

Cultural pluralism?

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psc.sagepub.com**Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak***Columbia University, NY, USA***Abstract**

This article is an analysis of the ideological production of the idea of cultural pluralism. It points at the impossibility of inhabiting two or more civil societies at once. It points at the fact that culture alive cannot be accessed. It recommends attention to the ungeneralizable huge subaltern populations of the world that often also constitute an electorate. It recommends linguistic rather than cultural pluralism and a nurturing of the understanding of the right to intellectual labor in education practice.

Keywords

Cultural pluralism, democracy, Antonio Gramsci, intellectual labor, subaltern

A robust cultural formation, when active, which basically means at all times, forgets that it is not a general description of human nature. Cultural pluralism is nested within this. Indeed, even cultural singularism, the sense that I myself am within a nameable culture, is nested within this. Thus, the political necessity we are speaking of is a product of intellectual labor. Yet to understand the right to intellectual labor is itself a product of intellectual labor, at the top as well as at the bottom: digital idealism, knowledge management at today's top, and/or historical cognitive damage of different sorts, at all levels, at all times. Our topic is held within these contradictions and performative contradictions. Whatever I say will be said without venturing up to the perilous necessity of seriously considering this, even if it were possible to look around one's own corner or fully tabulate one's own historical symptomaticity. Small-r rationalists mock this requirement, and I do not think I can do anything to change their minds.

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I will ignore the question: Who cannot be the subject or object of cultural pluralism? Just a reminder of the International Labor Organization's figures on forced labor readily available online.

I will also ignore the low-grade cultural pluralism that occupies the daily lesson plan of the more active side of the international civil society. 'In *Crazy Like Us: the Globalization of the American Psyche* (2010), author Ethan Watters chronicles both do-gooders and legitimate workers employing culturally erroneous attempts at MHPSS [Mental Health and Psychosocial Support].' Incidentally, this abbreviation provides us with a good example of the abdication of intellectual labor by knowledge management. I continue with the quotation:

In the chapter covering the 2004 tsunami response, Watters documents [2010] several problematic and/or harmful attempts by transnational outsiders: psychological trauma checklists, drive-by research, play therapy without translators, and single sessions of grief counselling. Those of us who have what we consider good educations, certifications and licenses might take comfort that these critiques are directed at unsophisticated, unprofessional people. Closer examination, however, shows that academic professionals and career relief workers are also prone to make these cultural errors.¹

Thus writes Dr Siddharth Ashvin Shah (whom I had had as a student briefly at the University of Hawaii), in the pages of the *Clinical Social Work Journal*. The passage is fallow for critical analysis, which will take us too far away from our concerns today.

Having touched, then, both the philosophical and the global mundane – I must think the first applies to the second and not vice versa – I will start on two fronts. The first: that cultural pluralism, if possible, would be an unquestioned good. And second, that we must think that possibility on a collection of fronts: global; Euro-national; national; and subaltern. To explain, let me quote a passage from a conference description on 'Margins and Marginal Communities', held at the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute in Calcutta in December 2012:

... the conference will not include those communities who form [a] majority population or numerically or culturally a dominant group in one country and become [a] minority group in another.

'That is exactly my situation,' said I at that conference, and continued, '[y]et you have invited me. I would like to report that I am aware of the problem and yet I also know that when others recognize, as you have by implication, that I have tried to face that problem, my responsibility becomes nuanced.'²

I cannot escape that nuanced responsibility in the name of the local/global. For the distinction being made here is precisely between the impossibility of full participation in two or more national civil societies, in spite of the existing widespread and correct concern with the theme of global economics and its politics, and their epistemological consequence. When we express satisfaction with legal and epistemological discussions of cultural pluralism at international conferences, we have to keep this diversified political field of enunciation in mind. Attempting to place myself within that intellectual problematic, I would say that the passage I just quoted indicates the common sense, perhaps unselfconsciously, that the line

between the legal system and epistemology is here, in this particular problematic of the separation between, and therefore the impossibility of full participation in, two or more national civil societies, not as direct as the global economic, where neo-liberal politics leads to widespread immigration, which in turn produces a restricted discourse of pluralism from the metropolitan subject. More about this later. Here I refer merely to a refusal of the interpellation noticed by the conference planners in Calcutta. When asked to report at Humboldt University in Berlin how others perceived Europe so that a lesson of cultural pluralism could be learned from visible minorities, I remarked that

