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A Critique of Western Liberalism

by

Siddhant Issar

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

A Critique of Western Liberalism

by

Siddhant Issar

Adviser: Professor Stanley Aronowitz

In this thesis I draw attention to the connections between Western liberalism, particularly exemplified by the idea of liberal freedom, and (in)visible modalities of oppression. In chapter 1, I examine how the philosophical basis of liberalism allows it to serve as a mediator of oppression. In chapter 2, through a genealogical analysis, I trace out the link between liberalism and political economy. Here I focus on the imbrication between (neo-)liberalism, capitalism, and the production of subjectivity. My analysis aims at revealing the specific form of subjectivity engendered under the sign of liberal freedom. In chapter 3, I take up post 9/11 liberal rights discourse and demonstrate the ways in which it commits violence materially, ideologically, and discursively, against particular internal and external populations. Here I tie the present day Western liberal project to histories of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. In chapter 4, as against liberal methodology, I put forth certain alternative methodological suggestions that would allow us to better comprehend the dynamics of oppression and work towards mitigating hierarchical structures of power that inevitably frame both local and global contexts.

Acknowledgements

As my time at The Graduate Center draws to an end, I feel humbled and grateful. This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and influence of my professors and peers alike. In this regard, I would like to thank my thesis adviser Stanley Aronowitz for his invaluable insights, patience, and most importantly, spirit. I would also like to extend a big thank you to Linda Alcoff and Sandi Cooper for opening my eyes in novel ways. A special thanks to Rob, my theory partner in crime from our Wes days. A shout out to the GC political theory “kids” for making me feel so loved. And talking about love, a very special person who never fails to amaze me—Rachel Brown, thank you for everything! Last, but not least, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father. Without you, none of this would be possible. Thank you, Papa.

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Introduction

Fighting brutality against women and children is not the expression of a specific culture; it is the acceptance of our common humanity—a commitment shared by people of good will on every continent. Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment...The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.¹ (Laura Bush, Radio Address)

Laura Bush's radio address on November 17, 2001 invoked the image of the oppressed Afghani woman as one of the justifications for American military intervention in Afghanistan. This discourse puts together a picture of the world that is simple and clear— on one side, there are those that fight “brutality against women and children” and thereby uphold a universal value that is instructive of a “common humanity,” and on the other side, are those such as the Taliban that oppress and brutalize women and children. Such a black and white worldview helps perpetuate binaries such as human/sub (or non) human, enlightened/barbaric, and free/oppressed; significantly, elisions effortlessly allow the former terms of these binaries to be equated with the Western² liberal world, while the latter terms come to stand for “illiberal” cultures. Thus, the Afghan woman is portrayed as oppressed and unequal prior to the war on terror. Implicitly, the Western woman is constructed as a subject that is empowered as she already has the rights of freedom and equality. Here the liberal “universal” notions of freedom and equality are unequivocally heralded as desirable for women globally and are seen as vital to fighting oppression. However, in abstracting the embodied existence of social individuals and favoring universal principles over the particular, the dynamics of oppression that are operative at the level

¹ I borrow this example from Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) and use it to highlight the type of discourse that makes implicit ideological assumptions that disguise and obscure Western “imperialist” interests. This critique is in line with broader post-colonial feminist critiques of Global North discourse around the issue of women's rights in the Global South.

² In this thesis "Western/non-Western" and "North/South" are used interchangeably. This dichotomy distinguishes affluent, privileged nations and communities, and economically and politically marginalized nations and communities. This is not to treat the West as a monolithic entity; rather, it signals the demarcation of economically, socially, and politically constituted privilege (see for example Mohanty 1986, 2003; Ahmed 1998; Eisenstein 2009).

of the everyday are removed from discourse. Thus, the aim of this thesis is to challenge the black and white liberal worldview by highlighting the modalities of oppression and the structures of power constitutive of Western liberalism.

I begin my analysis, in chapter 1, by examining the historical emergence of liberalism and briefly highlight its colonial, capitalist, white supremacist, and patriarchal foundation. I focus primarily, however, on the metaphysical assumptions underlying liberalism that allow it to serve as a mediator of oppression *tout court*. In chapter 2, I sketch out the political economic history accompanying the rise of liberalism. Here I argue that there exists an inextricable connection between capitalism and liberalism, particularly revealed by the specificity of the notion of freedom under liberalism. By adopting Foucault's genealogical mode of analysis, I explore shifts in the production of subjectivity, both of individuals and communities, in relation to the idea of liberal freedom. Through Foucault's concept of "governmentality" I bring to light the strong link between capitalism, (neo-)liberal freedom, and subjectivity. I also establish crucial distinctions between early liberalism and present day neo-liberalism. However, because Foucault's analysis remains incomplete in certain respects, I draw on Lazzarato to further explicate the particular ways in which capitalism functions and produces subjectivity under neo-liberalism.

In chapter 3, I examine liberal rights discourse as it arises in the post-9/11 West, and first elucidate the influence of discourses that invoke the image of the Muslim woman in the Global South as lacking in rights and requiring saving. Secondly, I examine the racialization of the Muslim man, particularly in its representation as a terrorist threat within the Global North. Out of the numerous conundrums that emerge from these discourses, I focus primarily on four

interrelated issues: firstly, the mechanism of “Othering”³ that essentializes the identity of the Muslim woman and fails to take into account heterogeneous historical and social contexts, and intra-cultural differences, that are of particular importance when discussing specifically “cultural” issues such as “veiling.” Secondly, the oppressive/free, Islamic/Western dichotomies that requires Muslim women to choose between their religion and culture, on the one hand, and their liberation on the other. Thirdly, how liberal rights discourse mediates Western neo-liberal and neo-colonial processes, thereby inscribing and reproducing modes of economic dependence in the Global South. And finally, I highlight the continuities between the racialization of Muslim bodies within the Global North to histories of colonialism and racial classifications. Taken together then, Western liberal discourse as it is applied internally and externally, helps preserve hierarchical dichotomies such as North/South, free/oppressed, civilized/barbaric, and secular/religious.

Methodologically, in chapter 2, I use a Foucauldian genealogical political economy lens to draw out the effects of liberalism/neo-liberalism, seen as a necessary mediator of capitalism, in the production of subjectivity. In chapter 3, I draw upon anthropological accounts of the everyday, lived, embodied experiences of Muslim women to highlight the inadequacies of liberal rights in addressing their unique positionalities within local and global power structures. While not promoting the reification of difference across groups of individuals, I suggest that with respect to Muslim women in Egypt, Iraq and Afghanistan as but three examples, Western liberal rights and particularly the notion of freedom, are tools of engagement that commit violence across multiple intersecting and overlapping axes. In a highly simplified sense, violence is committed ideologically by positioning the West as the arbiter of “universal values” such as

³ I use the term “Othering” to refer to the concept developed by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1979). It can be understood as the process of creating and emphasizing a dichotomy between “the familiar (Europe, the West, “us”) and the strange (the Orient, the East, “them”)” (1979, 43-44).

freedom, and at the material level by obfuscating relations of power that fuel economic, political, and social oppression. More insidiously, the demarcation between ideological and material violence, in this context, collapses when we examine the discursive production of subjectivity, and its consequent implications, under the sign of liberal freedom (as shown in chapter 2). Furthermore, through cultural analysis, I tease out the wide-ranging material, ideological, and discursive effects of the “coloniality of power” that is both foundational to and constitutive of Western liberalism. Here I tie the racialization of Muslim bodies to continuing legacies of colonialism. Ultimately, in chapter 4, I argue that an alternative methodology, composed of alternative epistemologies and ontologies, is required to create a framework that commits less violence against the very individuals it attempts to make “free.”

Chapter 1

Liberalism and its Presupposition(s)

Historically, liberalism emerged in Europe as a break from feudal and monarchical economic and political relations. Alongside the rise of capitalism, characterized by distinct property rights and modes of production, liberalism provided the necessary political grounding that allowed the “free circulation of capital and property, secured a mass of free laborers, and articulated the formal liberty and equality of relatively abstract human beings in incipient mass society” (Brown 1995, 143). Seen in political economy terms, liberalism is a part of a constellation of political, social, and cultural changes that marks a shift from mercantilism to capitalism. It is important to keep in mind that the articulated notions of formal liberty and equality in European liberal thought, during this historical period, were accompanied by the rise of colonial European empires that subjugated much of the globe to European control. In a similar vein, the American principles of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” as guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence (1776) were only available to white, property-owning males. In exploring this apparent paradox within liberalism, between the language of universalism on the one hand, and the historically exclusionary character of liberalism on the other, Charles Mills (1997) explains that the world we inhabit, including “our” political, social, moral, epistemological, and economic systems have been “*foundationally shaped for the past five hundred years by the realities of European domination and the gradual consolidation of global white supremacy*” (20). Alongside such an analysis, Carole Pateman (2007) argues that the consolidation of white supremacy is accompanied by the “*conviction that women must be governed by men,*” and therefore, it is essential to bring both race and sex into any analysis of “the major institutions of modern civil societies or the construction of the world system of modern states” (Pateman and Mills 2007,

135). Thus, the philosophical core of liberalism, namely the social contract, is predicated on both a “racial contract” under which Europeans emerge as “the lords of human kind” and non-Europeans as “their subjects,” and a “sexual contract” which legitimizes patriarchal structures of oppression that subordinate women to men (Mills 1997, 20; Pateman 1988).⁴ These historical processes of creating racial and gender hierarchies, along with the perpetuation of economic exploitation of both internal populations and particular geopolitical regions by global capitalism, continue to be an on-going project. Needless to say, these overlapping processes take on particular inflections at specific historical moments, and the period that this thesis is most interested in is the post-9/11 era.⁵ In this chapter, I argue that liberalism serves as a vital mediator to these processes of oppression through certain key philosophical commitments that are inherent to liberalism.

Today, although civil, political, and human rights that grant freedom and equality have been extended *de jure* to the majority of citizens in liberal-democratic countries, liberalism continues to be a fundamentally insufficient framework for understanding and alleviating oppression. To understand the gaps in this framework, it is crucial to identify what liberalism *is* and to expose its underlying presumptions. Although it is difficult to provide a rigid definition of liberalism, in all its attendant variations over geopolitical space and time that has remained coherent and unchanged, we can identify certain core ideas and practices that constitute and distinguish liberalism.⁶ In this regard, Talal Asad (2009) explains that liberalism can be understood as a discursive space that provides “its advocates with a common political and moral

⁴ Uday Mehta has made a similar critiques of liberalism from a postcolonial standpoint, and agrees that exclusion and domination of the Other, is historically built into the social contract tradition (Mehta 1999). In a related vein, decolonial theorist Anibal Quijano points out that the idea of race “in its modern meaning, does not have a known history before the colonization of America” (2008, 182).

