

Truth or Choice? the hegemonic-neoliberal destruction of knowledge

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How do we understand a distorted world? A contribution to counter-hegemonic epistemology.

Knowledge in the western tradition was often thought to be gained through rational, scientific processes, typically independent enquiry involving a combination of ideas and experience. Some intellectual and institutional foundations do remain in support of this approach. However western individualism and hegemonic dictates have introduced new and distinct currents of ignorance into ways in which we see the world. For example, select anecdotal stories are wrongly presented as social realities, we are warned off challenging key elite myths, urged to accept authoritative sources, to reject original enquiry and, in place this, encouraged to pass our time in individual identity fantasies. This systematic destruction of social understandings deserves study. So, as a contribution to counter-hegemonic epistemology, this essay outlines some peculiar features of manufactured ignorance under hegemonic-neoliberal regimes – that is, those systems dedicated to the promotion of corporate privilege and imperialism in the name of liberty. First, it describes an authoritative and hegemonic consensus which has been set up to override genuine truth-seeking in matters of substance, leaving only a narrow ‘allowable space’ for independent enquiry. Second, it explains how individualist method and resort to anecdotal ‘knowledge’ are wrongly presented as defining real pathways to social understandings. Finally, it discusses the application of liberal values within this ‘allowable space’, which have created a flourishing of individual fantasies over identity, expertise and representation in the world.

1. Hegemonic-authoritative consensus

A common popular response to controversial matters – particularly in matters of war, security and state criminality – is to adhere to what is regarded as a ‘hegemonic-authoritative consensus’, regardless of evidence and reason. This can be due to tribal, community or state loyalty, voluntary or enforced, or from a fear of contradicting a social expectation of such loyalty. Such pressures generate auto-censorship and, at times, direct repression. This leads to ‘the emperor has no clothes syndrome’, where few adults find the courage to speak out against the enforced myths of the day. Pack loyalty leads to a failure to acknowledge the obvious. Such is most obviously the case with the various false pretexts for war.

This hegemonic-authoritative consensus, constantly reinforced by ‘reputable’ media, combines with methodological individualism, to create new forms of confected knowledge. For example, adapting to social demands for participation, the online, participatory encyclopaedia Wikipedia has built in requirements for participants to defer to ‘reputable’ and secondary sources, specifically rejecting primary sources and original research. The rule is stated this way: “Wikipedia articles must not contain original research ... Wikipedia articles should be based on reliable, published secondary sources”. This is the opposite of what has been taught at universities, at least in the social sciences where, so far as possible, primary and independent sources in original combinations are used. The point of this academic custom has been to go as close as possible to the sources of evidence and take responsibility for interpretation, rather than simply adopt the interpretations of others. In a forensic sense, this approach includes emphases on independent evidence, corroboration and consideration of ‘both sides’ of any polemic.

Yet Wikipedia's rejection of primary sources privileges whatever sources the administrators (editorial supervisors) consider reputable and amplifies the alleged authoritative consensus of large media corporations. This defective method both reinforces and is reinforced by a hegemonic corporate media, not least Google, which elevates Wikipedia dictum in most of its searches. Attempts to use Google searches to find analyses of Wikipedia lead to almost endless loops back to Wikipedia itself. This closed loop might not matter so much in narrow or technical areas (information on television series or mobile phone specifications) but in social and historical matters it introduces gross distortions. Media analyst Helen Buyniski points out that – on top of the poor method – a toxic mix of lobbyist influence and the editorial clique has captured substantial and strategic Wikipedia listings. The result is that Wikipedia accepts donations in return for favourable coverage, backs corrupt regimes, allow partisan political attacks, is hostile to independent media sources, favours large corporate interests and facilitates the selective libel of independent and otherwise targeted voices (Buyniski 2018). In summary, the Wikipedia approach to knowledge increasingly substitutes (i) primary and independent sources with (ii) lobbyist-constrained, reputable secondary media sources. The results in many areas of social knowledge are catastrophic.

