Knowledge control as a form of social control. From hermeneutical injustice to epistemology of resistance

Il controllo della conoscenza come forma di controllo sociale: dall'ingiustizia ermeneutica all'epistemologia della resistenza

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Abstract: The existence of otherness as a social category is the result of a specific configuration of power relations. One way to maintain this configuration and exert control over subjectivities defined as "others" is to exclude them from participation in the production of knowledge, depriving them of the resources to understand themselves and the world and the words to describe their social experience. In this sense, the epistemic injustice, produced by exclusion from the system of knowledge production, constitutes a powerful instrument to control power relations and to maintain the subordination of minorised subjectivities. At the same time, the production of analysis by oppressed subjectivities constitutes a form of resistance to the control of the knowledge production and to the control of subjectivities themselves; since this production has a liberating function from oppressive systems and is able to reveal the implicit power dynamics within the production of knowledge.

Key words: epistemic injustice, decoloniality, feminist epistemology, knowledge production, social control.

Riassunto: L'esistenza dell'alterità come categoria sociale è il risultato di una determinata configurazione dei rapporti di potere. Un modo per mantenere questa configurazione ed esercitare un controllo sulle soggettività definite "altre" è escluderle dalla partecipazione alla produzione di conoscenza, privandole delle risorse per comprendere sé e il mondo e delle parole per descrivere la propria esperienza sociale. In tal senso, l'ingiustizia epistemica prodotta dall'esclusione dal sistema di produzione di conoscenza costituisce un potente strumento di controllo delle relazioni di potere e di mantenimento della subordinazione delle soggettività minorizzate. Allo stesso tempo la produzione di analisi da parte delle soggettività oppresse costituisce una forma di resistenza al controllo della produzione di sapere e delle stesse soggettività, dal momento che tale produzione ha una funzione liberatoria dai sistemi oppressivi ed è in grado di far emergere le implicite dinamiche di potere interne alla produzione di sapere.

Parole chiave: ingiustizia epistemica, decolonialità, epistemologia femminista, produzione di conoscenza, controllo sociale.

Introduction

The knowledge production system is not a neutral field, because it is subject and subjugated to power relations that play a role in legitimising some knowledge and subjectivities and disqualifying others. An unequal distribution of power between social groups implies an unequal participation in the production of knowledge and, in some cases, an exclusion of certain subjectivities from the knowledge production system. Having control over the production of knowledge means having the power to decide what knowledge is considered valid, to determine the structuring of collective social understanding, to produce the resources to obtain an adequate understanding of social facts (Fricker, 2007) and to determine which is the correct interpretation of reality that will be regarded as true. Controlling the production of knowledge means having the power to select, hierarchize and marginalise knowledge, and thus to prevent certain subjectivities from obtaining a correct interpretation of social experiences, depowering them as far as keeping them in a position of subordination. In other words, controlling the production of knowledge implies controlling the power relations between social groups. In this regard, epistemology, which is the science of knowledge acquisition (Ribeiro, 2020, p. 85), is the discipline that establishes the rules of the production of scientific knowledge. Therefore, epistemology plays a fundamental role in the exclusion or inclusion of those considered capable of producing knowledge, in selecting the issues and questions that are worthy of being addressed or ignored, and in establishing the paradigms, narratives, interpretations and perspectives that can be adopted to produce knowledge considered reliable and truthful (*Ibidem*). For this reason, epistemology is an important battleground for many theoretical and social movements: what is at stake is being able to constitute themselves as active knowing subjectivities capable of producing knowledge about reality and about themselves and, at the same time, contributing to the production of immediately employable resources.

The origin and the effects of the hierarchization of knowledge and subjectivity

In *Il faut défendre la société* Foucault (1997/1998) argues that during modernity through the disciplinarisation of knowledge a new relationship between knowledge and power was established. Through selection, hierarchization and centralisation, the process of disciplinarisation gave rise to subjugate and disciplined knowledge and subjects (Allen, 2017). According to Foucault (1997/1998) through this process some knowledge has been expelled from the domain of the true (Allen, 2017), thus some knowledge has been qualified as untrue and has been excluded from the possibility of establishing the true, while others have been organised into disciplines, systematised in social institutions, such as the academy (*Ibidem*). For the same reason, decolonial thinking uses the expression "coloniality of knowledge" *(Lander, 2000)* to describe the relationship between knowledge and power established through modernity/coloniality.

Through the epistemology that emerged during modernity, the criteria for establishing which is scientific knowledge were decided. The decolonial thinking, the feminist "standpoint theory" and the black feminism's "lugar da fala" theory identify epistemology as the main battlefield in which the game for the affirmation of a plurality of voices, subjectivities and knowledge is played out.

