CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?

REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORY OF AN IDEA

EDITED BY ROSALIND C. MORRIS

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

IN RESPONSE

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" was delivered as "Power and Desire" at the Institute on "Marxist Interpretations of Culture: Limits, Frontiers, Boundaries," in the summer of 1983. That version was never published. It was an exciting occasion, held in the evening. In the audience were my student Forest Pyle, now teaching at the University of Oregon, Jenny Sharpe, now teaching at UCLA; new friend Patricia Clough, then a student, now teaching at CUNY; Peter Hitchcock, a cool stranger recently arrived from England, now teaching at Baruch; Hap Veeser, whom I did not then know, but now a good friend, then a student, now teaching at CCNY. At the end of the session, Cornel West ran down from the top of the auditorium to give me a hug because, I think, I was womanfully and repeatedly invoking "the difference of the third world"—a phrase still utterable in 1983—in the Q & A. My fellow speakers were Ellen Willis and Catharine McKinnon. A Scots intellectual whose name escapes me wrote much later in the *Village Voice* that it was his first visit to the United States and he had heard Gayatri Spivak say that Americans believed they could achieve freedom by rearranging furniture.

In that first version I was trying to unenthrall myself from Foucault and Deleuze—because of the semanalyse people, turning all that into a kind of American graffiti, I think. I had spoken of sati, under Lata Mani's influence. But I had not yet written of Bhubaneswari's message.

It seems to have been a beginning, a turning of Derrida toward politics. To achieve the turn, I looked toward the Bengali middle class out of which I came. My work was French theory, my work was Yeats—I am a European-

ist—my work was Marx, but I wanted to make a change. In the first flush of this change I looked homeward; I went home to my class.

I have told this story many times. In 1981 I was asked by *Yale French Studies* to write about French feminism and by *Critical Inquiry* to write on deconstruction. I felt it was time for a change. The immediate result was "French Feminism in an International Frame" and a translation of Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi."[1] In a profound response to that impulse for change, I was turning, then, to the Bengali middle class, Mahasweta Devi, of course, but also Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, who was my grandmother's sister. To begin with, then, an act of private piety.

The woman to whom Bhubaneswari wrote the letter that was forgotten was my mother's mother. The woman who told me the story was my mother. The woman who refused to understand what she had said was my first cousin. I was a student of English honors at the University of Calcutta, she of philosophy. She was quite like me in education, and yet it made no difference. She could not hear this woman who had tried with her suicide, using menstruation, that dirty secret, to erase the axioms that endorsed sati. Sati in the piece was *not* given as a generalizable example of the subaltern not speaking, or rather not being able to speak—trying to, but not succeeding in being heard. Lata misunderstood me. It was Bhubaneswari who could not be heard, even by her.

The point that I was trying to make was that if there was no valid institutional background for resistance, it could not be recognized. Bhubaneswari's resistance against the axioms that animated sati could not be recognized. She could not speak. Unfortunately, for sati, a caste-Hindu practice, there *was* an institutional validation, and I unraveled as much of it as I could. My point was not to say that they couldn't speak, but that, when someone did try to do something different, it could not be acknowledged because there was no institutional validation. It was not a point about satis not speaking.

The point I was making about Foucault and Deleuze was that when these great intellectuals talk to each other, just in conversation as it were, they betray certain kinds of convictions that, when they are in theoretical full dress, do not show themselves. I have said this also in response to the criticism that my treatment of Kant in *The Critique of Postcolonial Reason* is "under-demonstrated." It may indeed seem so. For I am not looking at Kant writing about perpetual peace, about the ethical state in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, not when he is speaking about these issues in "What is Enlightenment?" not when he gives us *cosmopolitheia*, but rather where he is teaching us how to solve the most central problem of philosophy and in the description of philosophizing shows an extraordinary dis-

respect for the Fourth World, the Aboriginal.[2] That is the way I read as a literary critic. I look at the "marginal" moment that unravels the text; paradoxically, it gives us a sense of what is "normal" for the text, what norms the text.

