

ROUNDTABLE

Out of the Native Pigeonhole: Westernness, Knowledge Production, and Symbolic Capital

Kevork Oskanian 

University of Exeter, Exeter, UK
Email: k.oskanian@exeter.ac.uk

Several decades ago, Gayatri Spivak asked the pertinent question about whether the subaltern can speak.¹ Posed in the distinct context of Western colonial empire, her interrogation remains relevant to this day: Can those confined to the lower rungs of an informally hierarchical, Western-dominated liberal international order be expected to speak, and be heard, in ways that respect their agency? The 2020 war around Nagorno-Karabakh raised this issue in stark relief. In media reports, think tank analyses, seminar and conference panels, and policy pronouncements, clear hierarchies appeared at play.

First, throughout the war, scholars with ties to the region were confronted with a conflict between a commitment to their craft and their pigeonholing into specific, stereotypical ethno-national categories: expectations of conformity to certain, pre-set orthodox nationalist narratives on “their side,” combined with their reduction by the “other side”—and some outsiders—to mere representatives of their particular ethnic group’s subjectivities. This created a particularly toxic, and often silencing, combination. Second, and related, there was a clear tendency in the West to sideline local, native voices unless they reinforced narratives that clearly fit into a hegemonic, liberal worldview. Finally, a small minority of Western observers used a presumption of Western objectivity to push openly subjective, crudely propagandistic narratives that glorified or excused one side over the other, without much public opprobrium from either their peers or Western institutions invested in the production of reliable knowledge.

This raises valid questions about the conduct of debate and discussion on contentious issues in peripheral or semi-peripheral regions where similar dynamics are at stake. There is a clear tension between the need for local representation on the one hand, and the equal recognition of native knowledge production on its own terms on the other. The necessity for representation risks tokenism and the reduction of individual agency to stereotype, yet an abandonment of the field to Western-dominated narratives and practices leads to a further uncritical reproduction of the assumed “objectivity” of a very particular gaze—one often shaped by the very subjective experiences of past empire and contemporary hegemony—and moreover lends itself to abusive monetization by bad-faith actors. How to balance this dilemma will be the subject of what follows.

Bourdieu, Hierarchy, and Capital

Bourdieu’s well-established praxeological framework is, if anything, sensitive to the hierarchies of power that lurk, taken for granted, behind our everyday assumptions (or *illusio*). His conceptualization of power as “capital” (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic) lends itself

¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

to a particularly fine-tuned analysis of the unequal and agonistic nature of any field of human activity.² In fact, inequality and struggle are central to Bourdieu's definition of his central concept (the field) as

a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies.³

Bourdieu's conceptualization of power as unequally distributed capital acknowledges the relevance of material elements, albeit deeply embedded within a universe marked by socially constructed practices.⁴ This is most clearly evident in his notion of economic capital; but the ideational, intersubjective aspects of power increase in importance once one moves to capital's social, cultural and, especially, symbolic elements. Although economic, social, and cultural capital are fairly self-evident as emerging from material wealth, "connections," and influence and authority within a field, the notion of "symbolic capital" deserves particular attention here: it is constituted from the authority that emerges from the intersubjective meaning of specific markers embedded within the social fabric of the field.⁵ Examples include the credibility associated with a doctorate, for instance; the prestige that comes with being a decorated veteran; or, indeed, the privileges associated with Westernness.

Even when taken separately, these various forms of capital are useful in any cursory examination of hierarchical relationships between Western observers of (semi-) peripheral regions (in academia, think tanks, the media) and their counterparts in those regions themselves. There, an unequal distribution of various forms of capital acts as the foundation of this taken-for-granted hierarchy. Western institutions are wealthier, more culturally influential, and better connected than their counterparts in the global South; but the symbolic capital associated with Westernness may in itself play a particularly important role in reinforcing and normalizing these inequalities. Like "Whiteness" or "the International," I posit that Westernness makes us take for granted, and is in turn reinforced by, imbalances in the other forms of capital.⁶ It endows agents situated at the top of a nominally postimperial, yet still highly unequal global hierarchy with a uniquely objective, reasonable point of view that is contrasted with the subjective emotionality of those lacking this symbolic marker. As a result, it helps bestow upon academics, analysts, and journalists of the global North and West a greater ability to express themselves authoritatively in global and extra-regional affairs that is not afforded to their southern or "Oriental" counterparts, whose assumed parochialism confines them to their specific regions.

