Reading Notes on Professor Sangeeta Ray's Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: A Polemic with Digressions on a Theory of Irreducibility

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May 16, 2008. Middle school students from Beichuan get settled on the campus of Tian Fu College of Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, Mianyang, Sichuan Province, four days after the May 12 Wenchuan earthquake. Thus Tian Fu College was, at least for a time, "reduced" to its fundamentally *social* mission – the satisfaction of the human needs of the people. (Photo: JDL)

It is impossible to develop greater immunity from disease without being vaccinated, and it is also impossible to talk about increasing ability in detecting poisonous weeds without participating in the struggle of criticizing them.

- Chi Ping¹

Irreducibility in a nutshell

Irreducibility is a key link in the capitalist quasi-theory of reality.² It is an essential part of the reflection and worldview of capitalism propagated by the

¹ Chi Ping, "Attach Importance to the Role of Teachers by Negative Example," *Peking Review*, No. 13, Mar. 31, 1972, 5-7, http://massline.org/PekingReview/PR1972/PR1972-13a.htm>, accessed 08/09/2011.

² The word "irreducibility" is a term of art, and that's a friendly way of putting it, routinely appearing, disappearing, and reappearing again in Professor Spivak's work. The perspicacious reader of Spivak will want to watch out for it. In ideology we may classify its role within that which Lenin called, in 1918, "the itch." See Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, "The Itch," in Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 27, trans. Clemens Dutt, ed. Robert Daglish, Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1965/74, 36-39: "The itch is a painful disease"; "people don't know 'what's what'"; "stricken by the vile itch of phrase-making" (36); "ludicrous and pitiful 'theoretical' trivialities and sophistries under which this itch is disguised" (36-

dominant bourgeois intelligentsia. By its very nature, irreducibility is constantly at pains to resist revolutionary Marxist theory because the latter is a worldview that reflects the inevitable "reduction" of capitalism to the trashbin of history and its transformation, through the class struggle of the masses and the dictatorship of the proletariat, into socialist and ultimately communist society. In the irreducible thoughts and feelings of the bourgeois intelligentsia, therefore, revolutionary Marxism and all of its theories, practices and innovative, creative developments and applications are "reductive."

Objectively this is quite correct because reduction *means* explanation and transformation; subjectively, however, bourgeois intellectuals regard reduction as "bad" and irreducibility as "good" or otherwise simply "the way it is." And again, in the ideology of capitalism and its representatives in the bourgeoisie, this is correct because irreducibility reflects the perpetuation of their dominance while reduction reflects their doom. What this means is that genuine revolutionary Marxism represents, as Marx said, the *changing* of the world, not just its endless interpretation and reinterpretation. This is the revolutionary Marxist theory of irreducibility – that is, a critique of irreducibility.

The concept of irreducibility as discussed here derives from observations of its use and functions in contemporary bourgeois intellectual practices, particularly its appearance in the work of Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak³ and in that of her popularizer, Professor Sangeeta Ray. The word is most repetitively evident in Spivak; in Sangeeta Ray's Spivak book, however, the irreducible mentality reveals itself as an

^{37); &}quot;if the itch claims to be 'theory' it is intolerable"; "the company of wordy buffoons" (37); and "with a 'lordly' and learned mien" (38). A classically "contemporary" case in which this itch crops up, for example, is to be found in Professor Ellen Rooney's interview with Spivak in 1988. See "In a Word: *Interview*," in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Routledge: NY, 1993, 1-23; since 2008 Spivak's *Machine* has been published in the "Routledge Classics" series. Rooney: "I'd like to talk about . . . how we can signal the difference between a strategic and a substantive or a real [!] essentialism; about the possibility of mobilizing people to do political work without invoking some irreducible essentialism" (3). Note carefully – *without* some irreducible essentialism. And Spivak replies: "Strategy works through a persistent (de)constructive critique of the theoretical. . . . and unlike 'theory,' its [i.e., strategy's] antecedents are not disinterested and universal. . . . A strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory" (3-4). What's what? We say that this instance of the exchange, recirculation, spreading, self-expansion, etc., of the itch is classic since all of Lenin's

of the exchange, recirculation, spreading, self-expansion, etc., of the itch is classic since all of Lenin's basic criteria are present. Yet the case is also somewhat atypical in that the primary carrier (Spivak) manages herself to avoid repeating the telltale word, i.e., "irreducibility"; this serves to strengthen the virality of the itch, however, as Rooney asserts it in her own wordy, sophistic phrase-making, thereby reattaching it to Spivak's phrase-making and learned mien. Lenin? "Ugh! The itch is a nasty disease" (39).