⁵ I will take up these issues in further detail in chapter 2 & 3.

⁶ It is important to point out that liberalism should not be conceived as a monolithic entity. Even at its inceptive moments, there existed a “great variety in liberalism(s)” (Brown 1995, 143).

language” and “ideas such as individual autonomy, freedom of (economic, political, social) exchange, limitation of state power, rule of law, national self-determination, and religious toleration” belong to this space (24). Relatedly, Wendy Brown (1995) argues that it is necessary to conceive of liberalism both as “a set of stories and a set of practices, as ideology *and* as discourse, as an obfuscating narrative *about* a particular social order as well as a narrative *constitutive* of this social order and its subjects” (143). Seen in this way, liberalism both produces and positions subjects within its narrative. In order to properly grasp this ideological and discursive function of production and positioning of subjects under liberalism, it is essential to interrogate the metaphysics of liberalism particularly with respect to its fundamental ontological element—the autonomous individual.

Indeed, liberalism presupposes a demarcation between the political sphere and civil society; within the political sphere, individuals are treated as free and equal by abstracting them from their embodied particular selves. One form of this mechanism of universalization can be understood in terms of “the *substitutability* of individuals” in that “each voter counts as one and is the exact equivalent of every other voter—no more, no less, and no different” (Asad 2009, 24). According to this conception, individuals are understood as existing independently of each other and relating to each other exclusively through external relations. The social relations of the individual do not affect the basic human nature of these individuals and thus their nature is simultaneously regarded as fixed and common to all (Gould 1988, 93). Within this modality class, race, gender, and sexuality cease to play any constitutive role in the political process and any individual may be substituted for another.

Of course, the presupposition of human nature as fixed essentializes identity and hegemonically places value on a Eurocentric notion of subjectivity that is *a priori*, rational,

masculine, atomized, and individualistic. This assumption creates a major impediment in relating to “other modes of subjectivity, differently structured desires, and hybridized forms of lived experience” (Al-Saji 2009, 66). In this regard, subjectivity engendered by the liberal notion of freedom poses a major problem when conceived as a universal ideal, especially since it is portrayed as neutral in contrast to the varied understandings of freedom in the context of “illiberal” groups and communities. Of course, the silent referent of liberal rights is always an idealized liberal democracy constituted by modern (western) culture and reason (Abu-Lughod 2013). This problematic will become starkly visible, in chapter 3, when we look at the specific case of liberal rights discourse as applied to Muslim women in the Global South.

This presumption within liberal discourse, and within the liberal nation-state in particular, that the individual is ontologically prior to the social erases material difference and, therefore, depoliticizes individuals’ identity. As Marx’s (1978) critique of liberalism highlights, the liberal state, “far from abolishing these *effective* differences [found among individuals]...only exists so far as they are presupposed” and, importantly, “it is conscious of being a *political state* and it manifests its *universality* only in opposition to these elements” (33). Here Marx underscores that liberalism in its universalizing tendency depoliticizes and makes invisible material differences that exist among individuals. This serves as a barrier to understanding specific forms of oppression such as racism or heterosexism that individuals from marginalized communities may experience. Furthermore, this tendency to universalize is not happenstance but rather a conscious mechanism of the liberal project. As Brown (1993) clarifies, this tension that exists between the “I” and the “we” under political liberalism lends itself to universal representation. She states,

in a smooth and legitimate liberal order, the particularistic “I’s” must remain unpoliticized, and the universalistic “we” must remain without specific content or aim, without a common good *other than* abstract universal representation or pluralism. The

abstractness of the “we” is precisely what insists upon, reiterates, and even enforces the depoliticized nature of the “I.” (392)

According to this analysis of liberalism an inherent violence is perpetrated against the individual by the universal through the power that abstract representation exerts over the particular. By depoliticizing identity, any claims of oppression that originate from a standpoint other than that of the “ideal identity” are deemed illegitimate. With respect to the United States, Brown argues that the “white masculine middle class” is deemed as the ideal racial, economic, and social identity (395).⁷ Thus, the ontological commitment to independent free and equal individuals hides from discourse concrete social differences that affect the lives of individuals.

This critique of universal representation is reinforced by by post-structuralist philosophers (among others).⁸ The individual subject must be seen in the context of concrete relations with other individual subjects and is thus always a product of social processes rather than *a priori* origin (Brown 1993, 2006; Young 2004; Gould 1988). Only by keeping in mind how individuals are necessarily embedded within particular historical, social, and cultural processes can we adequately account for varying modes of oppression that do not conform to universal representations. Under an individualist liberal ontology, we cannot explain “the fact that some [individuals and groups] have greater social or economic power than others” (Gould 1988, 94). Unless material differences in power are made an ontological part of political analyses, both global and local understandings of individuals’ lived realities will be myopic.

⁷ Of course, the formation of an “ideal identity” isn’t fixed but is contingent on the confluence of particular historical and cultural forces at a particular moment in space and time.

⁸ Criticism of such a conception have been raised by “critical perspectives including strands of Feminism, Queer Theory, Cultural Studies, Critical Race Theory, Bioethics, Post-colonial Theory, Anthropology, Critical Theory, Multiculturalism, Post-modern Theory, and Comparative Political Thought” among others (Ackerly 2008, 57).

Chapter 2

The Production of Subjectivity

The ontology underlying liberalism posits the subject of rights to be the individual abstracted from their particular context. The autonomous individual is a necessary presupposition of a liberal-democratic order and is presented as an *a priori* given. At the same time, who counts as an individual and what meanings become ascribed to liberal autonomy are closely tied to particular spatial-temporal locationality. We can conceptualize this visually by imagining a circle whose circumference increases or decreases, dependent on historical and social contexts, thereby including/excluding particular individuals. Under this understanding rights, such as that of freedom and/or equality, can be seen as progressive tools that can be used by social movements to affect change within the existing political framework. In the American context, the (white) women's suffrage movement and the civil rights movement, as but two examples, can be viewed as instances of inclusion within the circle of liberal rights. However, such a reading dissimulates the relation between the form that rights, particularly the liberal idea of freedom, take on under liberalism (and neo-liberalism), and the resultant subjectivities engendered. In other words, the productive effects of liberal-democratic forms of freedom on individual and collective subjectivities remain unquestioned. Thus, in the first half of this chapter, by adopting a Foucauldian genealogical analysis, I will differentiate between liberalism and neo-liberalism based on shifts in "governmentality" and look at corresponding notions of subjectivity. Here I will argue that liberal freedom must be seen as a unique mode of governance that emerges from a specific matrix of relations that regulates, disciplines, and produces specific forms of individuals and communities. In the second half of this chapter, I will extend and supplement Foucault's analysis by exploring the linkages between neo-liberalism and present day post-industrial

capitalism in the United States.⁹ Although Foucault does provide us with an essential frame through which we can understand the ways in which neo-liberalism function, it is necessary to deepen this analysis by taking into account certain major events and ensuing mutations that have occurred since the time of his analysis. The rise of finance capital and financialization in general, along with its subsequent crises, the most recent being the financial crises of 2007/2008, and the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 are two notable points of transformation.¹⁰

Furthermore, my choice of focusing on the United States is not arbitrary but rests on the fact that the U.S. is a hegemonic “center” of neo-liberalism in relation to the world, an exemplary model of a “liberal-democratic” state that has transitioned from a Keynesian economic system to an explicitly neo-liberal one, and the site of the two transformative events mentioned above.

Ultimately, the goal of my analysis is to uncover the particular form(s) of subjectivity engendered by neo-liberalism and the methods/configurations of power relations through which such production is made possible.

Foucault, Liberalism, and Freedom

In comprehending the mechanism through which the notion of liberal freedom asserts power in “non-political” spaces (or spaces that are seen as autonomous/ beyond the purview of the “political”) such as the private sphere, civil society, and/or the personal realm, and on the subjectivities of individuals/communities, it is crucial to interrogate the relationship between liberal government and the subjects it governs. Here Foucault’s analysis of liberalism provides a useful point of departure— For Foucault, liberalism should be understood through the lens of

⁹ Although I will focus primarily on the United States, I will also draw examples from Western Europe, particularly in my discussion of the relation between neo-liberalism, capitalism, and the production of subjectivity in the present moment.

¹⁰ The transformative impact of 9/11 will be taken up in the subsequent chapter.

“governmental reason” which entails viewing the “rationality of political government as an activity rather than as an institution” and thus liberalism is “not a theory, an ideology, a juridical philosophy of individual freedom, or any particular set of policies adopted by a government” but is rather “a rationally reflected way of doing things that functions as the principle and method for the rationalization of governmental practices” (Burchell 1996, 21). From this perspective, government is a point of contact and interaction between “techniques of domination” and “techniques of the self” (20). Therefore, liberalism particularly in its modern incarnation(s),

constructs a relationship between government and the governed that increasingly depends upon ways in which individuals are required to assume the status of being subjects of their lives, upon the ways in which they fashion themselves as certain kinds of subjects, upon the ways in which they practise their freedom. (29-30)

It is important to note here that “governmentality”¹¹ defined as the “conduct of conduct,” and the rationalities guiding the techniques of government, thereby fashioning specific kinds of subjects, take on particular forms depending on the historical moment under consideration (Foucault 1991, 48). In this regard, Foucault distinguishes between forms of governmentality in the Middle ages, sixteenth century mercantilist Europe, Enlightenment era early or “classical” liberalism, and finally modern/advanced liberalism or neo-liberalism (Foucault 2007, chap. 5, 9; Foucault 2008,

¹¹ My usage and understanding of governmentality is in line with Wendy Brown’s conception of the term. For Brown, Foucault defines governmentality as the “conduct of conduct,” however, this “rich” term “is also intended to signify the modern importance of *governing* over ruling, and the critical role of *mentality* in governing as opposed to the notion that power and ideas are separate phenomena. Governmentality moves away from sovereign and state-centered notions of political power (though it does not eschew the state as a site of governmentality), from the division between violence and law, and from a distinction between ideological and material power. Finally governmentality features state formation of subjects rather than state control of subjects; put slightly differently, it features control achieved through formation rather than repression or punishment...As is often the case with Foucault -- think about biopower, resistance, power/knowledge, arts of the self -- the notion of governmentality is both extremely theoretically fecund and woefully underspecified. Perhaps it could not be the former without being the latter” (Brown 2003).

