the European colonial expansion since the late 15th century. From renaming the world with Christian cosmology (Europe, Africa, Asia, and later, America) and characterizing all non-Christian knowledge as a product of pagan and devil forces, to assuming in their own Eurocentric provincialism that it is only within the Greco-Roman tradition, passing through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and Western sciences that “truth” and “universality” is achieved, the epistemic privilege of Western, Eurocentric, male “identity politics” was normalized to the point of invisibility as a hegemonic “identity politics.” It became the universal normalized knowledge. In this way, all “other” traditions of thought were deemed inferior (characterized in the 16th century as “barbarians,” in the 19th century as “primitives,” in the 20th century as “underdeveloped,” and at the beginning of the 21st century as “anti-democratic”). Hence, since the formation of Western Liberal Social Sciences in the 19th century, both epistemic racism and epistemic sexism have been constitutive of its disciplines and knowledge production. Western social sciences assume the inferiority, partiality, and the lack of objectivity in its knowledge-production of “non-Western” knowledge and the superiority of the “West.” As a result, Western social theory is

based on the experience of 5 countries (France, England, Germany, Italy and the United States) that makes only less than 12 percent of the world population. The provincialism of Western Social Science social theory with false claims to universality, pretends to account for the social experience of the other 88 percent of the world population. In sum, Eurocentrism with its epistemic racism/sexism is a form of provincialism that is reproduced inside the social sciences today.

WESTERNIZED MALES' IDENTITY POLITICS

Against this hegemonic “identity politics” that always privileged Christian and Western beauty, knowledge, traditions, spiritualities, and cosmologies while deeming as inferior and subaltern the non-Christian and non-Western beauty, knowledge, traditions, spiritualities, and cosmologies, those subjects rendered inferior and subaltern by these hegemonic discourses developed their own “identity politics” as a reaction to the racism of the former. This process is necessary as part of a process of self-valorization in a racist world that renders them inferior and disqualifies their humanity. However, this process of identitarian affirmation has its limits if it leads to fundamentalist proposals that invert the binary terms of the hegemonic “Western” Males Eurocentric racist and sexist philosophical tradition of thought. For example, if it is assumed that subaltern non-Western ethnic/racial groups are superior and that the dominant Western racial/ethnic groups are inferior, they are merely inverting the terms of hegemonic Western racism without overcoming its fundamental problem, that is, the racism that renders some human beings inferior and the elevation of others to the category of superior on cultural or biological grounds (Grosfoguel 2003). Another example is that of accepting—as

do some Islamic and Afrocentric fundamentalists—the hegemonic Eurocentric fundamentalist discourses that the European tradition is the only one that is naturally and inherently democratic, whereas the non-European “others” are presumed to be naturally and inherently authoritarian, denying democratic discourses and forms of institutional democracy to the non-Western world (which are, of course, distinct from Western liberal democracy), and as a result, supporting political authoritarianism. This is what all Third World fundamentalists do when they accept the Eurocentric fundamentalist false premise that the only democratic tradition is the Western one, and, therefore, assume that democracy does not apply to their “culture” and their “societies,” defending monarchical, authoritarian and/or dictatorial forms of political authority. This merely reproduces an inverted form of Eurocentric essentialism. The idea that “democracy” is inherently “Western” and that “non-democratic” forms are inherently “non-Western” is shared both by Eurocentric fundamentalist discourses and its varieties such as “Third Worldist” fundamentalisms.

The “divisions” that results from these identity politics ends up reproducing in an inverted form the same essentialism and fundamentalism of the hegemonic Eurocentric discourse. If we define fundamentalism as those perspectives that assumes their own cosmology and epistemology to be superior and as the only source of truth, inferiorizing and denying equality to other epistemologies and cosmologies, then Eurocentrism is not merely a form of fundamentalism but the hegemonic fundamentalism in the world today. Those Third Worldist fundamentalisms (Afrocentric, Islamist, Indigenist, etc.) that emerge in response to the hegemonic Eurocentric fundamentalism and that the “Western” press put in the front pages of newspapers everyday are subordinated forms of Eurocentric fundamentalism insofar as they reproduce

and leave intact the binary, essentialist, racial hierarchies of Eurocentric fundamentalism (Grosfoguel 2009).