... I was indeed also somebody who was placed very much and intimately within an otherness to Europe, an old otherness to Europe which could perhaps allow me to be interpellated as such. In the final analysis, however, I refused that interpellation in the interest of complicity – being folded together – with a classed Europe,

taking my *longue durée* beyond the play of capital and colony. I will say a bit more about this expansion before I end.

Given my sense of robust cultural formations, I cannot be satisfied with the adjective ‘cultural’ as applied to the word ‘pluralism’. The claim that this can be practised demonstrates that the necessary and irreducible connection between culture and nature is no longer functioning. A functioning culture represents itself, or auto-affects, as human nature. As a result of this intuition, I would rather place our topic in the unrecognized aporia between liberty and equality: my culture (liberty) and all others (equality).

One of the examples of the impossibility of participation in two or more national civil societies is the fact that if one has a dual citizenship with the United States, one can vote only in the United States. It is largely because of this that I and others like me, long-time diasporics, have retained Indian (or other southern) citizenship. I speak these days from the large-scale disappearance of cultural pluralism from the world’s largest democracy. I cast my vote in the Indian general elections, where the party allied to Hindu nationalism has shown an overwhelming majority. Democracy is so hospitable a system that one is allowed to hope that in the next round, this may be changed.

What is at issue here?

Epistemological training through activating the imagination of the largest sectors of the electorate into not just liberty for me, my family, my group, but also equality for others who do not resemble any of the above. I substitute – although the speaking of this substitution is possible only when well-placed epistemologically trained diasporic intellectuals of a certain cast of mind speak – and I, being one of that group, easily substitute equality for pluralism at a conference podium. Even so reasonable a philosopher as John Rawls points out that some sort of grounding error must be claimed in this sort of context. I quote from *Political Liberalism*. In a volume necessarily committed to the cold war liberal logic of containment, this smart man picks up ‘neutrality’, as Derrida does reason, as the best grounding error:

... the term *neutrality* is unfortunate; some of its connotations are highly misleading, others suggest altogether inpracticable principles. For this reason I have not used it before in these lectures. But with due precautions taken, and *using it only as a stage piece, as it were*, we may clarify how the priority of rights connects with the above two ideas of the good.³

The electorate cannot perform this philosophical move. I believe this is why Derrida wrote:

To speak democratically of democracy, to speak in an intelligible, univocal, and directed way of democracy, to make oneself understood to anyone who can understand the word or the sentences that one makes with this word, for I always repeat Austin's adage, that a word is never directed: only a sentence is directed.

The word 'can' is given two meanings: power as capacity (*Gewalt* would complicate this, Derrida reminds us that we are speaking Graeco-Latin) and power as right. This brings in the question of translation. I never had the opportunity to ask him a question. What about those who, cognitively damaged millennially through social apartheid, have neither power nor right, and yet must vote without access to the rights of citizenship? Where are they in the formation of collectivity? The question of the contingencies of the event neutralized by sex-gender performativities can enter here.⁴

This is why also so-called pluralism or promotion of equality for dissimilar others should not be merely adjudicated, although laws must be passed. Laws remain increasingly less successful instruments of enforcement in the hands of epistemologically unprepared functionaries or place-holders until the persistent efforts at the epistemological training that allows laws to be constructed as objects of willing can be seriously undertaken. I should also mention that, even as a voter, I could only submit to the relentless arithmetic of clean democracy, incapable of turning the tide pulled up by billions of electors epistemologically trained into identitarianism by the hyper-real discourse of the residual practised by the dominant, in other words, identitarian culturalist voting-block politics. In my own quiet way I have been trying to produce such epistemological change here in a deep focus now for 30 years, for which I use the shorthand 'field' in this article. This effort is so against a long historical *durée* that, to quote the bookmark in my copy of Bakunin, I am not, unlike the successful 'Master of Business & Life', 'Effective, Focused, Productive, and Practical'.

