

“Can the Subaltern Speak?”

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

[This is a preface to a Croatia translation of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essays]

I was, unbeknownst to me, set on the track of the singularity and collectivity of the subaltern by the war-raped women in Bangladesh, an example that will resonate in the Balkans. The singular, as I often repeat, is the always universalizable, never quite universal (can one put "quite" before "universal?" How will this translate into Croatia? I am playing out the irreducibly provisional nature of the singular; doubly bound with universality.)

Among the photographs taken of these women by Sivani Chakravorty, my Mother, in 1973, is one of a woman, hardly more than a child, sitting alone, in a queered stance, on a low porch, rendered literally mute by this experience of the extreme signature of reproductive heteronormativity. When I looked again at that photograph with Nayanika Mookerjee, I realized that, in turning the pages of my album, I had marked her as a representation of the speechless subaltern, a trace - the architrace of singularity, appropriation violated by the mark of "there was." If alive, she would be in her fifties today. How did she live out the rest of her days, typecase of woman's fate as such?

A decade later, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, my grandmother's sister, animated Gramsci's articulation of subalternity for me, by way of Marx. That story is told in "Looking Back, Looking Forward," included in this volume. I have described her gift in my memoirs :

Bhubaneswari... supported armed struggle. Yet I would like to think that my pacifism resonates with her inability to kill. When in a public conversation with Judith Butler, I said, in answer to a question from the audience as to how I could be a pacifist in the face of Palestine, that the problem with the situation in Palestine was that politics would not allow me to be ethical, no one in the audience knew that I was thinking, in my heart, that it was a lesson I had learned from Bhubaneswari, who was only seventeen when she died.

Antonio Gramsci, the Italian democratic communist, had introduced the category of the subaltern into Marxist thought. WEB Du Bois locates slavery within the self-determination of capitalism. By his reckoning the slave might have been, as Gramsci's "subaltern" certainly was, a way of rethinking those who are "excluded from the process of production..." as well as from the protective mechanisms of the state.¹ The Subaltern Studies group of South Asian historians had harnessed the idea of the subaltern to the study of national liberation in India. Gramsci himself had written extensively on the Italian Risorgimento, where the subtext of subalternism is the guiding thread for the careful reader. There is thus a loose connection between subalternity and nationalism, the former usually ignored by the latter, which might be rediscovered by the readers of this volume.

Robert J C Young has recently suggested that my work contributed the thought of singularity to the thinking of the subaltern.² In 2003, Partha Chatterjee had suggested that I had introduced the question of representation into the study of subalternity. Is the subaltern only the description of a group or class, or also of singular individuals? Should we draw a correct historical portrait of the subaltern, or should we become its self-appointed proxy? For broaching such topics, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" became more popular than I had imagined possible.

(I myself cannot quite agree with these generous assessments. Recently Ursula Apitzsch has shown that Gramsci spoke of single if not singular subalterns in his letters to the Schucht women.³ And the idea of the two representations is implicit in Gramsci's description of the master-disciple relationship between the intellectual and the subaltern environment.)⁴

Of late, there has been a call for the idea of the subaltern in Western Europe—especially in the context of immigrant resistance. There a warning I placed in my original essay may be called to mind; that the sentence "White men are saving brown women from brown men" be read as Freud read "A child is being beaten."

Recently, Judith Butler has given a riveting reading of this injunction.⁵ Nobody in the intervening twenty-odd years had heeded it. I cannot reproduce the details of her reading, sitting here writing with my feet on earth and my notebook in my lap in the gathering dusk of rural West Bengal. I urge the reader to refer to Freud's text and relate to Butler's most moving description of the self-represented analysand (the author of "Can the Subaltern Speak?") as "the self-pleasing girl." Note also that the entire gesture is staged as a double bind. For, in taking Freud as a "monitory model," I was precisely using a white man to save brown women from brown men.