In sum, a political consequence of this epistemological discussion is that a foundational basis on contemporary discussions on political Islam, on democracy and on the so-called “War on Terrorism” is “epistemic racism.” “Western” epistemic racism by inferiorizing “non-Western” epistemologies and cosmologies and by privileging “Western” epistemology as the superior form of knowledge and as the only source to define human rights, democracy, citizenship, etc. ends up disqualifying the “non-West” as unable to produce democracy, justice, human rights, scientific knowledge, etc. This is grounded in the essentialist idea that reason and philosophy lies in the “West” while non-rational thinking lies in the “rest.”

EPISTEMIC ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Epistemic racism in the form of epistemic Islamophobia is a foundational and constitutive logic of the modern/colonial world and of its legitimate forms of knowledge production. European humanists and scholars since the 16th century have argued that Islamic knowledge is inferior to the West. The debate about Moriscos in 16th century Spain were full of epistemic Islamophobic conceptions (Perceval 1992; 1997). After the expulsion of Moriscos in the early 17th century, the inferiorization of “Moros” continued under an epistemic Islamophobic discourse. Influential European thinkers in the 19th century such as, for example, Ernst Renan “... argued that Islam was incompatible with science and philosophy” (Ernst 2003: 20-21).

Similarly, in social sciences we have concrete manifestations of epistemic Islamophobia in the work of classical social theories of Western-centric patriarchal

social science such as Karl Marx and Max Weber. As Sukidi states:

Islam, according to Weber, was the polar opposite of Calvinism. There was no double edge to predestination in Islam. Instead, as Weber stated in *Protestant Ethic* (ch. 4, n. 36), Islam contains a belief in predestination, not in predestination, which concerned the fate of Muslims in this world, not the next (*ibid.*, p. 185). The doctrine of predestination maintained by the Calvinists, which led them to work hard as a duty (vocation, calling), is not evident among Muslims. In fact, as Weber argued, ‘the most important thing, the proof of the believer in predestination, played no part in Islam’ (*ibid.*). Without the concept of predestination, Islam could not provide believers with a positive attitude to this-worldly activity. As a consequence, Muslims are condemned to fatalism. (p. 197)

The rationalizations of doctrine and conduct of life were alien to Islam. Weber used the belief in predestination as the key concept to explain the rationalization of doctrine and the conduct of life. In Calvinism, the belief in predestination could certainly generate an ethical rigor, legalism, and rational conduct in this-worldly activity. None of these things was present in Islam (p. 199). Accordingly, the Islamic belief in predestination did not lead toward rationalization of doctrine and the conduct of life. In fact, it turned Muslims into irrational fatalists. ‘Islam,’ in Weber’s view, ‘was diverted completely from any really rational conduct of life by the advent of the cult of saints, and

finally by magic' (Sukidi 2006: 200).

If we follow the logic of Weber to its final consequences, that is, that Muslims are irrational and fatalistic people, then no serious knowledge can come from them. What are the geopolitics of knowledge involved in Weber's epistemic racism about Muslim people? The geopolitics of knowledge is the German and French orientalist's epistemic Islamophobia that is repeated in Weber's verdict about Islam. For Weber, it is only the Christian tradition that gives rise to economic rationalism and, thus, to Western modern capitalism. Islam cannot compare to the "superiority" of Western values in that it lacks individuality, rationality and science. Rational science and, its derivative, rational technology are, according to Weber, unknown to oriental civilizations. These statements are quite problematic. Scholars such as Saliba (2007) and Graham (2006) have demonstrated the influence of scientific developments in the Islamic World on the West, modern science and modern philosophy. Rationality was a central tenet of the Islamic civilization. While Europe was in obscurantist feudal superstition during what is known as the Middle Ages, the school of Baghdad was the world center of intellectual and scientific production and creativity. Weber's and Weberians' Orientalist views of Islam reproduce an epistemic Islamophobia where Muslims are incapable of producing science and of having rationality, despite the historical evidence.