³ See "Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty," in *Dictionary of Revolutionary Marxism*, Massline.org website, http://www.massline.org/Dictionary/SP.htm>, accessed 02/10/2012.

ideological style or "spirit" clearly extrapolated from the Master. Thus, while a basic conception of irreducible thinking (or non-thinking, or bourgeois thinking) is necessary, a better way to develop and grasp the concept is to examine it in action, in its processes of development and unfolding.

Without exceeding the bounds of our nutshell, we raise the question only in passing: where exactly do we find the theoretical task of "reduction" articulated in its positive and necessary role? Nowhere else than in the so-called "bible" of the revolutionary working class, Marx's *Capital*.⁴ In Volume I, Chapter I, on commodities, this most complex and demanding area, Marx writes,

It is the expression of equivalence between different sorts of commodities that *alone* brings into relief the specific character of value-creating labour, and this it does by actually *reducing* the different varieties of labour embodied in the different kinds of commodities to their common quality of human labour in the abstract. (57, emphasis added)

Some eight pages on, by reference to Aristotle, we find precisely the same mode of "expression," only without the explicit use of the word "reduction." "What is that equal something," Marx asks, "that common substance, which admits of the value of the beds being expressed by a house? . . . Compared with the beds, the house does represent something equal to them, in so far as it represents what is really equal, both in the beds and the house. And that is – human labour" (65). In spite of all the complexity of Marx, the wordiness, the tiring example after example (e.g., bushels of corn, yards of linen, pounds of coffee, coats, iron, watches, diamonds, wheat, silk, gold and silver, rectilinear figures and triangles, cattle, tea, sugar, butyric acid and propyl formate, air, natural meadows, pearls, peasants, weavers, spinners, tailors, masons, the experiences of Robinson Crusoe, and our very own Dogberry and Seacoal, etc.), all with one side and then the other – in a word, despite the greatest difficulty, Spivak and company have never failed to discern Marx's leading role in "reductive" thinking and its superordinate task of illuminating what lies "at the bottom" (66) of things. In turn we find in Spivak and company the "expression" and

⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. I, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, ed. Frederick Engels, International Publishers: NY, 1967/87. Marx himself says in his original preface of 1867 that the section on commodities presents "the greatest difficulty" (page 18).

valorization of the very opposite of Marx. And that is? – *ir* reducibility, that characteristically *un*equal "something" regulating the whateveristic shop floor of the Spivakian teaching machine.

The idea of the "irreducible" is given in three similar and related expressions in the Chinese language. "Bu neng zai fen" refers to that which can't be divided. "Wu fa jian hua" refers to that which can't be made simple, or something which can in no way be made simpler. And "bu neng gai bian" means that which can't change or can't be changed anymore.

But how exactly do you determine what can't be divided, what can't be made simpler for purposes of understanding as well as labor, and what can't be changed? The problem is that while these meanings are useful to some extent, they are completely "abstract" in the sense of being divorced from practice and the social conditions of real people facing real contradictions. Abstractions of irreducibility, in short, are disconnected from class struggle and class analysis. In other words, such abstractions attempt to deny and negate what Mao called "the wall of bronze," that is, the aroused masses:

Comrades, what is the real wall of bronze? It is the people, the hundreds of millions who genuinely and sincerely cherish the revolution. They are the real wall of bronze."⁷

In this sense it becomes especially interesting that the notion of irreducibility enjoys such prestige in the post-postmodern⁸ "humanities." The quasi-theory of irreducibility denies the decisive and transformative role of the masses in the struggle

⁵ This summary is based on a small group discussion with Xie Yingjun, an English teacher and graduate of Anhui Normal University, and other students at Lanzhou Jiaotong University, Dec. 2, 2011. ⁶ See "Abstraction," in *Dictionary of Revolutionary Marxism*, Massline.org website,

http://www.massline.org/Dictionary/AA.htm, accessed 07/11/2012. See also "Revolutionary Theory of Reflection," *Peking Review*, No. 46, Nov. 17, 1972, 16-17, http://massline.org/PekingReview/PR1972-46a.htm>, accessed 02/01/2012; "The Birth of a Subterranean Well," *Peking Review*, No. 42, Oct. 20, 1972, 16-17, http://massline.org/PekingReview/PR1972-42a.htm>, accessed 01/01/2012; and Yao Shih-Chang, "I Learn Dialectics and Grow Bigger Crops," *Peking Review*, No. 17, Apr. 22, 1966, 22-24, http://massline.org/PekingReview/PR1966/PR1966-17q.pdf>, accessed 01/01/2012.

⁷ Mao Tse-tung, quoted in Liu Ching (Qing), *Wall of Bronze*, trans. Sidney Shapiro, Foreign Languages Press: Peking, 1954, page 1, epigraph.