I did not remain with Devi and nationalist women. Soon I realized that that was not the place to end. Those two women opened possibilities for me. I went on toward other kinds of things that I could think of as subalternity. In attempting to make her body speak, even unto death, Bhubaneswari had brought her subalternity to crisis. As I will expand below, I read her under the influence of the Marx of "The Eighteenth Brumaire" and recoded her under the influence of the *Subaltern Studies* group.[3] But gradually I stepped into scenes where subalternity, oppression itself, was accepted as normality in the underside of the Bengali rural poor. I do not quite know how, but I became involved in hanging out in that subaltern space, attempting, while I was there, to think it a normal teaching scene. In this effort I learned something about teaching. All teaching attempts change, yet all teaching also assumes a shared scene.

Gradually, some schools came into being as I hung out, thanks to my dollar salary. These schools are fragile things, mired in a system of education that makes sure that the subaltern will not be heard except as beggars. How different this scene is from national liberation, from the neighborhood of Bhubaneswari, Madan Mitra Lane in old Calcutta. Eleven schools in Purulia and Birbhum, the two most backward districts of West Bengal, undertaken the year "Can the Subaltern Speak?" was first published.

It was not enough for me to have moved from my class of origin. I am a comparativist; I needed to move away from my mother tongue to be encountered by the subaltern. From 1989 to '94 I learned Moroccan Arabic from Peace Corps manuals and local tutors and worked my way, helped by socialist women, through the urban subproletariat, moving toward the Sahel inch by inch, in Algeria. I went every year, sometimes twice. I asked the women in the old socialist villages established by Ben Bella: "what is it to vote?" I sat in silence in Marabouts, in women's clinics. I did some electoral education with socialist women in low-income housing in Wahran. I monitored polling booths with them when the Islamic Salvation Front won the first round. In '94 I had to leave at the head of a curfew. The question that guided my time in Algeria seems to have been: who hears the subaltern? It has stayed with me since.

Since 2001 I have been learning Chinese—Mandarin mostly, some Cantonese. I go to three tiny remote schools in rural and mountainous Xishuangbanna. Can I hear the subaltern as China dismantles down below?

I do not know in what ways this strange adventure, parallel to the salaried work, the publication routine, and the lecture circuit, nourishes that stream, draws on it as well. I only know that it was the attempt to read Bhubaneswari that put me on this path.

I find myself saying that when I am in those schools I don't notice the poverty, just as I perhaps don't notice the opulence in New York. When you are teaching, you are teaching. Over the years I have come to realize that it is not my way to give people shelter, not even to make collectives for resistance. My work, as I have said many times, is the uncoercive rearrangement of desires, the nurturing of the intuition of the public sphere—a teacher's work. In Bangladesh in the eighties I traveled some with rural paramedics—to intervene in the subaltern's sense of normality, to foster preventive and nourishing habits; again, a teacher's work. This too may bring subalternity to crisis. This intervention in normality has brought me—city girl—into organizing ecological agriculture among the families and communities of my students. Here, too, a difference from "Can the Subaltern Speak?" must be noted. Not only that Bhubaneswari too, was a city girl; my class, as I mentioned. But also that she had already brought subalternity to crisis, she needed me only to read her, hear her, make her speak by default. (Derrida has a marvelous discussion of the pun in French *il faut*—it must be [done]; that it also carries the sense of it cracks, it defaults.[4] I am reminded of that as I think of my relationship with Bhubaneswari.)

We now live in a time of sweeping projects for the betterment of the world—poverty eradication, disease eradication, exporting democracy, exporting information and communication technology. I have my own political analysis of these projects. This is not the place to launch them. Let us assume that they are laudable. But, even so, in order for these projects to sustain themselves without top-down control—sustainability in the only sense that should matter—there must be a supplement of unglamorous, patient, hands-on work—the way we teach in our classrooms, to teach that way everywhere. In a general sense we know that every generation has to be educated. We forget this when it comes to the subaltern. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" put me on this line. I saw that, in two generations, women in the family had forgotten how to read her. That was a private narrative of the failure of education. As I moved on to the terrain of more general subaltern normality, I increasingly saw this as a public narrative. I began to realize that it is not just schoolrooms, teachers, textbooks and teachers, and the social permission for children to be at school that count, important as these things might be. Unless there is an increment—to make sure that, when the subaltern is on the path of hegemony, "they do not become suboppressors"

and that we do not celebrate them simply because they have escaped subal-
ternity; the other details are not socially productive.[5]

