

## Migración y violencia epistémica

### *Migration and Epistemic Violence<sup>1</sup>*

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## Resumen

En este artículo se intenta situar la violencia epistemológica, así como desentrañar y desenmascarar las estructuras de poder, incluyendo los puntos de fricción entre el individuo migrante y la comunidad local. Asimismo, se presenta un nuevo tipo de sujeto que, por un lado, revela las estructuras de poder inherentes al individuo y a la sociedad que lo comprende y, por otro –a través del modelo ampliado de existencia–, ofrece oportunidades para una convivencia que estaría marcada por la solidaridad y la equidad, y que se produciría a través de conexiones interpersonales. Utilizando ejemplos de las estructuras de poder en los cursos de idiomas, en las universidades y en la pérdida de valores culturales a través de la migración, se rastrea la violencia epistémica y se presenta de forma no solo teórica, sino también factual.

**Palabras clave:** poder epistémico, migración, filosofía intercultural, filosofía japonesa.

## Abstract

In this article an attempt is made to localize epistemological violence, as well as to unravel and unmask power structures, including points of friction between the migrating individual and the local community. Also, a new type of subject is presented, which, on the one hand, reveals the power structures inherent in the individual and in the society containing it and, on the other hand –through the extended model of existence–, offers opportunities for a coexistence, which would be marked by solidarity and fairness, and would occur through interpersonal connections. Using examples of power structures in language courses, in universities, and in the loss of cultural values through migration, epistemic violence is tracked and presented not only theoretically, but also factually.

**Keywords:** epistemic power, migration, intercultural philosophy, japanese philosophy.

*Dedicated to my father:  
An actor, writer, and migrant,  
as well as to my mother:  
A teacher and later a gardener  
and migrant*

## **Introduction**

Bombs, Bombs, Bombs, Fire, War and death!

To reflect on theorems in times of such bloody facticity, even if they promote justice, may seem absurd or even mocking; in the midst of the raging fratricidal war between Russia and Ukraine, we are dealing with real violence; with the killing women and children, and also with violence against the very young, almost childlike soldiers who are being manipulated into a future of loss.

Worrying about epistemic violence or justice at such times seems like filling a theoretical bubble or asking questions that promote elitist relationships beyond actual realities. After all, theorems cannot bring about peace, stop violence, or even threateningly raise a hand in the face of such madness. So why then? Why, despite this madness, should it still be written about and why is it necessary or even essential to deal with topics such as epistemic violence today?

It is the case that we must write despite the daily horror and adversity because this is about our future and that is why one cannot remain silent. And it is not just about any future, but one in which disadvantage, discrimination, humiliation, and disenfranchisement are minimized and memory is to be generated and worked out for future generations in a manner exceeding Eurocentric, colonial, and capitalist practices and records.

I hope that theoretical reflections can help here, for example by uncovering epistemic violence and thereby offering curbs on the violence of epistemology and constructing a basis for a more just future. And above all, one thing is clear: violence is no pure physical experience; it is existential and reaches deep into the ontological realm of the socio-individual aspects of human existence. On the one hand this has to do with individual experience and events, marking the limits of our vulnerability through the bodily framework. On the other hand, however, this is embedded in geopolitical developments and thus marks the social framework for the good life or for subliminal practices that

set up and support systems of disregard and abuse through “agents of ‘consciousness’ and discourses” (Foucault, 2021, p. 54). This is because there exist systems of power, and not only a few of them, which prevent and manipulate “discourses and knowledge” and which “burrow [themselves] very deeply, very subtly into the entire network of society” (p. 54).

Power, violence, and episteme are thus deeply inscribed in the socio-individual events of existence and cannot be analyzed separately from each other in physical-psychological particles. However, to track and investigate the connection or “totalization processes” (p. 52). in their full breadth, it is not sufficient to use there a narrowly European model of the subject as a basis. There is a need for an expanded understanding of the subject as both individually and socially constituted, which therefore oscillates between all facets of power structures<sup>3</sup>. Because epistemic violence, as the dark side of power, not only knows how to control knowledge and thus establish and support elites, but also how to condemn people to invisibility, deprive them of language, and steer future generations toward harm. Epistemic violence is thus expressed in the empowerment of those who are already powerful and in the theft of speech from the disempowered. In this regard the powerful speak “for” the enfranchised, but “without” them. The powerful demand rights for those who already have a louder voice and who even more impertinently and hypocritically pose themselves as “proxy...[even] making it their job to speak for others” thus further expanding and consolidating their own power (p. 55).

