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Commentary

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Introduction

This special issue of *Language and Intercultural Communication* on Translational Research identifies a wide range of concerns related to the precarious status of the exceptionalised ‘Other’ and its representation in modern political life. Aiming at boosting research-informed social and political action, it deals with questions of social justice, agency, solidarity, and integration, in and through language and intercultural communication. It also exposes the politicised narratives that depict the Other as a pollutant of the imagined homogeneity inside an identified group or a state.

This short commentary is divided into three parts. First, I highlight the epistemological relevance of language and intercultural communication in promoting what Khan and Naguib (2019) refer to as ‘epistemic healing’. Second, as an insider with lived and professional experience of some of the topics addressed, I raise a central question of political intelligibility that is often overlooked in the scholarship about the progressively nascent, and yet outlawed, categories of people: is the Other’s voice politically recognisable? The assumptions about this fundamental question are crucial in charting a realistic path towards political and social change. Finally, I offer a brief conclusion to the commentary.

The LAIC Special Issue: A step towards ‘epistemic healing’

One interesting (and of course encouraging) trend that I note in reading the articles in this *LAIC* Special Issue concerns the creation of a space that allows the Other to participate in the production of knowledge, and promotion of social justice through multilingual and intercultural communication (ICC). Whether it is the example of the team based in Scotland and in the Gaza Strip working on a collaborative language-learning project, or rebuilding networks and maximising opportunities through recollection of success stories and ‘negotiating

employability’, or in the articles that challenge the unfounded perceptions about forced migrants, they all jointly show solidarity with the Other, and also embrace elements of ‘transpraxis’, or ‘moving beyond the constraints of existing structures or relations’ (Soliman, 2019, p.14). Unlike the at times paternalistic claims of solidarity made by international humanitarian organisations such as the UNHCR (Betts et al., 2011, p.121), the special issue understands the power and ethical dilemmas associated with ‘vertical solidarity’ and attempts to either address or acknowledge some of the problematic issues of positionality in solidarity. The description in the Introduction of transitioning ‘from *talking* about ICC and social injustice, to *doing* ICC’ says it all.

For an inclusive transpraxis when dealing with participants whose bodies and human capacities are immobilised within the confines of carceral spaces, bureaucratic asylum regimes or border technologies, solidarity has to be more than just supporting the oppressed to meet the exigencies of their day-to-day lives. It has to include elements of epistemic healing that bring into the discussion and the political sphere the claims of those reduced to ‘illegible’ humans. Epistemic healing, according to Khan and Naguib (2019, p.91), is:

the process and production of texts based on and being faithful to the indigenous knowledge formations situated in the Global South that have been distorted and silenced in the scholarly discourses of the Global North.

For those whose physical capacities are immobilised and emotional states detained, having the opportunity to enhance their competence and participate in both the projection of their ideas and perspectives, and the rejection of the misrepresentations and prejudices about their identity and potentiality, provides them with a space for virtual mobility. And that space is where the epistemic healing begins. It ‘creates a space for the other and those willing to show solidarity with the other to engage in reconstructive surgery aiming to restore what has been lost or distorted’ (Khan and Naguib, 2019, p.91). The articles in the *LAIC* Special Issue provide a vantage point for that ‘surgery’ to start and promote the ‘healing process’, at least at the theoretical and epistemic levels. This would also require learning to unlearn Euro-centric neo-colonial epistemic traditions.

However, transpraxis and epistemic healing can be truncated when marginalised groups in the intercultural context are rendered politically mute and their world views unrecognisable. More than just epistemic healing, the promotion of political intelligibility, and the recognition of the

Other as a co-partner in the production of knowledge and in shaping social and political change, are essential considerations for reaching the goal of adequate amelioration and inclusive change.

Can the Other speak to systems designed to silence them - and be heard?

It has been several decades since a vanguard group of successive philosophers and political theorists published their seminal works warning us against the dangers of the merger of life and politics — biopolitics — and the shrinking of so-called universal rights to citizens' rights. In her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, first published in 1951, the once stateless Hannah Arendt persuasively demonstrates that the modern political apparatus has never failed to isolate disposable humanity — ‘the scum of the earth’, in her words — from political life (2017, p.349). Several years later, in his four-volume study, *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that, underpinned by carceral institutions, the modern state has succeeded in creating a biopolitical machine that has weaponised the law with ‘death’ and applied power ‘at the level of life itself’ (1998, p.143). In his three-decade long project that began with a critical response to Arendt’s work and ended up with his latest book, *The Use of Bodies* (2016), Giorgio Agamben asserted that the entire Western political system, from its Greek roots to its modern form, revolves around a paradigmatic figure. This figure is referred to as the ‘bare life’, which he formulates as a form of life that can be destroyed with impunity (Agamben, 1998, p.12).

These and other scholars have repeatedly warned against the reification of the rightlessness of the Other. They also warned against the emergence of an unaccountable form of violence that functions to securitise the rightlessness of the Other. Putting aside the different metaphysical traditions and theoretical nuances in the works of these scholars, they all agree on the presence of a ‘rightless’ and ‘speechless’ ‘sub-human’ figure that can be destroyed with impunity (see, for example, Harper and Raman, 2008; Malkki, 1996; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2004). The refugee and the stateless, whose vulnerabilities and potentialities the articles in the *LAIC* special issue try to highlight, are increasingly visible victims of such exclusive politicisation of life.

