

## Reading the Global Turn

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

I question the emergence of "Western domination studies" as having much to do with the effects of globalization. They are largely identitarian subgroups within the general movement towards the Sociology of Knowledge, started by the *German Ideology*, gaining different faces as history changed.

The general transformation of the world has happened so unevenly that to call it "general" is to beg the question, to take as demonstrated what we set out to prove - assume a network society as "world," before looking for counter examples. The network society is the condition and effect of the movement of electro-nified capital. To political theorists like Jon Elster the labor theory of value may be simply wrong, Gramsci a "bullshit Marxist." To political theorists like John Roehmer Marxism, having proved its uselessness, has now moved into the humanities.<sup>1</sup> I have not been trained in any of the disciplines listed in your prospectus: sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history, and geography. Disciplinary formation trains us how to construct a knowable object and we don't really lose that trained habit, however interdisciplinary we become. My disciplinary training obliges me to notice that we continue to assume ourselves as transparent subjects of investigation, able to make change. Therefore, even as I understand the points of view of these colleagues I just cited, I want to add the insights of a reading skill, reading the world, reading the so-called global turn.

The humanities teach epistemological performance. I don't really know how an economist reads the labor theory of value. But, read as a text of a desire to change the world, the trained reader can surmise that, in proposing the labor theory of value, Marx was suggesting that commensurability (viz., the value-form) can be computed in labor, not just by way of the general equivalent. Value is an empty form, not just a real or potential economic thing. Marx thought that the value-thing (for him gold) lost substantiality. Today we can think of data as the ubiquitous substance of value. But what is it for data as value-thing to be desubstantialized? There is a bit of been-there done-that feel about the idea of the network in the second decade of the twenty first century. We need to concentrate on the diversified substance of data, rather than sentimentalize it with psychic conclusions that would relate to well-tended subjects like ourselves. This is where I'll place vernacular cosmopolitanism and new legal subjects, at the end of my brief remarks.

These days, with the state decimated, great universities like mine often become an adjunct to the international civil society. But you have instituted, wisely I think, a disciplinary discussion. I will not, therefore speak unmediated "activism," but concentrate on disciplinary inquiry.

We need, then, to concentrate on the substance of the data, in an unsentimental and de-romanticizing way. A) on thick descriptions of what is being networked with attention paid to historical diversity of subject-formations; B) on how people are positioned on the network, their *Verhatnis* by the logic of the structure, rather than their *Beziehung* or

incidental relationship presented in terms of subjects in the image of the investigator; and C) what escapes the network. It is C) that most interests me. At one end of the spectrum of what escapes is rather large groups of people. At the other, the epistemic-epistemological event. This is what leads me to speak of institutional education.

What institutions of tertiary education in varieties of the metropole now have to think about is that globalization has introduced a kind of accessible contemporaneity to us, and placed us within it, which has not taken away, but rendered obsolete, the established ways of knowing the historical. Modernity/tradition methodologies, colonial/postcolonial methodologies remain appropriate in their own place, but are no longer useful to understand this new situation, which seems to lend itself more easily to a quantified, statisticalized, and, in a less rigorous way, simply arithmeticalized approach, democracy computed as supervised safe elections, epistemic claims without reality checks, going hand in hand with a collection of "global" curiosities as evidence.

Let us rather ask ourselves how we must change in response to this challenge to knowing, not how we can add more information and money to the spectacular alternative streams at the edges of disciplines. How can the mainstream of disciplines be rearranged so that we and our students learn to think differently, rather than separate rigorous history and method from the glamour of easy globality. Such challenges have come in history from time to time and intellectual historians as well as students of the history of consciousness have told us after the fact how these changes happened. To that extent, we too must give ourselves over to what we call the future anterior, what will have happened in spite of our best efforts. But at the university, we must also make these efforts—once again, to change ourselves, rather than simply to acquire more substantive knowledge.

The globe is on our computers, I wrote in 1997. No one lives there. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, indeed are it. It is not amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say "on the other hand."

I have given up hope that my counter-intuitive use of "planet" will fly, though many have claimed "planetarity" à la Spivak, even Christian theologians. The experimental musician Laurie Anderson, when asked why she chose to be artist-in-residence at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, said: "I like the scale of space. I like thinking about human beings and what worms we are. We are really worms and specks. I find a certain comfort in that."

She has put it more aggressively than is my intellectual style, but my point is close to hers. It is different from a sense of being the custodians of our very own planet, although I have no objection to such a sense of accountability. For that a good epistemological preparation is Isabelle Stenger's *Cosmopolitics*.<sup>ii</sup>