It is therefore essential to deal with the connection between violence and knowledge, or rather with the violence *in* knowledge, to cease this outcry and to demand a space for the voice of those who deserve to be noticed. For this purpose, however, studies that merely criticize and show no way out of hopelessness are useless and ultimately unnecessary. In order to show a way out of this situation, the connection between subject, power, and episteme should be tracked and grasped in terms of its entire structure and then dissected with the necessary sharpness that facticity demands. To enable this, the subject, its violence, and the connection to knowledge should be examined introspectively so that “(...) relationships, which in reality are closely intertwined, support and serve as instruments for each other (...)” (p. 252) can be disclosed and analyzed in individual detail as well as in concert.

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3 For more on this point, please see the second section.

## Subject, Violence, and Knowledge

When it comes to the connection between episteme and violence, the Eurocentric/monocultural orientation as to how knowledge is generated has been criticized in recent decades, be it in decolonial theories, in political philosophy, sociology (of the Global South) or even in anthropology. This concerns criticism of “abyssal thinking,” and “ontological degradation”; it is about the “epistemologies of the north”<sup>4</sup>.

Clearly, it has been worked out to whom the grievances are addressed: the accused is the European subject as historically elaborated and established in Western European thinking. With its ambitious, elitist “monoculture of knowledge” this subject suppresses the plurality of the world’s stocks of knowledge and celebrates itself as the ruler over (other) people and even over the phenomena of nature (Escobar, 2020, p. 43). The Western European, and I expressly emphasize this point, because there is no Western-Eastern European subject<sup>5</sup> that has risen and established itself in the history of philosophy, and has been viewed and identified as individual, self-centered as well as self-loving, economized, liberal and patriarchal<sup>6</sup>. It was predominantly Greek-Western European and male philosophers such as Aristotle, Descartes, Hegel and Heidegger who made sure of that (Klaus and Buhr, 1985, p. 1189-1900).

The development of the subject is thus well documented in (Western) European philosophy: already in Aristotle, the subject is both the “(...) permanent bearer of objective properties and the logical subject (...)” (p. 1189), the “recognizing” being (St. Thomas Aquinas), as well as the active ‘I’ (Fichte) that produces “reality” or even the “bearer of the world” (Schopenhauer) (p. 1189). It is a “(...) self-consciousness of the human being that, as a determination of the ‘absolute idea’ pushing for self-knowledge, produces itself through active operation by practically and theoretically *appropriating* the world, the ‘realized idea’” (p. 1189)<sup>7</sup>.

And here, already in this brief retrospective of how the subject has been elaborated, it becomes apparent how the Western European ‘I’ produces itself

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4 de Sousa Santos, B. (2020).

5 For alternative elaborations of the subject from Eastern Europe, see, for example Zwalen (2010).

6 See Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Claudia Brunner, Rada Ivanovic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and many others.

7 Emphasis mine.

predominantly and not further others; i.e., it generates itself and leaves the world and its appearances as objects outside. It is thus possible to guess what started the seeds of alienation of the self from others or the self from the world, from nature and its phenomena; it is the European (and, more precisely, the Greek-Western European) 'I' as subject dominating nature (Ritter et al., 1984, p. 477) and as a solitary monad, competing and occasionally strategically fraternizing with other selves, constructing a world far removed from the socio-cosmological structure envisioned in some non-European cultures. The West-European 'I', i.e., the subject that has distinguished itself and asserted itself worldwide through colonization and capitalism, through cruelty and arrogance, is a self-absorbed, narcissistic subject, separated from nature and wanting to dominate it<sup>8</sup>.

This is an "isolated individual relating to itself essentially contemplatively" (Klaus and Buhr, 1985, p. 1189) and speaking alone to itself as well as principally questioning itself (Heidegger, 1993, pp. 5-7, 12). This Western European 'I' tries to get a grip on nature and phenomena around it, but above all it manages to objectify and disrespect this nature and its miracles, thereby bringing, in a single word to be read literally and figuratively-contamination.

However, this absolutist, yet also autistic model clearly testifies, in its lonely superiority, to violence and violent tendencies with its domination of nature and of other non-Western European subjects. Above all, it testifies to violence, which is understood as "the use of means of power to enforce certain intentions against the intentions of other people" (Klaus and Buhr, 1985, p. 500). The Western European (and since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, also the American) 'I', generates violence through the domination of nature, the exploitation of resources, and the subordination and silencing the people by way of debasement based on class and race<sup>9</sup>. But despite this pessimistic diagnosis how can this subject be better understood? And how can one delve into one's own structures to unravel the entanglements of power and violence, which are clearly knitted together individually and socially? (Foucault, 2021, p. 241).

In order to position the subject on a basis with solidarity on the one hand, but also in order to understand the indicative-correlative relationships, which in turn include practices and records of power on the other hand, alternative

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<sup>8</sup> See Boteva-Richter, B. (2022a).