The status of outlawed categories of people in political life, and their representation, can be viewed through the prisms of radical philosophical and theoretical claims, and from the state-centric depictions of these exceptionalised people as ‘threats’, or even as an ‘invasion’. In the

radical philosophical approach highlighted above, the categories of the refugee, the irregular migrant and the stateless are theorised as ‘bare life’ (Agamben, 1995; Darling, 2009; Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2004), ‘wasted life’ (Spijkerboer, 2017), ‘illegible humanity’ (Limbu, 2009), and ‘less than human’ (Harper & Raman, 2008). In general, they are outlawed as political actors and left to represent a collection of rightless and ‘speechless emissaries’ (Malkki, 1996). The settled state-centric narratives depict the presence in the polity of these excluded categories as an invasion, a threat, an infestation or even a disease (Ambrosini, 2018; Betts et al., 2011; Jones, 2019; Papastergiadis, 2006; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2004. See also Jenks & Bhatia, this volume; and Burford-Rice et al., this volume).

The irony is that both the radical theories and state-centric narratives reveal one reality: that the biopolitical filtering regulated by the panoptic state has not only excluded the Other from political life but also threatened its very existence. To understand the perspectives of the outlawed categories, therefore, their disavowal as political agents must be taken seriously and protested against.

If these political theories and biopolitical arguments are at least partially correct, then it begs a variant of the question first posed, famously, of the subaltern, by Spivak (see Spivak & Riach, 2016), can the ‘sub-human’ speak politically? In her book, *Excluded Within: The (Un)intelligibility of Radical Political Actors*, Sina Kramer reminds us to be wary of the structural political systems ‘that render some claims unintelligible as political claims or some persons unintelligible as political agents’ (Kramer, 2017, p.11). From this perspective, as both Arendt and Agamben have also argued, refugees, irregular migrants and stateless people and their claims are consistently excluded from the realms of political intelligibility. This occurs in myriad ways but which are enmeshed in discourses (see Scarabicci, Burford-Rice et al, and Nartey in this volume). And as Kramer notes, ‘if those who are excluded contest their exclusion, their claims are unintelligible as political claims and instead appear as wildness, madness, criminality: a diffuse threat’ (2017, p.6). Thus, the bodies and the claims of these outlawed people are regulated by the diffuse threat and the fear of it, in a system that criminalises them and reduces them to disposable humanity (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2004; Salter, 2008).

However, the question is, if we do not address these questions and issues of political (un)intelligibility, how effective, impactful or even ‘truthful’ can the work of social justice

through social and political action be? One of the recurring themes in this Special Issue concerns how we bring the voices or perspectives of the Othered, the dispossessed or colonised groups, into the discussion. However, little attention is paid to whether these voices and perspectives can speak to the system that is designed to denigrate them in silence and with impunity. More important is whether these voices and perspectives, or their clamour and agony when the outlawed are dying in treacherous waters, at borders, in torture camps or detention centres, can be politically or even legally recognisable. Likewise, can the included and privileged academics, the humanitarian organisations, or even the hosting states speak for and rescue the excluded Other? The assumptions related to these issues are central to the arguments about the status, agency, identity, integration and social justice of the constitutively outlawed Other.

Despite the attempt of the Special Issue to address questions of misrecognition and social justice, there still remains a persistent disconnect between theory and rhetoric, each of which remains in considerable variance with practice. The articles tend to focus on issues of misrecognition and denial of opportunities, and how these might be tackled through social and political actions. It is undeniable that 'Misrecognition and maldistribution, while distinct, are closely linked: both need to be included in a vision of justice, as addressing one will not ameliorate the other' (Soliman, 2019, p.15). The *LAIC* Special Issue seems to embrace this line of argumentation.

However, it is also true that neither the claims of misrecognition, nor the question of inequality of distribution directed against the politically excepted Other, can be addressed unless they are rooted in a political will that recognises their socio-cultural intelligibility. If we take the example of the simplistic and uni-directional rhetoric of refugee integration (*qua* 'assimilation'), it is merely the Others unmaking themselves in order to become citizens of a state that was once hostile to their existence. Even after the so-called naturalisation process, neither the process of unmaking, nor the marginalisation and the feeling of Otherness, disappear. In the current tumultuous times, when toxic language and discriminatory discourses are increasingly finding their way into the political sphere of liberal democracies, the voices, perspectives, identities, cultures, human capacities and potentials of exceptionalised categories of people remain 'shards of radical potential buried in the sedimentation of the political present' (Kramer, 2017, p.12).

Conclusion

As a refugee with lived and professional experience and as a researcher, I would suggest that scholarship about the perspectives of outlawed categories of people, and their political representation, must address radical questions of epistemic healing, political intelligibility and accountability. It should also address the conditions and causal mechanisms that make the creation of apolitical forms of life possible. However, we should worry that the politicisation of their lives will not suffice to make their voices politically recognisable because ‘Bare life is politicized and political life disappears’ (Edkins, 2000, p.7). Hence, radical questions need radical thinking.

Finally, refugees, irregular migrants and stateless people do not represent monolithic groups of people, and no single person or commentary can command all the nuances of their perspectives in their entirety.

Notes on contributor

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