

# ARE YOU POSTCOLONIAL?

**Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak**

*[In December, 2005, the Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Literatures asked me to moderate a session called "Are we Postcolonial?" at their annual convention. Here are my opening remarks as moderator. These US-based remarks should be read in conjunction with "Ensuring Compatibility, Respecting Differences," (see p-8) by Alexander Kiossev, a Sofia University-based Bulgarian intellectual. —G C Spivak]*

You have involved yourselves in the rethinking of Soviet Studies as not only postsoviet studies but postcolonial studies. The first wave of postcolonial studies, based on the British empire. We have a lot to learn as that model travels out of its first contained sphere into the aftermath of old multicultural empires. Does postcolonialism lead to nationalism? Is postcolonialism appropriated by the metropolitan diaspora? Is "scientific socialism" comparable to "civilizing mission?" Is the "other Europe" movement in Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, the Balkans and elsewhere - manageable within a specifically postcolonial framework? Must the postSoviet world be thought of as a new "Eurasia" in order for the postcolonial viewpoint to stick, as Mark von Hagen has suggested? The argument about women as the surrogate proletariat in Central Asia traveled out of Soviet studies. How will that figure?

This rethinking implies that the most emancipatory vision of the Enlightenment could not withstand the weight of the objective and subjective history of older pre-capitalist empires. Our current and so-called emancipatory programs do not engage with this. There might be some use, then, in rethinking postcolonialism for this new task. But it must unmoor itself from its provisional beginnings in monopoly capitalist or mercantile colonialisms and transform itself in the process. Every postcoloniality is situated, and therefore different. A *Critique of Post-colonial Reason* was provoked by Kant's use of the West Australian aboriginal. How will this travel to the "European" imagination of the "the Other Europe" today? How will you displace our modern notions of hybrid diasporas when you think of the restlessness of, say, Armenia?

In response to students in the Slavics Department at Columbia University, I wrote at follows:

The terms "postcolonial" can be fairly elastic if you define scrupulously. When an alien nation-state establishes itself as ruler, impressing its own laws and systems of education, and re-arranging the mode of production for its own economic benefit, "colonizer" and "colonized" can be used. The consequences of applying them to a wide array of political/geographic entities would be dire if we thought colonialism had only one model. On the other hand, if we noticed how different kinds of adventures and projects turn into something that would fit the bare-bones description given above, we would have a powerful analysis of the politics of progressivism, of one sort or another. How do political philosophies of social justice relate to the overdeterminations of practical politics? This venerable

question would receive interesting answers if we considered the irreducibility of the colonial in a situation-specific and flexible way. Additionally, if we cast our glance at the place(s) colonized (according to the rarefied formula), we encounter great heterogeneity. This provides us an opportunity to study the politics of cultural and epistemic transformation.

The problem with applying these terms to the area you cover would be merely to follow the three most powerful models of colonial discourse theory currently available, belonging to the Middle East, South Asia and Latin America. These refer to colonial adventures undertaken by single nations as exploration and conquest nourished mercantile capitalism—followed by the expanding market needs of industrial capital. Your area displaced the political lines of old multi-ethnic imperial formations, Ottoman, Habsburg, Russian. The Eastern edge pushes into terrain that would be even further from the single-nation model. Another great difference is the presence of an articulated ideal—versions of “scientific socialism”—which gave a seemingly greater specificity to the epistemic change. The single-nation model was accompanied by “civilizing missions” that were relatively autonomous from political and economic structures.

Historically, it has always been the powerful who have spoken or been spoken of. I don't know enough about the area under study to go into detail here but, as a feminist and a subalternist, I am used to looking at the pores of elite texts to tease out excluded itineraries. As we move eastwards, the nature of the texts changes. Here, my disciplinary commitments kick in. I want us to use the literary imagination to read sagas and chronicles. I spoke with women from inner Asia ten years ago, and to folks from former Soviet Armenia more recently. They spoke of the difficulty of communication with their mothers—and for sure their grandmothers—because Russian gets in the way. The fracturing of gender is somewhat different from the nationalist insistence on native-language politics in the “new” nations bordering on the Russian Federation. However one approaches this, it seems to me a fertile field for real language-based Comparative Literature, much more like Cultural Studies than the older model of East European Comp. Lit.—where the discipline began. Colonial discourse and postcolonial studies have not been good with languages. The areas you study can turn this around. Your field can offer spectacular opportunities for history to join hands with literary criticism in search of the ethical as it interrupts the epistemological.

Postcolonial theory will engage analytical representations of positions other than the colonizers' (old and new) in the model of the organic intellectual (“permanent persuaders” —Gramsci). But it is the theory that must be made to engage with this, not ourselves as academic narcissist. The gendered approach is particularly effective in postcolonial work because it often seeks to elaborate a position that exposes the patriarchal collaboration between colonizer and colonized, feminism and postcolonial theory have a certain concern for social justice. I would like to think that this would be the case for all Humanities and Social Science work, perhaps for all work. But too narrow a definition of political commitment leads to work with foregone conclusions coming to the same dull litany time after time. I

have always found such “research” tedious. These are warnings from a battle-scarred veteran on the eve of your new departure. They were students. You are colleagues. I will let you add the pinch of Salt. ✍️✍️✍️✍️