An Unequal Division of Labor

Perhaps the clearest expression of the unequal distribution of capital in academia can be found in its intensely stratified and partially compartmentalized (or pigeonholed) division

² Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986).

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1998), 40–41.

⁴ D. Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998).

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power," *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 1 (1989); Pierre Bourdieu, *Manet: A Symbolic Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018).

⁶ Anja Weiß, "Racist Symbolic Capital: A Bourdieusian Approach to the Analysis of Racism," in *Wages of Whiteness and Racist Symbolic Capital*, ed. Wulf D. Hund, Jeremy Krikler, and David Roediger (Münster, Germany: Lit Verlag, 2010); Tugba Basaran and Christian Olsson, "Becoming International: On Symbolic Capital, Conversion and Privilege," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 46, no. 2 (2018).

of labor. A cursory overview of the top international relations journals, for instance, would easily reveal how articles written by academics either born outside or based outside the West disproportionately specialize on their regions of origin, whereas the same limitation does not appear to apply to their Western counterparts.⁷ Most scholars from Africa, Eurasia, and East Asia are, respectively, confined to Africa, Eurasia, and East Asia; very few can end up concentrating on southern regions other than their own, let alone looking into the politics of the global North on its own merits. Put simply: Western scholarship appears to travel more freely than its non-Western equivalent.

Indeed, Western scholars, and analysts and journalists, simply have an excess of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital compared to their non-Western counterparts. A Kyrgyz girl growing up in the Fergana valley will have much less of a chance of becoming a leading scholar in the social sciences than the male scion of an academic family growing up in either of the Cambridges. She might be poor, and if she does overcome patriarchy to attend university, her institution will likely be underfunded. She will probably lack the connections the parents in an academic dynasty have at their disposal. And, unlike her Western counterpart, she will have to learn a foreign language and adapt to a very different culture to succeed. But even if these disadvantages in economic, social, cultural capital are overcome, the challenge of “non-Westerness” will likely remain: whether or not she will be allowed to go outside her Central Asian pigeonhole—if she is, say, interested in European integration or grand theory—will in large part depend on the intellectual largesse and open-mindedness of the usually Western individuals in positions of academic power, a hurdle her white Cambridge counterpart likely will not have to confront.

The idea that the Western gaze holds the key to universal, “objective” truths, whereas the “native’s” is a parochial one (pervasive, and well-documented in the relevant literature) puts the non-Western scholar in a further bind.⁸ What Scheurich and Young have referred to as “epistemological racism” ensures that his or her writings seemingly come with an assumption of subjectivity in ways that white or Western scholarship on a region does not.⁹ Two disturbing interlinked processes again distort the field of knowledge production in ways that seriously hamper their search for “truth.” Western subjectivity is denied, and as a result “native” views are selected based on their proximity to a Western perspective mistaken as universal objectivity: yet another *illusio* camouflaging the workings of unequal symbolic capital.

This point on the denial of Western subjectivity is not an argument for radical cultural relativism or anti-foundationalism, merely an acknowledgment of the role of specific, culturally informed lenses in interpreting the same objective realities—the research questions we ask, and how we make sense of a social universe of almost infinite variables and data points through a selectiveness that will always be values-based.¹⁰ All practices, including the social-scientific, are shaped by the individually specific predilections (or, in Bourdieu’s terminology, “habitus”) of actors, the culturally specific unspoken assumptions or *doxa* they hold, and the resulting *illusio* obfuscating unequal power relations, of which assumed objectivity and subjectivity form a part.¹¹

⁷ Based on an informal analysis of 217 articles published in 2021 in five top-rated IR journals: *International Affairs*, *International Security*, *International Organization*, *Journal of Peace Research*, and *European Journal of International Relations*.