⁸ For an uncritical review of the "post-postmodern," see Alan Kirby, "Successor states to an empire in free fall," *Times Higher Education*, May 27, 2010, http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=411731>, accessed 01/20/2012. Kirby concludes, "for me, the confusion and uncertainty just adds to the fascination." See also generally Ihab Hassan, *In Quest of Nothing: Selected Essays*, 1998-2008, ed. Klaus Stierstorfer, AMS Press: NY, 2010.

to bury the capitalist system and change the world. As Mao points out, however, the "real wall of bronze" *is* humanity, the masses, the people, the humanity of capitalism's wage-slaves throughout the world.

Now what does Spivak have to say on the question of irreducibility?

Three samples from the irreducible analects of Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Let's have a look at just three samples⁹ of the irreducible line in Professor Spivak's irreducibly convoluted writings.

<u>Analect Number 1</u>: "One of the offshoots of the deconstructive view of language is the acknowledgment that the *political* use of words, like the use of words, is irreducibly catachrestic. Again, the possibility of catachresis is not derived." ¹⁰

Spivak provides a handy dictionary definition of "catachresis" here as well: "an affirmative 'misuse,' a wrenching away from proper meaning . . . is among the important dictionary meanings of 'catachresis.'"

Irreducibly catachrestic, the irreducibility of catachresis: what does this mean? The very terms seem irreducible, and that's precisely the point. "Reducing" it spoils the obscurity and mystification. It means "not derived"; in other words, not resulting from anything else, as if fallen from the sky. Since the "possibility" of catachresis is irreducible and non-derivative, this means that the "possibility" itself is not derived from, not a result of, *practice* – that is, human labor, human production, and the organization of that production.

⁹ Analects are conventionally defined as "a collection of teachings," as in the famous *Analects of Confucius*, a gathering together of scattered fragments or extracts from a field of literature or other writings. On the examination of Confucian ideology, see the Workers' Theoretical Study Group of the No. 2 Workshop of the Shanghai No. 5 Steel Plant, "Criticism of Selected Passages From 'Analects' – A Confucian 'Classic," *Peking Review*, No. 16, April 18, 1975, 6-10, 14, http://massline.org/PekingReview/PR1975/PR1975-16b.htm, accessed 08/11/2011; see also Yuan Ching, "Build a Theoretical Force for Combating and Preventing Revisionism," *Peking Review*, No. 9, Feb. 28, 1975, 15-19, http://massline.org/PekingReview/PR1975/PR1975-09b.htm, accessed 08/11/2011. The three analects of Spivak quoted here are taken from the unpublished doctoral dissertation of Jerry D. Leonard, "Reducing Spivak: Marxism, Deconstruction and the Post-Theoretical Mystique," Univ. of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA, Dept. of English, 1996, which brings together 26 passages demonstrating Spivak's incessant and various ways of harping on "irreducibility" as opposed to "reduction." ¹⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "French Feminism Revisited," republished in Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, supra, at page 161; the essay originally appeared in the collection, *Feminists Theorize the Political* (1992).

Irreducibility in this analect is quintessentially idealist and metaphysical, however much deconstructionists like Spivak prefer to be regarded as "post"-metaphysical. The possibility of catachresis simply has no history – not derived. It's like saying that the possibility of a new offshoot of a branch is not derived from the branch itself, which is not derived from other branches, which are not derived from the tree trunk, which is not derived from a seed or group of seeds, which are not derived from the conditions of the soil, which are not derived from a host of atmospheric conditions interacting with geologic conditions, which are not derived from millions of years of evolution, and so on. If a thing or a process is "not derived," how and why did it get there? The conclusion ("not derived") has already provided the answer but avoided the question at the same time. It's what physical scientists refer to – and dismiss – as an "argument from ignorance" or an "argument from incredulity."

Analect Number 2: "Derrida's own remark . . . is not coy: 'Dissemination ultimately has no meaning and cannot be channeled into a definition. I will make no attempt at that here and prefer to refer to the working of the texts.' . . . Keeping that admonition in mind, let us say briefly that 'Spacing . . "is" the index of an irreducible outside, and at the same time the index of a movement, of a displacement which indicates an irreducible alterity." 12