<sup>9</sup> For more on this, see the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, Judith Butler, Walter Dignolo, Nikita Dhawan, and many others.

ontological models are needed that might initiate and support such investigations. So relational ontologies with an alternative understanding of existence, which depict people inhabiting the world in its reality and not as occupying its being, are needed here (Escobar, 2020, pp. 45-46). This also requires elaborations of existence that would be situated in an alternative time-space relationship and understanding and that would *reflect—in a global context—the* living environment of people and nature. Such a model, and it is important to emphasize that this is only one possibility among many, is provided by *nin-gen* 人間, i.e., the notion of relational “human-between” existence advanced by the Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻 哲郎.

Watsuji Tetsurō<sup>10</sup>, who is known as *the leading figure* of the new Japanese cultural-synthetic ethics and for his works *Ethics as a Science of Man (Ningen no Gaku Toshite no Rinrigaku)*<sup>11</sup> and *Ethics (Rinrigaku)*, generated the concept of *ningen* or “human-between” as referring to relational individual-social existence. The human being is, according to him, a “*self-active*” subject who is interwoven in a socially natural network and lives and acts in multiple connections, between person and society, but also between person and nature. Here, in this elaboration of existence, which is based on Buddhist-Shinto roots, the human being is an individual-social-climatic being, acts simultaneously as individual and as society, and transcends nature and its phenomena<sup>12</sup>.

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10 “Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960) was one of a small group of philosophers in Japan during the twentieth century who brought Japanese philosophy to the world. He wrote important works on both Eastern and Western philosophy and philosophers, from ancient Greek, to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Heidegger, and from primitive Buddhism and ancient Japanese culture, to Dōgen (whose now famous writings Watsuji single-handedly rediscovered), aesthetics and Japanese ethics. His works on Japanese ethics are still regarded as the definitive studies. Influenced by Heidegger, Watsuji’s *Climate and Culture* is both an appreciation of, and a critique of Heidegger” (Carter et al., 2019). Watsuji created the concept of ‘ningen,’ which means that “human beings have a dual-nature, as individuals, and as member of various social groupings” (2019). Unfortunately, he was involved, together with other philosophers of the so-called Kyoto School, in the nationalist debate that occurred between 1941 and 1942. Watsuji wanted to create an East Asian/Japanese opposition to Eurocentrism, but in doing so he played into the hands of the military regime. Later, he publicly regretted his position and his silence. For more on the role of the Kyoto School in the nationalism debate, please see: Heisig and Maraldo (1995).

11 *Ethics as a Science of Man*, published in 1936, introduces the famous reworking of the term “human-in-between” or “*ningen* 人間” in Japanese. This important work of Japanese ethics was translated quite well into German by Hans Martin Krammer, but unfortunately it has never been translated into English. See: Watsuji, T. (2005).

12 See Watsuji’s *Fūdo* (1995).

Watsuji avoids observing the human being as a merely individual being, as he states, that we all are *ningen* 人間, i.e., persons, who “possess this dual structure, as something subjective. The implication is that *ningen*, although being subjective communal existence as the interconnection of acts, is at the same time an individual that acts through these connections. This subjective and dynamic structure does not allow us to account for *ningen* as ‘thing’ or ‘substance’” (1996, p. 19).

This is very important, because unlike as happens in European-American philosophy, in which the subject can very well denote things and substance and yet is separate from objects and from the world as a human being, Watsuji models a being that plays all the roles: it is a dual, relational existence that is generated and destroyed again through the “negation of the negation”: in one moment the individual aspect predominates and the human being is, for example, predominantly a woman, someone’s wife, mother, colleague, or a member of a family, a company, a country. Here one lives out their individual relationships and intimate interdependencies.

But this ‘I’ is nonetheless not only individualistic, as the society is also inherent in it. Therefore, in the next moment, through the previously mentioned relationships, social consciousness outrages egoistic goals within the small personal structure. As a result, the individual aspect must be overcome by negating it with all strength so that society in the ‘I’ can take over leadership from this point forward. Then the ‘I’ is now a social whole, living and generating history and sharing memory, functioning as a citizen or as part of a country, nation, or group as a member of a formation (pp. 87-90, 113-117).

This social side cannot exist in the long run either though, because there is a danger of losing oneself as an individual with their own characteristics and thus fading in everything big and social; so, the social is now bitterly fought and the individual ‘I’ appears again anew in its existence (pp. 23, 117). Existence is, when viewed from all sides, an individual-social existence, which in its spiral structure is alternatively spatio-temporally designed as a double helix (individual-social).