None of this means that critical readings should ignore hegemonic sources. It is important to understand the hegemonic narrative in some detail, including the evidence used. The detail of such sources may also provide independent primary evidence, and may contain valuable admissions, such as when senior US officials admitted that their regional allies were financing and funding the terrorist groups in Syria (Anderson 2019: 71-76). Similarly, and despite pressure from the fossil fuel companies, almost all governments and most of the corporate media have been forced to recognise the phenomenon of human-influenced climate change. So it is foolish to simply react against everything coming from a hegemonic source. Admissions can avert pointless argument and save much time and energy.

Hegemonic relations themselves drive distorted epistemes. Elite groups from the formerly colonial cultures assert, in an 'authoritative' manner, moral criticisms of formerly colonised cultures and their leaders. This may be accusations of corruption, backwardness or human rights abuse. This includes moral attacks on the more independent post-colonial states for their supposed 'dictatorial' systems – generally those which resist hegemonic tutelage. And in clientalist 'aid' relations, the formerly colonial 'donors' typically blame the natives for corruption, while hiding their own corporate thievery.

In matters of international conflict, there is tremendous deference to the near daily assertions of the imperial leader, regardless of his moral bankruptcy. A foundation may be built for 'humanitarian intervention' or 'interventionist protection' through constant repetition of imperial edicts (amplified by corporate and state media and an array of state-funded NGOs) on the supposed transgressions of other peoples. Typically these moral attacks see no need for perspective, or respect for principles of international law, when addressing formerly colonised peoples. These propaganda attacks may serve as a basis for physical attacks or economic siege, as carried out against Cuba, north Korea, Nicaragua, Libya, Syria, Iran and Venezuela.

If hegemonic moralism is not based on entirely false premises, it is usually seriously distorted. Anecdotal accounts are often used by the western corporate media to fuel aggression and misleading stereotypes. When 'activists' are arrested in target countries (e.g. Venezuela, Cuba, Iran), accused of having been paid by western state-funded programs aimed at overthrowing the targeted governments, those same western governments (and their media and Amnesty International) claim these people are 'prisoners of conscience'. Such was the case with dozens of

US-government paid Cubans, labelled ‘dissidents’, in 2003. Unfortunately for that story, many of the US paid agents were undercover Cuban operatives, who later reported in full (Elizalde and Baez 2003).

Similarly, and for geo-strategic reasons, the colonial state of Israel is often presented in the western media as ‘the only democracy in the Middle East’; without reference to the millions of Palestinians denied their own state and denied citizenship under the regime which dominates every aspect of their lives. Far from being a democracy, an independent report commissioned by the UN found the Israeli regime to be an ‘apartheid state’ and therefore a crime against humanity, which must be dismantled (Falk and Tilley 2017).

Whoever presides in Washington makes a great fuss about persons imprisoned in other independent countries. Western media reports of such claims (indeed, campaigns) rarely recognise the fact that no state on earth has a higher rate of imprisonment than the USA (WPB 2020). More than that, the hegemonic state which claims to be the ‘exceptional’ guiding light of freedom in the world, was founded on the largest slave system in human history. Many of the founding fathers, including Thomas Jefferson, principal author of the United States Declaration of Independence, which stated that “all men are created equal”, were slave owners to the day they died (Wiencek 2012). Such double standards are demanded by hegemonic moralism and help drive its distorted world view.

2. Individualist method and anecdotal knowledge

Although the neoliberal subscription to individualism is largely fictitious – the neoliberal world being ruled by a large, dictatorial state in league with giant corporations – this focus helps reinforce the illusion of broad representation conditioned by personal experience.

Hegemonic consensus has few problems with the cult of individual experience – ‘I know because I was there’ – because it operates within constrained space. However when those stories cross prohibited boundaries, questioning the pretexts for war and corporate privilege, the laissez faire façade disappears. But the proverbial ‘thousand flowers’ do indeed bloom, so long as individualism is expressed through consumerism, inoffensive adventures, narcissism and identity fantasies.