Why was I reading Bakunin? Because, apart from taking a moratorium on so-called cultural pluralism or equality for and with dissimilar others, in my state in India, and in the nation in general, we have recently also witnessed a clear movement toward the decline or even the demise of the left. As a sort of act of private piety, the morning after the elections I was listlessly turning the pages of Bakunin, not because I am a closet anarchist, exactly the opposite, but because I think he betrays more clearly the epistemological make-up of the International than the more robust and worked-over history of Marxism. And, in a typical passage, it came clear to me, mourning, that the general trend was powerfully to ignore the aporia between equality for all and liberty for us: 'The Association poses a vast goal: *equality*. The means it proposes as the only effective and real ones, are no less formidable: *the overthrow of the power of the members of the bourgeoisie and the destruction of their existence as a separate class*.'⁵ Equality for anyone, rather tougher than the safer goal of cultural pluralism.

This is why, to Occupiers, Arab Springers and varieties of Maidanists, I say, echoing Gramsci, that justified interest in destroying the corrupt other side – the International Workingmen's Association's 'bourgeoisie' – who is holding a conference on cultural

pluralism today – does not lead to the establishment of a politically stable society or to political structures that are both stable and flexible. (The one who listens in this crowd is Amin Husain, a Palestinian New Yorker.) The nerve-racking hospitality of democracy will continue to demand, turn after turn, that liberty for us – whether it be the 99 per cent or concerned citizenship or yet us nationalists or, further, us working men – cannot ignore the huge problem of equality for those who do not resemble us at all. All varieties of struggle are under the relentless command of a necessarily crossed aporia.

Although this line of thinking requires much greater development in order to distinguish it from mere reformism, I want to go back to the Indian general elections again. I should mention here that, the nature of the bit of historical evidence that I will quote now, will be speaking of the Bengalis rather than Indians in general – which last phrase, as many readers will agree, is a gift of imperialism that the post-colony must protect over against the economic epistemology of globalism, in parts of Asia as in Africa. And, for better or for worse, it happens that in West Bengal the anti-pluralist party has less of a numerical hold, although I do not think that has much to do with the passage I will quote.

It is a passage where the Bengali ‘natives’ religious tolerance was dismissed as ‘imbecilic’, ‘a gigantic superstition . . . which admitted that various modes of faith might be acceptable to the Almighty; and which, therefore, was perpetually undermining our allegiance to the *sole* majesty of the everlasting Gospel’.⁶ The author was Thomas Fanshaw Middleton, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s senior contemporary at Christ’s Hospital and later the first Bishop of Calcutta, of whom Coleridge speaks fulsomely in the *Biographia Literaria*.⁷

I want to add emphatically here that much, though not all, of the move towards cultural pluralism comes from a combination of the British 19th-century and French radicalism and the good bishop was Coleridge’s revered senior. These are imperial subjects in general, epistemologically resembling benevolent feudality today with unevenly dispersed feudalism. That mindset, displaced, today considers the immigrant in Europe as the endpoint of all benevolence. We have repeatedly identified the paperless (or even papered) immigrant as the new subaltern. But, the active forgetfulness of subalternity in general is the relatively long *durée* of that good imperial mindset and is allied to the general subsumption of class under identity, which was the target of criticism of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.⁸

Over against this, I have mentioned earlier versions of cultural pluralism that do not resemble the heavy-duty benevolence of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support: the Mughals; the Ottomans; and now Bishop Middleton has given us the Hindu Bengalis. The first two were models of conflictual co-existence (in spite of a good deal of recent work, the master source for us remains George Makdisi’s *Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Classical West*) – the Mughal example is part of the mental furniture of every Indian child brought up in the secular tradition.⁹ For Ottoman pluralist modernity my favorite witness is Khaled Ziadeh in *Neighborhood and Boulevard*, giving a young man’s view of the culture of the Ottoman café in his native Tripoli in Lebanon, soon to be Islamized by the French.¹⁰ The imbecile Bengalis may have been expressing belief in the eternal return of the Incarnation.

