

# Digital Colonialism and Epistemic Dependence. A Postcolonial Critique of Power and Knowledge

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**ABSTRACT:** This research sheds light on the troubling relationship between power and knowledge in the context of digital transformations, via a postcolonial reading of how digitization is performing epistemic dependencies. It starts from the hypothesis that digital decentralization hides behind it a new Western centrality that reinforces the soft control of epistemic dependency in the form of knowledge production and circulation. The research investigates the contention of the authors that colonial logic remains evident in the digital space, by employing concepts from philosophers like Foucault, Deleuze, Jaspers, and Morin - and utilizing a critical analytical lens. The findings of the study suggest liberation is no longer confined to the free of political or military liberation, but an epistemic and cultural liberation, and that what is being passed off as opportunities for digital participation and openness it is an illusion that will entrench epistemic dependency largely controlled by big corporations or large Western research centers. The study results conclude that the challenge of digital colonialism requires developing local epistemic strategies that are independent, which can repatriate knowledge, liberated epistemes from the cultural space of Western centrality.

**KEYWORDS:** Digital Colonialism; Epistemic Dependency; Postcolonialism; Power and Knowledge; Decentralization and Centralization.

**TITLU:** „Colonialism digital și dependența epistemică. O critică postcolonială a puterii și cunoașterii”

**REZUMAT:** Această cercetare evidențiază relația problematică dintre putere și cunoaștere în contextul transformărilor digitale, printr-o lectură postcolonială a modului în care digitalizarea creează dependențe epistemice. Pornind de la ipoteza că descentralizarea digitală ascunde în spatele ei o nouă centralitate occidentală care consolidează controlul subtil al dependenței epistemice sub forma producției și circulației cunoașterii, studiul investighează afirmația conform căreia logica colonială rămâne evidentă în spațiul digital. Acest lucru se realizează prin utilizarea unor concepte ale filosofilor precum Foucault, Deleuze, Jaspers și Morin și a unei lentile analitice critice. Concluziile studiului sugerează că eliberarea nu se mai limitează la eliberarea politică sau militară, ci este una epistemică și culturală, iar ceea ce este prezentat ca oportunități de participare și deschidere digitală este o iluzie care va consolida dependența epistemică, controlată în mare măsură de marile corporații sau de marile centre de cercetare occidentale. Rezultatele studiului arată că provocarea colonialismului digital necesită dezvoltarea unor strategii epistemice locale independente, care să separe cunoașterea de spațiul cultural al centralității occidentale.

**CUVINTE-CHEIE:** colonialism digital; dependență epistemică; postcolonialism; putere și cunoaștere; descentralizare și centralizare.

## Introduction

The idea of the liberation/revolutionary struggle is often tied in our heads to national liberation movements in contemporary history, which, as some define them, are resistance movements which are representing peoples claiming their right to self-determination or their right to liberate their land from occupiers and colonizers (Imbong 2025). However, this organic association limits the overall meaning of the liberation revolution and denies the chance to expand its semantics in order to describe the liberation/revolutionary struggle in general terms that include more than armed resistance and that emotively represent the notion of radical and holistic transformation on social, political, moral, and epistemic realms.

The functional dimension, due to its frequent and sometimes improper use, has often been approached in a non-systematic way, which has significantly contributed to overlooking a set of characteristics that marked the historical development of the concept. One of the key features of this semantic evolution lies in the strong connection between it and the concept of civilization, for there can be no civilization without liberation – or rather, liberation is the essence of civilization. Both are human necessities, and no advanced or developed human society can exist without them (Bowden 2015). It would not be an exaggeration to say that consciousness is a condition for liberation, just as it is a condition for the humanity of civilization. One may even go as far as to state that the history of humankind is the history of the evolution of human awareness of itself and its capacities—a path along which human effort must advance. As Karl Jaspers notes, consciousness is the necessary condition for human growth, progress, and persistence in confronting reality. Needless to say, this very experience transforms and develops with the advancement of knowledge (Jaspers 2017).