So this is where my turn to the Bengali middle class took me. I made
mistakes in the first version. I have kept the statements that show that I was
ignorant of the material of South Asia. One way out would have been to re-
veal that she was my grandmother's sister. But that would have been turned
into a love fest, legitimizing myself because my grandmother's sister killed
herself. In the event what I drew was many hostile published responses. But
it was in fact an act of private piety.

As I have indicated, in my reference to "the betterment of the world,"
imperialism may have displaced itself all over the world. A thinker such as
David Harvey says quite openly:

> I share with Marx the view that imperialism, like capitalism, can prepare the ground for human emancipation from want and need. In arenas like public health, agricultural productivity, and the application of science and technology to confront the material problems of existence (including the preservation of the environment), capitalism and imperialism have opened up potential paths to a better future. The problem is that the dominant class relations of capitalism and the institutional arrangements and knowledge structures to which these class powers give rise typically block the utilization of this potential. Furthermore, these class relations and institutional arrangements set in motion imperialist forms dedicated to the preservation or enhancement of the conditions of their own reproduction, leading to ever greater levels of social inequality and more and more predatory practices with respect to the mass of the world's population ("accumulation by dispossession," as I call it).
>
> My argument is that, at the present moment, the U.S. has no option except to engage in such practices unless there is a class movement internally that challenges existing class relations and their associated hegemonic institutions and political-economic practices. This leaves the rest of the world with the option of either resisting U.S. imperialism directly (as in the case of many developing country social movements) or seeking either to divert it or compromise with it by forming, for example, sub-imperialisms under the umbrella of U.S. power. The danger is that anti-imperialist movements may become purely and wholeheartedly anti-modernist movements rather than seeking an alternative globalization and an alternative modernity that makes full use of the potential that capitalism has spawned.[6]

Harvey is writing a displaced imperialism (i.e., addressing a late stage
of imperialism characterized by the multiplication of subimperialisms?).

Lenin's argument, that communism needed to align itself with the national-liberationist progressive bourgeoisie, anticipates him, for it tacitly argues that the liberationist colonial subject has been "freed" by imperialism.[7] Harvey does not mention these earlier national liberationist movements, within which Bhubaneswari would have found her place.

I find it difficult to accept Harvey's endorsement of the burden imposed upon the United States today. My alternative is not to go back to old-fashioned nationalism. If I may quote myself: "In globalized postcoloniality, we can museumize national-liberation nationalism, good for exhibitions; we can curricularize national-liberation nationalism, good for the discipline of history. The task for the imagination is not to let the museum and the curriculum provide alibis for the new civilizing missions, make us mis-choose our allies."[8] I would rather focus on Harvey's phrase "unless there is a class movement internally that challenges class relations. . . . "

Nice words. The lesson that Gramsci taught was that class alone cannot be the source of liberation within subalternity. And that is the lesson the subalternists taught in their first phase. The problem is that subaltern studies now seems not concerned about class as an analytical category at all. Between Harvey's Scylla and the subalternists' Charybdis lies my downwardly mobile trajectory. I think of education as a supplement—and a supplement can animate an alternative.

Joseph Stiglitz would offer a corrective to David Harvey's sense of the mission of the United States. In his *Globalization and Its Discontents* he argues again and again that the developing countries be allowed to set their own agenda over against the transnational agencies.[9] Yet in a recent presentation he was obliged to offer something like a good imperialism, the reconstruction of the world by America, in exchange for a bad imperialism—the war in Iraq—that he, of course, opposed. To bring to the floor what his text seems to ask for, we would need the project of listening to subalterns, patiently and carefully, so that we, as intellectuals committed to education, can devise an intuition of the public sphere in subalternity—a teacher's work.