Watsuji represents spatial expansion in terms of public versus private existence with the help of transport and communication. It is determined as a “connection of meanings” (p. 37) and defines human connections as friendship, business relationships, intimate relationships, or relationships in the public realm. Everything is thereby closely networked and lived, as



the connections bind and determine the ‘I’ with the ‘we’ and vice versa. Watsuji writes:

The spatiality of human being is known to everybody in an ontic way. People use transportation facilities and behave in a special fashion for the benefit of their ordinary lives (...) [but] Does the *Thou*<sup>13</sup> who stands beside me indicate that *Thou*, as a natural object, stands beside me in a spatial fashion? (...) Does the fact that I feel lonely because I am far apart from, Thou mean not so much that this subjective Thou with whom I fell in love is far away, as that this Thou, as natural object, is far away from me spatially? (p. 156).

The philosopher is aware of the futility of such questions, but he sharpens them to the point where he wants to show the indivisibility of ‘I’ and ‘you’, and thus of ‘I’ and ‘we’, as well as wanting to show precisely how he bases spatial extension on sensory connections and to show that existence is in fact so constituted. In order to work out the spatial expansion even more clearly and to secure it against purely noematic representations (p. 159), Watsuji uses the example of the interruption to communications that took place after an earthquake struck the Kanto region in September 1923. Telephone lines and thus communication generally were interrupted by the earthquake, which partly isolated people from each other and in any case fragmented society. The public cracked and spatial awareness developed in terms of inner vs. outer (p. 159). The split and the subsequent suffering of not being able to know the fate of a person’s loved ones reveals both the inseparability of ‘I’ and ‘we’ as well as the spatial expansion of individual social existence, expressed through the existence or interruption of communication channels (pp. 158-159)<sup>14</sup>. On this point, Watsuji writes:

The spatiality exhibited by these phenomena of human transportation and communication is clearly subjective extendedness. It interconnects both subjectively and practically but lacks the same extendedness as objective thing. This subjective extendedness arises because human beings, despite dividing themselves into great number of subjects, nevertheless, strive to constitute a connection among themselves (p. 165).

This spatial extension of existence, which is lived out through subjective connections and is determined by not just an inner, but also an outer, spatial

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13 Original author’s emphasis.

14 Something similar is happening right now in 2022, as Russia is trying to control the communications of its own citizens and is even attempting to establish an internal internet of its own, and to separate the own citizens from the world.

consciousness and reveals society in the self (and not vice versa), is individual, but at the same time strives for a social union, which, if things are as previously shown, causes suffering and fragmentation.

But it is not only spatiality that is elaborated by Watsuji through the explanation of transport and communication. The temporality of existence is also shaped in a similar way where he presents the dual structure of existence as individual-social. He writes:

When we begin to walk, this walking activity is already determined by a definite “place to go”. That is, to say, going to our workplace or to a friend’s house and so forth exists beforehand as directions for our walking activity (...) Beyond the present consciousness of the walker, this “already beforehand” has the significance of being the manner of her present existence (p. 182).

This transportation of the human as specifically *going* reveals an alternative time, which also shows itself, as well as the structure of existence, in a spiral movement of one *at the same time from what is been-now-future*:

One goes to one’s workplace or pays a visit to one’s friend, only because a definite state of labour or of friendly relationships “already” somehow exists. Hence, it is not that the past betweenness that obtained until yesterday is now gone, having somehow perished; it exists in one’s present attendance at the office or in one’s visit to achieve a working relationship or a friendly relationship for the first time, this for the first time is determined by that betweenness that exists in the “already” (...) Thus, we find ourselves burdened with human existence in which what is possible “beforehand” is “already” determined. The already established human existence that belongs to the future is its authentic “past”; that is, its “bygones” (...) Human relationships, which the simplest types of transportation exhibit, do not remain only to be subjectively extended but also possesses a temporal structure in which the past and the future are unified in the present (pp. 183-184).

Watsuji’s notion of existence, presented here in a greatly abbreviated form, serves multiple demands for an alternative spatio-temporal model<sup>15</sup>. It also relies less on a linear sequence of time and/or quantitative spatial expansion, as is prevalent in European philosophy, and which has been framed as ‘mechanical’, ‘finite’ or ‘infinite’, ‘moving’ or ‘still’ or even “pure forms of intuition” (Klaus und Buhr, 1985, p. 1013).

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<sup>15</sup> See Escobar, Foucault and others.

Watsuji's formation of being is thus inherent in a time and a space that are mainly built upon/constituted by different human connections and encounters. Here time and space in the human being are also included as subjective time and subjective space, and *not the other way around* as the product of subjective thought/elaboration.

But what does this analysis mean for the understanding of power, violence, and how they are maintained? What does this analysis mean for the epistemic violence that occurs in or during migration? Power is, and this was already briefly outlined in the introduction, generated, and transported through and in interpersonal connections. According to Watsuji, however, these connections are not external, they do not indicate *connections between individuals*, but are *inherent to existence; they are a part of it*.