The three principles that establish which is the knowledge legitimised as scientific, and on which modern epistemology is based, are: neutrality, universality, and objectivity. Starting from these three principles the decolonial and feminist thinking build their critique of the mode of production of knowledge established by modernity, tracing its foundations to *Descartes' philosophy*. Indeed, the Western academy has inherited from *Descartes' philosophy* a system of thinking that is based on binary oppositions in which one of the terms is inferiorised, de-humanised, de-legitimised and de-authorised[1]. Binary oppositions form a hierarchy by which everything in the world is classified and ordered. To understand how this system of thinking has shaped the way we know, observe, and see the world, it is necessary to examine how the mind-body opposition originated. Indeed, the mind-body opposition is one of the main binary oppositions from which the neutrality, objectivity and universality of modern epistemology derive. According to Grosfoguel (2013/2017), through Descartes' statement 'I think therefore I am', the new foundation of modern scientific knowledge was established (Grosfoguel, 2013/2017). The 'I' replaced God, the latter was the holder of universal and objective truth, because emanated from a superior entity located in another place, or rather in a non-place, beyond time and space. In this way, the "I", the mind, assumed the God's eye view (Bondi & Domosh, 1992), the viewpoint detached from material, earthly, corporeal reality. The mind-body separation has released the "I" from what makes it human, the body. In this way the "I" (the mind) has become immune to the conditioning due to the body, constituting itself as a subject capable of obtaining impartial and objective knowledge. This led to the affirmation of the superiority of the mind and to the "inferiority" of the body, which

was considered impure, fragile, and vulnerable. The body, in fact, expresses desires and emotions and is considered to be "the site of unruly passions and appetite that might disrupt the pursuit of truth and knowledge" (Puwar, 2004, p. 16). Furthermore, the body is situated in time and space and for this reason its knowledge is limited to what it can experience through its senses.

In this way, the hierarchy of knowledge and subjects considered capable of producing knowledge took place. In fact, the mind (the "I")/the body (the other) opposition contains all the elements that define the production of knowledge legitimised as scientific. First of all, according to Descartes' logic, the knowledge is the result of an individual production, it is obtained through the method of solipsism, thus, through an internal monologue with themselves (Grosfoguel, 2013/2017), isolated from social relations and the concrete social, historical context, for this reason there is no shared, collective and relational construction of meaning. In addition, the scientific knowledge is obtained through the detachment of the observing subject from the "object" of knowledge and from his or her own feelings and emotions. In this way, in the process of knowledge production we can distinguish two figures linked by a power relationship: an active subject producing knowledge *on* a passive "object" of knowledge. The knowing subject (the "I", the mind, *res cogitas*) is the one who defines the "object" of knowledge (the other, the body, *res extensa*). While the identity of the knowing subject remains unknown because has no body, so it is impossible to define the gender, sex, "race" that characterise it, the "object" of knowledge, the "other", is always clearly identifiable. The "object" of knowledge has been built as "inferior" because it has being associated with the body and for this reason suffers from the conditioning resulting from

associated with the body and for this reason suffers from the conditioning resulting from it, which makes the "object" incapable of producing objective knowledge. The process of body elision has produced what Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006/2014) call the dis-incorporated epistemology (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006) that produces knowledge from a geo-historical location and a body that are not made explicit, passing as neutral and therefore objective. In other words, the epistemology that emerged with modernity "is based on the separation between the ideas produced and the geographical and corporal location of the thinker who produced them" (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2014, p. 188). In this way, modern epistemology denies the specificities that derive from the geo-corporal and historical context and presents itself as universally valid and applicable. The claim of universality suggests that what is produced from a specific location and time "is sufficient to explain the socio-historical reality of the rest of the world" (Grosfoguel, 2017, p. 59). Consequently, in *Descartes'* logic, the knowing subject approaches knowledge as if he was looking at a landscape external to himself, in which the subject does not conceive and perceive himself as an integral part (Ruocco, 2021). In this regard, Santiago Castro-Gomèz (2003) calls "point-zero epistemology" "the point of view that does not assume itself as a point of view" (Grosfoguel, 2013, p. 76). Not conceiving oneself as part of the reality in which the research is produced implies not conceiving oneself as marked bodies, that is to say, "not defining oneself on the basis of one's sex, race and class" (Ribeiro Corossacz, 2020, p. 91), presenting and assuming "this situation of privilege as a fact, a fact of the order of things" (*Ibidem*). In this way, power relations are denied because the reality of these relations is presented as neutral and therefore correct (*Ibidem*). Moreover, conceiving oneself