If this teaching work is not performed, subalterns remain in subalternity, unable to represent themselves and therefore needing to be represented. The "wars of maneuver" signaled by Gramsci could not happen without leadership from above.

To represent "one" self collectively is to be in the public sphere. Marx had understood it in terms of class in "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," where the famous line occurs. Gramsci had introduced hegemony—the condition into which the subaltern graduates as a result of a larger share of persuasion and, inevitably, some coercion from the organic intel-

lectuals as well as the state. I mention this because when I gave "Power and Desire," the first version of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" I had read Gramsci's "Some Aspects of the Southern Question," but I read Ranajit Guha's "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" only a year later.[10]

When I read Guha's essay I was so overwhelmed by the work of the *Subaltern Studies* group, which he headed, that I pulled my piece, I pulled my act of private piety, that I had performed to get myself out of the prison house of just being a mere Europeanist, and pushed it into the subaltern enclave. I recoded the story.

I learned to say that "the subaltern is in the space of difference," following a wonderful passage in Guha. (I did not then understand that Guha's understanding of the subaltern would subsequently take onboard a much broader transformation of the Gramscian idea insofar as the subaltern, according to Guha, would call out in a collective voice.[11] I never went that way at all.) In fact what I had thought of when I gave the first version of the story was about not having an institutional structure of validation. And indeed, as can be read in the words Partha Chatterjee kindly sent to the conference, the subalternists themselves felt that it was my stuff from Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, on different kinds of representation: *Vertretung* or proxy and *Darstellung* or portrait, and also *representation*, that introduced a new twist in the understanding of the representation of the subaltern.

Right before the famous passage of "they cannot represent themselves"—the English translation of Marx says "they are therefore incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name whether through a parliament or through a convention." And although this is not a wrong translation, the German *geltend zu machen* is, literally, to "make it count," "make it hold." The French peasant proprietors who were completely emptied out in the gray transition from feudalism to one stage of capitalism, could not make their grievances count. They had no covenant, says Marx, they had no institutions through which they could make whatever they wanted to say count," "make it hold."

This is one of Marx's great journalistic pieces. There is a clear insight here that it is not so easy to write a liberation theology where reason is god. When he is overturning the public use of reason to make the subject the proletarian, he is elsewhere, in *Capital 1*, his only book—the other *Capitals* were put together by Engels after his death—an educator; he is trying to teach, trying to rearrange the feelings of the workers so they would think of themselves as agents of production. But when he is writing this journalistic description of the only revolution he ever saw, he has a long wonderful rhetorical paragraph that pleases every literary critic—where the "subject" is

the proletarian revolution, called forth by existing social conditions, and, as the end of the paragraph shows, those conditions tell the proletarian revolution, don't wait for the right moment, leap here now. By implication, since the call is to the vain boaster in Aesop's fables, the claim of the proletarian revolution seems theoretically distant and practically urgent. Marx the rationalist asks for a restricted use of reason here. As is well known, the paragraph ends in a deliberate alteration of Aesop by Hegel. Marx then alters Aesop another way. Again, by implication, what he corrects is Hegel's vaulting confidence in historically determined reason in *The Philosophy of Right*: "As a work of philosophy," Hegel writes, this book

> must be poles apart from an attempt to construct the state as it ought to be. The instruction which it may contain cannot consist in teaching the state what it ought to be; it can only show how the state, the ethical [*sittlich*] universe, is to be understood. "*Idon Rhodos, idon kai to pedema. Hic Rhodus, hic saltus.*" To conceive of [*begreifen*] what is, this is the task of philosophy. . . . It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can rise above [*hinaus übergehen*] its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overleap his own age, jump over Rhodes. If his theory really goes beyond the world as it is and builds an ideal one as it ought to be, that world exists indeed, but only in his opinions, a soft [*weich*] element which will let anything you please be shaped [*dem sich alles Beliebige einbilden lässt*]. With hardly an alteration, the proverb just quoted would run: "Here is the rose, dance thou here." What lies between reason as self-conscious mind and reason as reality to hand [*vorhandener Wirklichkeit*], what separates the former from the latter and prevents it from finding satisfaction in the latter, is the fetter of some abstraction or other which has not been liberated into the concept. To recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present and thereby to enjoy the present, this is the rational insight which reconciles us to the actual, the reconciliation which philosophy affords us.[12]