chap. 1, 3).¹² In sixteenth century Europe, the primary rationality guiding government was *raison d'Etat*¹³ and the primary political, social, and economic “institutions” corresponding to this form of governmental reason were mercantilism, the police state, the development of a permanent diplomacy, and a permanent army, all to ensure the “plurality of states free from imperial absorption” such that an “equilibrium” could be established across Europe (Foucault 2008, 5).¹⁴ However, around the mid eighteenth century, a fundamental shift in governmental rationality occurred. This transformation was characterized by the emergence of an “internal limitation of governmental reason” expressed through the “intellectual instrument” of “political economy” (13). Foucault states that the term “political economy” “oscillates between two semantic poles”: in a narrow sense, it refers to an analysis of wealth concerned with production, distribution, and circulation; however, in a broader sense, and it is this understanding that interests Foucault, political economy refers to “any method of government that can procure the nation’s prosperity” (13). In linking liberal governmental reason to political economy, Foucault identifies three core intertwined features of liberalism. Firstly, political economy generates a particular regime of truth in which the market becomes established as the natural site of truth, and the practice of

¹² For the purposes of this thesis, and in this section, I will focus primarily on Foucault’s understanding of liberalism and neo-liberalism.

¹³ Foucault (2008) explains that “*Raison d’Etat* is precisely a practice, or rather the rationalization of a practice, which places itself between a state presented as given and a state presented as having to be constructed and built. The art of government must therefore fix its rules and rationalize its way of doing things by taking as its objective the bringing into being of what the state should be” (4).

¹⁴ It is important to understand the interconnectedness of these three institutions under *raison d’Etat*. Mercantilism, for Foucault (2008), represents something much greater than a mere economic doctrine. He states, “It [mercantilism] is a particular organization of production and commercial circuits according to the principle that: first, the state must enrich itself through monetary accumulation; second, it must strengthen itself by increasing population; and third, it must exist and maintain itself in a state of permanent competition with foreign powers” (5). Simultaneously, foreign policy of states guided by *raison d’Etat*, exhibits “a limited objective in comparison with...most sovereigns and governments in the Middle Ages to occupy the imperial position with regard to other states,” and thus, “external self-limitation is the distinctive feature of *raison d’Etat* as it manifests itself in the formation of the military-diplomatic apparatuses” (6). However, the “internal” police state, deployed as a governing apparatus, could be described as “unlimited” in its objective(s) with regard to the governed (7).

liberal governmentality (as opposed to *raison d'Etat*) connects up to this specific regime of veridiction (Foucault 2008, chap. 2).¹⁵ This regime of truth is most concerned with ensuring that economic exchange occurs with the least possible intervention by the State thereby allowing prices of commodities to be established *naturally* by the forces of demand and supply. Second, internal limitations set within the government are based on the principle of utility, and this is connected to the market through the idea of “interest(s)” (44). Finally, the last defining feature of early liberalism is the positioning of Europe as a space capable of infinite economic development in relation to a world market (61).¹⁶ With regard to the concept of “interests” (the primary idea that connects the first two points), Foucault (2008) explains that the modern form of governmental reason, in its search for internal or “self” limitation(s),

functions in terms of interest. But this is no longer the interest of an entirely self-referring state...as was the state of *raison d'Etat*...[I]nterest is now interests, a complex interplay between individual and collective interests, between social utility and economic profit, between the equilibrium of the market and the regime of public authorities, between basic rights and the independence of the governed...[G]overnment in this new governmental reason, is something that works with interests...it is through interests that government can get a hold on everything that exists for it in the form of individuals, actions, words, wealth, resources, property, rights and so forth. (44-45)

In this analysis, the domain or space that liberal governmentality is interested in extends to “everything” including supposedly “non-political/autonomous” spaces such as civil society.¹⁷

¹⁵ Foucault (2008) maintains that this new art of government associated with political economy should not be seen as “something other than *raison d'Etat*, an element external to and in contradiction with *raison d'Etat*, but rather its point of inflection in the curve of its development” that helps in “maintaining it [*raison d'Etat*], developing it more fully, and perfecting it” (28).

¹⁶ As mentioned earlier, the collusion between the rise of liberalism, the rise of capitalism, and increasing forms of colonial domination by European states, was not merely coincidental but deeply connected. For the purpose of my analysis here, I will focus on the first two points and return to this point in the next chapter.

¹⁷ Maurizio Lazzarato (2009) provides an insightful explanation about the connection between governmentality and civil society. He states that “[i]n order for governmentality to preserve its all-inclusive character and not be split between two branches – an economic and a juridical art of government – liberalism invents and experiments with a set of techniques that apply to a new frame of reference: civil society. Civil society is here not the space where autonomy in relation to the state is produced, but the correlate of techniques of government. Civil society is not a

Consequently, “freedom” under liberalism is “not a given,” rather liberalism “proposes to manufacture it constantly, to arouse it and produce it” (65). Thus, freedom that is established by this mode of governmentality is *actively* produced, and this production of freedom hinges on the fact that liberalism is also a “consumer of freedom inasmuch as it can only function insofar as a number of freedoms actually exist: freedom of the market, freedom to buy and sell, the free exercise of property rights...and so on” (63). Simultaneously, the act of producing freedom entails establishing limitations through “strategies of security” such as restrictions, controls, methods of coercion, etc. (64). Thus, we see a dynamic interplay between freedom and security internal to liberalism, and Foucault calls this “the economy of power peculiar to liberalism” (65).

This “economy of power” that functions through the regulation of freedom/security has serious implications with regard to the subjectivities of individuals and communities.¹⁸ First of all, an entire educational and cultural apparatus around danger and fear is established. Individuals and whole communities, “are conditioned to experience their situation, their life, their present, and their future as containing danger” (Foucault 2008, 66). Examples of this “political culture of danger,” that arises in the nineteenth century, can be seen in the “campaign for savings banks at the start of the nineteenth century,” along with “the appearance of detective fiction and the journalistic interest in crime around the middle of the nineteenth century;” however, it is represented most emphatically in “campaigns around disease and hygiene...[especially] with regard to sexuality and the fear of degeneration: degeneration of the individual, the family, the race, and the human species” (66). The point that Foucault is

primary and immediate reality, but something which is part of the modern technology of governmentality. It is at this juncture, it is in the management of this interface that liberalism is constituted as an art of government. It is at this intersection that biopolitics is born” (116).

¹⁸ For an exhaustive study on the relationship between liberalism, governmentality, and individual/collective subjectivities look at Nikolas Rose’s (1990) book *Governing the Soul* and also *Governing the present* (Rose and Miller 2008).

emphasizing is that intrinsic to liberalism, and more specifically, inherent to the liberal art of government is the implementation of danger as an always existing possibility. In a post 9/11 context, this culture of fear is consolidated in the West around the image of the (“Islamic”) terrorist that appears as an ever-present threat, and as a result, we see an explicit increase in the proliferation of disciplinary and policing mechanisms in the name of ensuring the safety of the community.

The second major consequence of this constant tension between freedom and security is the increasing refinement and deployment, throughout society, of “disciplinary techniques” aimed at shaping the behavior of individuals (Foucault 2008, 67). Therefore, embedded within liberal governmentality is the historically specific idea of “power over life”¹⁹ that comes to be exercised through two primary methods — disciplines of the body and the biopolitics of the population (Foucault 1977; 1978). With regard to disciplining bodies, Nikolas Rose points out that disciplinary mechanisms and techniques ranging “from the school to the prison, seek to produce the subjective conditions, the forms of self-mastery, self-regulation and self-control, necessary to govern a nation now made up of free and “civilized” citizens” (Rose 1996, 44). At the same time, “bio-political strategies” such as “statistical enquiries, censuses, programmes for

¹⁹ The idea of “power over life” is something that Foucault identifies as being characteristic of sovereign power; however, it undergoes certain major transformations through history such that its ancient form can be contrasted to its modern form. Thus, with respect to its ancient formulation, Foucault (1978) explains that “[t]he sovereign exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing; he evidenced his power over life only through the death he was capable of requiring. The right which was formulated as the “power of life and death” was in reality the right to take life or let live...Power in this instance was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it;” however, “[s]ince the classical age the West has undergone a very profound transformation of these mechanisms of power. “Deduction” has tended to be no longer the major form of power but merely one element among others, working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, mak-ing them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them. There has been a parallel shift in the right of death, or at least a tendency to align itself with the exigencies of a life-administering power and to define itself accordingly. This death that was based on the right of the sovereign is now manifested as simply the reverse of the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life” (136).

the enhancement or curtailment of rates of reproduction or the minimization of illness and the promotion of health— seek to render intelligible the domains whose laws liberal government must know and respect” (44). It is vital to recall that liberal governmentality is intricately bound to political economy, and more specifically, to the regime of truth that arises from the market. Seen in this way then the functions carried out by the mechanisms of control and discipline are intertwined with and essential to the preservation and reproduction of economic freedom.²⁰ In this case, “good” government is “only to intervene when it sees that something is not happening according to the general mechanics of behavior, exchange, and economic life” (Foucault 2008, 67). Thus, the subjectivities of individuals engendered by liberal freedom, including but not limited to the interests and behaviors of individuals, must conform to and correspond with modes of being that enhance and maximize the “natural” mechanisms of the economy. In cases where deviance(s) from market rationalities occur, liberal governmentality will step in and “correct” any such anomalies.

The Neo-liberal Subject

Today, we still live under this regime of liberal governmentality albeit in an inflected form. Arising as a “crisis of liberalism,” neo-liberalism can be seen as manifesting itself “in a number of re-evaluations, re-appraisals, and new projects in the art of government” (Foucault 2008, 69). Foucault delineates two strands of neo-liberalism: *ordo*-liberalism which emerges in post-war Germany and is connected to the school of economists called the Freiburg School; and the more

²⁰ It is important to clarify that discourses of control and discipline do not necessarily arise from a purely economic base and work in a unified and univocal way. Here Foucault’s break with the Marxist understanding of society in terms of base and superstructure is clear. Rather, Foucault (1978) insists on the “tactical polyvalence of discourses” which implies that “we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (100).

radical American neo-liberalism which appears mid-twentieth century and is associated with the Chicago School of economists.²¹ Although these two versions of neo-liberalism vary from one another in particular ways, I will focus on developing a general understanding of how neo-liberalism differs from liberalism.²² Furthermore, I will explore the kind of subjectivities that neo-liberalism, specifically American neo-liberalism, forges.