Does individual experience generate knowledge? Of course, especially as evidence of particular events and experiences. Does it permit one to generalise about social experience? only in a limited sense. Individual and anecdotal experiences can illuminate particular events and possibilities and can help illustrate broader social realities; but they cannot define them.

Much the same goes for dozens - even thousands - of individual experiences, unless they are subject to systematic methods, such as comprehensive datasets and representative studies. One of the best demonstrations of the way in which systemic bias can produce misleading impressions was the competition between the polls of The Literary Digest and George Gallup, in attempts to predict the outcome of the 1936 US Presidential election contest between Franklin Roosevelt and Alf Landon. The Literary Digest surveyed 2.4 million people, but with a sampling method based on databases of telephone lines, magazine subscriptions and club memberships. This approach gave too great a weight to opinion of the middle and upper classes, and predicted a Landon win. George Gallup, by contrast, used stratified and randomised sampling techniques, sampling just 50,000 people. Gallup’s poll turned out to be more accurate, correctly predicting a Roosevelt win (Squire 1988). That contest of polls provided dramatic proof of the fact that sample size was not

as important as the need to eliminate sample bias. In a similar way, the collection of multiple anecdotes (or ‘case studies’) does not, by itself, provide a basis for social knowledge.

Today we can see many examples of sample bias at work, in online media polls (which bias towards the active readership of that particular outlet) and in political ‘echo chamber’ polls. For example, the International Republican Institute (IRI 2012), using US Government money, ran US government funded ‘snowball’ polls amongst their Syrian opposition associates pretending to show an internal demand for foreign intervention in Syria. However they began with their political associates, all anti-Syrian government, then got them to ask their friends; three-quarters of whom were living outside Syria. This type of poll, drawing on extreme and obvious bias, was used to increase pressure for foreign military intervention. Corporate media polls of their own readership are little better.

There are a variety of sampling methods these days, often randomised but also stratified, yet the need to produce results which represent (within certain limits) a particular ‘population’ remains important. This is often ignored by journalists and even academics. Qualitative studies, often useful for interpretation, are sometimes wrongly used in place of representative studies. Journalists in particular often present two or three voices, suggesting they represent a much larger constituency. Such stories are convenient if their voices reflect predetermined views but, as evidence of social reality, they are unscientific nonsense.

Is there then no valid social learning from visiting other places and talking to people? Of course there is, but reasonable boundaries should be observed. Given a decent perspective, gained from wider study, observation and conversation can confirm or contradict what we have read and studied. We might notice things we did not know existed. We might be impressed by some particular reality or context, and we might make connections between circumstances and behaviours. We may see a more complex human dimension. But this must be placed in a perspective with well-founded social evidence. Let’s not pretend that speaking to a few people, or having some particular experience, allows anyone to define social realities. Even living in a place for decades and speaking with hundreds of people is typically subject to bias. If simple residence were a qualification for expertise, all older people would be tremendous experts in their own societies – yet most are not. Deep social knowledge comes from systematic study, supplemented by observation and discussion.

Methodological individualism does not see this. Personal experience may be ‘valid’ in the particularities of personal life, but cannot be a substitute for wider social study. By the same logic, mutual respect and healthy pluralism notwithstanding, not all opinions are equally valid.

3. Constrained liberalism, identity and expertise

Within the limits of ‘allowable space’, whole worlds have been given over to the individual imagination. We see a proliferation of superhero myths, qualification and disqualification by skin colour, and improbable new individual identities including the creation of new and imagined ‘genders’.