The sense of custodianship of our planet has led to a species of feudality without feudalism coupled with the method of "sustainability." This work, unlike traditional imperialisms, does not engage with epistemic interference. At the top, it does not train participants in anything resembling the epistemological preparation I have been outlining above; the only preparation is teleological, with, at best, an unconnected and superficial cultural relativism. In the global south, the partners who come forth are in a benevolent feudal relationship with the bottom feeders, whom they represent with romantic

archaism. I believe arguments from "vernacular cosmopolitanism" come from a reaction-formation resulting from taking the victim-subject for granted. It is a way of avoiding the unregulated development of a species of world governance (or world "management") in a world that must necessarily be unready for *cosmopolitheia*. The use of gender here is altogether striking, as it is in all international civil society and sustainability exercises. Let us rescue the word into its political meaning: a constitution for the world, an abstract juridico-legal structure that must match the abstractions of globality. It is not enough to hang on to the colloquial sense and suggest, as does Bruce Robbins, that vernacular / cosmopolitanism is just a change of definition.<sup>iii</sup> For a corrective vernacular cosmopolitanism to work, there must be a world governmentalized evenly. To suggest now, that global minorities - labor export, paperless immigrant women, - achieve cosmopolitanism, is to forget that they must exist in race- class-divided situations where it is impossible to feel or exercise the sense of general equality that must be the definitive predication of epistemic cosmopolitanism. Restricted solidarities unregarding of national origin in immigrant oppression cannot be called cosmopolitanism. Today's global cosmopolitan looks more like this :

My informant, this relaxed good looking man, going slightly thick in the middle with stress and easy living, described himself, in effect, as a member of the cosmopolitan *culture*—very good telecom links abroad, traveling abroad incessantly, making a dollar salary but living in India, free to be globally mobile in skills, with aspirations clued in.

I had introduced him with a "gender division of labor in the culture of the mega city : for the husband business and globalization, for the wife childrearing and Americanization. That connection remains unmade."

Pre-modern trade routes articulated in world systems theory come closest to varieties of masculinist cosmopolitanism. Nationalism and continentalism, by no means dead today, came to suppress the global turn there. And, as we recall them, their margins begin to blend with what I have called "civilizationism."

On the other side of the feudality without feudalism of the global turn are the recommendations for empire in one form or another in the general academic field; keeping to the root meaning of *cosmopolitheia*. At the extreme edge are those that simply recommend empire for empire's sake, saying that because they are powerful, by winning wars they bring peace; the United States should behave more like an empire. Historical analyses such as Niall Ferguson's or Mark von Hagen's can take on board the argument from imperialism as "enabling violation". Some understand the "enablement" but not the "violation:" "Despite nationalist and Marxist cant, this first liberal order [the British empire] was hugely beneficial for the world, particularly its poorest," writes Deepak Lal. For him, Woodrow Wilson overthrew Westphalia (192). The epistemological matter is taken care of by a simple formula : "Modernize without Westernizing" (203). Ferguson asks the question : "can you have globalization without gunboats?"(xix), and comes to a conclusion, at the end of his book, in favor of "the United States shifting from informal to formal empire," although it might mean "a great many small wars like the one in Afghanistan" (314). Joseph Stiglitz's three popular books are representative of a welfare-state liberal position. He knows that integration into an equitable globalization is the only solution for "developing" countries and it is the responsibility ("burden"?) of the "developed" countries to transform themselves accordingly. He is critical of the "colonialism" of the IMF and the inequities of the WTO but this general attitude of the developed folks' burden leads to a "good" imperialism, the best we can hope for.

Stiglitz's notion of "asymmetries of information" (xi) can lead our way, if attention is paid to the difference between information control and learning to read, information or anything. His notion of education is of course as access to jobs (59). By *Making Globalization Work*, the emphasis has swung towards enforcement for the many excellent policy suggestions that he has assembled, to create a balance between the economic sphere and "basic values." But what are these values? How are they manufactured? Such impractical questions drive my remarks this morning. Stiglitz would enforce "good behavior" (159). This change begins to resemble the justified impatience of the human rights lobby locally and globally, which is also beginning to swing toward enforcement. Charles Tilly's conviction that "bearing burdens for the common good," and making it possible that a government will provide equitable treatment to the subaltern, does indeed lead to a "transformation and an enhancement," require epistemological production of the internal conditions of citizenship which may be potentially capable of wrenching its external conditions without interminable global benevolence and an unquestioning insistence on enforcement alone. Obama's solution is behavioral economics. This is where Hardt and Negri also remain conservative. Their idea of democracy ignores the double bind between ipseity and alterity that rides democracy from Plato to Gandhi. I cannot endorse their notion of the contemporary scene, as Empire sublating the Dream of America, to be sublating by a multitude that must come into itself. "A universe of productive linguistic networks" - their phrase - must take into account that because of the immense linguistic richness of the world, we cannot always understand each other (this beyond the irreducible mis-understanding in successful human communication even monolingually) and some might want to preserve that mystery in the face of the data-based clarity of globalized capital in the service of a world. This implies an ignoring of the example of Africa is resolutely ignored. If the importance of first language acquisition in an infant as activating the metapsychological circuits of ethical semiosis is grasped, we will understand that globalization itself is a one-way road and the task of the humanities is to attempt to supplement it. Even a good globalization (the failed dream of socialism) requires the uniformity which the diversity of mother-tongues must challenge. Otherwise, it will perish again and again because of an ethics-shaped hole.

This is a "reading." Take it or leave it. The planet will have its way, not the globe or the world. □□□

**NOTES :**

- i. Symposium on Analytical Marxism, Columbia University, 9/14/10.
  - ii. "Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*, tr. Robert Bonono (Minneapolis : Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010); *Cosmo-politiques II* (Paris : La Decouverte, 2003).
  - iii. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, eds. *Cosmopolitics : Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 1-2.
- [First presented at *Le tournant global*, Paris, Sept 26, 2010]