¹¹ The "underived" origin, as it were, of Spivak's catachresis is itself a "missing link" between this irreducibility thesis and the so-called Intelligent Design thesis of "irreducible complexity" put forward in 1996 in Professor Michael J. Behe's book, Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution, Free Press: NY. Behe's Godly twist on irreducibility has been discredited as pseudo-science in federal court (see Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District, 400 F. Supp. 2d 707, 2005) as well as in numerous theoretical studies and responses from fellow scientists. See e.g., Kenneth R. Miller, "The Flagellum Unspun: The Collapse of 'Irreducible Complexity,'" http://www.millerandlevine.com/km/ evol/design2/article.html> (2004), accessed 11/27/2011; Pete Dunkelberg, "Irreducible Complexity Demystified," http://www.talkdesign.org/faqs/icdmyst/ICDmyst.html (2003), accessed 11/27/2011; Mark Isaak, ed., "Index to Creationist Claims," particularly on the "argument from incredulity," http://www.talkorigins.org/indexcc/CI/CI101.html (2004), accessed 11/28/2011; Massimo Pigliucci, Nonsense on Stilts: How to Tell Science from Bunk, Univ. of Chicago Press: IL, 2010; Barbara Forrest, "The Wedge at Work: How Intelligent Design Creationism Is Wedging Its Way into the Cultural and Academic Mainstream," http://www.talkreason.org/articles/Wedge.cfm#conc (2003), accessed 12/07/2011; Robert T. Pennock, "Whose God? What Science?," Reports of the National Center for Science Education, http://www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/pennock behe.html > (2001), accessed 12/09/2011; Mark D. Decker, "Why Intelligent Design Isn't Intelligent," reviewing Mark Perakh, Unintelligent Design (2003), http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1103713/?tool =pmcentrez> (2005), accessed 11/29/2011; and Richard Dawkins, "Inferior Design," reviewing M. Behe, The Edge of Evolution: The Search for the Limits of Darwinism (2008), http://select.nytimes.com/preview/2007/07/01/books/1154680128921.html (2007), accessed 12/01/2011.

¹² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translator's Preface," in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G.C. Spivak, Johns Hopkins UP: Baltimore, 1976, at page lxxi, quoting her translation of Derrida.

Aside from the obsessively inane tricks of fusing and blending the translated (Derrida) with the translator (Spivak), here the "irreducible outside" and "irreducible alterity" come down to the idea of a phenomenon that "ultimately has no meaning and cannot be channeled into a definition." *Ultimately* no meaning, *ultimately* no definition. Thus, one can only ever say what a thing "is" in the most tediously evasive way. If it's even possible to follow the absurdly coy logic, an "irreducible alterity" is (not really "is") some unfathomable otherness with no meaning and no definition. What would this alterity want? What could it do? Does it work, does it produce anything? Is it exploited or oppressed? Is it an exploiter and an oppressor? Is Derrida really "not coy"? Is Derrida's translator really "not coy"? If irreducibilities have no meaning and can't be defined, how can they have a politics and an ideology which isn't also meaningless and "ultimately" obscure? Doesn't that mean, however, that this is a politics of "end game," of no way out? There's no practice, no contradiction, no dialectics, no struggle; only "I . . . prefer to refer to the working of the texts." But Professor Spivak, we Marxists "prefer" to refer to workers and exploiters. What you really prefer is to refer to the same thing that Confucius preferred to refer to: "the words of the sages."¹³

Analect Number 3: "I heard only the other day a talk in New York, where once again it was said with *confidence* that Foucault and Lacan and Derrida reduced everything to language. I don't think these people who are sort of working with speed-reading and criticism by hearsay have tumbled onto the fact yet that these three names, and a general movement after structuralism, was precisely to *question* the privileging of language and to *question* the notion that the best way to understand everything was to reduce it to sign-systems. This is something that I think has still to be brought to people's attention."

¹³ As exposed and criticized in the above-referenced essay, "Criticism of Selected Passages From 'Analects," Confucius said: "The superior man stands in awe of three things: the will of heaven, great men and the words of the sages." The authors point out that "Standing in awe of the three things' or not was an important content in the class struggle and the two-line struggle for more than 2,000 years. Liuhsia Chih, outstanding leader of a slave uprising, refuted Confucius to his face and exposed that Confucius' so-called 'great men' and 'sages' were merely 'turmoil creators' and 'the strong bullying the weak."

¹⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern Talk: Interview with the Editors," in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, eds. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, Routledge: NY, 1996, at page 302.

This analect reflects the irreducibility thesis by a common reversal in form – using the word "reduced" rather than "irreducible" – the point being to target and delegitimize materialist criticisms of deconstruction and poststructuralism. Spivak is saying that if you try to argue that Derrida, for example, "reduces" everything to language, your argument is *prima facia* incorrect on the basis of "the fact" she points out; in addition, smuggled into this seemingly self-evident rebuttal is the implication that the first argument is itself "reductive." The first argument is therefore recast as merely a non-argument and can be summarily dismissed, as Spivak does, by further negating it as "speed-reading" and "hearsay."