⁸ For arguments in that vein, see Frederick H. Gareau, “Another Type of Third World Dependency: The Social Sciences,” *International Sociology* 3, no. 2 (1988): 171–78; Immanuel Wallerstein, “Eurocentrism and Its Avatars: the Dilemmas of Social Science,” *Sociological Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (1997): 22–23; Claude Alvares, “A Critique of Eurocentric Social Science and the Question of Alternatives,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 2 (2011): 72–82; and Lansana Keita, “Eurocentrism and the Contemporary Social Sciences,” *Africa Development* 45, no. 2 (2020): 17–38.

⁹ James Joseph Scheurich and Michelle D. Young, “Coloring Epistemologies: Are Our Research Epistemologies Racially Biased?” *Educational Researcher* 26, no. 4 (1997): 4–16.

¹⁰ For a recent reimagining of international relations based on various civilizational influences, see Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya, *Re-Imagining International Relations: World Orders in the Thought and Practice of Indian, Chinese, and Islamic Civilizations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 159–97; Cécile Deer, “Doxa,” in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. Michael Grenfell (London: Routledge, 2014), 119–30.

The consequences of this imbalance are manifold, but, as intimated above, they may be expressing themselves in a particularly noxious selection bias within Western institutions. At world-leading (still usually Western) universities, there appears to be an at most marginal presence of non-Western scholarship not grounded in Western intellectual traditions.¹² You will likely find few panels at ISA (International Studies Abroad) or at think tanks discussing the niceties of the Iranian, Chinese, or Indian politics with Iranian, Chinese, or Indian counterparts not subscribing to Western ideological assumptions. This silencing of nonconforming, non-diasporan natives fundamentally critical of the West risks reducing them to passive, inert objects of analysis, reporting, or scholarship, rather than active agents, a form of exclusion that distorts the West's understanding of the non-West—indeed, of social truths themselves—toward its own predilections.

But even among non-Western professionals who might hold views that largely conform with the expectations of Western institutions, that same assumed subjectivity can serve to reduce individual scholarship to an ethno-religious category. Individuals from the (semi-)periphery are still called upon to give the *insert ethnonym here* perspective on a given issue (usually safely situated within their regional pigeonhole) in ways that their Western counterparts seldom are. In Tlostanova and Mignolo's words, "the logic of Western imperial epistemology consists in a meta-discourse that validates itself by disqualifying the difference. That is, it consists of making and remaking the epistemic colonial difference: Barbarian, primitives, Orientals, Indians, Blacks, and so on, are qualified as people 'outside' or 'behind' who need to be brought in and to the modern present."¹³ The fact that *all* perspectives, including the Western, have a parochial geographic or cultural aspect is obfuscated, and the validity of non-Western knowledge overridden: a phenomenon that cannot be explained through economic, social, or cultural power alone, instead requiring the added symbolic power emanating from sublimated imperial hierarchies.

Most worryingly for those concerned with maintaining ethical standards in scholarship, analysis, and journalism, apart from these exclusionary and reductionist effects, the assumed objectivity and universality of the Western agent can become a source of corruption, especially when its associated symbolic capital is monetized. In those fields involved in the production of knowledge, this monetization of Westernness may help create the alternative realities, the "fake news" that is so much a hallmark of our times. "Westernness" is much in demand as a commodity among non-Western authoritarian states; it allows them to boost their credibility through the purchase of the assumed objectivity outlined above. Western lobbyists masquerading as journalists, analysts, or scholars are a distinguishing feature of our times; they oftentimes ply their mercenary craft in plain view, occasionally unmasked through the revelation of illicit payments or associations with entities with financial ties to questionable regimes.¹⁴ And although peer review may act as a brake to unbridled propaganda in academic journals, the same cannot be said in think tanks and mass media, where such safeguards are largely absent.