That is why migration not only decouples people from their traditional location, but also tears them out of an intimate, familiar environment. It deprives them of their homeland in a kind of “recurring event” (Améry, 1988, pp. 65-66; Boteva-Richter, 2020, p. 64) and creates a kind of “falling out of the nest” (Boteva-Richter, 2013, p. 52), in which people not only leave behind places, but above all abandon their fathers and mothers, their children, thereby also catapulting these, as former parts of their intimate social existence, into an equally insecure, cold, and unloved future. Close, intimate bonds between parents, primarily between mothers and children, are warped by spatial separation. Mothers who migrate to rich countries to earn a living for their families break off physical relationships with their loved ones and then try to fulfill their role as parents remotely, via Skype or Zoom, i.e., digitally (Gheaus, 2013). These people: mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, try to establish connections in their new home at the same time that they have to look for and find work, obtain legal recognition of documents, and build up a new life and a new identity parallel to the old one.

To do this, however, they need language skills, new semantics, and knowledge about their new homeland, as well as information about the possibilities of learning something yet again or of being able to obtain recognition for what has already been learned.

Here, however, at this interface between the migrants and their new society, which is often characterized by rejection, everyday racism, and in any case initially by isolation in refugee camps or by human coldness, epistemic violence is already emerging. This violence can last for a while or for the whole

of the subsequent life abroad and designates migrants as such. In migration, therefore, this connection between subject and violence also gains new sharpness in the epistemic dimension through the “ontological degradation of certain groups of people” (de Sousa Santos, 2020, p. 119) and through withholding of vital information, be it because of intention or of ignorance. Due to separation from their loved ones, but also due to a lack of language skills, lack of recognition of documents, and uncertainty in the semantics of their new life, migrants suffer a breakdown of existence that is second to none.

In order to prevent this, fragmented interpersonal connections must first be cemented, new sources of knowledge opened up, and new strategies developed. Both life experience and (specialist) knowledge from a migrant’s prior life, as well as the new experience of migration can be utilized as a knowledge resource. Because, to find a new home and build a new life in concordance with the old one, it is necessary to progress through the different stages of the migration experience, to break through experiences of power such as everyday racism, power mechanisms, etc. and to combat epistemic violence. Only in this way can the migrating people represent themselves (Brunner, 2020, p. 279) by fighting for a space for their concerns, including for the generation and the application of knowledge<sup>16</sup>.

In this regard the previously mentioned idea of extended existence advanced by Watsuji helps to better understand the power structures. It reveals the connections which are closely interwoven in an individual-social manner and which function as conduits not just for transporting solidarity, but also for power and power strategies. Knowledge and strategic semantics can be shared and communicated via these connections, from colleague to colleague, from new citizen to new citizen and from friend to friend (Watsuji, 1996, p. 35). Therefore, if we define epistemic violence not as an abstract reservoir of knowledge, but as knowledge generation through acts in the “social relationship” and as “social (...) and (geo)political (...) positioning within power relations” (Brunner, 2020, p. 283) then a whole complex of power structures opens up within the individual-social field, which are particularly strong in migration.

In the following chapter, in order to outline this sharpness, the meaning of language of the mechanisms and actors of epistemic violence, will be shown as an example. This arises in the course of immigration and often decides the further fate of the people.

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16 See de Sousa Santos and Brunner.

## Language and Origin

### a) *Language as Knowledge of Home*

To a certain extent, language is natural to us, but it is also a kind of knowledge of oneself and of one's origins. As Heidegger argues: "A person speaks. We speak while awake and in dreams. We always talk; even if we don't let a word go (...) We keep talking in some way. We speak because speaking is natural to us (...)" (2001, p. 11).

But do we actually succeed in this ability to speak in any human language so easily and fluently? Can we be so natural and uninhibited in different languages; can we move in an absolute intimacy of knowledge; and can we share and give ourselves and the world, love and suffering? Do we speak the language in all languages (p. 12)<sup>17</sup> so easily and lively as the rippling water of a mountain stream in May? Of course not, because we can only move well, express ourselves, and give ourselves with certainty (as we are) on an ancestral terrain where a familiar element recurs time and again as a constant and well-known event<sup>18</sup>.

According to Heidegger, language also "designs" the human being and the sound of speaking initiates the "passions (*Erleidnisse*) of the soul" (1982, pp. 112, 114)<sup>19</sup>. As it lies in the most human of all activities, whereby the important act is in coming to an understanding, be it through sound or by speaking. He highlights language as home in his "Letter on Humanism" (1946), leading Tsutomu Ben Yagi to comment that: "If our thinking about the Being is only possible with the help of the language, then language indicates the location, where we will be brought to relation to [it]. So, language shows the place where we live, our homeland (...)" (Yagi, 2014, pp. 34-35).

