



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



Rituals of myth and sacred, two legitimizing moments in 'from the annals of the laboratory state': A critique

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Abstract

This critique unfolds the areas of Visvanathan's article which aims to open up challenges to 'prevailing' western discourse of science which, he assumes, is linked to and associated with political and economic interests. In this review, the writer seeks to draw attention to the concepts deployed both by the western scientists and Visvanathan, as well as to the methodology Visvanathan has adopted by combining the concepts in arts, science and humanities to advance with his agenda. The writer would show that defining any paradigm or procedure as a 'sacred' moment may easily lead to discipline-policing and to the reproduction of reductionist worldviews, implicated whether in the scientific or humanistic thought.

Keywords: Science; Laboratory state; West; Myth; Visvanathan

1. Introduction

Shiv Visvanathan is an Indian scholar who has mainly contributed to the research in science. In his article 'From the Annals of the Laboratory State' [1], also published by the United Nations University, Visvanathan describes the modern force as a totalitarian moment and "modernity-as-violence" which, according to him, tends to violently summon, sideline and erase 'the Other' who is unable to conform to or does not fit into the project of progress [1, p. 37]. With reference to the 'concerns' Visvanathan delineates in his article and the suggestions that he puts forward, the humanities of the environment seem to go against the radical grains of scientific paradigm. In this context, we seek to overview the arguments of the article, clarify main ideas of its logic, critique its rigid statements, shed an evaluating light and to pose a response.

2. Scheme and Statement

Visvanathan's methodology to critically portray the scientific projects of modernity is a revisit to two anecdotal fictive and non-fictive moments in the history of social developments and a walkout with a systematic delimiting exegesis.

2.1. Arts and Modernity

He starts his debate by citing the cases from narratives of the 20-century novelist Joseph Conrad and explicates the problem by stating that although Conrad, either wittingly or unintentionally, illustrates West and modernity analogous to "violence", he is unable to recognize 'science', which "could be a mode of violence or tyranny" [1, p.38], in its nature. Visvanathan even makes a daring claim for Conrad as "one of the great students of modernity-as-violence", [1, p. 37]. To expand on his argument, he notes examples from Conrad's *Nostromo* [2], *The Heart of Darkness* [3] and *The Secret*

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Agent [4] to show how the civilized West has imposed its "savagery" on the uncivilized "savage" world by enacting violence through soul and sense of the subject.

2.2. Science and Modernity

Meanwhile, through the metaphor of "laboratory state" [1], Visvanathan states that, through the western lens, development is regarded as a scientific project and its violence is carried out systematically. He outlines three separate assumptions to advance with his debate:

- The realization that science could encode a structure of domination and violence;
- The violence of science is not a pathology confined to the fringes or frontiers such as atomic physics or genetic engineering; it is a pathology which resides in the banality of its everydayness; and
- The act of protest inaugurates what has been called the of the little knowledges. [1, p. 38]

The writer's approach to conceptualize the space of "modernity-as-violence" is expanding on four theses of what he calls "the contemporary rituals of the laboratory state": *The Hobbesian project*, *The imperative of progress*, *The vivisectional mandate* and *The idea of triage*. [1, pp. 38-39].

3. Discussion

3.1. Hobbesian Project

It is virtually self-evident from the first paragraph of his article that Visvanathan would blame socialization of "progress" as well as "modernization as scientific projects" of legitimizing the subjugation of 'the Other' as an "object of experimentation ... and erasure" [1, p. 41]. Through Hobbesian lens and expanding on his *Leviathan* [5], the writer seeks to draw links between science and power. His criticism of Hobbes is a brief theoretical reading of history of science and a picture of total rupture with nature as an embodiment of "rampant disorder" [1, p. 39]. To break with past and to establish a civil society, Hobbes strategy is to integrate propositions of science with those of sovereign state to make the mandates of scientific society operative, Visvanathan contends.

3.2. Imperative of Progress

By relying on Hobbesian and evolution theories, as well as taking advantage of literary examples, Visvanathan intends to explain that implementation of project of modernity has been possible by reading science as the grammar of power where "violence of the state becomes a symptom of the breakdown of science" [1, p. 39]. He uses "museum" as another spatial metaphor to sketch the map of "progress" from a modern science perspective. To expand on his thesis, he announces that the moderns forged the linear "identical temporality" and the "infinite, uniform and homogeneous space" [1, pp. 40-41], as opposed to those of classical Greek, to explain themselves within the framework of evolution theory in the sequential spatio-temporal arrangements of "museum". In the writer's eyes, this model of progress legitimizes West's "power and responsibility over this-world" and its "violence to the third world, as objects of experimentation" [1, p. 41].

3.3. Vivisectional Mandate

The metaphor of "laboratory state" is more encoded by the concepts of "vivisection" and "triage". While the author explicates his two first theses by means of theoretical discussions on the history of science and abstract ideas, his method in elaboration of "vivisection" and "triage" is through historical samples and documents. He attempts to show the 'conspiracy' of scientists and statesmen in inflicting of pain on "lesser" creatures for the purpose of scientific research, and the erasure of "surplus" and "dispensable" [1, p. 47] for the purpose of development. To exemplify, Visvanathan asserts that the concentration camp serves as "an industrial research laboratory organized completely by doctors and scientists" [1, p. 45] to celebrate findings in the synthesis of ammonia and indigo.