The small but crucial change made by Marx is from "leap" as a noun to "leap" as an imperative. Unlike Hegel's, this is unannounced. *Hic Rhodus, hic saltus*—a literal translation of the Greek—is changed by Marx to *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!* By repeating Hegel's alteration immediately afterward, he changes the message of a mystical (Rosicrucian) acceptance of reason as a rose in the cross, which allows us to enjoy the present and see all change as a servitude to abstractions. He changes it to a message of change, a livelier acceptance of the Aesopian challenge.

When I was thinking of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, I was full of "The Eighteenth Brumaire." It seems to me now that I inserted the singular suicide of my foremother into that gap between the reasonableness of theory and the urgency of the revolutionary moment. I felt that my task was to represent her in all of Marx's senses. But the gesture and the task could not yet emerge into considerations of collectivity and of the public sphere.

So that was in fact where the essay began. Not in understanding the subaltern as a state of difference. And it started the trajectory of the subaltern in my work in the possibility of creating an infrastructure here as there which would make the subaltern not accept subalternity as normality. I thought that Bhubaneswari as revolutionary subject, as it were, had questioned the presuppositions of sati, but could not be acknowledged. She remained singular. I was therefore unable to generalize from her. But I certainly never spoke of sati as anticolonial resistance. I thought the criminalization of sati, while it was an unquestioned good, had not engaged with the subject-formation of women; colonial education remained class fixed. I was trying to understand how it could be that women, perhaps two or three generations behind me, in my own formation, could have respected sati in its traditional meaning. To think that I could support sati is derisive. But I needed to step out of myself.

When, in 1986, Rup Kanwar had committed sati, her mother had smiled. It is that smile that I was anticipating—that was the text I was reading as I read the Scriptures—the *Dharmaśāstra*.[13] For the smile said yes to the Scripture. That desire had to be rearranged. I felt that Bhubaneswari rearranged that desire, coerced by situational imperatives.

She taught me yet another lesson: death as text. She made me read situations where no response happens. If the peace process carries no credibility, if a whole country is turned into a gated community, young people who do not yet know how to value life—and Bhubaneswari was seventeen years old—may feel that it is possible to write a response when you die with me for the same cause. Suicide bombers form a collectivity whose desires have been rearranged. The decision to die was something like that in Bhubaneswari as well. It was the gendering of the second decision, to postpone death, that made her exclusive. The idea that when you die with me for the same cause, since you will not listen to me, since I cannot speak to you, we do memorialize an accord—is action in extremis. How much do the Scriptures arbitrate desire? The question of the Koran, of the *Dharmaśāstra*.

The trajectory of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has not yet ended for me. On the one hand, the schools. On the other, the search for a secularism as

legal instrument of social justice that can accommodate the subaltern, a consuming interest only to be mentioned here.

NOTES

1 Spivak, "French Feminism," "'Draupadi' by Mahasweta Devi."
2 Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, pp. 19–36.
3 Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," p. 239.
4 Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 109.
5 The idea of the oppressed themselves becoming suboppressors without proper pedagogy comes from Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, pp. 29–34.
6 Agglutianations.com, November 3, 2003.
7 Indeed, as Harvey points out, the position is already present in Marx. See Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India," in *Surveys from Exile*, pp. 306–307. The questioning of the teleological view of Marxism is most strongly associated with Louis Althusser's structuralist project. The subalternist questioning, legitimizing Marx's position by reversal, can lean dangerously toward nationalism.
8 Spivak, "Nationalism and the Imagination."
9 Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents*, pp. 236–252 and *passim*.
10 Gramsci, "Some Aspects of the Southern Question"; Guha, "On Some Aspects."
11 Guha, *Domination Without Hegemony*, p. 134 and *passim*.
12 Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, pp. 10–12 (translation modified).
13 Kane, *History of the Dharmasastra*.