Indeed, scientific knowledge represents the most significant form of consciousness in our contemporary history, as it has become indisputable that no intellectual revolution can occur without intellectual wealth or cognitive capital. It is now well established that competition over intellectual and cultural capital is the driving force behind progress, development, and civilizational advancement. Possession of intellectual resources serves as both a safeguard and the measure of whether societies thrive or perish, liberate themselves or fall into dependency—especially in light of the emergence of new forms of imperialist colonialism that are far more elusive, complex, and profound than their classical counterparts (Chavez Padilla 2025).

The most dangerous of these forms is the reproduction of civilizational subordination through the recreation of conditions that entrench Western epistemic dominance with all its values, conceptions, and frameworks (Grosfoguel 2013). Thus, the contours of epistemic, informational, and cultural power appear as new manifestations of domination. Any attempt at revolutionary liberation from this epistemic/cultural domination requires new forms of intellectual resistance. In this light, the present study seeks to reconsider the concept of revolutionary liberation by tying it fundamentally to the epistemic question, building on the critical approaches offered by cultural studies to deepen the perspective and renew the discourse (Sajed 2024).

## **The Cultural Extension of the Question of Knowledge**

The intense presence and generalized use of certain concepts often produce a kind of obscurity in clarifying their meanings, such that their very presence turns into absence, and the known takes on the status of the unknown. Indeed, there are many concepts that circulate on tongues, are taken up by pens, and embellish discourses, elevating themselves to the rank of universal concepts that construct thought, truth, meaning, and value. These are concepts we continually return to without ever re-examining them, invoking them without questioning them, thus transforming them into idolized notions to which we submit and for which we create the conditions of compliance (Sajed 2024). Among these is the concept of knowledge, which today requires more knowledge—or rather, a constant deepening of knowledge. The knowledge of knowledge is the difficult wager. As Edgar Morin states in his book *Method*: “It seems to us that the notion of knowledge is simple and self-evident.”

Yet the moment we pose the question, this notion explodes, diversifies, and multiplies into countless propositions, each one raising a new inquiry (Morin 2012). In this way, the epistemic question turns back on itself, uncovering a torrent of hidden questions buried beneath layers of self-evidence, familiarity, intimacy, and routine that strip the concept of its vitality. Numerous questions emerge, branching out from the question of knowledge and closely tied to it, placing us face to face with the concept's entanglements and intersections with the issues of cultural reality and its intertwined complexities. Within these, knowledge becomes interwoven with politics, religion, ethics, power, resistance, education, collective perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and the broader horizons of culture.

This is precisely what Morin affirms in his discussion of the unknown of knowledge: human cognitive capacities and activities require a cognitive apparatus—the brain—which is an immense biological,

physical, and chemical machine. This brain, in turn, presupposes the biological existence of an individual. Human cognitive abilities can only flourish within a culture that has produced, preserved, and transmitted language, logic, a reservoir of information, and criteria of truth. It is within this very framework that the human mind develops and organizes its knowledge, employing the cultural tools available to it. Finally, throughout all of human history, cognitive activity has found itself in interactions that are at once complementary and conflicting with ethics, myth, religion, and politics. Power has often resorted to restricting knowledge in order to restrict the authority of knowledge itself (Morin 2012, 23)

Since this is the case, it is no longer possible or useful to address the epistemic question as separate from the cultural question in its various dimensions. Nor is it possible or useful to limit ourselves to a purely epistemological perspective on the issue of knowledge, one that elevates it into the lofty realms of theorization and abstraction. Rather, it is necessary to ground it within reality with its cultural conditions. Just as human existence cannot be separated from knowledge, knowledge itself is subject to the requirements of our existence, which are expressed through our culture. This leads to the conclusion that epistemic reality is an integral part of cultural reality, and that any inquiry into systems of knowledge must be conditioned by an inquiry into the broader cultural framework of which knowledge is but one mode. This is precisely what contemporary thought has come to recognize in its postmodern turn, armed with a critical, pluralistic, and differential awareness that wagers on reformulating the question of knowledge from a new relational perspective.

### **The Postmodern Concept of Power**

We begin from a fundamental premise: everything is a relation — *Tout est relation* — language, religion, society, system, self... even power is a relation (Deleuze 1988, 33). Likewise, relation itself is power, for power is the condition of all human relations. As Alvin Toffler states: "Despite the foul odor that clings to the word power due to its uses, power in itself is neither good nor bad. It is an inescapable aspect of every human relationship. It exerts significant influence over our sexual relationships, our professional positions, the cars we drive, the television programs we watch, and all the hopes we try to fulfill. We are products of power to a far greater extent than most of us realize" (Foucault 1978).