Not so fast! . . . Like all one-sided interpretations of "the facts," the rebuttal here is itself a "speed-reading" that attempts to negate debate and contestation. While Spivak wants to play lawyer by invoking the general rule against "hearsay," it is actually her misconception of hearsay that is more interesting. Is it safe to assume that Spivak really knows anything about the doctrine of hearsay in American law? Does she know that the law of hearsay is primarily elaborated in the US *Federal Rules of Evidence*, and in each state's legal statutes and caselaw, as well as in federal caselaw? Does she know that the roots of hearsay law "derive" from the "confrontation clause" contained in the Sixth Amendment to the *US Constitution*? – that is, the right of a defendant in a criminal prosecution to confront and cross-examine adverse witnesses. Does she know what the general rule of hearsay says in the first place? . . .

The basic rule of (and against) hearsay is that second-hand statements may not be used as evidence to prove the truth of the statement itself. Hearsay is typically defined as "out-of-court statements offered for the truth of their content," and such statements are inadmissible unless they fall within any of the numerous and highly complex exceptions or exemptions.¹⁵

Let's briefly examine Spivak's "confident" assertion of the rule. How exactly is it ascertained in the first place that the "talk" she "heard" constitutes "criticism by hearsay"? It *can't* be ascertained, and why? What Spivak "heard" is not quoted but merely paraphrased from memory. Who was the "declarant" (the speaker) of the alleged hearsay? This is also unknown. Was the alleged hearsay offered (in the "talk"

¹⁵ The restatement of the hearsay definition here is taken from Professor Travis H.D. Lewin's commentary, "New York Evidence Law," http://www.law.syr.edu/Pdfs/0NY EVIDENCE LAW 2006 UPDATED.pdf>, at page 12, accessed 01/20/2012; see also Kenneth S. Broun et al., *McCormick on Evidence*, 6th ed., Hornbook Series, West Pub. Co.: St. Paul, MN, 2007.

that she "heard") in order to prove the truth of what was said, i.e., that deconstruction reduces everything to language? Again due to the lack of substance and foundation in her claim, this also cannot be known. Where, then, is the "criticism by hearsay"? . . . It turns out that it's Spivak's own "criticism." Or perhaps more precisely, if we allow Spivak the presumption of having really heard what she thinks she heard, this is an instance of "hearsay within hearsay," a subcategory within the hearsay doctrine, also known as "food chain" and "telephone" hearsay: her own "criticism by hearsay" of something she decries as mere "criticism by hearsay."

Objection! – lack of foundation. We see that on cross-examination Spivak can only fall back on "the fact" she confidently asserts, namely, that Derrida and company "question" the reduction of everything to language. But Professor Spivak, tell the jury of your peers (if that's possible), did you or did you not say in Analect 1 that catachresis is "not derived"? And did you say this as a "question," in the form of a "question"? Did you or did you not say that you "acknowledged" this? Is it your opinion that an "acknowledgment" is the same thing as a "question"? . . . With this we leave it to the jury to decide for themselves the veracity of Spivak's criticism.

Spivak's knowledge of hearsay is every bit as deep and profound as Sergeant Carter's knowledge of "circumstantial evidence" in *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* When Gomer is wrongly accused and detained for attempting to defraud the phone company, Sergeant Carter explains circumstantial evidence to Gomer as follows: "Circumstantial evidence – ah, that can be rough. Ya see, they got all the evidence, and it's *circumstantial*." Is that clear?

As in analects one and two, on cross-examination the irreducibility thesis, even when recast as a valiant and faithful defense against "reduction," resolves itself into a *reductio ad absurdum* – it has "no meaning" and is supposedly underived, floating above the contradictions of class struggle and outside of history. Whence irreducibility? It is a talisman of "post"-metaphysical idealism and subjectivism in the service of mystifying and obscuring "contemporary" capitalism on the theoretical front.¹⁷

¹⁶ Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C., 2nd Season, CBS/Paramount Television, "Gomer and the Phone Company," orig. air date Feb. 25, 1966.

¹⁷ A "talisman" is a superstitious object, such as a charm or trinket, thought to possess magical or protective powers against "evil" or disease. See "Long Live the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution," *Peking Review*, Vol. 9, No. 25, June 17, 1966, 7-13, http://massline.org/PekingReview/ PR1966/PR1966-25f.htm >, accessed 08/09/2011, which exposes and criticizes five "talismans" (magic words and phrases) of the representatives of the bourgeoisie.

We turn now to Professor Sangeeta Ray's book, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak:* In Other Words. ¹⁸

A long way from the lofty ideals of communism

Professor Ray, we are told, is a "leading" postcolonial intellectual. Where her academic thinking "leads," however, is exactly the issue. It leads, of course, to irreducibility as well as to her super-intellectual model, Gayatri Spivak, as the title of this book makes clear. But Ray's subtlety, or what she believes is subtlety, in characterizing what her own book "is" is itself a demonstration of the irreducible mind in action. This book, she tells us at page 23, "cannot be a book that simply explains Spivak," nor is it a book that "delineates" (clarifies?) Spivak's engagements with "this or that theorist," although she then immediately allows that the book "may be read as that."