Use of the notion of ‘race’ is a resilient phenomenon within constrained liberalism. In fact there are no such things as separate human races. Imperialism and its subset, colonialism, have been the most powerful engines of the deep prejudice-based discrimination launched against other peoples. Simple suspicion of ‘the other’, which exists everywhere, cannot explain centuries of virulent and often genocidal ‘racism’. Deep-rooted discrimination, distinct from petty prejudice,

is part of the logic of dispossession and domination. It meets the demand that those to be dispossessed and dominated must also be dehumanised. It follows that the greatest ignorance of other cultures can be seen in those countries with strong colonial histories. Deep prejudice blocks human understandings including, of course, those to do with the achievements and contributions of other cultures.

In the colonial cultures theories of 'race' and 'scientific racism' were formed, mostly by the larger European empires. The very idea that inherently distinct 'races' of human beings exist, is a fabricated myth, notwithstanding differences in ethnicity, religion and culture. The United Nations body responsible for the elimination of race discrimination has rejected this entirely. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (OHCHR 1965) declared "any doctrine of superiority based on racial differentiation [as] scientifically false". After that the 'Durban Declaration' (the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance: Declaration and Programme of Action) went a step further. It branded as "scientifically false ... theories which attempt to determine the existence of separate human races" (OHCHR 2002). Nevertheless, beliefs about essential race characteristics, which fuel racial prejudice, persist. The aim is to preserve some sense of historical privilege, to sanitise shameful histories or legitimise contemporary interventions. Of course, such fictitious beliefs undermine human understandings. In this sense hegemonic consensus, once again, persists in undermining social knowledge.

The racial legacy is apparent in both coloniser and colonised cultures. For example, young western students want to travel, see the world and help people in the formerly colonised countries. They assume (because their own cultures set up mechanisms for them to do so) that they might 'teach' older and more experienced people in other cultures, despite their lack of experience and minimal understandings of other cultures. It is hardly surprising that many of these expeditions end in disappointment and failure. Indeed, this patronising approach, added to the corporate thirst for huge public subsidies, leads the entire 'development cooperation' industry to be a wasteland of such failures (Easterly 2007; Anderson 2011). Prejudice and systematic ignorance prevents proper understandings of this phenomenon, as it is most often taken for granted that western cultures act to benevolently mentor their former colonies.

On the colonised side there remains psychological damage from long processes of subjugation, de-education and slavery. Decolonisation of the mind from the 'double consciousness' of 'colonial alienation' built under colonisation has been stressed by postcolonial writers, notably the north American writer W.E.B. Du Bois (1994) and the Caribbean psychiatrist and writer Frantz Fanon (1952). In these circumstances there has been a natural anti-thesis, to rebuild confidence in ethnic, religious or community identity. The assertion of black, colonised or indigenous pride aims at countering the violence done by long term social oppression. However this has also helped foster the relatively new emphases on identity politics.

A humanist synthesis would aim at the elimination of racial ideas, to regard human beings as equal in character, with cultural and language differences holding opportunities for cross-cultural learning, a sharing of specialist knowledge from differing experiences. Yet western individualism and materialism turns from that path.

Unlike the case in the former colonies, where national identities remain popular, because of their links to liberation struggles, western progressives are reluctant to identify with national identities, because of their chauvinist and imperial histories. As a result here has been a rush to occupy new identity spaces, such as 'people of colour' or some other minority identity tag. This often results in petty squabbles to assert supposed identity authority or privilege.

This anti-thesis holds the risk of opportunists using subaltern identities as a substitute for principled action. For example, in 2019 the US Presidential candidate Kamala Harris claimed that her failing campaign was because she suffered discrimination as ‘woman of colour’. In fact the former Attorney General of California had been widely criticised for her contradictory and regressive positions on health care, education and reform of a racist criminal justice system (Bazon 2019). She attempted to use the mixed ethnicity of her parents as a substitute for her own actions. Similarly, senior US officials from African-American backgrounds, including an elected president, have helped provide a façade of social advancement in a nation which was founded on mass slavery.