It would be a mistake, however, to take such examples as a simple corroboration of the ‘colonialism ruined us’ theory of history.

Many years ago we read Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.¹¹ Benevolent, malevolent, or indifferent pre-colonial power groups unevenly enriching themselves at the expense of the groups without power, both inheriting older hierarchies postcolonially, share that logic. This gives us a pre-modern clue to the word 'underdevelopment' as it spread to varieties of class-apartheid present in all polities, cutting across gender-apartheid and group-apartheid, where the usual overflowing of something like 'class' in the everyday must be allowed to contaminate the disinfected house of scientific socialism. I have so often cited Ambedkar's graduate seminar paper at Columbia, intended for a non-Indian audience, where he suggests that the difference in the treatment of surplus men and surplus women, present in all societies, is the motor of group-formation, including caste, that I will not quote it here.¹² I will simply refer to the fact that it acknowledges reproductive hetero-normativity as the matrix within which the history of apartheid as generic is held.

If we allow the concept of development to overflow the interplay of capital and colony, we will see this matricial role more clearly. This requires allowing reproductive hetero-normativity itself to overflow the outlines of sexual reproduction and be thought as the possible unacknowledgeable antonym of the auto-normativity that is the authoritative self-representation of ideology as Idea. The mere idea of cultural pluralism, investigatable as such in epistemology and the law, is autonormative, repeatable for the textbook. It must ignore the heterogeneous activity of the denial of a situation-specific and diversified ideological practice that makes the investigation possible. The effort to acknowledge this folded-togetherness of ideology and idea – their complicity – allows us to embrace with great caution the useful and trivial Euro-sequential truism – time moves from the pre-modern to modern through colonialism into globality – spiced up now by 'culture' as invented by anthropology and now bowdlerized by UNESCO and the Nara Document of 1994 – that runs the world and protects sustainable underdevelopment by a sanitized cultural pluralism; in order persistently to walk in the mud that gives us the agency of complicity, and the courage to keep revising the conceptualization of development as freedom in capitalism without the task of subject-formation, just recognition in the status quo.

This is not a debilitating self-accusing denial of practice, as David Lloyd has recently claimed, and certainly not pre-capitalist romanticization of the subaltern, as I have been told Henry Schwartz has claimed. As a caste-Hindu in the case of the caste system, for the white South African in the case of J. M. Coetzee, and in the case of the Armenian genocide in the history of Turkey, I have asked in published prose:

Have hardworking members of the colonizing elite, mindful of the daily consequences of complicity, of being folded together, earned the right to access subaltern helplessness? Is history so much larger than personal affect that only political correctness is allowed?

... how much larger is history than personal goodwill? Should this question be withheld regarding pre-colonial violence, depredations, slave trading, etc.? ... I have asked myself this question continually over the last thirty years as I try to train teachers among the rural landless dalits in my home state. My caste and class have millennially denied them the right to intellectual labor, oppressed them in many cruel material ways, and convinced them of their social and spiritual inferiority.¹³

Perhaps literature says it in ways that an expository argument cannot. Here is J. M. Coetzee in 1974, in his first published work of literature, recounting the mingling of master and man in an inscription of the soil that cannot be erased. A transformation of Levinas' idea of the human as object as the inauguration of the ethical.¹⁴ In this fictionalized account (comparable in inspiration with Assia Djebar's imagining of women's moments in a medieval Arabic text in *Far from Madina*) of an actual 18th-century deposition by an actual ancestor of the author, the account itself is also included in the text.¹⁵ This is what is left when that ancestor happened to be the first white man to have penetrated so far north in the South African Karoo:

From the scalp and beard, dead hair and scales. From the ears, crumbs of wax. From the nose, mucus and blood (Klawer, Dikkop [Hottentot followers – Coetzee takes into account the collaboration of the subalternized colonized], a fall and blows respectively). From the eyes, tears and a rheumy paste. From the mouth, blood, rotten teeth, calculus, phlegm, vomit. From the skin, pus, blood, scabs, weeping plasma (Plaatje [Hottentot follower], a gunpowder burn), sweat, sebum, scales, hair. Nail fragments, interdigital decay. Urine and the minuter kidneystones (Cape water is rich in alkalis). Smegma (circumcision is confined to the Bantu). Faecal matter, blood, pus (Dikkop, poison). Semen (all). These relicts, deposited over Southern Africa in two swathes, soon disappeared under sun, wind, rain, and the attentions of the insect kingdom, though their atomic constituents are still of course among us. *Scripta manent.* (D 119)