In the Figure (1), charted by Visvanathan in the article, he aims to demonstrate that the pattern for general scientific activity or "scientific management" means to put on its agenda greater areas of control while incorporates infinite "sets of violence within the genre of vivisection" [1, p. 42].

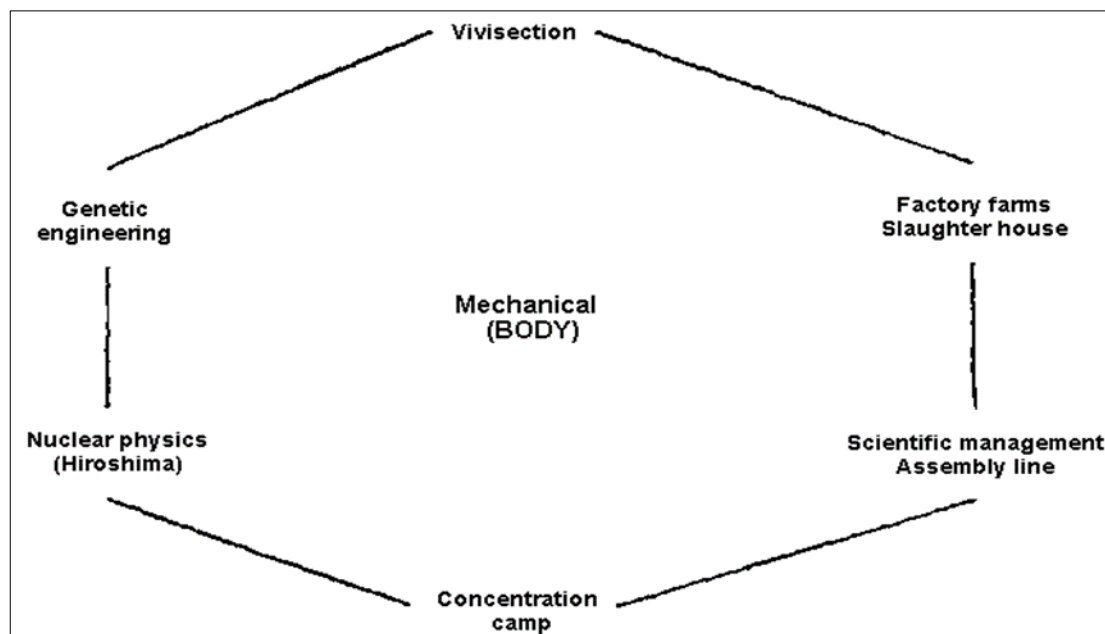


Figure 1 Scienticizing an issue bears the “seeds of vivisectional violence” with it, cited from ‘From the Annals of the Laboratory State’

Based on his discussion, the factory or slaughter house were initial laboratories served as the laboratory for the animal’s body to be laid off like a “map” to be disassembled, surveyed and discussed. The process was reversed later to become the engineering model for the assembly line. In the bombing of Hiroshima, he states, “the leading scientists not only helped the governments in making the decision but picked Hiroshima and Nagasaki as experimental sites ... The city became in their eyes an industrialized table of symptoms to be subjected to clinical gaze” [1, p. 44].

3.4. Idea of Triage

Furthermore, he cites an example from Richard Rubenstein on triage where scarce penicillin was denied from the injured American soldiers during World War II only because they were considered as helpless incurables. He also draws upon the local Indians who were displaced forcefully from their “home” as “memory” for the good of development. Visvanathan, at the end, addresses the problem of the article, once more, by blaming science and modernity for blatant violence against ‘The Other’ as well as against the commons: like “an ocean, a lake, a forest or a prairie” [1, p. 45].

4. Return to Sacred, Roots

Visvanathan in his article blends figurative language with that of science to criticize, what the writer calls, “totalitarian” and “violent” discourse of science. The writer’s selective terminology and well-developed approach for representing the monolithically unconstructive behavior of modern scientist in demonizing ‘The Other’ raises expectations for an “insurrection” and rebellious response at the end of the story. His debate, moreover, suggests that in order to keep environmental resources and commons intact from the devastating force of the state-science discourse of development, the rights groups, advocates of nature and the ethnic communities should shoulder their supports for “local knowledges” [1, p. 50] which demand a return to the “sacred” roots of *communitas*. We are also compelled to learn that green-revolution reductionism is no substitute for ecologically-sensitive traditional practices. This insurrection of the local knowledges which demands a return to the sacred is providing the crystal seed around which the challenge to the laboratory states of modernity has begun [1, p. 50]. As the writer toils to decry absolute assertions of a certain period, he is unwittingly slipped to lay outright claim on another cultural moment [6].

5. Conclusion

The review of ‘From the Annals of the Laboratory State’ could provide the reader with the knowledge that while the writer inclines to contradict the tradition of one moment, he accentuates the fancy of another. Visvanathan is on the one hand criticizes scientific discourse for its exclusions and creation of “myth”, and on the other invites us for recognition

of another paradigm or method as “regulatory” and “sacred” which could readily tend to police and reproduce lines of another absolute thought and homogeneous conflict-free space.

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