But the same problem of epistemic Islamophobia we find in Marx and Engels. Although Marx spent two months in Algiers in 1882 recovering from a sickness, he wrote almost nothing on Islam. However, Marx had an orientalist epistemic racist view of non-Western peoples in general of which he did write extensively (Moore 1977). Moreover, his close collaborator, Frederick Engels, did write about Muslim people and repeated the same racist stereo-

types that Marx used against "Oriental" people. Talking about French colonization of Algeria, Engels said:

Upon the whole it is, in our opinion, very fortunate that the Arabian chief has been taken. The struggle of the Bedouins was a hopeless one, and though the manner in which brutal soldiers, like Bugeaud, have carried on the war is highly blamable, the conquest of Algeria is an important and fortunate fact for the progress of civilization. The piracies of the Barbaresque states, never interfered with by the English government as long as they did not disturb their ships, could not be put down but by the conquest of one of these states. And the conquest of Algeria has already forced the Beys of Tunis and Tripoli, and even the Emperor of Morocco, to enter upon the road of civilization. They were obliged to find other employment for their people than piracy... And if we may regret that the liberty of the Bedouins of the desert has been destroyed, we must not forget that these same Bedouins were a nation of robbers—whose principal means of living consisted of making excursions either upon each other, or upon the settled villagers, taking what they found, slaughtering all those who resisted, and selling the remaining prisoners as slaves. All these nations of free barbarians look very proud, noble and glorious at a distance, but only come near them and you will find that they, as well as the more civilized nations, are ruled by the lust of gain, and only employ ruder and more cruel means. And after all, the modern bourgeois, with civilization, industry, order, and at least relative enlightenment following

him, is preferable to the feudal marauding robber, with the barbarian state of society to which they belong. (Engels, French Rule in Algiers, *The Northern Star*, January 22, 1848, in: MECW, Vol.6, pp.469-472; quoted in S. Avineri (1968), *Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization* (Doubleday: New York, p. 43)

Engels's option is quite clear: to support colonial expansion and bring Western Civilization even if it is bourgeois and brutal in order to overcome a "barbarian" state of affairs. The superiority of the "West over the rest" and, in particular, over Muslims is quite clear in this statement. Talking about India, the irrational fanaticism of Muslims is expressed in the following quote of Engels:

The insurgent warfare now begins to take the character of the Bedouins of Algeria against the French; with the difference that the Hindoos are far from being so fanatical, and that they are not a nation of horsemen. (Engels: *New York Daily Tribune*, July 21, 1858, MECW, Vol.15, p. 583)

If there is any doubt about Marx's shared views with Engels's on the inferiority of Muslims and "non-Western" people relative to the West, the following quote is a confirmation:

... The question ... is not whether the English had a right to conquer India, but whether we are to prefer India conquered by the Turk, by the Persian, by the Russian, to India conquered by the Briton. England has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating—the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of

the material foundations of Western society in Asia. Arabs, Turks, Tartars, Moguls, who had successively overrun India, soon became Hinduized, the barbarian conquerors being, by an eternal law of history, conquered themselves by the superior civilization of their subjects. The British were the first conquerors superior, and, therefore, inaccessible to Hindu civilization... The day is not far distant when by a combination of railways and steam vessel, the distance between England and India, measured by time, will be shortened to eight days, and when that once fabulous country will thus be actually annexed to the Western World (Marx, "The Future Results of the British Rule in India" written on July 22, 1853, in *Marx and Engels On Colonialism*, page 81-83...)