as external to reality enables the exploitation and the domination of what has been built as "other" than oneself. In the binary oppositions, the body, as the nature, land, women and racialised people are all terms defined as *res extensa*, and therefore "have no divine dignity as human beings" (de Sousa Santos, 2018, p. 18), they are "objects" and not subjects of law. As a result, subjectivities that have been associated and identified with the body have been inferiorised and, for this reason, excluded from participation in the production of knowledge and relegated to "objects" of knowledge. Indeed, according to Anibal Quijano (2000/2014), the expulsion of body and its objectification has made possible the elaboration of scientific theories of race. The latter has become the "object" of study because the racialised subjects are considered as not rational, and therefore "inferior" subjects, for this reason "they could legitimately be dominated and exploited" (Quijano, 2000, p. 221). In this regard, the classification and hierarchization of populations and knowledge on a racial and sexist basis has produced a separation between rational/non-rational subjects in which the non-rationality is associated with non-humanity, non-European, female, nature while rationality is associated with fully humanity: European, male and capable of governance (Grosfoguel, 2013/2017). Thus, the separation of the mind from the body is responsible for further binary oppositions, such as theory-practice, high culture-low culture, rational-irrational, and can even be traced in the public-private separation. Racialised subjectivities, women, the body, as well as experiences and emotions, all these elements have been categorized as irrational, out of control, therefore unreliable, for this reason they have been delegitimised, ousted from the public space of knowledge production, and relegated to the private sphere. For the same reason these subjects and elements are considered

out of place in both the physical and theoretical public space of institutional knowledge. The production of a scientific discourse on the supposed irrationality and the consequent "inferiority" of certain subjectivities was functional to maintain their social subordination and to justify their control and exploitation. This discourse about irrationality implies the inability of these subjectivities to self-determine, to decide for themselves, to have a will. Therefore, these subjectivities are conceived as available, that means be at the disposal of man who can freely dispose of them for his own purposes and enrichment, they could be "appropriated" (Guillaumin, 2020). Through epistemic inferiorisation, the Euro-western academy has been able to establish itself as the only subject with the legitimacy to produce knowledge over other subjectivities, thus building its own superiority and wealth. In this regard, it is possible to say that the West has literally prospered *on* the inferiorisation of subjectivities and epistemes. For example, Euro-Western scientists have long used enslaved people to study the body (its biology) and to produce knowledge in different fields (Owens, 2017). Many of gynaecological "discoveries" have been achieved through painful medical experimentations on enslaved black women "without the use of anaesthesia, even at a time when it was regularly used" (Owens 2017, p.11). This practice was justified by the scientifically supported belief of the "inferiority" and thus non-humanity of black women. It is a practice that we might call epistemic extractivism in which the extraction of value, and thus the "enrichment" (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2017/2019), is achieved through the production of knowledge *on* and *with* the bodies of epistemically inferiorised subjectivities. In this case, the raw materials are the bodies or body components of inferiorised subjectivities which, "like the minerals of the earth", before man's appropriation belong to no one,

or rather, they would belong to themselves, but since they are conceived as "objects" and not subjects of law, they could be appropriated. The enrichment process takes place through the production of discourse, therefore the production of knowledge *with* and *about* those bodies and without which it would not have been possible. For example, the production of a discourse on the "inferiority" of minorised2 subjectivities has enriched the Euro-western academy, turning it into the centre of knowledge production *par excellence*, hence into what it is today. In fact, it is precisely the knowledge produced *on* and *with* bodies in the modern era through these violent practices of appropriation that have affected both bodies and territories that the West and the Euro-western academy have been able to elevate themselves as superiors. The same could be said about the "culture" contained in many European museums, the current source of prestige and enrichment of cities, which is based on the plundering of places, artefacts, and bodies. Again, "the practice of trading and collecting body parts" (Grechi, 2021, p.85) of minorised subjectivities has paradoxically served to enrich the national cultural "heritage" of several European museums (*Ibidem*), as in the case of the Maori heads. These latter, "like many other ethnographic "artefacts", have been taken, collected, stored, classified, labelled and exhibited in many European museums" (Grechi, 2021, p. 84). These examples show the violence produced through the division into subjects and "objects" of knowledge supported by epistemic racism/sexism. The West has used these bodies and the knowledge it has gained from them to produce a discourse upon which it has built up its worldwide importance as the centre of culture, of the scientific production of knowledge. In this way the West constituted itself as a standard by which measure the knowledge produced in other

parts of the world. Thus, the mind-body separation has made possible to exclude various elements from the knowledge production system, from experiences to certain subjectivities, precluding the latter from participating in the production of cognitive resources. This system of thought has had and still has practical impacts on the lives of minorised subjectivities that are excluded from the knowledge production system.

Hermeneutical injustice as a means of depowerment and control

As I have already mentioned, the division between subjects and "objects" of knowledge defines a power relationship in which the former establishes the perspective from which to describe and define the world, constituting itself as the one who actively produces knowledge. This power relationship ensures to those with social privilege to have a point of view on the world, while it prevents those in a socially disadvantaged position to have one, and therefore from being able to speak for themselves and to describe themselves and reality. Since those who are socially disadvantaged are the reality under observation, they are perceived as "objects" on which knowledge is produced. In fact, socially disadvantaged groups have been relegated to a passive role, in which they are subjected to the knowledge that is produced about them, because they have been built as not epistemically reliable, and therefore as incapable of producing objective and impartial knowledge. The decolonial thinking define the "epistemic privilege" as the advantage due to the possibility of constituting the starting point of observation, as the privileged *locus* of enunciation from which to describe the rest of the world (Mignolo, 2007/2013). Moreover, the epistemic privilege guarantees the superiority of epistemic explanation and a greater credibility