In reality, most of us take a reductionist, static view of power, seeing it as synonymous with politics and governance. We typically refer to power – as an essence—in singular forms, locating the power "there," at the center, where coercive force resides and where it claims and extracts its monopoly. However, in reality, power is plural – powers – or better, exists as relationally connected across space, branching out into if not distributed among, many nodes. Power is everywhere: in the family, school, factory, institution... hence denying power as a "compulsory point of reference for understanding what motivates people, how they relate to each other, what they generally 'control', controls them, and what lies ahead for human societies" (Foucault 1978).

Clearly, this conceptual extension invites an investigation into power with a substantially broader perspective on what it means to be human. Here power appears not as a political phenomenon, but as a network of complex relations and practices that extend from the political to all realms and activities of human life. Power runs through all social relations and is attached and connected to all spheres of life, including the economic, linguistic, cognitive, religious, and physical. Power is everywhere, and it is within everyone and also between all, not because it absorbs everything in some invulnerable unity, but because it reproduces itself in every instant, constantly taking new content and new forms (Deleuze 1988). In doing so it creates new power relations between human beings, institutions, and ideas, so we can conclude that the intense and active presence of power in our lives produces multiple and multilayered displays that are at times both hidden and visible. Furthermore, its effect is not limited only to the behaviour and materiality of individuals and human collectivities, but also includes their doctrinal, spiritually, and intellectually aspects. Possibly, this last aspect is the most interesting and contestable today, as many studies have made evident the strong links between knowledge and power (Gordon and Foucault 1980).

## Knowledge and the Dynamics of Power Relations

Possibly the most insightful work in this area has been completed by the contemporary researcher Michel Foucault. This contemporary researcher was able to reveal the implications of power in all forms of knowledge that are currently dominant, thereby negating what is often called the autonomy of knowledge from power. In fact, power and knowledge presumes one another – there is no power relations without an adequate knowledge base in a domain of knowledge, and there is no knowledge that does not presuppose and establish a power relation at the same time (Foucault 2013).

Thus, the interdependent and correlative nature inherent in the interplay between power and knowledge becomes clearly evident. There can be no form of power relations without bodies of knowledge connected to and corresponding with them; likewise, there is no knowledge that does not presuppose and simultaneously constitute power relations.

One may even go so far as to say that knowledge is power—indeed, it is a tremendous source of power that drives progress and advancement, while at the same time representing a powerful threat, a means of coercion and domination exercised by the knowledgeable over the ignorant. This leads to the conclusion that power is not an external support for knowledge; rather, power is woven into the very fabric of knowledge, shaping it from within and enabling it to exert its influence over individuals and human groups through what is produced, circulated, and discursively employed on a wide scale—propositions, principles, concepts, ideas, skills, and information that today have come to constitute one of the most important sources of what is known as soft power (Foucault 2013).

The discussion of soft power thus takes us to another level of analysis that links the concept of power to contemporary societies. Power over life has become one of the most distinctive features of modern societies, which have developed various forms of exercising authority over people. Power has shifted from being tied exclusively to force to becoming diffused across multiple forms and embedded in diverse discourses, reflecting the multiplicity of stakes imposed by globalization, current social transformations, and the emergence of new rules for the distribution of power, wealth, and the production of meaning. Within this framework, Foucault—and other scholars who followed a similar path—was able to highlight the vital role played by knowledge-power as a force of pure domination. For, according to Foucault's conception, the will to knowledge is a will to power and a will to desire; the only distinction among these three drives lies in the fact that neither power nor desire can come into effect except through knowledge and discourse (Foucault 2013).

The significance of Foucault's propositions lies in their transcendence of the traditional concept of power, offering instead a modern social practice of power. In his various studies, Foucault consistently examined the manifestations of exclusion and coercion in modern social practices linked to systems of knowledge, insofar as they employ different sciences and bodies of knowledge to consolidate the legitimacy of power and reinforce its presence. Prior to the emergence of his major work *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in 1969, he tended in his research to conceive of intellectual practices from the perspective of exclusion and marginalization, relying on the repressive conception of power. He pointed in particular to the practices of segregation carried out by society in its institutions that housed individuals afflicted with leprosy and plague, as well as in the newly established hospitals designed to remove the poor, deviants, and the insane from the cities (Foucault 2003).