Marx did not have much hope in the proletarian spirit of the Muslim masses when he stated in relation to the Ottoman Empire's expansion to Eastern European territories the following:

The principal power of the Turkish population in Europe, independently of the reserve always ready to be drawn from Asia, lies in the mob of Constantinople [Istanbul] and a few other large towns. It is essentially Turkish, and although it finds its principal livelihood by doing jobs for Christian capitalists, it maintains with great jealousy the imaginary superiority and real impunity for excesses which the privileges of Islam confer it as compared with Christians. It is well known that this mob in every important coup d'état has to be won over by bribes and flattery. It is this mob alone, with the exception

of a few colonized districts, which offers a compact and imposing mass of Turkish population in Europe. Certainly there will be, sooner or later, an absolute necessity for freeing one of the finest parts of this continent from the rule of a mob, compared with which the mob of Imperial Rome was an assemblage of sages and heroes. ("Turkey," *New York Daily Tribune*, April 7, 1853, written by Engels at Marx's request, quoted in S. Avineri (1968), *Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization* (Doubleday: New York, p. 54)

For Marx, similar to Weber, Muslim people from Turkish origin are a mob of ignorant people that made the mobs of the Roman Empire look like sages. He called for a struggle of liberation against the Muslim mobs. Accordingly, for Marx, Western civilization is superior and, thus, called to civilize the non-Western Muslims. In his perspective, better is the Western colonial expansion rather than leaving intact in a timeless stage a barbarian inferior people.

Marx distrusted Muslim people and was convinced of the inherently xenophobic traits in Islam and, thus, wrote apologetically about Western colonialism. Marx said:

As the Koran treats all foreigners as foes, nobody will dare to present himself in a Mussulman country without having taken his precautions. The first European merchants, therefore, who risked the chances of commerce with such a people, contrived to secure themselves an exceptional treatment and privileges originally personal, but afterwards extended to their whole nation. Hence the origin of capitulations. ("The Outbreak of the Crimean War—Moslems, Chris-

tians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire," *New York Daily Tribune*, April 15, 1854, quoted in S. Avineri (1968), *Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization* (Doubleday: New York, p. 146)

Marx said, repeating the typical epistemic racism of the orientalist vision of his time, that:

The Koran and the Mussulman legislation emanating from it reduce the geography and ethnography of the various peoples to the simple convenient distinction of two nations and of two countries; those of the Faithful and of the Infidels. The Infidel is "harby," i.e. the enemy. Islamism proscribes the nation to the Infidels, constituting a state of permanent hostility between the Mussulman and the unbeliever. ("The Outbreak of the Crimean War—Moslems, Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire," *New York Daily Tribune*, April 15, 1854, quoted in S. Avineri (1968), *Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization* (Doubleday: New York, p. 144)

These simplified, essentialist and reductionist views of Islam from a Judeo/Christian-centric, Western-centric perspective was part of the Orientalists' epistemic racism and condescending paternalism towards Islamic thought of which Marx was no exception.

Marx believed that secularism was fundamental for revolution to have a chance in Muslim lands. He said:

...if you abolish their subjection under the Koran, by a civil emancipation, you cancel at the same time their subjection to the clergy, and provoke a revolution in their social,

political and religious relations.... If you supplant the Koran by a *code civil*, you must Occidentalize the entire structure of Byzantine society. ("The Outbreak of the Crimean War—Moslems, Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire," *New York Daily Tribune*, April 15, 1854, quoted in S. Avineri (1968), *Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization* (Doubleday: New York, p. 146)

This secularist view of Marx was a typical colonial strategy promoted by the Western Empires in order to destroy the ways of thinking and living of the colonial subjects and, thus, impede any trace of resistance. By arguing that Muslim people are subjected to the rule of a "religion," Marx projected in Islam the cosmology of the secularized Western-centric, Christian-centric view. Islam does not consider itself a "religion" in the Westernized, Christianized sense of a sphere separated from politics, economics, etc. Islam is more a cosmology that follows the notion of "Tawhid" which is a doctrine of unity, a holistic world view, that the Eurocentric Cartesian modern/colonial world view destroyed in the West and with its colonial expansion attempted to destroy in the rest of the world as well. The practice of colonial Christianization in the early modern/colonial period and secularism after the later 18th century colonial expansion was part of the "epistemicide" and "religiouscide," that is, the extermination of non-Western spirituality and ways of knowledge implemented by Western colonial expansion. Epistemicide and "religiouscide" made possible the colonization of the minds/bodies of colonial subjects.