Foucault (2008) conscientiously points out that there is something qualitatively new about neo-liberalism that sets it apart from the liberalism of the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth century. Although often conflated with older forms of economic liberalism that are intensified and deployed in the service of capitalism, Foucault explains that unlike “the initial formula of liberalism” that consisted in the acceptance of “a free market defined by the state and kept as it were under state supervision,” neo-liberalism turns this formula around and adopts the free market as *the* “organizing and regulating principle of the state...[that is] a state under the supervision of the market rather than a market supervised by the state” (116). With this reversal comes a fundamental change in what the most important principle of the market is and the precise way in which it is understood. For eighteenth century liberalism, exchange was the defining feature of the market; however, for neo-liberalism, competition is the model and fundamental principle around which the market should be organized (118-119). Furthermore, neo-liberals recognize that competition is not a natural given that results from a “natural

²¹ *Ordo*-liberalism gets its name from the journal *Ordo* that was an important journal founded by the Freiburg School.

²² We can talk about neo-liberalism in a general sense because of the common foundation(s) shared by the two forms. Foucault (2008) identifies three key foundational points of intersection between these two forms of neo-liberalism: “First of all there is the main doctrinal adversary, Keynes, the common enemy, which ensures that criticism of Keynes will pass back and forth between these two neo-liberalisms. Second, they share the same objects of repulsion, namely, the state-controlled economy, planning, and state interventionism on precisely those overall quantities to which Keynes attached such theoretical and especially practical importance. Finally, a series of persons, theories, and books pass between these two forms of neo-liberalism, the main ones referring to the Austrian school broadly speaking, to Austrian neo-marginalism, at any rate to those who came from there, like von Mises, Hayek, and so on” (79).

interplay of appetites, instincts, [and] behavior,” and therefore, it must be taken as “an historical objective of governmental art” (120). This marks a major point of distinction between liberalism and neo-liberalism. For the former, the market appears as a natural phenomenon, whether it is with respect to exchange (eighteenth century) or competition (nineteenth century liberals), and thus, the conclusion with regard to governmentality is the necessity of minimum intervention or laissez-faire; however, for the latter, competition is *not* natural and thus must be constantly produced by an “active governmentality” (119-121). Under neo-liberalism, what we see then is a “complete superimposition of market mechanisms, indexed to competition, and governmental policy. Government must accompany the market economy from start to finish” (121). The essential point here is that governmentality, and government more generally, becomes a mere means serving the ends of the market.

The primacy of the market as the organizing principle of society, understood specifically through the mechanism of competition and not exchange, has certain major consequences with regard to both society and the subject. Foucault (2008) explains that neo-liberals envision a society in which the mechanisms of competition “should have the greatest possible surface and depth and should also occupy the greatest possible volume,” and thus what is sought after is not “a supermarket society, but an enterprise society. The *homo economicus* sought after is not the man of exchange or man the consumer; he is the man of enterprise and production” (147). This shift in locus from exchange to entrepreneur with regard to *homo economicus* forms the primary foundation of the theory of human capital that Foucault identifies as specific to American neo-liberalism.

The theory of human capital that emerges in the context of American neo-liberalism exhibits two processes that distinguish it from classical economics. First of all, economic

analysis is extended within its own domain into a “previously unexplored” space, and secondly, based on this, arises “the possibility of giving a strictly economic interpretation of a whole domain previously thought to be non-economic” (Foucault 2008, 219). With regard to the former, there occurs an “essential epistemological transformation” expressed by a shift in “the object, or domain of objects” of economic analysis. While traditional economics, right from Adam Smith to Marx to the beginning of the twentieth century, takes its object(s) of focus to be production, consumption, and exchange within a particular society, along with the interconnections among these three processes, neo-liberals adopt an altogether novel framework (222). Neo-liberal economic analysis studies “the nature and consequences” of “substitutable choices,” that is, “the way in which scarce means are allocated to competing ends,” and thus the starting point and framework for neo-liberals is “the way in which individuals allocate these scarce means to alternative ends” (222). What we see here is that the individual appears as the primary point of departure for economic analysis. In a fundamental sense, economics ceases to be “the analysis of processes” and rather, under neo-liberalism, it becomes “the analysis of the internal rationality, the strategic programming of individuals’ activity” (223). Emphatically, it is the first time in economic analysis that the individual, specifically the worker, is presented as an “active economic subject” in opposition to earlier representations as a mere object (223). Under neo-liberalism, *homo economicus* appears as “entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings” (226).

It is precisely because of the emergence of this new *homo economicus*, along with the corresponding mode of governmentality, that conventional liberal spatial distinctions represented by dichotomies such as economic /non-economic, public/private, political/civil, social/personal etc. collapse. Under neo-liberalism, market rationality is generalized “throughout the social

body” such that processes, relations, and behaviors previously associated with non-economic domains can now be submitted to a “grid of intelligibility” that takes the market economy as its mode of analysis thereby generating an economic analysis of non-economic phenomena (Foucault 2008, 243). It is important to clarify that this process of “economization”²³ of non-economic spheres does not have to involve monetization. Rather, what economization fosters is the way in which we orient ourselves to the world around us. This entails thinking and acting like “market subjects where monetary wealth generation is not the immediate issue, for example, in approaching one’s education, health, fitness, family life, or neighborhood” (Brown 2015, 31). With the dissemination of market rationality to every sphere of life, individuals are modeled and configured as rational market actors, as entrepreneurs of the self, that are (and should be) constantly making calculations to maximize their own human capital.²⁴ Thus, the point that must be emphasized here is that neo-liberal rationality functions through a dual mechanism— on the one hand, it provides a descriptive analysis of what we *are* and how we behave, in a sense it ontologizes the subject as an economic subject; on the other hand, it makes a normative claim

²³ Koray Caliskan and Michel Callon develop this term. For them, the study of “economization” involves “investigating the processes through which activities, behaviours and spheres or fields are established as being economic whether or not there is consensus about the content of such qualifications” (Caliskan and Callon 2009, 370).

²⁴ Nikolas Rose provides paints a poignant picture of the various apparatuses that work in concert to produce subjectivity in what he calls “advanced” liberal democracies. He states, “In the name of public *and* private security, life has been accorded a “social” dimension through a hybrid array of devices for the management of insecurity. In the name of national *and* individual prosperity, an “economic machine” has taken shape, which may have as its object an economy made up of enterprises competing in a market, but structures that domain through implanting modes of economic calculation, setting fiscal regimes and mandating techniques of financial regulation and accounting. In the name of public citizenship *and* private welfare, the family has been configured as a matrix for organizing domestic, conjugal and child-rearing arrangements and instrumentalizing wage labour and consumption. In the name of social *and* personal wellbeing, a complex apparatus of health and therapeutics has been assembled, concerned with the management of the individual and social body as a vital national resources, and the management of “problems of living”, made up of techniques of advice and guidance, medics, clinics, guides and counsellors... The lines between public and private, compulsory and voluntary, law and norm operate as *internal* elements within each of these assemblages, as each links the regulation of public conduct with the subjective emotional and intellectual capacities and techniques of individuals, and the ethical regimes through which they govern their lives” (Rose 1996, 37-38).

about how we *ought* to be, i.e. we should apply a cost-benefit analysis to every sphere of our life (Brown 2015, 36). Of course, as was the case under liberalism, neo-liberalism bridges the gap between the ontological and the normative through modes of governmentality that help produce the requisite subjectivities.

Supplementing Foucault's Analysis: Homo economicus and/or homo debitor

By employing a Foucauldian genealogical lens, I have endeavored to tease out the basic principles upon which liberal and neo-liberal governmentality are premised. My analysis has traced the shifts in governmental reason from early liberalism to neo-liberalism, and has focussed on the increasingly hegemonic position occupied by the economy within society. Additionally, by examining the methods/functions of disciplinary processes, and the corresponding notions of subjectivity, typified by the production of *homo economicus*, I have drawn out certain distinctive characteristics unique to neo-liberal governmental reason. However, this Foucauldian analysis has certain lacunas that must be addressed in order for us to make sense of our present situation. Thus, the primary issues I will address in this section are the rise of finance capital along with the centrality of debt within the economy, and the consequent mutations in subjectivities engendered by an economy wherein debt serves as a key mechanism of discipline and governance. In a simplified sense, I will look closely at the relationship between neo-liberalism, present-day capitalism, and the production of individual and collective subjectivities.

Unique to modern-day capitalism, and missing from Foucault's analysis of neo-liberalism, is the power occupied by the creditor-debtor relation, especially brought to the fore by the series of financial crises from the 1990's onwards (Lazzarato 2012).²⁵ Representing an

²⁵ For a discussion on Foucault's odd neglect of capital as itself a force/system of domination, look at Wendy Brown (2015) especially p. 73-78.

asymmetrical relation of power, credit/debt or the creditor-debtor relationship “entail[s] specific forms of production and control of subjectivity—a particular form of *homo economicus*, the “indebted man”” (Lazzarato 2012, 30). Due to neo-liberal policies such as cuts in public spending, and regimes of austerity more generally, the entrepreneurial self is more aptly described as the indebted self. Neo-liberalism produces “human capital and “entrepreneurs of the self” who are more or less in debt, more or less poor, but in any case always precarious,” and thus for the “majority of the population...[the entrepreneurial self] is restricted to managing, according to the terms of business and competition, its employability, its debts, the drop in wages and income, and the reduction of public services” (94). In order to fully comprehend the centrality of debt within neo-liberalism, it is necessary to ascertain what capitalism is, and most importantly, the ways in which it produces subjectivity.