to those who possess it. In order to ensure the preservation of the epistemic privilege, the colonial logic provided for the construction of a discourse on the inferiority of other epistemes and also for the elimination of them (*Ibidem*). In this regard, the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014/2021) coined the word "epistemicide" to indicate the systematic extermination of entire populations in order to eliminate the knowledge they incorporated and handed down, an extermination that ensured the West's monopoly on legitimate knowledge. Grosfoguel (2013/2017) identified four genocides/epistemicides that occurred in the 16th century. The first took place against Muslims and Jewish in the Iberian Peninsula, the second against indigenous peoples in the American continent, the third was determined by the Valladolid process which established the inferiority/non-humanity of the *indios*, giving start to the transatlantic trafficking of Africans in order to enslave them, and finally, the fourth was the one against women accused of witchcraft that took place in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries (Grosfoguel, 2013/2017). The genocides were accompanied by a combination of violence aimed at leaving no trace of the cultures, at annihilating any element of them and destroying their memory, for example through prohibiting people from thinking, speaking, and practising their cosmologies and cultures (*Ibidem*) or through forced religious and spiritual conversion practices. If today the Western European *corpus* of knowledge seems to be the only one possible, it is also because the others have been eliminated (Borghi, 2020). The Western epistemic privilege has been achieved through the construction of a knowledge system that relegates subjectivity and knowledge to a subordinate status by distinguishing between what is knowledge, hence "what is worthy of being known and what is not because it does not

exist or is not perceived" (Casalini, 2016, p. 130). If epistemic inferiorisation and epistemicide seem to belong to the past, the philosopher Sueili Carneiro's definition of epistemicide helps to understand how these practices persist in the contemporary world. According to Carneiro (2005) we can equally call epistemicides

> […] the exclusion from educational opportunities, [which are] the active principle for social mobility in the country. In this dynamic, the education apparatus becomes, for those who are racially inferiorised, the source of multiple processes of annihilation of cognitive capacities and intellectual confidence. It is a phenomenon that occurs because of the lowering of self-esteem that racism[3] and discrimination cause in everyday school life through the denial imposed on blacks of the status of subjects of knowledge through the devaluation, denial or concealment of the contributions made by the African continent and the African diaspora to the cultural heritage of humanity; through the imposition of cultural whiteness and through the production of failure and school evasion we call these processes epistemicide (Ribeiro, 2020, p. 82).

Thus, according to Sueili Carneiro, epistemicide consists in knocking out certain subjectivities, both humanly and intellectually, through the devaluation of their cognitive capacities produced by everyday discrimination, through epistemic, systemic and institutional racism and/or also sexism. This devaluation has a negative impact on personal self-esteem and hinders subjectivities in a number of ways, in their self-construction, aspirations, and opportunities, for example by preventing their access to those fields in which social meanings are generated (Fricker, 2007). The

combination of these processes leads to the disempowerment of subjectivities functional to the preservation of their subordination and thus to the conservation of a certain setting of social relations of power. In this sense epistemic marginalisation is a means of domination since, as Brunella Casalini (2016) states, one way to exert power over the life of the "other" is to create "a reality of common sense that does not contemplate it" (Casalini, 2016, p. 130). In other words, through the creation of a knowledge production and learning system in which, on one hand, the identity and experience of minorised groups is deviant because it is not contemplated and, on the other hand, is not able to provide them with the tools to understand their experiences. Thus, it is possible to say that epistemic privilege also consists of "the advantage possessed by the dominant group in determining the structuring of collective social understanding" (Fricker, 2007, p. 147), which allows them to control the power relations between social groups. In fact, the dominant group, having a greater "influence in those practices through which social meanings are generated" (*Ibidem*), has the power to decide even what is not allowed to be known, thus it is responsible for the production of ignorance on certain issues. For this reason, Nancy Tuana (2006) argues that ignorance is a much more complex issue than something we simply do not know and that, in order to

> […] fully understand the complex practices of knowledge production and the variety of factors that account for why something is known, we must also understand the practices that account for not knowing, that is, for our lack of knowledge about a phenomenon (p. 2).