Discussion of ‘black’ and ‘white’ people has a particular history in the USA, where it defined civil rights for centuries. Yet, along with many other North American ideas, that notion has been exported to other countries, with distinct histories. In many other western countries there are derivative attempts to categorise people as ‘black’ or ‘white’, and even academic moves to study a suggested universal ‘whiteness’ (e.g. Hill 1997). But racialised histories vary from country to country. For example, the often well-educated immigrant Indians living in Australia sometimes like to identify with indigenous people, as ‘people of colour’; yet their social experience is entirely different. That has led to misunderstandings and resentment. Indeed, how could knowledge advance by equating Indians with Aborigines, the Irish with the English, or the English with the Russians, simply based on skin colour? There must be better understandings of the human condition, other than those based on individual identity. If we want to speak of neo-colonialism and of groups with historical social privilege, let us do that directly.

Yet to do so is considered impolite in hegemonic culture, where the cult of individualism favours reversion to idiosyncratic identity, rather than social relations. That is, whomever one claims to be may be raised as a qualification, in place of social relations and in place of actual expertise or reason. The industrial scale super-hero myth is part of this liberal cult. North American culture in particular is saturated in Superman, Rambo, Captain America and Wonder Woman stories, deflecting attention from the reality of corporate monopolies, and the need for social mobilisation to achieve any social advance, such as the construction of public health systems.

In this fantasy world it is often asserted that the neo-liberal world means an ‘absence of values’. That value systems have somehow been excluded from understandings and practice might, at first glance, seem an alternative to hegemonic moralism. However on closer inspection it is more likely that hegemonic-neoliberal values of individualism and materialism have become embedded. There is nothing wrong with individual liberty, the problem is individual liberty posing as social analysis. Western ‘exceptional’ modernism constantly imposes its hegemonic consensus, supplemented by methodological individualism.

Individualism helps introduce moral equivalence to a range of matters. There is, for example, a common critique of war reporting, or war analysis, which suggests that opposition to an elite consensus for foreign intervention is ‘biased’. Yet, if this is a bias, it is one in favour of international law. That highlights an important contradiction. An elite consensus maintains the claim that the imperial network is entitled to intervene when it sees fit. In other words, social discussions are permeated with social values, above all the commitment to hegemonic and corporate prerogatives; and to choice within the ‘allowable space’ of liberal individualism. There are no real ‘value free’ discussions; the more honest commentators simply spell theirs out.

Nevertheless, certain common values have become embedded in consensual agreements, called universal human rights agreements. Where such values contradict hegemonic moralism,

contradictions arise and the necessary double standards must be reconstructed. So we have doctrines of exceptionalism, humanitarian intervention and a ‘responsibility to protect’, all of which undermine international law. For that reason human rights claims have become a battleground of legitimacy struggles, with resort to many fabrications and exceptional claims (Anderson 2018). Those debates have helped characterise the culture of the 21st century.

The idea of ‘expertise’ is also quite often rejected, as experts may be seen as abstract, ‘ivory tower’ and out of touch; but also because liberal values favour the idea that each opinion is as good as the other. This is plainly false. Some opinions are better informed than others. The better question is: how might we tell the difference?

In an academic sense, expertise is generally recognised by certain types of publications, in particular systematic studies which draw on a range of sources and are often peer reviewed. In the western social sciences, where interpretive methods dominate, this expertise is recognised without implying that experts are necessarily correct. This academic expertise is simply regarded as meriting serious consideration. Non-academic expertise is also recognised in particular specialised fields, where people have a proven record in the application of certain skills. For example, a technician or artist with years of experience may be recognised as an expert for the purpose of providing advice in that field.

Proper social understandings are regularly subverted by hegemonic neoliberalism, by the construction and promotion of ‘reputable’ consensus, the enforcement of hegemonic relations and through individualistic method and the promotion of anecdotal ‘knowledge’. The limits of ‘allowable space’ has led to a proliferation of idiosyncratic identities, in efforts to qualify individuals in a status heavy world. Such pressures convert the search for truth into a cocktail of conformism and fictional choice.

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