Yes, within the limits of self-analysis (transgressed as defined by Freud himself), that was indeed the intention of the analysand, a vulnerable concept-metaphor! —to hint at the labyrinth of "representational" desire of the postcolonial—a desire more boldly grasped and presented in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*⁶. The point of departure of my subsequent work has been the elaboration of a methodology of rearrangement of these desires.

The subaltern is a position without identity. If you think you can claim to be specifically a subaltern, the only thing to do with it is to lead in the name of the subaltern, a grounding error in the same category as tracing Bach, only reversed, from above, not from below.⁷

Jonathan Chauveau, a French journalist (like many politically correct folk in that part of the world, anxious to have me endorse a speaking subaltern), e-mailed me as follows :

the popular revolts in Africa and their political consequences were neither anticipated nor envisaged by the countries concerned and even less by international diplomacy. Can one explain this blindness by the fact that leadership came from young people and women not belonging to recognized circles of the "official opposition." It would thus be their subaltern position —a population not recognized as a "classically" constituted political force— which would explain that no one anticipated these events definitively, because no one had, at their disposal, the means for hearing them, listening to them, or yet understanding them. Do you agree with this analysis? Is it not a case of the subaltern grabbing the right to speak? ...Given that these popular uprisings seem identical. Can one envisage a regional political alliance in future?

I replied :

I am of course tremendously impressed by what's happening in North Africa, but it's not necessarily "the subaltern speaking." It is rather the awe-inspiring spectacle of citizens claiming citizenship. It is possible that the urban subproletariat mingled with the largely metropolitan, class-mixed, gender-mixed crowd we saw in Tahrir Square. There was also a phenomenon of "prendre la parole" by the private sector, by civil society, by the citizen. Unfortunately, if the term "subaltern" has to remain useful, it cannot be identified with varieties of national liberation movements. It must, however, be said, that the young man who burnt himself to death in despair in Tunisia might be thought of as a subaltern bringing himself to crisis, "speaking," and there being an infrastructure of political will, created, paradoxically, by the predatory state, able to "hear" him and complete his speech act.⁸

I hope these words will echo for the play of Balkan nationalism with a call for a New Left that is now active in the Croatian historical moment!

That at least was international news before I went to my rural schools, off the electronic track. Back now in Kolkata, but no time to catch up.

Structurally, the only place in West Asia that could have managed such a desiring historical moment was Iraq (and perhaps Libya), a class-hatched secular state held together by a dictator altogether malevolent to his enemies. One hopes that Egypt will reclaim a somewhat sullied historical memory of a socialism that was not sufficiently democratic.

Today's examples are all national liberationist. Socialism, tied to the persistent turnaround of capital, definitively global, must be international in its scope. Otherwise we will have islands of socialist nation-states, disabled by a global neo-liberalism, transformed into managerial socialism, flank open to totalitarian transformation, occluding ceaseless subalternization in the interest of nationalism.

Socialism *can* undo structural subalternity, persistently. But even international socialism cannot undo subaltern singularity. There we are in the ethical rather than the political, inseparable spheres in a relationship without a relationship. I have written so much about training the imagination for epistemological performance so that it remembers to wait on the opening of the ethical that I will hope that the readers of this will read that material as well, and align myself with Du Bois and Gramsci, gendered and queered.⁹

References :

1. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, tr. Patrick Lavin (London: Bookmarks, 2005), p. 92, n.3.
2. Intervention, roundtable on Rosalind Morris, ed. *Can the Subaltern Speak: Reflections on the History of An Idea*, Center for the Humanities, CUNY, March 2, 2011.
3. Introduction, forthcoming text on Gramsci in conversation with Giulia and Tatiana Schucht.
4. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, tr. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (**:*), p. 350.
5. Intervention, roundtable on Morris, ed. *Can the Subaltern Speak*, CUNY, March 2, 2011.
6. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999.
7. See Joseph Diebes, <http://www.joediebes.com/works/one2one.html>
8. Unpublished e-mail French portion translated by author.
9. I refer the reader to my forthcoming book *An Aesthetic Education in the Time of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press).