Nancy Tuana refers to the epistemology of ignorance to describe the *corpus* of

knowledge that is deliberately ignored by the knowledge production system. It is on this "*corpus* of ignorance" produced on women that the research work of the women's health movement was focused to fill that ignorance. From this perspective, ignorance is the result of structural inequalities of power and involves not only injustice, but also epistemic violence. In fact, the exclusion or marginalisation of certain subjectivities from the production of knowledge has important consequences on them since it can lead to a lack of correct interpretation of certain experiences. For this reason, according to Brunella Casalini (2016), ignorance is far from innocent as it is "socially constructed and even actively researched, consciously produced, strategically used and fiercely consumed" (Casalini, 2016, p. 130). In this regard, Miranda Fricker (2007) in her book *Epistemic Injustice* discusses a specific type of epistemic injustice that she called hermeneutical injustice. It consists in the presence of gaps in the collective interpretative and cognitive resources or in the presence of distorted resources that prevent minorised subjectivities from obtaining a correct interpretation of social facts or from understanding and making sense of important experiences, thus depriving them of the means to understand their self and reality (Fricker, 2007). The presence of cognitive gaps or distorted resources can create epistemic advantages and disadvantages whereby those in a position of social advantage have the appropriate resources to understand and make sense of their experience, unlike minorised subjectivities. The latter will find difficult to understand, make sense of and transmit their experience, either because there are no hermeneutical resources and therefore even the words to describe certain experiences are not available, or because the existing resources are inadequate or distorted (*Ibidem*). Gaps can be particularly damaging for socially disadvantaged subjectivities. In fact, gaps can prevent subjectivities from recognising a situation of injustice in which they are involved (Casalini, 2016). Knowledge gaps may produce real damages that have direct consequences on subjectivities. Epistemically marginalised subjectivities are harmed first and foremost as knowing subjects, so as subjectivities capable of understanding, producing and transmitting knowledge. Gaps in collective interpretive resources prevent minorised subjectivities from understanding and making sense of experiences that are fundamental and important to understand and communicate. Two examples of injustice and epistemic violence produced by the lack of interpretive resources, or the presence of distorted resources, are: identities that have been built as socially undesirable and experiences of sexist, racist and homo/lesbo/bi/trans-phobic violence. In fact, for some of these experiences, until recently, there were no adequate terms to describe them or the terms that were available were not yet in common use, such as for homo/lesbo/bi/trans-phobia. With regard to the first case, therefore, gaps or distortions in the interpretative resources concerning gender identity, "race" and sexual orientation that have been constructed as socially undesirable can negatively affect the individual's development and self-acceptance, hindering subjectivities in the process of self-construction as a subject. With regard to the second case, the experiences of violence have long been denied, distorted and therefore difficult to recognise, describe, nominate and communicate. Sometimes gaps and distorted interpretative resources have prevented victims from recognising themselves as such (Casalini, 2016). Understanding these experiences and making them intelligible is in the interest of the subjects because this is the only way they can avoid further violence. At the same time, as Tuana argues, "willful ignorance often works

in tandem with the practice of denying cognitive authority" (Tuana, 2006, p. 14) which constructs certain identities as "not epistemically credible" (Tuana, 2006, p. 13). The lack of credibility of these subjectivities may lead to further damage as their testimony may be discredited, exposing them to a further epistemic injustice that Miranda Fricker calls "testimonial injustice" (Fricker, 2007). The denial of cognitive authority is a tool of delegitimisation used to exclude and disqualify both intellectually and humanly as far as depowering subjectivities and their knowledge. In this way, minorised subjectivities lose confidence in their ability to understand, know and evaluate because they are portrayed as irrational, unreliable and suggestible. At the same time, the delegitimization of emotions and feelings as cognitive tools prevents subjectivities from using the only resources that come from themselves, losing confidence in conceiving themselves as subjectivities capable of knowing without depending on an external authority. Overall, the loneliness generated by living experiences that are difficult to understand and impossible to communicate rips away faith in their ability to make sense of the world (Fricker, 2007), undermining personal self-esteem and epistemic trust. Moreover, the dissonance between the experience embodied by excluded subjectivities and the interpretation of social reality made by dominant subjects leads the former to self-doubt as far as questioning the veracity of what they experience. Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006/2014) argue that the inferiorisation produced by the classification of bodies that do not fit into the criteria of knowledge established by white European men has consequences in the formation of the subject because "people who are not trusted in their thinking, are doubted in their rationality and wounded in their dignity" (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006, p. 207). Thus, the coloniality of knowledge produces and feeds

what in decolonial thinking is called the "coloniality of being" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). In fact, the expression coloniality of being refers to the process by which minorised subjectivities are ousted from the possibility of being as human beings, as subjects, through the denial of the ability to think. Therefore, the exclusion of these subjectivities from the realm of the human, and therefore of thinking subjects, translates into an ontological denial, which has consequences for these subjectivities. Franz Fanon discussed this theme in his political writings on colonial psychiatry and in *Peau noire masques blancs* (1975/2015) and in *Les damnés de la terre* (1961/2007), when he discussed about the "psychological illness of the North African migrant" (Borghi, 2020, p. 88). This psychological illness was caused by the deceptions produced by the French nation, which deludes migrant subjectivities into thinking they are citizens, that they have rights and that they belong to the community, leaving them permanently on the threshold (*Ibidem*). In this way migrant subjectivites develop "the identity of the rejected, marginalised, subordinate, of half-human" (*Ibidem*), perpetually out of place and inadequate because "outside of fully recognised humanity" (Sayad, 2019, p. 91). It is possible to say that the basis of the coloniality of being is hermeneutical-epistemic injustice. It is from the combination of this violence acting in concert that an instrument of fragilisation, discipline and control of the interiority is obtained, which hinders the capacity of minorised subjectivities to rebel and keeps them in a position of subordination.