If Marx and Weber are social sciences' classical theorists, Western social sciences are informed by epistemic Eurocentric and Islamophobic prejudices. To decolonize the Western social sciences, it would entail many important processes that we cannot

spell out here in detail. But one of them would be to expand the canon of social theory to incorporate as a central component the contributions of decolonial European and non-European social theorists such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Salman Sayyid, Ali Shariati, Anibal Quijano, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, W.E.B. Dubois, Silvia Wynter and other social theorist thinking from the underside of modernity. To incorporate these thinkers is not a question of multiculturalism but of creating a more rigorous and pluriversal (as opposed to universal) decolonial social science. Ali Shariati in particular is an Islamic social scientist that produced important critiques of Western social theorist such as Marx.

But isn't there only one social science and, thus, not different social sciences? Right now what we call social science is a particular, provincial (Western male tradition of thought) defining for the rest what is social science and what is valid, universal knowledge. To decolonize Westernized provincial social sciences we need to move into a global inter-epistemic horizontal dialogue among social scientists from different epistemic traditions of thought to re-found new decolonial social sciences in a pluriversal mode rather than the current universalistic mode. This is not an easy task and we cannot go into the detail of what this implies in this article. However, the transformation from universalism towards pluriversalism in the social sciences is fundamental for moving from the framework in which one defines for the rest (colonial social sciences) to a new paradigm where the production of concepts and knowledge is the result of a truly inter-epistemic horizontal universal dialogue (decolonial social sciences). This is not a call for relativism but to think of universality as pluriversality, that is, as the result of the inter-epistemic interaction in horizontal mode rather than the current universalistic social sciences of mono-epistemic imperial/colonial interaction with the rest of the world.

ISLAMOPHOBIC DEBATES TODAY

The importance of this discussion about epistemic Islamophobia is that the latter is manifested in contemporary debates and public policy. The epistemic racism and its derivative Eurocentric fundamentalism in social theory are manifested in discussions about human rights and democracy today. “Non-Western” epistemologies that define human rights and human dignity in different terms than the West are considered inferior to “Western” hegemonic definitions and, thus, excluded from the global conversation about these questions. If Islamic philosophy and thought are portrayed as inferior to the West by Eurocentric thinkers and classical social theory, then the logical consequence is that they have nothing to contribute to the question of democracy and human rights and should be not only excluded from the global conversation, but repressed. The underlying Western-centric view is that Muslims can be part of the discussion as long as they stop thinking as Muslims and take the hegemonic Eurocentric liberal definition of democracy and human rights. Any Muslim that attempts to think these questions from within the Islamic tradition is immediately suspicious of fundamentalism. Islam and democracy or Islam and Human Rights are considered in the hegemonic Eurocentric “common sense” an oxymoron.

The incompatibility between Islam and democracy has as its foundation the epistemic inferiorization of the Muslim world views. Today an artillery of epistemic racist “experts” in the West talks with authority about Islam, with no serious knowledge of the Islamic tradition. The stereotypes and lies repeated over and over again in Western press and magazines ends up, like in Goebbels’ Nazi theory of propaganda, being believed as truth. As Edward Said said not too long time ago:

A corps of experts on the Islamic world has grown to prominence, and during a crisis they are brought out to pontificate on formulaic ideas about Islam on news programs or talk shows. There also seems to have been a strange revival of canonical, though previously discredited, Orientalist ideas about Muslim, generally non-white, people—ideas which have achieved a startling prominence at a time when racial or religious misrepresentations of every other cultural group are no longer circulated with such impunity. Malicious generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West; what is said about Muslim mind, or character, or religion, or culture as a whole cannot now be said in mainstream discussion about Africans, Jews, other Orientals, or Asians.... My contention... is that most of this is unacceptable generalization of the most irresponsible sort, and could never be used for any other religious, cultural, or demographic group on earth. What we expect from the serious study of Western societies, with its complex theories, enormously variegated analyses of social structures, histories, cultural formations, and sophisticated languages of investigation, we should also expect from the study and discussion of Islamic societies in the West. (Said 1998: xi-xvi)

The circulation of these stereotypes contributes to the portrayal of Muslims as racially inferior, violent creatures—thus, its easy association with “terrorism” and representation as “terrorist.”

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