Furthermore, Professor Ray tells us in the previous paragraph, on page 22, "This is not a book about Spivak." And as if to answer the question *why* or how this can be, she says in the very next sentence: "Spivak paradigmatically refuses paradigms. To write a book about Spivak's work would be to do exactly what her work demands we not do." Of course, one wouldn't want to do anything Spivak would disapprove of! As Sergeant Carter puts it, that can be rough; that could be paradigmatically . . . uh, *critical*.

Liberated from explanatory or "paradigmatic" obligations, and indeed from this very notion of the "aboutness" of a book, we suddenly find our Professor Sangeeta Ray proclaiming out of the blue in the first sentence of this same paragraph on page 22,

I feel like the woman with a cigarette in the Old Virginia Slims ad who delightedly confesses that she has come a long way."

An excellent situation – "baby"! Our Sangee fails to realize, of course, that the ad said, "You've come a long way, baby." But nevermind; she continues, "Looking

¹⁸ Sangeeta Ray, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words*, Wiley-Blackwell: West Sussex, UK, 2009. The book informs us that "Ray adheres to the spirit of a Spivakian methodology as she traces and retraces the full development of Spivak's thought . . ." Ray is professor of English at the University of Maryland, USA.

back at my own relationship with Spivak, I must say that I have moved from a place of some trepidation and resistance to one of deep, critical immersion." This "place" in which she is so happy to be "immersed" is, of course, the place of irreducibility. She "feels like" that woman with a trendy new cigarette!

And what was that woman in the Virginia Slims ad (there's no such thing as "Old" Virginia Slims, by the way)? She was, paradigmatically or reductively speaking, a yuppie! The "Old" ad that Professor Sangee presumably has in mind (though in reality she probably doesn't), appearing in 1968, juxtaposes a black and white image of a woman washing laundry and hanging it on a line with a color image of the young, white, voluptuous, implicitly "successful" Virginia Slims smoker wearing a long, flowing evening gown with heels. What she "feels" like, is that she has been liberated from manual labor and housework, or perhaps labor of any kind at all. Professor Sangee *identifies* with this paradigmatically bourgeois woman ("I feel like") because, like Spivak's "work," she is free to imagine that she can "refuse" all paradigms – especially class – at will. She can do "whatever" she desires, without "trepidation" or "resistance." For our Sangee, there's no need for resistance once you've joined the game of academic careerism and the climbing of the ladder of bourgeois "success."

This intellectually vacuous notion in Professor Sangee's book of coming a "long way" reveals how "success" and progress are understood in diametrically opposing ways by bourgeois academics on the one hand and revolutionary workers on the other. For example, consider the enormous difference between Sangee's happy success story as compared with the following reflections by Wei Feng-ying in her 1972 essay, "Always Be One of the Working People":

"In the old society," Wei says, "I was a child in a poverty-stricken family. From early childhood, I helped eke out a living by gathering wild vegetables and picking coal cinders out of garbage heaps. In the new society, I became a member of the working class, and have now even taken on leading work. I often remind myself that although my position has changed, my status as a working person must never change. Referring to comrades working at the grass-roots level like me . . . , Chairman Mao said: 'See to it that they do not divorce themselves from the masses or from productive labour while performing their duties.'" Taking Mao's words to heart, Wei says, "I went

back to the bench. My mates welcomed me with open arms and showered me with attention, making me take frequent rests and not letting me know when there was overtime work. Careful there, I thought to myself. You're an ordinary worker, and taking part in labour is your duty. If you don't handle this problem correctly, pretty soon there won't be anything 'ordinary' about you anymore. . . ."¹⁹

Wei emphasizes "retaining the fine qualities of an ordinary working person," "oppose having ideas of the privileged," and "building socialism and realizing the lofty ideals of communism." For Professor Sangee, however, success really means "having ideas of the privileged" and rising above the working people and the masses in the realm of labor. So which kind of "leader" do you want? Whether our Sangee has come "a long way" is a political question, and her conception of the problem, or her very inability to see it as a problem at all, is itself a very long way from Wei's commitment to realizing the lofty ideals of communism. In short, Professor Sangee has no lofty ideal whatsoever, since her ideal is already realized within the capitalist culture industry. In Wei's worldview, our Sangee has come "a long way" for nothing!