From consciousness to knowledge through epistemic r-existence

In the article Toward a Foucaultian Epistemology of Resistance: Counter-Memory, Epistemic Friction, and *Guerrilla* Pluralism

(Medina, 2011), José Medina asks the question: "How do we fight against established and official forms of knowledge when they are oppressive?" (p.13). A few lines later he replies: "by turning knowledge(s) against itself(themeselves), or by mobilizing some forms of knowledge against others" (*Ibidem*) in order to fight the monopolisation of knowledge production. Therefore "resisting the omissions and distortions" (*Ibidem*) of official and dominant narratives, producing what Foucault calls genealogy or more simply "counter-history" or "counter-memory". In *Il faut défendre la société* Foucault (1997/1998) describes geneaology as follows

> [...] with respect to the project of inscribing knowledge in the hierarchy of power proper to science, [genealogy is] an attempt to free historical knowledge from subjugation and to make it free, and therefore capable of opposition and struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse (Foucault, 1998, p. 18-19).

In other words, geneaology is an attempt to "break with the authorised and mono discourse that claims to be universal" (Ribeiro, 2020, p. 69), recovering the disqualified knowledges by promoting a multiplicity of voices, breaking "the silence instituted for those who have been assigned to a subordinate position, moving towards the disruption of the hierarchy" (Ribeiro, 2020, p. 87**).** Something that is similar to what materialist feminists, and in particular Monique Wittig, call the theory or "science of oppression" (Wittig, 2019, p. 26), the essence of which is the disruption it introduces into the "way of thinking about reality" (Guillaumin, 2020, p. 225) and the reversal of perspectives (*Ibidem*).

> When we women, discover that we are subject to a system of

oppression and appropriation, in the moment in which we can think about it, we become subjects, in the sense of cognitive subjects, through an operation of abstraction. Being aware of oppression is not just a reaction, a struggle against oppression: it is also a total conceptual re-evaluation of the social world, a total conceptual reorganisation of it, through new concepts elaborated from the point of view of oppression. It is what I call the science of oppression developed by the oppressed themselves. This operation of understanding reality must be undertaken by each of us: let us call it subjective, cognitive practice (Wittig, 2019, p. 26).

As bell hooks (1990) teaches, the margin can be a site of resistance because, unlike most of the knowledge production which prefers the centre as a point of observation, it offers a unique and unprecedented point of view, a radical perspective. As Colette Guillaumin (1992/2020) states, "theory (produced by marginalised, oppressed groups) is, first of all, consciousness, the exact consciousness of the position they occupy in society" (Guillaumin, 2020, p. 226), this is how the theory of the oppressed takes shape. In fact, one way to avoid being subjected to the discourses (which are produced on the oppressed) and the (oppressive) reality is precisely to analyse it, turning knowledge against itself, producing theories of their own in response to official oppressive theories, so as to constitute themselves as subjects and not "objects" of knowledge. Before consciousness turns into knowledge, what leads subjectivities to embark on this research path is the need to understand themselves, the world and their own experiences. Indeed, being able to understand and make sense of important everyday experiences is not only an interest for everyone,

but also a human necessity. For this reason, subjectivities suffering from epistemic marginalisation must make an effort to search for resources and/or self-production of hermeneutical and epistemic resources in order to respond to the need for knowledge and understanding of the world, as well as of their own experience. This production of sources and resources inevitably takes place in contexts outside the academy, contexts in which the production of knowledge retains a strongly and inevitably political role since it constitutes a means of resistance to the invisibility and inferiorisation produced by the system of knowledge production. As Foucault wrote, "where there is power, there is resistance" (Medina, 2011, p. 1). In this case where power has produced the epistemic marginalisation of certain subjectivities, there is epistemic resistance. Many thinkers of black and decolonial feminism refer to "epistemology of resistance" (Tuana, 2006, p. 7) indicating a production of knowledge useful to contrast the production of ignorance, through the creation of knowledge able to liberate from oppressive systems (Tuana, 2006), as well as the re-appropriation of a space of speech and a cognitive authority on themselves, which is denied and hindered. In this sense, social movements, such as the feminist movement, the LGBTQIA+ movement, the Afro-American rights movement and their subsequent evolutions, have been and still are important movements of epistemic resistance and collective self-production of hermeneutical-epistemic resources. The work of these movements consists in produce new knowledge and recover knowledge that has been foreclosed by hegemonic practices of knowledge production and disqualified as unworthy of epistemic respect. This work recalls what Foucault described as the insurrection of subjugated knowledge "against the centralising power effects linked to the institution and