If we recognize that the economic sphere does not have a “natural” reality corresponding to an objective existence that is prior to a specific arrangement of institutions and contingent historical, political, and social processes, then the essential question that we must answer is how and particularly through what methods does the “economy” come to be constructed and constituted. Lazzarato (2009) argues that the economy is an ensemble of *dispositifs*²⁶ [apparatuses] and “economic” categories such as unemployment and work are the result of two intersecting sets of *dispositifs*, “those that establish the law, the norm, opinion, categories, knowledges (*savoirs*), and those that administer the conducts and the behaviour of individuals” (111). To conceptually clarify the mechanisms through which these two sets of apparatuses produce and govern populations and individuals, the Foucauldian and Deleuzian differentiation

²⁶ Dispositif is a Foucauldian term. Foucault (1980) explains that “What I’m trying to pick out with this term [dispositif] is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements” (194-228).

between discursive and non-discursive practices/formations is useful. For them, discursive practices involve “what one *says* (possible or probable statements)” while non-discursive practices involve “what one *does* (possible or probable action)” (Lazzarato 2009, 11). For example, “unemployment” can be understood as an object of discursive practices. What this means is that “unemployment” as a category is constituted and made possible by an assemblage of heterogeneous apparatuses in which each apparatus generates specific statements, in different ways, about “unemployment.” Hence, with regard to the specific case of unemployment, “legislative bodies such as a parliament drafts laws, employment agencies specify the norms, other agencies establish regulations, universities produce academic classifications and reports, media constructs opinions, and experts make informed judgements” (112). The point being that through the intersection of various apparatuses such as legislative bodies, employment agencies, universities etc., a web of meaning(s) is created around the category “unemployment.” On the other hand, non-discursive practices govern the actions of individuals and populations. In keeping with the example of “unemployment”, non-discursive practices refer to apparatuses that monitor, control, classify, and manage the conduct and subjectivities of the “unemployed.” These non-discursive apparatuses carry out functions of control, classification, management, etc. through a variety of “technologies” that operate according to multiple logics, and vary from juridico-legal institutions to disciplinary apparatuses to technologies of surveillance (112). Of course, this distinction between the discursive and non-discursive is *purely* conceptual; discursive and non-discursive practices mutually presuppose each other and are intricately intertwined such that they “together produce our world the relations that constitute it.” Through this lens, the “economy” and economic categories such as “unemployment” can be understood as

the “overall effects” of the intersection of various discursive and non-discursive dispositifs (113).²⁷

Similarly, capitalism must also be understood in this manner and is itself the “result” of discursive and non-discursive apparatuses. Instead of thinking of capitalism (or capital) as an independent economic reality that is subsequently regulated by institutions and/or discourses, we must *de-naturalize* it and recognize that it “needs to be constantly instituted” and consequently, “[c]apitalism as an historical reality is the contingent product of an institutional framework and positive rules (legal and extra-legal) that constitute its conditions of possibility” (113). In addition, an integral and necessary component that ensures the constant reproduction and survival of capitalism is the production of appropriate subjectivities. Invoking Guattari, Lazzarato (2014) states that “[c]apitalism ‘launches (subjective) models the way the automobile industry launches a new line of cars’” and thus, capitalist politics fundamentally consists of “the articulation of economic, technological, and social flows with the production of subjectivity in such a way that political economy is identical with “subjective economy”” (8). The question we must now investigate is how exactly does capitalism “produce” subjectivity?

From a Foucauldian point of view, individual and collective subjectivities are engendered by particular modes of governmentality, corresponding to liberalism/neo-liberalism, through both discursive and non-discursive apparatuses such that “autonomous” and “self-regulating” individual subjects with particular “social” characteristics (such as an identity, sex, profession, nationality etc.) are created; however, this process of “social subjection” is just one of the ways

²⁷ Lazzarato (2009) further explains that the ensemble of dispositifs, whether it relates to the “economy” or to a category such as “unemployment”, are *regulated* by both discursive and non-discursive practices; however, discursive formations exercise more power in terms of *regulation* since they “construct and determine the ‘problems’ of a society at a particular time...[and] [t]hus, on the one hand, they delimit what is possible, and, on the other hand, they prevent statements appearing that do not conform to the *dominant* regime of statements” (112; my emphasis).

in which capitalism acts on and affects subjectivity (Lazzarato 2014, esp. 24).²⁸ Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, Lazzarato (2014) states that specifically under capitalism, “[a]n entirely different process and an entirely different capture of subjectivity— “machinic enslavement” — come to be superimposed on the production of the individuated subject” (25). Although we must keep in mind that discursive and non-discursive practices are ceaselessly intertwined and mutually presuppose each other, we can distinguish between social subjection and machinic enslavement on the basis of the dominant logics that each of them employs. In contrast to social subjection that relies on “subjectivation” primarily through language and discursive practices that create a closed web of significations and representations, machinic enslavement works through “desubjectivation” that predominantly uses non-representational and asignifying semiotics i.e. non-discursive apparatuses (25). Deleuze (1995) points out that while social subjection produces individuals, under machinic enslavement individuals become “‘*dividuals*,’ and masses become samples, data, markets, or ‘*banks*’” (180). Therefore, what sets enslavement apart is that it functions through “deterritorializing” processes or “decoded flows” such as “abstract work flows, monetary flows, sign flows, etc.” that do *not* revolve around the individual and their subjectivity but rather on “enormous social machinisms (corporations, the collective infrastructures of the welfare state, communications systems, etc.)” (Lazzarato 2014, 28). Although capitalism relies on this dual apparatus of power — subjection and enslavement, that are complementary and interdependent, to engender subjectivities, Lazzarato (2014) argues that one of the unique features of capitalism is its use of machinic enslavement and particularly its control of asignifying semiotic apparatuses (such as stock market indices, unemployment

²⁸ Of course, Foucault was weary of using capitalism as an analytical category; however, Lazzarato seems to be accurate in pointing out that “social subjection” coincides with the emergence of liberalism which as we know is tied to the rise of capitalism.

statistics, financial ratings, etc.) (32-54).²⁹ It is through these apparatuses that capitalism is able to both depoliticize and depersonalize power relations (41). Thus, Lazzarato (2014) states that the strength of asignifying semiotics lies precisely in the fact that,

on the one hand, they are forms of “automatic” evaluation and measurement and, on the other hand, they unite and make “formally” equivalent heterogeneous spheres of asymmetrical force and power by integrating them into and rationalizing them for economic accumulation. In the economic crisis [2007/2008], asignifying financial ratings and stock market indices have dominated, deciding the life and death of governments...The signifying semiotics of the media, politicians, and experts are mobilized in order to legitimate, support, and justify in the eyes of individuated subjects, their consciousness and representations, the fact that “there is no alternative.” (41)

After the financial crisis of 2007/2008, both subjection and enslavement explicitly converge around this idea that “there is no alternative,” and credit/debt comes to the fore as the primary relationship within neo-liberal capitalism; of course, the corresponding notion of subjectivity is not that of the entrepreneur but is rather that of the “indebted man” (54).

Within the present “debt economy,”³⁰ we can classify debt into three categories—private, sovereign, and social/public debt—although each category exercises power on a distinct object, it is in their simultaneous configuration that the “hold” of neo-liberal capitalism over subjectivity becomes clear (Lazzarato 2012; esp. ch. 3). The subprime crisis and the sovereign debt crisis provide us with two key points of departure through which we can better understand

²⁹ Lazzarato (2014) explains that “[a]signifying semiotics remain more or less dependent on signifying semiotics; yet at the level of their intrinsic functions they circumvent language and dominant social significations” (40). Furthermore, flows of asignifying signs “act directly on material flows—beyond the divide between production and representation—and function whether they signify something for someone or not...[Thus] asignifying signs act directly on the real, for example, in the way that the signs of computer language make a technical machine like the computer function, that monetary signs activate the economic machine [etc.]” (40-41).

³⁰ Lazzarato (2012) points out that “[t]he American economy is fundamentally a debt economy. Within it finance does not primarily represent speculation but rather is the driver and determines the nature of growth. On June 30, 2008, the aggregate US debt—for families, businesses, banks, and government—exceeded \$51 trillion, compared to a GDP of \$14 trillion. In the US, the average household debt increased by 22% over the eight years under George W. Bush. The amount of unpaid loans rose by 15%. Student debt doubled. Learning how to “live with debt” has now been made part of certain American school curricula” (112).

the ways in which these three kinds of debt function. An analysis of the subprime crisis reveals not only the functioning of the neo-liberal “power bloc”³¹ but also the failure of neo-liberal governmentality in producing the entrepreneurial self in terms of subjectivity (109). Driven by the neo-liberal logic of transforming everyone into “owners” and “human capital”, the paradox of enriching workers and the middle class while simultaneously leaving profits untouched, reducing taxes (mainly for business and the rich), and cutting down on wages and social spending, was resolved by finance through subprime credit (110-11). However, as we saw, with the rise of interest rates, this “whole mechanism of income “distribution” through debt and financing” collapsed (111). In the aftermath, what has proved true is that the majority of the population is now converted into debtors. Lazzarato (2012) maintains that the objectives of this debt economy are political in that debt works towards neutralizing not only “collective attitudes (mutualization, solidarity, cooperation, rights for all, etc.)” but also “the *memory* of the collective struggles, action, and organization of “wage-earners” and the “proletariat”” (114; my emphasis). Additionally, the subprime crisis betrays a crisis of subjectivity in terms of the failure of neo-liberal capitalism to produce the requisite subjectivity; however, at the same time, the neo-liberal power bloc is able to capitalize on this failure and explicitly exploit the newly formed “proletariat” through the State.