Wei Feng-ying is a class-conscious revolutionary worker, and she *is* an intellectual at one and the same time. When she tells us that she went back to the bench to continue to work side-by-side with her workmates, does this mean that she stopped thinking, stopped reflecting, stopped writing the very essay from which we've quoted? Of course not. The problem is that Professor Sangee's seemingly declassed idea of "intellectual" is in fact a bourgeois idea. But because she is either unaware of this or is unwilling to think it through, she "leads" people to believe the falsehood that bourgeois "intellectuals" stand for the interests of everyone, including the masses of the working people who would find her privileged ideas uninteresting, obnoxiously self-absorbed and individualistic – in short, as Mao said, divorced from their lives, from practice, from their own bitter experiences under capitalism.

First Professor Sangee accepts the bourgeois concept of "intellectual" without considering the problem that intellectuals and their thoughts exist in class society, and then she unconsciously applies this ahistorical idea to reality; consequently, it seems

¹⁹ Wei Feng-ying, "Always Be One of the Working People – Notes on Studying *The Civil War in France*," *Peking Review*, No. 50, Dec. 15, 1972, 11-13, http://massline.org/PekingReview/PR1972/PR1972-50a.htm>, accessed 08/12/2011.

"natural" to view Wei Feng-ying as a worker (which is correct) and *not* as an intellectual (which is wrong). From the bourgeois point of view, however, this "makes sense." It makes sense to the bourgeois-dominated culture industry in the same way that Sangee believes it makes sense to celebrate her feeling like the woman in the Virginia Slims ad. It makes sense because it is pragmatically "useful" – albeit totally vacuous – in the mystification of class, knowledge, and the struggle for truth. The reactionary character of such a confession is further evident in the fact that Sangee refers to the "Old" Virginia Slims ad, from forty years ago, because this serves the "useful" purpose of collapsing history into the irreducible (unchanging and non-transformable) form of the present, the status quo. In this bourgeois sense, Sangee represents the intellectual of the "contemporary."

Wei Feng-ying, however, is the working intellectual of the revolutionary communist future, in which the privileged role of the "intellectual," as someone standing above and exempt from manual labor and systematically cut off from the masses, has been ended and transformed into a higher unity of mental and manual labor. Ni Chih-fu is another example:

I became a child labourer at 11 in a factory owned by a foreign capitalist in Shanghai. Toiling like a beast of burden, I barely eked out a living. I had my fill of sufferings from harsh oppression by foreign capitalists and the exploiting classes. It was under the leadership of Chairman Mao and the Communist Party that we drove away the imperialist pirates and overthrew the reactionary Kuomintang rule and the evil exploitation system. We workers have since become masters of our own destiny and are now living a happy life under socialism. . . . My proletarian feelings – deep hatred of capitalism and ardent love for socialism – are not inborn but are the result of my personal experience."

How does Ni Chih-fu consider his feelings and experiences? He points out that "simple class sentiments cannot replace consciousness in the struggle between the two lines and purely practical experience cannot replace Marxism-Leninism." Rather, "it

²⁰ Ni Chih-fu, "Overcoming Empiricism – Notes on Studying Lenin's 'Materialism and Empirio-Criticism," *Peking Review*, No. 43, Oct. 27, 1972, 5-7, http://massline.org/PekingReview/PR1972/PR1972-43a.htm, accessed 08/10/2011.

is necessary to conscientiously study revolutionary theory, use the Marxist-Leninist standpoint, view and method to sum up one's direct experience, especially the experience in class struggle and the struggle between the two lines . . ." Ni characteristically begins his essay by quoting Mao: "Read and study seriously and have a good grasp of Marxism." So much for our Sangee's "deep immersion."

Stop, apostropher!

Another convenient permutation of irreducible nevermindism could be summarized as sheer boredom, "enough of that stuff," and a casually contrived but absolute disinterest in whatever other intellectuals and critics have to say, especially where the latter raise and pursue arguments in contradiction with irreducibility. Professor Sangeeta Ray gives a clue of this attitude above in the expression, "this or that theorist" – off-handedly suggesting that while she knows about "them," it just doesn't matter all that much, so don't worry about it. This form of irreducibility occurs in Ray's short shrift treatment of the intellectual historian Arif Dirlik.

Ray's brief invocation of Dirlik occurs at the beginning of two paragraphs which attempt to compare Spivak's well-known difficulty with that of her competitor in the upper echelons of postcolonial studies, the eminent Homi K. Bhabha. According to Ray, Spivak is hardly "more difficult than, say, Homi Bhabha" (20). And the next sentence: "Bhabha has himself been apostrophized, by Arif Dirlik, as the 'master of political mystification and theoretical obfuscation" (21), citing pages 334-35, note 6 of a 1994 essay by Dirlik. But this is the first and last we hear from Arif Dirlik; for such a remark he is kicked out of the book. Professor Ray only follows the quotation with more of her own dense obfuscation, in the form of a "However, it is also true that . . ." Here the "however" (21) is just as good as a whatever.