functioning of an organised scientific discourse" (Foucault, 1998, p. 17) within our society. More precisely, the production by these movements constitutes a response to violence, exclusion and epistemic invisibilisation. In these cases, as bell hooks (1994/2020) has written, theory (especially that produced by the oppressed) can have a curative and transfromative power and function, becoming a "place of healing" (hooks, 2020, p. 95) which is able to repair the wounds produced by the system of knowledge production and the coloniality of knowledge and being. The epistemology of resistance consists of a responsible production of knowledge, in which the producer assumes the courage and responsibility to affirm and speak starting from themselves, that is, from their own social, geo-historical and corporeal location. In this regard, Ribeiro (2020/2020) argues that in order to achieve the goal of decolonising knowledge, it is necessary to adhere to social or epistemic identity because this is "a reflection of the fact that experiences in different places are distinct and that this localisation is very important for knowledge" (Ribeiro, 2020, p. 31). Indeed, a central and fundamental element in the epistemology of resistance is the recovery, valorisation and analysis of experience as a cognitive tool. The inclusion of personal experience as a source of learning and knowledge fosters the emergence of different social experiences, making possible the deconstruction of "the implicit idea that we share a common origin and perspective" (Sereke, 2020, p. 9). At the same time, recovering experience as a source of knowledge make it possible to claim a form of knowledge that everyone can share (*Ibidem*). This counteracts the idea that theory belongs only to some people (Topini, 2020 p. 199) and the consequent distancing of those subjectivities whose experience is diminished by theory, leading to an empowerment (Ghebremariam Tesfaù, 2020), thus encouraging

them in the learning process. The production of interpretative resources can be achieved in different ways. One of these is the sharing of experiences through forms of collective self-consciousness. Consciousness groups are composed of minorised subjectivities that share similar experiences because, due to structural power inequalities, they occupy socially disadvantaged positions. Self-consciousness groups are useful to: discuss issues that have no space within the knowledge production system, but are essential to people's lives; share and analyse experiences that are difficult to communicate because they generate shame, are stigmatised, and for which listening and credibility are undermined by judgement or ignorance. As Brunella Casalini (2016) writes, consciousness groups have offered "unprecedented interpretive resources for experiences [...] considered as private, personal" (Casalini, 2016 p. 136) whose responsibility has long been attributed only to women. In general, through these groups it is possible to "overcome existing social interpretative habits and arrive at unprecedented interpretations of some experiences" (Fricker, 2007, p. 148), generating new interpretative resources "that bring clarity, cognitive confidence and communicative ease" (*Ibidem*). That is why this path is a cognitive achievement. By sharing experiences, it is possible to: create common knowledge and languages that can offer new interpretative resources for experiences concerning violence; develop new knowledge that can bridge the gaps that have been created by the production of ignorance and epistemically disadvantaged identities; cultivate social imaginaries of resistance to the established social imaginary (Casalini, 2016). In this regard, an example of experience that has generated new knowledge *through* and *for* women's bodies and women's health that was particularly significant is that of self-examination, one of the main practices of feminist consciousness-

raising groups. Through this practice, basic medical knowledge was made accessible to women, thus combating the inaccessibility of knowledge produced by the theory/practice and expert/lay knowledge divisions. In fact, these binary oppositions "have constructed women as "objects" of knowledge and not as authorised cognitive subjects" (Tuana, 2006, p. 9), denying them cognitive authority over their bodies. The knowledge developed through self-examination was able to contrast the androcentric, sexist and racist interpretations of female sexuality that had led to a partial knowledge of women's genitals due to a definition of them exclusively in relation to the reproductive faculty (Tuana, 2006). For this reason, as Tuana (2006) wrote, "such knowledge was political and a source of resistance to oppressive conceptions of women's bodies" (Tuana, 2006, p.7). Self-examination, consciousness-raising and self-help groups enable people to learn from their bodies, about their bodies autonomously and, in this way, to regain cognitive authority and to trust it. Through this practice it was possible to put knowledge back into the bodies and hands of women (*Ibidem*), encouraging them to become Knowing Subjects. Embodied experience became a means of producing knowledge and contrasting the production of ignorance. Placing knowledge back into the body means reuniting what has been separated by *Descartes'* philosophical thought: the mind from the body, the theory from the practice, ending the alienation generated by living in a world where knowledge is not connected to experienced reality and has lost its social function of providing the tools to orient in the world. The production of knowledge and resources whose meanings are shared by a group gives knowledge a strong social and political dimension as it constitutes a means of resistance to epistemic violence, to the invisibility produced by the system of

knowledge production, to the distortion of interpretative resources that have produced socially undesirable identities. In addition, it has another important function: by listening and sharing personal experiences, individuals understand that they share a condition of social disadvantage and realise that they belong to a social group. This process fights the sense of loneliness, the social isolation and disempowerment because it leads to the rise of a shared, collective, critical and political process of subjectification (Ghebremariam Tesfaù, 2020) from which subjectivities can draw the strength to react against structural and systemic oppression. Becoming knowing subjectivities, capable of both knowing and producing knowledge, speaking up and defining themselves allows epistemically marginalised subjectivities to "become subjects" (Kilomba, 2021, p.25), and thus to reconstitute an identity that is no longer the object of definition by someone else, no longer constructed in opposition to a universal model (the model of man, white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied and Euro-western). As Kilomba (2020/2021) and other thinkers of black feminism have argued, speaking out, self-defining, self-writing, self-narrating are political acts through which it is possible to re-appropriate the right to define one's own history and reality, to determine one's own identity, naming and describing realities and identities that have been distorted or denied, achieving "the transition from objectivity to subjectivity" (Kilomba, 2021, p. 25), becoming valid and legitimate subjects. Becoming Subjects means becoming the narrators of one's own story, becoming the authors of one's own reality and not the narrated (*Ibidem*). In conclusion, the use of tools such as self-consciousness, self-reflection and auto-ethnography are indispensable when someone is part of an epistemically marginalised group in which the very subjectivities that are part of it are the Subject