The problem of debt that arose with the subprime crisis persists albeit in a different form. By shifting private debt to sovereign State debt, the “enormous sums that States have handed

³¹ Lazzarato (2012) argues that from the 1970’s onwards, with the rise of financialization, and particularly with the privatization of money by finance which entailed the appropriation of most of the functions of central bank policies by the financial sector, “a new power bloc formed based on the debt economy, uniting what continues stubbornly to be taken separately: the so-called “real” economy, the “financial” economy, and the State” (96-98). Furthermore, the “State deliberately transferred its prerogative of creating money to the “private” sector” and “[c]ontrary to what the vast majority of economists, experts, and journalists maintain, there is in fact no competition or conflict between State financial and monetary policy, but a *new neoliberal alliance* bringing together banks, institutional investors, private enterprise, governments, entire swaths of public administration, as well as the media and academics, etc.” (98; my emphasis).

over to banks, insurance companies, and institutional investors must now be “reimbursed” by the taxpayers” (115). Through the use of “public” money, States “bailed out” banks and reestablished the creditor/debtor power relation; paradoxically, the cost of reestablishing this “mechanism for domination and exploitation specific to modern-day capitalism...will have to be paid for by its victims” (115). One of the primary ways in which sovereign State debt is “collected” is through the imposition of regimes of austerity that aim at undermining the Welfare State. In this process, the neo-liberal power bloc primarily uses international organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank to help determine the conditions of austerity through assigning apparatuses such as credit ratings. While previously the Welfare State functioned as an instrument of control over particular populations and a genuine method of redistributing income through myriad services and social rights (such as education, health care, unemployment etc.), today the Welfare State is itself seen as “social debt” (122-128). Austerity policies therefore are essentially implemented through restrictions and reductions on all social rights and public services with the intent of constituting the “indebted man” (127). Indeed, it is the poorest sections of particular societies that are affected by these policies. Put another way, debt can be seen as a “political logic for governing social classes within globalization” (111). Thus, not only are entire geopolitical regions placed in specific “sovereign/social debt” hierarchies determined by the *global* neo-liberal power bloc but also within each sovereign state the governed are classified and categorized as per their level of private debt. In this machinic mode, debt creates hierarchies both at the macro geopolitical and micro social levels. Of course, a fundamental process that helps produce and reproduce this entire system is the systemic configuration of individual subjectivity in the form of *homo debitor*.

Chapter 3

Saving the Muslim Woman: Gender and Race post-9/11

Although the events of 9/11 mark a distinct point of transformation in relation to the creation of specific racial and gendered hierarchies, both within and outside the United States, it is crucial to also recognize 9/11 as a point of continuity with already existing racial and gendered histories. In particular, Western discourses circulating post 9/11 resonate uncannily with European colonial and imperial discourses around the uncivilized and barbaric Other.

In this chapter, I will examine post 9/11 Western discourses that invoke the image of the Muslim woman in the Global South as lacking in rights and requiring saving. Here I focus specifically on the portrayal of issues such as “veiling” that to the West serve as paradigmatic examples of gender oppression and patriarchy intrinsic and unique to Islam. Furthermore, through such a construction of Islam and the Muslim woman, the culture of fear and security that forms an integral part of liberalism, and liberal freedom in particular, manifests in the West in the circulation of discourses that posit the Muslim man or anyone that fits this profile in terms of appearance (read: bearded and brown/black skinned) as a possible terrorist threat. By exposing the underlying logics that motivate the formation and diffusion of such discourses, I endeavor to establish continuities with the historical legacies of Western colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and capitalist economic exploitation.³² As mentioned in chapter 1, the historical emergence of liberalism implicates it as being coextensive and intertwined with the rise of capitalism and colonialism. Importantly, it was in this context, that a temporally linear model of “progress” arose; and under such an understanding, Europeans were positioned at the apex of civilization

³² Taking into account particular inflections.

and progress, while “illiberal” nations and peoples lagged behind.³³ Thus, it was widely believed by Europeans that “fully civilized human beings lived within the bounds of state systems and that those who did not...belonged to inferior “tribal” societies” and were therefore “scarcely human” (Hallaq 2013, 24). Additionally, as Foucault explained, one of the defining characteristics of early liberalism was the positioning of Europe as a space capable of limitless economic development in relation to the rest of the world, and the world served as a potentially infinite market for this purpose (Foucault 2008, 61). I argue that these colonial, economically exploitative, racist, and patriarchal tropes, present at the inception of liberalism, continue to exert influence over the Western (neo-)liberal project today.

The (In)Visible Implications Of “Liberating” the Muslim Woman

A central concern shared by both liberal and progressive feminists with regards to the lack of freedom and choice of the Muslim woman is the use of the “veil.”³⁴ The veil has come to discursively represent the social, cultural, and gender oppression of Muslim women and is seen as an essential aspect of Islam. Thus, the West constructs Islam as the barbaric root of women’s inequality, with the veil as its ultimate symbol (Al-Saji 2009; Abu-Lughod 2013; Hirschmann 2003; among others). Three intertwined assumptions underlie this undue emphasis on the veil.

The first is that Islam is a unified monolithic entity and intra-group differences are erased. The

³³ In the context of nineteenth century colonial India, Uday Mehta points to the power that this idea of progress had with regard to judgments made by Europeans (specifically, the British) about Indians. While discussing James Mill’s disturbing work *History of British India*, in which “[a]n entire civilization, with its ancient religious moorings, its artistic and cultural production, its complex legal system, its cosmology, and its science, are dismissed as representing the “rudest and weakest state of the human mind”” (Mehta 1999, 90). Mehta states that such views were accepted as “a perspective of truth and not of life from which things, beliefs, situations, and ways of being are judged not by reference to the local positivities or the bounded finitude with which experiences occur. Rather they are judged as forms of knowledge, as truth claims, that when underwritten by Mill’s epistemology generate a universal typology in which things must be hierarchical. From this perspective progress is always, even if only implicitly, the only evaluative yardstick” (Mehta 1999, 95). Also see Bury, J. (1982). *The Idea of Progress*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.

³⁴ The “veil” has a complex social and cultural history and its use varies widely throughout the Islamic world. In the context of this paper, I will be using “veil” interchangeably with hijab/niqab/burqa/head scarf depending on the particular community I am referencing.

second is that the Muslim woman is oppressed by her religion and is thus antithetical in her existence to the Western woman who is either free or equipped by liberal rights to be free (Al-Saji 2009; Abu-Lughod 2013; Hirschmann 2003; among others). Thus, this discourse creates a dichotomy between the free western woman and the veiled Muslim woman. The last assumption is that the antidote for the oppression of Muslim women is liberal freedom; however, this conception of freedom takes on a hegemonic character as it “confronts Muslim women with an impasse, a choice between their religion or culture, on the one hand, and their supposed liberation or full subjectivity, on the other hand” (Al-Saji 2009, 66). Upon careful scrutiny, the premises these assumptions rest upon belie the imperialist projects of the West.

Under the Taliban, Afghan women were forced to wear the blue burqa and this was commonly held by the West to be the ultimate sign of their gender oppression. Of course, once America removed the Taliban from power in 2001 and “liberated” these Afghani women, liberals were surprised that these women did not remove their veils. In her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Abu-Lughod rhetorically poses the question, “Did we expect that once “free” from the extremist Taliban these women would go “back” to belly shirts and blue jeans or dust off their Chanel suits?” (Abu-Lughod 2013, 35). The larger point that she is emphasizing is Western liberalism’s lack of historical understanding of the cultural milieus of Afghani women. Needless to say, the Taliban did not invent the veil, however, they did impose the blue burqa that was one particular regional style of veiling on the entire population.³⁵ The burqa is one of many forms of covering (veiling) in the subcontinent and Southwest Asia and has developed as a convention that symbolizes women’s modesty or respectability (Al-Saji 2009; Abu-Lughod 1986, 2013; Hirschmann 2003; among others). It should not be surprising then that Afghani women did not

³⁵ The blue burqa “was the local form of covering that Pashtun women in one region wore when they went out” and in Afghanistan “the Pashtun are one of several ethnic groups” (Abu-Lughod 2013, 35).

cast off their veils once “free” as there exist cultural meanings associated with the veil that differ from the western conception of the veil.

In the West, the veil is primarily conceived of as a constraint on freedom and a sign of oppression; however, it has been seen by many Muslim women as a symbol of liberation since it affords women the opportunity to leave their segregated living spaces while still observing the basic moral requirements of their particular Muslim communities (Abu-Lughod 2013; Hirschmann 2003). In this context the veil signifies a particular way of life for these women characterized by “belonging to a particular community and participating in a moral way of life in which families are paramount in the organization of communities and the home is associated with the sanctity of women” (Abu-Lughod 2013, 36). It is not the complete absence of patriarchy and gender oppression in Islamic communities that we must emphasize; rather, it is the neat dichotomy presupposed by liberal rights rhetoric between the free western woman and the oppressed Muslim woman. This dichotomy not only elides cultural complexity that we must understand in order to fight structures of gender oppression but also serves as the façade behind which imperial projects such as military interventions are justified thereby systemically perpetuating global power structures.

In Laura Bush’s speech it is clear that the liberal West prides itself upon bringing freedom to the “uncivilized” world and liberating the Muslim woman in Afghanistan; however, we must be sure to ask at what cost. With respect to post-9/11 liberal anti-terrorist war rhetoric, Zillah Eisenstein emphatically states, “Women’s rights, as though this issue were simply Western, becomes the rallying cry as women are once again made the pawns of war: the civilized world will have to protect the women of Afghanistan from the Taliban” (2004, 164). What Eisenstein is drawing attention to is the actual positioning of Afghan women in relation to liberal

discourse and the West. Here violence is committed against women both ideologically and materially. Ideologically, the West is superior and “civilized” providing freedom to the oppressed, “uncivilized” and victimized³⁶ Afghan woman. Materially, the Afghan woman is a mere pawn³⁷ that is dispensable in the quest to assert Western hegemony. These forms of violence are not isolated to countries under direct military occupation by the Global North but extend in different configurations to other countries in the Global South as well. This becomes clearer through investigation at the level of particularity.

Let us look closely at the life of one young Egyptian village woman named Khadija who is a victim of domestic violence.³⁸ Although Khadija is in an unhappy marriage in which her husband sometimes gets violent with her, she doesn't have the privilege of choice to end her marriage. Through sustained engagement with Khadija and her family, Abu-Lughod concludes that the logics of oppression that force Khadija to remain in this violent marriage can be traced here not so much to traditional patriarchal forms of gender inequality as to abject poverty (2013, 194). Furthermore, Khadija's impoverished state is a result not only of local family history but also of broad political economic transformations. This latter structural factor has led to the concentration of wealth in the northern part of Egypt and the capital and today, this inequality is further exacerbated by neo-liberal reform (Abu-Lughod 2013, 194).

³⁶ For a useful discussion on the impact of such rhetoric both ideologically and materially, see Ratna Kapur's (2005) *Erotic Justice: Law And The New Politics Of Post Colonialism*, in which she argues that “the victim subject has reinforced gender essentialism and cultural essentialism. These have been further displaced onto a third world and first world divide... this displacement resurrects the ‘native subject’ and justifies imperialist interventions” (Kapur 2005).

³⁷ Both Eisenstein (2004) and Brown (2006) discuss the “collateral damage” of American military intervention in Afghanistan. They also discuss the continued structural effects of poverty that disproportionately affect the lives of women and children in Afghanistan. Both locate the source of such inequality to the Western imperial project (Eisenstein 2004; Brown 2006).