Although Foucault attached great importance to the exclusionary and repressive nature of power—or, let us say, to its negative form—he nevertheless drew attention to a fundamental issue: power also possesses a productive nature. In other words, power is a strategy founded on a network of interwoven and overlapping relations, and for that very reason it is, above all else, a set of productive relations. These are creative relations that never remain fixed upon anything (Taylor 2014). Naturally, the dynamics of power relations render them continually generative and perpetually self-transcending.

Thus, contemporary thought, in its postmodern orientation, sought to undermine the traditional formulations of the concept of power, which had confined it to its negative, restrictive, and repressive dimension. The radical displacements introduced by the postmodern turn made it possible to move beyond the limits of the repressive hypothesis toward broader horizons of inquiry and analysis. Critical

debates in this regard have centered on four points: first, power is more productive than repressive, in the sense that it brings into being meanings, subjectivities, and social systems—all of which are outcomes of power rather than its raw materials or presuppositions (Foucault 1978). Second, power and freedom are not opposites, since there are no subjectivities, and therefore no freedom, outside of power. Third, repressive models of power implicitly assume a human subject (or human nature) untouched by power's operation. Fourth, repression itself is far from suppressing desires; rather, it multiplies them

As said before, this new concept does not see power as an absolute essence. There is no absolute power, and no single power where it makes sense to reduce the essence of power. Power is not a monolithic authority or apparatus; it is immanent to every field and every role (Deleuze 2017). This immanence makes power a relatively concentrated force depending on circumstances and possibilities, with its sites and roles in constant and possible flux, and its forms and modes of exerting power multiplying to the point where we can reveal more clearly than ever its capacity to transform and its dynamism. We are now witnessing a refigure of the map of forces and the balancing of forces; we are now witnessing the reconfiguration of the rules of the power game, not being reconfigured in relation to a raw concept or notion of might and force, but rather with a specific momentum in favor of economic and scientific forces, technologies, at the disadvantage of the traditional kind of power, strength, and influence.

### **Knowledge and the Civilization of the “Third Wave”**

In sum, there are noticeable changes in the hierarchy of the relationship between the well-known and familiar sources from which power derives its legitimacy and from which all other forms of power emanate, namely: violence, wealth, and knowledge. These elements appear to be in a state of continuous revolution. In short, knowledge has been reshaped with the same depth as the reshaping of both violence and wealth, to the point that all three components of the power triad are undergoing a simultaneous revolution. However, the other two sources of power are gradually and increasingly dependent on knowledge (Toffler 2022).

The latter has become the true source of power in the civilization of post-industrial societies, or what Alvin Toffler called the “Third Wave” civilization. Knowledge, as a higher form of power, is not only capable of striking and securing success by compelling others to do what is required of them; it possesses capacities far greater than that. Its effectiveness lies in achieving the desired outcome through the minimal use of power. In many cases, knowledge can lead the other party to embrace your goals and actions, and even convince them that it was they who proposed these goals and actions in the first place (Toffler 1980).

Thus, the effectiveness of knowledge and its unlimited capacity to play various roles that enhance the legitimacy of power and consolidate its position becomes evident—whether through persuasion, punishment, reward, or even transforming opposites into their contraries. In all cases, knowledge functions as a multiplier of both wealth and force, since it can be used either to increase resources or to reduce expenditure in order to achieve a given goal—and in both situations, effectiveness is heightened. Whatever the endgame or the match, fewer cards of power are risked (Gordon and Foucault 1980). Knowledge, therefore, is the primary and winning card in the game of power.

Given the power of knowledge and its growing effectiveness in achieving qualitative gains and tipping the balance in struggles over power and domination, it has become the central stake. Indeed, in the context of the knowledge society and the information age, knowledge has emerged as a vital and highly significant axis of investment and a crucial foundation for building a comprehensive and sustainable development strategy. It constitutes a stock of intellectual and cognitive capital that can be exchanged, accumulated, utilized, and invested by those who possess it. In this sense, knowledge represents a source of cognitive wealth, an effective competitive weapon, and a strategic asset in the hands of contending forces and influential players in the dynamics of the new global order.