However, this sounds easier than it actually is, because in migration and in the period of creating a personality, finding new aspects of identity, and building a home again the new life must be *interpreted, explained, and lived in a sharing of emotions*. If the homeland is intimately connected with language (Gadamer, 1993, p. 367) then building a new home is inseparable from building the home as an *interpretable or inhabited world filled with a*

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17 This refers to Heidegger's statement that "Language speaks (*Die Sprache spricht*)".

18 Maldonado-Torres also points to the need to delimit language from a single location, i.e., from Western Europe. See: (2004, 31f.).

19 This is based on Aristotle.

*language that one is able to understand.* Situating oneself anew requires an understanding of a new hermeneutic of everyday life, which primarily can be transmitted through the interconnections in the new home.

Yet, before there can be a new interpretation and understanding, a break first happens in and through the migration. Because to seek contemplation in a new language requires first: “(...) a break that cannot be avoided and that has to heal if you want to survive. [...] So it is [a kind of] farewell to the language that connects people when you can no longer hear your own language [and can no longer read it]. That is the human background of all exiles” (p. 367).

Due to the connection to native language being disrupted, people are thus no longer able to share their meanings or to generate a new body of knowledge, because first the new language must be learned well and its semantics must become familiar and natural for oneself. And even knowledge of the old homeland cannot be shared in the new place if proper new connections cannot be established due to a lack of speaking. And at times this can also come to the point of speechlessness. *Knowledge is not there if language does not speak.*

### *b) Speechlessness Abroad*

When moving to a new place and looking for a new homeland, migrants often suffer a loss of language or communication skills due to a lack of knowledge of the new homeland's language. But what is the effect of this temporary loss of language and expression, which is limited in time as long as the new language has not been learned well, but which, in the state of original speechlessness, penetrates deeply into the ontological realm and generates traumatic experiences? This condition, which usually occurs upon first arriving and initiates a special state of existence, is of existential importance, but it is difficult to convey it to those who are not affected. To wit:

Whoever has not been without language and tried to articulate a break, a loss, an escape over mountains or across the sea without being able to speak, cannot understand this state of not being able to speak. Language is stolen away as a strong connection to home or as a witness to a sense of belonging and it is prevented in many cases by fleeing or in migration: Language no longer speaks. The loss of language, which transports emotional content and is essential for breaks and for the reconstitution of intersubjective connections, literally bears a longing on the tongue, speaking of loss, of homelessness, of joy, and sadness. In the loss of language, the loss of one's homeland manifests

itself as a definitive displacement, be it temporary or forever. And if there is ever or again to be a new beginning, it is thanks to language as “the house of being” (Heidegger, 2001, p. 90) that we can start again and constitute a new home and new connections. *Language is our means of sharing our existence*. Through this sharing we create an old and new, a respective togetherness, in a sharing of the self with the others (Boteva-Richter, 2015, p. 6).

This means that, to prevent epistemic violence, an urgent, quick release from this state of not being able to speak is required. The demands of decolonial thinkers to open up a space for speaking and for the concerns of the subaltern (Spivak, Brunner, Maldonado-Torres, etc.) lose substance if these affected people cannot express their concerns themselves due to a lack of language skills. When this occurs, migrating people depend on interpreters, who in turn, not infrequently, use epistemic violence or abuse their position of power. In order to escape this initial helplessness, language courses are required that teach the new language quickly and effectively and that also provide semantic orientation.

### *c) Language Acquisition as Assimilation or Empowerment*

But it is precisely here, in such courses and in language teaching<sup>20</sup>, that epistemic violence takes place in a genuine and actively violent form. This often occurs with the content that is often politically selected to provide a representation of the new home and the desired cultural values. The topics and values are pre-sorted and written in a language of power that tells newly arrived people that “you all are guests here”, “you all have to behave yourselves”, “you all have to follow our rules, otherwise we will evict you”, etc.<sup>21</sup>.

Until a few years ago, in an earlier brochure, a catalog of values for language courses for migrants in Austria was selected by the ÖIF (Austrian Immigration Fund), the organization of the liberal, center-right ÖVP party and made mandatory under Sebastian Kurz<sup>22</sup>, who later, as a right-wing populist,

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20 It is quite helpful and indeed praiseworthy when government agencies, like those here in Austria, pay for such courses for migrants. For criticism of the content, however, see the previously presented text.

21 This is my own interpretation of the style of this teaching.

22 The former Chancellor Kurz had to resign in October 2021 because of corruption. For more see: <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/oesterreich-sebastian-kurz-ruecktritt-1.5478316>. Kurz is known worldwide for his harsh policies towards migrants, which are in no way less harsh than those of right-wing populists.

rose to the post of Chancellor<sup>23</sup>. It begins with: “The ability to speak, write and read in German is necessary to become a member of Austrian society” (p. 78). It then continues with statements like: “Education is very important to Austrians” (p. 90), “In Austria, women and man have equal rights in the labor market” (p. 104) and “There are very clear rules and regulations that govern coexistence in Austria”. (p. 119) The authoritative style is much sharper in German than in the English translation though.