³⁸ Abu-Lughod uses Khadija as a paradigmatic example to show the failure of rights discourse across organizations, given that domestic violence is seen as a key aspect of women's rights work around the world. She states that “in recent years, it is the most publicized issue United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), succeeded by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) is promoting. It is also a central element in the WISE Shura Council's first campaign, *Jihad against Violence*” (Abu-Lughod 2013, 191).

From a global structural analysis of oppression, abject poverty for particular geopolitical areas is a direct consequence of globalization and neo-liberal political and economic practices. In this situation, a country in the Global South such as Egypt is necessarily entangled within power structures whose locus can be traced to the Global North. This entanglement in turn directly affects individuals at the local level. In the case of Khadija, Abu-Lughod points out that Khadija's husband and his brothers "were among the first men in the village to get involved in tourism" since their village is located near Pharaonic sites (2013, 194). However, this close involvement with tourists and foreigners has negative effects, as Khadija's husband starts drinking and becomes involved with an older European woman (Abu-Lughod 2013, 194-195).³⁹ Khadija's unique situation lies at the intersection of both local and global forces that relegate her to a position in which there are a dearth of viable choices. Such a situation of powerlessness cannot simply be attributed to being the result of patriarchal Muslim violence but must inevitably be understood in terms of extant global hegemonic forces that disproportionately affect particular geopolitical areas.

Commenting upon this dichotomy between oppressive-Islamic/free-Western, Hester Eisenstein explains that democracy, the free market, and the emancipation of women are linked to the liberal West while the Islamic tradition is connected with the patriarchal suppression of women's rights and terrorism (2009, 175). Thus, the choice for Muslim women is no choice at all since it becomes an impasse between the free world of modernity, industrialism, democracy, and capitalism and the Islamic world that by its very nature is barbaric, a part of non-modernity, and in sum a terrorist threat. In this context, Western economic imperialism is masked by the

³⁹ Since Islamic law forbids drinking and sexual involvement with foreigners, Khadija's husband is seen as an anomaly within this community (Abu-Lughod 2013, 194-195).

rhetoric of liberal freedom. Instead of fighting oppression, the implicit aim of the West is the domination of the Other primarily to profit economically and to maintain its hegemonic status.

Through the lens of political economy, the abstract individual that is the bearer of formal political rights is both a necessary precondition to capitalism and integral for its perpetuation and reproduction. As Eisenstein asserts, “the goal of capitalist interests [is] to pry open *all* forms of premodern traditional political economies” in order to “make the world safe for foreign investment, and to reproduce the individualistic culture that will guarantee the rise of consumerism” (2009, 193). Consequently, the globalizing interests of the North exemplified by the nexus of Western corporations and governments are opposed to both economic and religious elements of traditional cultures because the very framework of a capitalist economy requires the establishment of private property, and of a legal system that protects it (Brown 2006; Eisenstein 2009; among others).

In this capitalist drive towards “civilizing” and “liberating” Muslim women in the Global South, we must pay attention to the real material violence of imperialist interventions⁴⁰ by the Global North. For example, during the occupation of Iraq, the strategic move by the U.S. to support Iraq’s Shiite Islamists led to a rollback of women’s legal rights and returned “authority over family law to clerics” thereby giving rise to a situation of extreme danger and vulnerability for Iraqi women. Furthermore, by providing material support in the form of arms to militias that were against the Sunni-led resistance there was a substantial rise in attacks on women that included rapes, forced prostitution, and murders (Eisenstein 2009, 177). Far from being concerned about the material well being of women, the Global North, and particularly the United

⁴⁰ Zillah Eisenstein (2004); Wendy Brown (2006); and Hester Eisenstein (2009) among others discuss the material violence wrought upon Muslim women by post-9/11 US military interventions in the name of bringing freedom and liberty.

States, makes no qualms about forging alliances with “premodern” actors as long as there is a tangible ‘return on investment’.⁴¹

Fear of the Muslim Other: Eurocentrism and the Coloniality of Power

The masking of Western neo-liberal and imperial projects in the Global South in the guise of liberal rights and women’s freedom is but one part of the story. The other part involves securitization within the liberal nation-state, marked by the criminalization of certain communities and peoples. The economy of power within liberalism, as identified by Foucault, relies on the constant interplay between freedom and security. In a post 9/11 United States, by mobilizing tropes of barbarism as exhibited by anti-Western terrorist activities on the one hand, and the oppression of women within Islamic communities on the other, brown (and black) Muslim masculine bodies (or those that “look” Muslim) are marked as criminal objects. After 9/11, governmentality in the United States and Western Europe increasingly depends on the circulation of discourses designed to incite fear of the male Muslim Other.

In spite of priding itself as a center of multiculturalism, American nationalism post 9/11 was reconfigured against what is popularly understood as “Islamic culture.” Through the use of various discursive apparatuses, arising out of a matrix of “disciplinary power, racialized nationalism, and the geopolitics of the U.S. state,” the articulation of a new racial and gendered category that includes ““Middle Eastern men,” Muslims, and those who “look Middle Eastern or Muslim,” makes this opposition clear (Grewal 2006, 197). Deeming members of this newly created category as potential “terrorist” threats mandates biopolitical strategies of discipline and surveillance. Through a combination of geopolitics and biopolitics, mediated via liberal discourses of freedom and liberty, American nationalism produces “the term “American” as a

⁴¹ For a discussion on the “spoils of war” see Eisenstein’s *Against Empire Feminisms, Racism, and the West* (2004: 14-15).

discursive regime in which oppositions like “terrorism vs. security,” “good vs. evil,” and “civilized vs. barbaric” powerfully capture popular imagination (204). The dominant meaning that multiculturalism assumes then is far from its literal meaning in the context of the United States; predictably, the white (Judeo-Christian) middle-class male continues to be seen as the ideal identity type. Crucially, the constitution of this ideal-identity type, and of American nationalism, rests upon its opposition to the Islamic Other. Although newly created within the racial hierarchies of the United States, the category of Muslim men/or those that “look” Muslim betrays an old colonial history albeit serving a new purpose.

The idea of race, and of racialized hierarchies, historically originates from relations of domination expressed between colonial Europeans and their non-European conquests. Following the colonization of America and after the spread of European colonialism to all parts of the world, Anibal Quijano explains that the constitution of the new European identity necessitated “a Eurocentric perspective of knowledge, a theoretical perspective on the idea of race as a naturalization of colonial relations” (2008, 183). In other words, race served as a way to legitimize relations of “superiority and inferiority between dominant and dominated” (183). In this way, racial categories opened up the possibility of situating conquered peoples into a “natural position of inferiority” such that “their phenotypic traits as well as their cultural features were likewise considered inferior” (183). These relations of power, expressed through racial classifications, elevated (male) Europeans to the status of “civilized” human beings while relegating non-Europeans to “barbaric” sub-human status. Similarly, the culture(s) of dominant European colonial powers came to represent the pinnacle of civilization, while in contrast, non-European cultures were seen as backward and in need of civilization. Now, the primary force driving the European colonial project was the newly emergent system of world capitalism. In this

regard, the positioning of Europe as a space capable of endless economic growth, along with the portrayal of the world as an infinite market, necessitated greater control of labor, resources, and the world market. Therefore, within this system of global colonial capitalism, race became intricately bound up with control of labor and resources. In fact, the structural link between race and labor appeared as a “new technology of domination/exploitation” and “was articulated in such a way that the two elements appeared naturally associated” (185). The Eurocentric configuration of power expressed by the race/labor linkage, arising out of colonial capitalism, continues to exert hegemonic influence on the world.⁴²

Today, the racialization of Muslim bodies, expressed by discursive representations of their inherent barbarism/backwardness, connects to the Eurocentric worldview thereby maintaining and reproducing the coloniality of power. In a highly simplified sense, under the façade of spreading liberal rights, the Global North led by the United States is engaged in a constant struggle to maintain and increase its hegemony, economic and cultural, both internally and externally. By employing historical colonial discourses with certain key re-configurations, the West, in the name of freedom and equality, systematically dichotomizes the world between those populations, geo-political regions, and cultures that conform to desired neo-liberal subjectivities and Eurocentric ways of life and those that do not. Of course, through the deployment of various apparatuses, both discursive and non-discursive, every attempt is made to bring the latter under the former.

⁴² Quijano points out that the “racial inferiority of the colonized implied that they were not worthy of wages. They were naturally obliged to work for the profit of their owners. It is not difficult to find, to this very day, this attitude spread out among the white property owners of any place in the world. Furthermore, the lower wages that “inferior races” receive in today’s capitalist centers for the same work done by whites cannot be explained as detached from the racist social classification of the world’s population—in other words, as detached from the global capitalist coloniality of power” (187).

Chapter 4

Constructing an Alternative Framework

I have analyzed “liberalism” from varying perspectives to develop a somewhat robust understanding of this protean signifier. In chapter 1, I brought to the fore the primary ontological element upon which liberalism is constructed—the autonomous individual. The individualist metaphysics underlying liberalism, along with liberalism’s tendency to universalize by abstracting from the embodied particularities of human existence, conceals a Eurocentric, capitalist, white supremacist, and patriarchal foundation. The bearer of liberal rights, although presented as neutral and universal, is molded in a specific form. In this regard, by adopting a Foucauldian genealogical lens, in chapter 2, I traced out the political economic history accompanying liberalism and neo-liberalism. Furthermore, through Foucault’s concept of governmentality, I shed light on the specific forms of subjectivity engendered by the idea of liberal freedom. However, since Foucault’s insights fell short in certain respects, I supplemented his analysis with Lazzarato’s understanding of the ways in which neo-liberal capitalism affects the production of subjectivity. Lazzarato argues that with the rise of the debt economy, individual subjectivity is systemically configured in the image of *homo debitor*. Simultaneously, at the macroscopic global level, entire geopolitical regions come to be situated in economic hierarchies. Strikingly, it is through the universalizing language of liberalism that the Global North is able to mediate its hegemony, both economically and culturally, over the Global South. The move towards universalization is especially problematic when dealing with purportedly illiberal cultures, as Western liberal discourse attempts to position itself on a moral high ground when paradoxically it mystifies and aggravates forces of oppression. This hypocritical tendency is most visible in women’s rights discourse used by the Global North to justify imperialist

projects of political, economic, and cultural domination with regard to the Global South. In chapter 3, I took up these very issues and examined post 9/11 liberal discourse not only in its use by the Global North over the Global South, as exemplified by the quest to liberate “the Muslim woman”, but also in its internal deployment against specific populations and communities. The post 9/11 racialization of Muslim bodies, epitomized by the establishment of a culture of fear around the image of the Muslim “terrorist” Other, although newly configured, represented the recuperation of older colonial ideologies. Through Quijano’s analytic lens, the “coloniality of power”, I drew out the connections and continuities between Eurocentric racial classifications, capitalism, and colonialism. In order to combat the collusion of these various axes of oppression, and to arrest their very real material consequences, it is essential to develop a theoretical framework that can do better than the currently existing liberal model of engagement. Thus, in this conclusion, I will suggest certain methodological changes that will help us develop an alternative framework of analysis.