of knowledge (Craaazi, 2020, p. 65). The knowledge produced by the movements is based on the opposite assumptions to those of *Descartes'* logic. Experiences, the body and emotions are not denied in the knowledge process, but become useful material for consciousness-raising and for filling gaps in the knowledge production system. The recovery and valorisation of experience as a cognitive tool, breaking down the idea that knowledge is possessed only by some people, has a function of empowering people and knowledge itself. Moreover, the knowledge of movements is a collective, relational product, the result of sharing, it is not disconnected from the reality experienced by subjectivities and is therefore able to fulfil its social function of providing tools for understanding oneself and the world. Such production of knowledge (by oppressed subjectivities and social movements) does not distinguish between subjects and "objects" of knowledge, potentially does not exclude any subjectivity from understanding and production, in fact it is a field in which everyone can claim a role, therefore it is accessible. It does not follow the existing hierarchies of knowledge and power, it does not inferiorise or depower by undermining self-confidence, on the contrary it is empowering knowledge because it increases confidence in one's own cognitive abilities and awareness of one's social location and diversity of experience.

Conclusion

Through this article I have tried to outline a route on how exclusion from the world of knowledge production can be an instrument of control of power relations between social groups, useful for maintaining the subordination of marginalised groups. Decolonial and feminist thought identify the principles of objectivity, impartiality, and

universality on which modern epistemology is based as the instruments through which it has been possible to create a hierarchization, marginalisation and exclusion of knowledge and subjectivity. The hierarchization and inferiorisation of knowledge and subjectivity has enabled the domination, control, exploitation and appropriation of the bodies of minorised subjectivities by the West. Through the appropriation and inferiorisation of certain subjectivities, the West has constructed its epistemic privilege and constituted itself as the sole subject and privileged centre of observation and enunciation from which to observe and describe the rest of the world. By examining the practical implications of exclusion from participation in the knowledge production system, it emerges how this determines real damages for minorised subjectivities. In this respect, those who occupy a dominant social position have control over the knowledge production system, and thus have the power to structure collective social understanding and determine knowledge, but also collective ignorance on certain issues. This ignorance, which takes the form of gaps in collective interpretative resources, harms those in a socially disadvantaged position because such gaps make it difficult to understand and make sense of important social experiences and at the same time to name, talk and convey them. The epistemic inferiorisation as well as the denial of cognitive authority, the impossibility of understanding and communicating some important experiences for minorised social groups are a source of disempowerment that keeps them in a position of social disadvantage. One way of breaking out of the circle of epistemic violence for these groups is the self-production of interpretive resources. This production of knowledge, which is primarily the result of the consciousness of the social location occupied by these subjectivities, is an important source of empowerment

for them. Non-conforming subjectivities (in terms of gender, sex, "race", etc.), driven by the need to understand themselves and everyday social experiences, embark on a research path that is both subjective and collective, the outcome of which is the production of new interpretative resources for collective experiences. In this regard, consciousness-raising groups such as feminist groups, through the analysis of experiences, have proved to be instruments capable of bridging the cognitive gaps and distortions regarding identity and reality, satisfying the needs for knowledge, understanding of oneself and of reality for minorised subjectivities. Finally, the passage from consciousness to knowledge is able to repair the damage that epistemic exclusion produces, in fact in this way the minorised subjectivities regain confidence in their own cognitive capacities resulting in their empowerment.

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[1]In the Italian translation of Djamila Ribeiro's book *Il luogo della parola* (2020), Valeria Ribeiro Corossacz in the afterword uses the term discursive des-authorization to indicate the delegitimization of the analysis of one's own condition produced by oppressed subjectivities, thus referring to the systematic delegitimization of theoretical production as a device of exercise of power used by the dominant in order to silence, invisibilize black feminist thinkers and their contributions.

[2] I use the term minorised and not minority because it makes it clear how the condition of minorised subjectivity is caused by power inequalities. In fact, the use of the term minorised refers to an active political process of disempowerment. A minorised subjectivity is such not because is minority, but because the unequal distribution of power implies being disadvantaged with respect to those who hold power.

[3] In addition to racism, sexism, heterosexism and the intersection of these and other means used as sources of oppression can lead to the same result, namely the devaluation of cognitive capacities and thus the disempowerment of subjectivities.