## Declared Digital Decentralization / Implicit Western Centralization

The conclusion that can be drawn from the foregoing is that the new and distinctive Nietzschean/Foucauldian conception of the relationship between power and knowledge has greatly influenced postcolonial philosophers and thinkers such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and others. It has become evident that the idea of the neutrality of knowledge is nothing more than a slogan emptied of its content. There is no such thing as pure knowledge, nor knowledge for the sake of knowledge; rather, the very existence of knowledge is conditioned and bound up with the drives of power and domination, and is strongly linked to authority, positionalities, and interests. One could even say that the will to knowledge emerges from—and is fused with—the will to domination. This is manifest with even greater clarity in our globalized and digitized era, where we recognize and acknowledge that “scientific knowledge has become a productive and creative activity within the framework of a global network, comprising actors capable of contributing according to their share in this productive and creative endeavor.

Regrettably, the Arabs—like the countries of the Third World—remain outside this network. The controlling force is none other than the world’s foremost industrial power, with its universities, research centers, and technological production that has developed over the course of five centuries. It is the West, with all its contradictions. The West represents the center: the center of production, control, and informational utilization. It is the source of scientific knowledge and information, whether in the form of books, journals, research centers, universities, global communication networks, or news agencies—in short, everything that contributes to the making of minds or to their manipulation (Amin 1989).

Thus emerge the contours of knowledge coloniality, which has come to rely on the unlimited possibilities offered by digital networks—possibilities that allow for the penetration and reconfiguration of time and space, thereby creating an environment in which the material boundaries of time and space dissolve, and where events and entities interconnect regardless of their geographical location or the material moment of their occurrence. Here, one can speak of what may be termed the *digital-cognitive expansion of power*, which exploits the boundless nature of digital temporality to extend the influence of authoritarian systems crafted by the West through digital tools – repression, surveillance, and manipulation of scientific/epistemic discourse. This is made possible by the Western monopolization of the digital infrastructure (software, databases, equipment, communication networks, and beyond) (Ndayisenga 2024).

It can hardly be disputed that there exists a Western digital hegemony grounded in technological innovation and investment. This hegemony reinforces the centrality of the West, though now in a renewed form, with a different vision and unfamiliar dimensions. The traditional hierarchical model of centrality has receded behind a new, invisible authority—namely, the “power of networked decentralization.” This power allows individuals and users from technologically lagging countries to produce, disseminate, share, and distribute knowledge outside the conventional frameworks of the research institutions to which they belong within their local contexts. Yet, this apparent empowerment entangles them in the illusion of liberation and cognitive agency through decentralized digital networks, which are promoted as democratic spaces free from the grip of hierarchical authorities. In reality, however, the essence lies in a latent and premeditated design to reproduce the very conditions of Western domination in a new guise: an absolute algorithmic hegemony capable of exerting profound influence on human consciousness by reshaping individuals’ convictions, ideas, beliefs, and attitudes toward everything (Ibrahim 2023).

In fact, the algorithms of artificial intelligence, designed and developed in research centers and major technology corporations in the Western world, are no longer merely neutral technical tools; rather, they have become central actors in shaping all forms of human consciousness, including cognitive consciousness, which is among the most elevated and complex of these forms. Algorithms now direct public discourse toward specific agendas, whether by promoting certain content or by restricting and concealing it (Ramos 2019). They have also come to dominate the mechanisms of the knowledge process in the contemporary world by controlling the production and distribution of knowledge, as well

as the flow, filtering, and classification of scientific data and information according to invisible criteria - thereby imposing a hidden guardianship over the sphere of scientific research.