I have cited these texts to consolidate my intuition that *The Childhood of Jesus* is the last in a line of texts writing the attachment to land outside of the topology of colonialism. Rationalized cultural pluralism, a good but restricted consciousness-raising goal, and certainly not to be avoided, is still held within that topology. Measure the distance from this being-written to the error recounted in *Mental Health and Psychosocial Support*: 'play therapy without translators'. Those who are not written into the soil have the opportunity to slow themselves down and learn languages. Languages can be learned, not cultures. Intellectual labor for the elite. It is impossible to be global; even as you must cross that impossibility for short-term redress, again and again.

In conclusion, then, let me repeat further, a gist: because it does not advocate ignoring cultural difference at the expense of class and destroying the opposition, cultural pluralism is not Marxism, not even the Gramscian model. Indeed, it usually emphasizes identity at the expense of class. Because it ignores the aporia between liberty and equality, it is not democracy. Because it ignores culture as performative of human nature, it is not significantly 'cultural'. Most who sponsor cultural pluralism will not want to go as far as Derrida. Let us rather recommend Rawls' common-sense Derridean moment and suggest the adoption of neutrality as grounding error. The way to make this available is the practice of propagating interest in intellectual labor – persistently claiming complicity, recognizing that social justice, which builds itself on its own indefinite continuation, nests in all children's, and therefore all people's, capacity to *use* the right to intellectual and imaginative labor, not just in ease and speed of learning. All accountable efforts at social justice are no more (and no less) than the way in which we can access justice as such, if there is such a thing. This – a lesson learned in the field of practice – I said in

Utrecht on the 300th anniversary of the Peace of Utrecht (1713). Today, in metropolitan Turkey, an altogether different social formation in a conjuncture productive of classed internationality defining globality, I add that such a thinking of social justice can or might acknowledge, in turn, that the practice of cultural pluralism in our expanded and discontinuous sense is nested in its own performative contradiction.

If this seems too obscure, I repeat my plea, rewriting class struggle: do not, at least, forget subalternization everywhere, for the subaltern as such cannot be generalized, crossing out all access to pluralism, again and again. Tested in the field that produced the message in Utrecht, a field that I left 4 days before the conference where these words were first spoken, and would re-enter, in 4 weeks, to continue learning how not to teach. At the time of revision, re-entry was planned in 5 days. And now, finalizing, in a month.

Notes

1. 'Ethical Standards for Transnational Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS): Do No Harm, Preventing Cross-Cultural Errors and Inviting Pushback', *Clinical Social Work Journal* 40 (2012): 438–49 (438–9).
2. Forthcoming in collection ed. Nandini Bhattacharya Panda.
3. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 19; 'neutrality' original emphasis, other emphases added by author.
4. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Deconstruction: What you Will', forthcoming in vol. ed. Peter Goodrich.
5. Mikhail Bakunin, *From Out of the Dustbin: Bakunin's Basic Writings 1869–1871*, trans. R. M. Cutler (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985), p. 91.
6. Charles Webb Le Bas, *The Life of Thomas Fanshaw Middleton, Late Lord Bishop of Calcutta* (London: Rivington, 1831), p. 171.
7. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'A Willing Suspension of Disbelief, Here, Now', in Forest Pyle III (ed.) *Constellations of a Contemporary Romanticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming [2016]).
8. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward A History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
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11. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1973).
12. B. R. Ambedkar, 'Castes in India', in Valerian Rodrigues (ed.) *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 239–62.
13. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Margins and Marginal Communities: A Practical Keynote', forthcoming in collection ed. Nandini Bhattacharya Panda.
14. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998).
15. Assia Djebar, *Far from Madina*, trans. D. Grant (London: Quartet, 1994).