¹² "QS World University Rankings 2022," 2022, <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2022>. This also is something noted in various disciplines of the humanities and social sciences by numerous authors. See, among others, A. Acharya and B. Buzan, "Why Is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory? An Introduction," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 7, no. 3 (2007): 287–312; Michael A. Peters, "The Humanist Bias in Western Philosophy and Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 47, no. 11 (2015): 1128–35; and Bryan W. Van Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

¹³ Madina Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia to the Americas* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 198.

¹⁴ Thorsten Benner, "An Era of Authoritarian Influence? How Democracies Should Respond," *Foreign Affairs*, 15 September 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-09-15/era-authoritarian-influence>; Nadège Rolland, *Commanding Ideas: Think Tanks as Platforms for Authoritarian Influence* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for Democracy, 2020); Arch Puddington, *Breaking Down Democracy* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2021).

The 2020 Karabakh War brought all the above-described issues to the fore. There remained a palpable, unresolved tension between pigeonholing Armenian and Azerbaijani journalists, academics, and analysts (by assuming they would provide an “Armenian” or “Azerbaijani” viewpoint), the perceived need for “ethnic” representation in media and on academic and think tank panels, the assumption of Western objectivity, and the always-lurking undue influence of a regime widely acknowledged to be both highly authoritarian and corrupt. Was the assumption that ethnicity, rather than a scholarly professional ethos, determined the views of “native” observers on the conflict one that should be adopted a priori? If so, was the ethnic composition of academic or think tank panels of any real consequence? And if it was, did panels that excluded those from either side, composed of only Western observers, or publications written from a Western perspective, truly provide a more balanced view of the conflict?

The question of how to find balance in such a contentious informational space was resolved in any number of ways, most of which appeared to reflect the imbalance of power between West and non-West, the former more often than not acting as arbiter and determinant of that space, be it on panels or in traditional, online, or social media. Local, native actors were well aware of the great symbolic capital that Westernness provided, and every word and act by such powerful outside “arbiters,” each judgment—how to compose an academic or think tank panel, what and how to report and not to report—became the subject of great import, and of potential controversy, precisely because of the local frustrations born from such a relative imbalance of power.¹⁵

Take the ethnic composition of panels discussing the conflict, for instance. In many cases, there remained an unresolved tension between the need for the professional scholarly credibility of the participants (defined in Western terms) and the need for native voices perceived as representative by organizers and audience alike. The resulting compromises always remained vulnerable to criticism from both sides of this equation. Emphasizing representation risked precisely the kind of essentialism (the reduction of the native scholar to his or her ethnic origins) outlined above. On the other hand, that native scholar’s knowledge would, within these Western-dominated institutions, always be judged by hegemonic Western standards of knowledge production. Was a panel including only Armenians or Azeris necessarily inferior in its ability to expound valid knowledge? If not, how could the quality of such knowledge be judged without falling back onto Western hegemonic standards? Alternatively, did the inclusion of native scholars established in Western academia guarantee representativeness? The unresolved dilemmas posed by civilizational difference and inequality to both organizers and participants presented themselves in stark relief.

But just as the inclusion of local voices did not guarantee the expression of presumed (and nonexistent) standard “native” viewpoints, the assumption that Western entities would provide a balanced view of the conflict remained a persistent, and toxic, elephant in the room. The misguided contrast between the assumed subjectivity of the “locals,” and the presumed objectivity of Western “rational man” was perhaps best illustrated in the ability of some think tanks in Washington, DC, and some Western scholars to consistently organize clearly one-sided panels and publish one-sided narratives on the conflict, without much pushback or questioning by their peers. Native actors unable to tap into significant reserves in symbolic capital would have immediately been dismissed as committed “activists” or “nationalists” in case of such open bias; the threshold at which Western “observers” ensconced at the top of an unequal global power structure would be repudiated as “lobbyists” or “apologists” appeared considerably higher.