In reality, Western dominance over the digital space is intensifying, and with it the rapid expansion of the digital divide between the Western world and other regions, which have become mere consumer markets for technological products and services offered by Western companies. More than that, these regions have turned into profitable sources of big data exploited by major Western technology and information companies—such as Google, Amazon, Microsoft, and Apple—to develop artificial intelligence algorithms. In this way, data ownership is transformed into a strategic resource that fuels the West's self-centered digital colonial supremacy, reminding us of the colonial past and of the West's obstinate exploitation of the natural resources of colonized countries without justice or sovereignty. Yesterday and today seem strikingly similar: the West continues to produce and reproduce the conditions of perpetual dependency, concealed behind soft and contemporary masks.

As is evident, digital decentralization plays a pivotal role in reproducing the exploitative frameworks of colonialism by monopolizing digital research outputs and transforming them into marketable commodities subject to the standards of algorithmic dissemination—standards that inevitably serve the Western project, reinforce its interests, and strengthen its economic, cultural, and technological dominance. Digital platforms, backed by data servers, thus become wide-open gateways that provide universal access to information and knowledge, but under undisclosed conditions embedded in systems of digital control. These conditions are, for the most part, opaque, complex, and incomprehensible to the majority of users.

Undoubtedly, digital exploitation expands to new dimensions when the user is a researcher confronted with academic and professional challenges. These challenges not only drive them to develop their tools, methods, and approaches but also compel them to submit to epistemic, technical, and ethical requirements that are detached from their local realities, cultural values, and research needs. More troubling still, these requirements are not presented as guidelines but rather as binding standards upon which both research and researcher are judged.

Thus, the researcher finds themselves constrained and subjected to the coercion of an implicit normative authority that dictates the frameworks, principles, and values governing the research process by imposing standardized criteria for data, algorithms, and mechanisms of access. This renders the researcher subordinate to a new epistemic centrality whose fertile and vital ground is the supposedly decentralized digital space. This exposes the persistence of the logic of domination, though in a new guise adapted to the age of globalization and digitization – a guise that may best be described as *false decentralization*, which creates conditions of dependency for researchers to the same extent that it ensnares them in the illusion of openness and liberation.

In this way, the hidden collusion between digital technology and Western colonialism is unveiled. Digital technology, which is founded upon and promoted through the idea of decentralization as a pluralistic emancipatory solution—supposedly capable of dismantling the monopoly of knowledge, decision-making, and authority by redistributing power and enabling genuine, free, and independent participation for all users of digital space—harbors at its core a concealed colonial centrality. This centrality lies hidden behind the promotion of the illusion of universality, neutrality, comprehensive progress, and both individual and collective liberation.

Under the cover of this illusion, a Western-dependent consciousness is domesticated into accepting and normalizing domination at the epistemic level. And under the same cover, the imperial West continues to strengthen its hegemony through preemptive measures aimed at managing the global digital transformation, which itself bears the appearance of decentralization.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that the journey toward liberation from colonial domination remains arduous and fraught with uncertainty. Despite the significant progress achieved by the Global South, many more steps remain to be taken before it can uproot the renewed Western centrality—constantly adapting to shifting conditions—and free itself from its soft yet tenacious grip, extending invisibly but effectively throughout the boundless realms of digital space.

## Conclusion

This investigation has identified that liberation is more than just a political act or a military action; it has become epistemic and cultural, situated at the intersection of the stakes of the digital age and the new challenges that emerge. The postmodern framework has demonstrated that the relationship between power and knowledge is dialectical and intertwined in both theory and practice. Knowledge does not simply have innocent or neutral habits; rather, it is an agent in control and the reproduction of hegemony. In an age of digital globalization, the purported decentralization exposes some level or kind of implicit Western centrality through the need to change the conditions of dependency; that is, they maintain their control and direction of flows of information and knowledge via the mechanisms of algorithms and technological infrastructures.

The research has further shown that what is termed digital liberation may in fact turn into an illusion: it gives users the impression of participation and empowerment, while keeping them subject to a hidden epistemic authority managed by research centers and major corporations in the West. This reproduces the colonial logic in a new form, one that may be described as soft hegemony.

Accordingly, confronting digital coloniality requires the articulation of a critical epistemic resistance based on rebuilding knowledge consciousness on independent foundations and developing local research alternatives capable of producing authentic knowledge that meets cultural and societal needs. There can be no genuine liberation without epistemic independence, and no epistemic independence without intellectual and scientific strategies able to narrow the digital divide and liberate the digital space from the renewed Western centrality.

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