But what is the significance of statements such as “(...) in Austria women’s rights are respected, in Austria people are allowed to choose their own religion, in Austria the state is the same for all women (...)” for new fellow citizens? For the migrants, this means that they are tolerated at best and that they have to adapt and submit if they want to stay and live in this country<sup>24</sup>. But that also means that it is subtly assumed that women’s rights per se are not respected in their home countries, that there is no freedom of religion or the rule of law. This may be true for some migrants, especially those coming from autocratic countries, but not for all migrants from all over the world. Not all countries in the world are worse off than Austria or Germany in terms of democracy, women’s rights, equality before the law, and so forth<sup>25</sup>.

And right here, already at the beginning of arrival in a new home and in the beginning of a new life, there are, instead of a greeting of welcome, instead of friendly emotional connections that could create a new home and prevent hegemony, epistemic violence will already be employed and exercised.

## Education and Narratives

### *a) University and School*

Some of the reasons for the previously mentioned epistemic violence employed at the beginning of arrival are inherent in the school and education/university system of the new homeland. Hegemonic knowledge is already

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23 The brochure is German-English bilingual. See: ÖIF (*Mein Leben in Österreich*). [https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Zentrale/Integration/Publikationen/Wertebroschuere\\_Lernunterlagen.pdf](https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Integration/Publikationen/Wertebroschuere_Lernunterlagen.pdf)

24 There has been criticism of the authoritative style of the brochure and similar representations of values for quite some time. Among other sources, see: <https://erwachsenenbildung.at/aktuell/nachrichten/9917-integrationsfonds-stellt-lernunterlagen-fuer-wertekurse-vor.php>

25 In the German-language book for the B1 level, which is obligatory in the state-supported courses, on p. 66 it literally says: “our children can attend better schools in Austria”, which presented as a statement by a migrant from Russia. This statement is to be discussed seriously, as the school system in Austria is in many cases weaker than those found in the Eastern European countries, such as in Bulgaria, Romania, etc. See: Hilpert, S. et al. (2018).



being generated at universities (Fornet-Betancourt, 2004, p. 16), on the one hand because they are part of the “public administration”, and on the other hand because the people who teach there have been selected in such a way such that they establish and support the dominant, hegemonic system (p. 16). It is also worth noting that the previously mentioned brochure, which was in public use for a long time and was even mandatory<sup>26</sup>, was created and reviewed with the collaboration of university professors.

It is therefore urgently necessary to train new teachers, new types of researchers and to admit them into the teaching ranks. The small circle of teachers with a migration background urgently needs to be expanded so as to enable an emphatic approach that can only be generated through existential connection and personal experience. Foucault also supports this demand where he writes: “*The nature of the ends* which are pursued in influencing the actions of others: protection of privilege, accumulation of profits, exercise of status-based authority, exercise of office or profession” (Foucault, 2021, p. 259).

These should be revealed and fought. And unfortunately, this is especially so at universities, where professorships are characterized by a high status and authority and are also responsible for the training of future teachers, and where people with a migrant background and without the necessary networks are rarely admitted. Thus, the elite keeps solidifying and multiplying from the new, and the spiral of epistemic violence turns incessantly over and over again.

### *b) Certificates as the Home of Knowledge*

In addition to the previously mentioned issues, the following must also be considered: the importance the recognition of documents/certificates from home countries is for migrants. Because, as we all know, such certificates attest to achievements, to the accumulation of knowledge and act as witnesses to the skills that a person has developed during life. In Austria, the procedure for recognition has been simplified<sup>27</sup> in recent years and people are finally being supported as they share their knowledge and skills and as they use them professionally.

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<sup>26</sup> It is not possible to give an exact time, since the brochure, which is still used despite no longer being compulsory in language courses, was published without a year date.

<sup>27</sup> See: Bundesministerium für Bildung (Ministry for Education and Science). <https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/schule/schulrecht/nostr.html>.

But are certificates really equivalent documents, be they recognized or not? Are certificates from, for example, Eastern European countries of equal value and can they be utilized just as much on the professional path? Unfortunately, no. It is rather the case that references from the Western European and Anglo-Saxon world bring recognition and respect and, through appointment, support professional advancement in every conceivable way. However, the same does not apply to certificates from Eastern Europe, where the universities work at a very high level. For example, to be allowed to teach German courses for migrants in Austria a certificate in German studies and even teaching experience at a university in Belarus, Ukraine, or Bulgaria is not sufficient. Colleagues who have been teaching German for many years at universities and schools in Eastern European countries had to take German exams about two years ago, according to a new regulation from the Ministry of Education and the previously mentioned ÖIF, to be enabled to receive certification for their German-language skills here in Austria. Teachers of German Studies from Eastern Europe therefore had to acquire a C1 language certificate after the fact, thereby starkly calling the language skills of teachers from Eastern Europe into question<sup>28</sup>.