It is not difficult to look at other regions of the world, the Middle East and East Asia, for instance, where Western liberal attitudes clash with culturally and politically divergent realities, and illiberal states have infiltrated the “knowledge business” to see similar dynamics at work: Western individuals and institutions defining the “objective” truth, as much by their abilities as by their dominant position in the global hierarchies of knowledge-as-power.

¹⁵ Personal observations.

Eventually, this ends up distorting the ability to speak truth to power, through the selection of causes worthy of special activist intervention (boycotts, calls to divest, campaigns) based on the West as an ever-present, universal, necessary reference point. Whether or not an issue is deemed worthy of exceptional measures comes to largely depend on some kind of Western role. For something to be talked about and acted upon, the West either has to be present as a perpetrator of injustice (as in Palestine), in which case those of a more critical disposition will be pushed into action, or the issue must fit into its broader geopolitical interests (as in Ukraine or Xinjiang) resulting in its active promotion with official blessing. Non-Westerners whose suffering neither emerges from Western violence nor figures within the context of the West's broader geopolitical interests (like the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, the Tigrayans, the Yemenis, or the Rohingya) are not deemed worthy of such special attentions. Add reported financial flows from authoritarian regimes and potential conflicts of interest to the picture, and the problem becomes apparent in stark relief.¹⁶ This is the nature of Western knowledge, critical or traditional, still standing in judgment over everything, well into the 21st century.

Conclusion

In potentially exposing Westernness as a persistent source of symbolic capital, Bourdieu's agonistic framework can pull back the curtain in front of the *illusio* in fields where the West's subjective forms of knowledge production still remain dominant, their claims to universality based on a taken-for-granted position at the top of a global hierarchy of power. In a de-globalizing, decolonizing, "multiplex" world where civilizational reality has reemerged, Western scholarship will face a choice: either insist on denying the parochialism of its own civilization-specific, and contingently privileged, truth-claims, or adopt a holistic view providing a clear, truly global understanding of the social realm, one that accepts the validity of the subaltern standpoint as an alternative perspective on "objective" truths.¹⁷ A greater awareness of, and scholarly engagement with, the questions evinced above may add to the necessary piercing of the misrecognition standing in the way of such holism.

The alternative is that Western parochialism, through legacies of empire, maintains an increasingly untenable illusion of universality. Two generations have now passed since decolonization, and, unless one believes a future of never-ending Western ideational hegemony to be morally or practically tenable, claims to objective knowledge will have to be decentered from the West. The problem of how to do this while not allowing malicious actors, wealthy authoritarians in particular, to artificially skew the field(s) in their favor through a warping of the knowledge space will require a special sensitivity to the workings of power-as-capital within it. This makes a reflexive attitude on the part of all more indispensable than ever. It also increases the need for a simultaneously respectful and critical view: respectful of the at times fundamental cultural differences that nevertheless do not stand in the way of a potentially fruitful dialogue on a truly global form of knowledge production, and critical of the corrupting power relations that so often are hidden behind a veil of taken-for-granted-ness.

¹⁶ "Azerbaijan and Think Tanks," *New York Times*, 6 September 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/09/07/us/07thinktank-docs4.html>; Till Bruckner, "How Azerbaijan Manipulates Public Opinion in the US," OCCRP, 19 June 2015, <https://www.occrp.org/en/corruptistan/azerbaijan/2015/06/19/how-azerbaijan-manipulates-public-opinion-in-the-US.en.html>; Rasmus Canbäck, "Svante Cornell's Dealings in Azerbaijan Despite Funding from MFA of Sweden," Blankspot, 9 May 2022, <https://blankspot.se/svante-cornells-dealings-in-azerbaijan-despite-funding-from-mfa-of-sweden>.

¹⁷ Julian Go, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 143–84; Amitav Acharya, "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order," *Ethics & International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2017): 271–85.