One of the primary drawbacks of the liberal framework is its proclivity towards universalization. The failure of Western liberalism to comprehend and account for different ways of living and existing, other than conveniently labeling them as “illiberal”, poses a barrier to appropriately diagnosing and remedying oppression. My analysis of the “oppressed Muslim woman”, in chapter 3, illustrates this very issue. Importantly, focusing solely on particularity/difference is also problematic since we run the risk of slipping into an apolitical cultural relativism under which “culture” once again becomes reified. Under such a framework, we would not be able to make any normative claim other than to “respect” difference. A cursory detour into certain postmodern methods of inquiry will uncover this tendency towards cultural relativism. I will briefly draw upon Lyotard’s work in explaining this postmodern methodology,

as it is paradigmatic of this tradition. Such an example illustrates the concern that emerges when value is placed exclusively on difference as opposed to universality. Lyotard rejects modern universality by valuing difference and heterogeneity through a critique of totality; however, this critique itself leads to a reification of “difference by assuming it can exist as a pure, undifferentiated category” (Ahmed 1998, 48). Even in the case of valuing difference and incommensurability as ideals to be upheld, the very demand of normative argumentation means that these ideals will be violated to a certain degree and in this sense some amount of violence towards difference may be inevitable (Ahmed 1998). What Sara Ahmed argues in this respect is that the dichotomy between modern and postmodern methodologies seen as representing either the universal or the particular needs to be challenged because both fall short in establishing a rigorous way of approaching ethical engagement. If we are seriously committed to mitigating oppression, both in a general sense and in the particular case of women in the Global South, how can we go about such an analysis in a manner that avoids the drawbacks of both a liberal and postmodern framework?

Firstly, in terms of methodology, the ontological foundation of the liberal-democratic framework must be radically transformed. The failure of a liberal individualistic ontology must be replaced by a social ontology that conceives of the individual as an “individual-in-relations” so that the individual human being is viewed as necessarily connected to other individuals (Gould 1988, 105). This ontology can be seen as a foundation of social construction in the sense that human beings and their human natures are the products of particular historical, social, and cultural constellations in opposition to an essentialist view that conceives of human beings as having a fixed identity. This move towards a social ontology is crucial for grasping the dynamic relationship between individuals and other individuals mediated by social and political

institutions and processes. Viewing the social from this conceptual angle allows for a better account of differences and connects them to structures of oppression. From the purview of this social ontology, for example, there exists a major ontological difference between a white, middle-class man and a low-income black woman. Under a liberal individualistic ontology, there would be no ontological difference between the two. Relatedly, Khadija's ontological positioning would take into account the vectors of oppression that specifically affect her community and would tie back to the global neo-liberal power structures that relegate her community to a state of poverty.⁴³

Secondly, all knowledge claims, and especially those that are top-down epistemological⁴⁴ claims must be continuously scrutinized in order to unmask power relations. Thus, what is required is a “destabilizing epistemology”⁴⁵ that is constantly challenged in order to be attentive to concealed forms of power that exist within certain practices and institutions (Ackerly 2008, 27). The importance of adopting a destabilizing epistemology, both within liberal-democracies of the Global North and in any sort of engagement between the Global North and the Global South, cannot be stated enough. For example, in a country such as the United States, the wide spread effects of white supremacy continue to pervade the daily existence of minority communities. The growing number of clearly documented cases of police brutality, often involving the death of minority bodies, is symptomatic of structural forms of racism. In this specific case, through destabilizing epistemic practices, we might begin to unravel the variety of ways through which

⁴³ Khadija's unique positionality within both local and global power structures is used as an example in chapter 3.

⁴⁴ In *Are “Old Wives’ Tales” Justified*, Vrinda Dalmiya and Linda Alcoff argue that epistemology “needs to incorporate accounts of knowing how and experiential knowledge along with [traditional] propositional knowledge” (1993: 241). They argue that traditional epistemology has neglected experiential knowing, which has historically caused harm to individuals whose claims have been discounted on the grounds of not passing the criteria of “true knowledge.” This holds true especially within the medical sciences; however, it is directly related to knowledge claims about Third World women that originate in the First World.

⁴⁵ Although Ackerly uses this specific term, the concept has been developed and used by postmodern, feminist, and post-colonial thinkers (among others).

racism, and white supremacy in particular, is exercised. Of course, this is but one example of certain institutional arrangements of power unequally affecting particular groups.

Similarly, this destabilizing epistemology is vital for Western feminist engagement within the Global South, as it accounts for both the complexities of particular embodiment and intra-group power differentials. Applying the universal category of gender oppression as understood in Western terms to Khadija, for example, would produce what Chandra Mohanty calls the “Third World Woman” as an object of knowledge (Mohanty 1986). In this relationship, the “Third World Woman” is seen as an object whose “victimhood” is not only misunderstood but is also authorized by the “Western feminist subject”, thereby reinforcing a “colonial relation” (Mohanty 1986; Ahmed 1998; Kapur 2005). This relation can be seen clearly in Western liberal feminism’s historical failure in accounting for the global neo-liberal and neo-colonial power structures within which the subaltern woman is necessarily placed. In this scenario, universal (Western) ethical judgment falls victim to a self-affirming politics that does not assuage domination but rather re-inscribes and perpetuates Western hegemony both ideologically and materially. Instead, what is required is the epistemic standpoint⁴⁶ of the particular marginalized woman or community of women under consideration. Using this standpoint provides a vantage point from which systemic power can be discerned (Mohanty 2003).

In order to use such an epistemic standpoint what is essential is a contextualized approach to difference and specificity that moves away from making universalizing judgment. In this regard, normative judgments should be made on the basis of “specific engagement” (Ahmed 1998, 57). Integral to such a process would be the creation of a dialogical space where speaking *for* is replaced by listening and speaking with the oppressed (Alcoff 1992; Ahmed 1998). Of

⁴⁶ This argument is in continuation with Marxist standpoint theory that has been further developed by Lukacs (1971) and feminist standpoint theorists among others.

course, even this relation would be asymmetrical in terms of power and positionality, say for example, between the Western feminist vis-à-vis the particular oppressed woman; however, it may commit less violence than the universalizing tendencies of liberalism.

Simultaneously, it is necessary to incorporate into analysis the continued power and prevalence of colonialism, and more specifically Eurocentrism. As understand through Quijano's concept of the colonality of power, colonialism entailed not only the exploitation of the resources of the colonized but also "the hegemony of Eurocentrism as epistemological perspective" (quoted in Mignolo 2000, 54). The effects of the colonality of power, understood as an epistemological force, continue to pervade and inform popular discourses. In this regard, the creation of binaries and hierarchies that position the Other as uncivilized and barbaric is symptomatic of Eurocentrism. As shown in chapter 3, post 9/11 Western discourses around the Muslim Other (whether "man" or "woman") reveal the deep-rooted colonial nature of these discourses. A possible solution to mitigate this phenomenon of epistemic distortion, put forward by Walter Mignolo, is the re-inscription of the "colonial difference" (Mignolo 1995; 2000; 2005). Mignolo explains that since "the Eurocentric imaginary of modernity has forgotten colonialism and relegated the colonized spaces to the periphery and to the past in its description of universal reality (even if that "past" paradoxically exists in the "present"), the task of the colonial difference is to reinscribe simultaneity" (Alcoff 2007, 87). Therefore, the matrix of power through which the linear conception of progress, traceable to the Enlightenment, in which Europe (and now the United States) is placed in the present, in terms of civilization, while the rest of the world is relegated to the backward and uncivilized past, is explained through the colonial difference. The aim then of Mignolo's concept of the colonial difference is to "reveal the way in which power has been at work in creating that difference (that is, the way in which

colonialism creates “backwardness” both materially and ideologically) as well as the way in which colonial power represents and evaluates difference” (87). Thus, through concerted *de-colonial* efforts, we need to work towards untangling the Eurocentric assumptions and biases that undermine our theoretical frameworks. Since the locus of enunciation of the production of knowledges has and continues to be the West, the very frames we use to understand our world are seeped with Eurocentrism. By reinscribing simultaneity and contextualizing difference, we might be able to begin to diminish the hegemonic Eurocentric epistemological perspective, especially in our analysis of non-Western cultures.

Finally, if we are to take the methodological changes that I have suggested seriously then our very conception of freedom will necessarily be radically altered. From the viewpoint of someone like Khadija, the key concern that emerges is the lack of viable choices as constrained by both local and global forces. From a social constructionist perspective, individuals’ subjectivity in terms of will and desire are contextually constituted (Hirschmann 2003). However, liberalism and today neo-liberalism, to be precise, works towards producing subjectivity in a form that allows for the control of entire populations and geopolitical regions by the neo-liberal power bloc. Thus, neo-liberal economic forces proscribe communities such as that of Khadija’s to a situation of abject poverty. For freedom to be meaningful in this context, it must first attempt to account for choice as something that is socially located within particular contexts. Of course, it is vital that these contexts are continuously challenged through specific engagement to uncover structures of oppression such as patriarchy. Secondly, the economic model of capitalism must be part of the wider critique of liberalism and neo-liberalism, and alternatives must be presented so that all communities can have access to “decent” standards of living. Even if patriarchy were hypothetically eliminated from a community, without adequate

economic means to sustain existence, freedom would nevertheless be meaningless. Here attention must also be focused on the connections between particular political and economic arrangements and the production of subjectivity. Thus, the concept of freedom must be rooted in a social ontology that can accommodate different subjectivities and identify and transform external economic constraints so that liberation becomes contextually imaginable.

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