A certificate is, according to this, not in and of itself a certificate and with this people not only lose their loved ones and also the places of their homeland through migration, they also lose the places of their knowledge, so to speak, due to lack of recognition of their certificates and/or their respective competences, thereby falling victim to an unambiguous epistemic violence in its most genuine form.

### *c) The Cultural Memories or Libraries of Migrants*

Another point that can be mentioned as a point of nuance for decoding epistemic violence are the books lost during fleeing and migration, which, as people's cultural memory, occupy a special position in their respective lives. Books and their loss are something very special, because factual life, even in the manner of literary fiction, is interpreted through the art of poetry or prose. Art also interprets time and place of the subjects involved and it conveys individual-social transformation, interaction, affective entanglements, and historical-political tableaux. Literature is a kind of crossover of our "semantical and biographical memory" and thus can help in explaining the ambivalent and polysemantic power of home (Eco, 2004, p. 31). Stories and poetry, as

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<sup>28</sup> These requirements were introduced by the previously mentioned ÖIF.

transcribed in books, can transmit and translate the intimate narratives of home in the original language of one's foremothers or of those who provided care once upon a time. Literature can therefore conjure up closeness and intimacy with the aesthetic tools that provide the existential background for an adequate semantic transmission, "Because the language of the work of art is distinguished such that the individual work of art gathers in itself the symbolic character that, seen hermeneutically, belongs to all beings, and brings it to appearance" (Gadamer, 1993, p. 8).

The lyrics and prose captured in the books of their owners, in their complexity and through their gathering of things, tell their own respective stories, explain the original past, represent the present, and construct the future. Books (literature) develop their own temporality, and among other things serve to decode their 'owners' location. They also help people to catch their breath during migration, and to rediscover themselves as human. The power of literature, as semantic and biographical memory and knowledge, facilitates a special kind of hermeneutics of the homeland, that is, a hermeneutic of the respective ontological location<sup>29</sup>.

Therefore, through the loss of books and through disconnection from past, present, and future, people suffer a new kind, a new level of epistemic violence that prevents them from verifying their origins, telling their own narrative, and finding comfort in books where they might rediscover their childhood.

### **Conclusion - Who Is Allowed to Speak about Migrants?**

The connection between migration and power, epistemic violence, and its differentiated forms, as well as the people affected by this form of violence can and should be debated and written about in detail for a long time to come. Migration and power are inextricably linked, on the one hand because hegemonic conditions cause migratory movements, and on the other hand because new and old hegemonic conditions are made possible and power structures are constituted by immigration.

Thus, it is the facticity along the point of friction between the individual and the respective society that allows or hinders the possibility of dialogue and participation. But it is precisely at this point of friction that the powerful speak in everyday life and assign to the subordinate people a space that

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29 Small portions of this page will soon appear in Boteva-Richter, B. (2022b).

those same powerful people themselves determine: the powerful speak in the media, at scientific conferences, and as advisors to politicians and others in power. And the people whom those in power talk about most, but rarely with, are often migrants. But this “talking about” is like “discourse on” migrants, i.e., a “discourse on” migrants as if they were a problem area to be solved, a strategy to be assigned, to which the powerless must submit. These people, who are being crushed between borders, between institutions, between the sides of the “contradiction we experience every day, not having the same rights as the citizens” (Fornet-Betancourt, 2007, p. 110) of the so-called “host” society, must listen and must also submit.

Fornet-Betancourt also criticizes this. It even appears to him that: “It is not an exaggeration to assert that in many societies that call themselves multicultural and congratulate themselves on their integration policies, the public sphere is now a place of observation and control for migrants, where every day they feel themselves to be under the supervision of “citizens” and their institutions (...)” (p. 113).

But precisely “(...) in this situation it has become indispensable for philosophers to reconsider the possibility of a transculturally valid way of philosophizing (...)” (Wimmer, 1997, p. 41) in order to recognize and reveal the epistemic violence that opens up along the faultline of cultures living together for the first time. With the help of sharp analysis, a new type of subject is to be presented that understands the narratives and traditions in an extended way, a subject that includes society in itself as well as nature and cosmology and thus offers an expanded understanding of self and of others. This is a subject who treats others justly and respectfully, no matter where they come from, along with nature, because these others and nature too are always included as personal aspects within the self.

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