"However, it is also true that certain theoretical and epistemic categories produced by Bhabha have been easily accommodated into the conceptual vocabulary of postcolonial theory and analysis."

What this means in connection with Dirlik's remark is entirely unclear and, in a word, irreducible. "It is not my purpose here to pit one postcolonial critic against another to see who comes out on top" (21), says the open-minded Professor Ray.

Irreducibility doesn't want to "pit" anything against anything. It's like an infinite glob of jello, or vaseline on a mirror reflecting some drab, indefinite wall. A "responsible and accountable" critic, she says, "has to learn to acknowledge the impossibility of a fully revealed and therefore a fully graspable episteme of alterity" (22). In that case, let's examine a bit closer how our responsible and accountable Professor Ray has dealt with the rude "alterity" of Dirlik.

There are three impossible points here which, taken together, recall the famous scene in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* where Marshall McLuhan steps into the unreality of the film to contradict the pontifications of a professor who has been talking "about" McLuhan's thought:

"I heard what you were saying," says McLuhan. "You know nothing of my work. How you ever got to teach a course in anything is totally amazing." ²¹

<u>Point one</u>: Professor Ray gets the page citation to Dirlik wrong. The statement doesn't appear on pages 334-35 at all, but rather on page 333, in note 6 (that's correct). The full note continues from pages 333-34.

<u>Point two</u>: Professor Ray's paraphrasing set-up of the statement is wrong and misleading. She says that Dirlik accuses Bhabha of being "the 'master . . . "But Dirlik doesn't use the word "the" as Ray imagines. He says, rather, that Bhabha is "something of a master" of, and so on. The full sentence is fairly lengthy and presents a powerfully condensed critique of Bhabha: "Bhabha's work, however, is responsible for more than the vocabulary of postcolonialism, as he has proven himself to be something of a master of political mystification and theoretical obfuscation, of a reduction of social and political problems to psychological ones, and of the substitution of post-structuralist linguistic manipulation for historical and social explanation – all of which show up in much postcolonial writing, but rarely with the same virtuosity (and incomprehensibleness) that he brings to it" (page 333, note 6).²²

²¹ Annie Hall, dir. Woody Allen, United Artists, 1977.

²² The text by Arif Dirlik is "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Winter, 1994, 328-56. Dirlik's comments on Bhabha arise in the course of his examination of other writings by Gyan Prakash. In the sentence preceding the one quoted above, Dirlik points out that "Prakash himself draws heavily on the characteristics of postcolonial consciousness delineated by others, especially Homi K. Bhabha, who has been responsible for the prominence in discussions of postcoloniality of the vocabulary of hybridity and so on" (333, note 6). He goes on to cite a number of Bhabha's influential writings and concludes the footnote as follows: "Bhabha is exemplary of the Third World intellectual who has been completely reworked by

Ray's manipulated sound-bite from Dirlik's essay is irreducibly simple-minded and complex at the same time; it serves the purpose of reducing the scope of the critique by making Bhabha appear to be the sole target, as well as reducing it to a merely trivial attack. Note the phrase in Dirlik's sentence, "all of which show up in much postcolonial writing." Indeed, as we come to find out when examined carefully, Professor Ray's writing ends up "showing up" in the very critical discourse she confuses. And this is precisely an example of the warping "logic" of the irreducible mentality in action, but it's not incomprehensible and can in fact be more or less "fully graspable" – which is exactly what Ray believes is impossible.

Point three: What is this business of "apostrophizing"? Professor Ray tells us that "Bhabha has himself been apostrophized, by Arif Dirlik . . ." Apparently – yes, only apparently – it doesn't have to do with the use of apostrophe as a mark of punctuation, as in "Ray's" book. Rather it refers to the dramatic or literary device of "turning away": a speaker or writer will suddenly "turn away" from the real audience and begin to address an imaginary or absent figure, or even an inanimate object, as if the imagined figure or object could hear and understand. For example:

O stranger of the future!

O inconceivable being!

Whatever the shape of your house,

However you scoot from place to place,

No matter how strange and colorless the clothes you may wear,

I bet nobody likes a wet dog either.²³

But there is no such apostrophe in Dirlik's essay. It's as simple as that. If we were to break the illusion of reality of Ray's book, we could ask Arif Dirlik himself. Indeed, we might begin by apostrophizing him:

Oh, Dirlik! Did you really apostrophize Homi Bhabha? . . . Well and, here he is. . . .

the language of First World cultural criticism" (334, note 6). Spivak is of course equally exemplary, if not more so.

²³ Billy Collins, "To a Stranger Born in Some Distant Country Hundreds of Years from Now," in *Sailing Alone Around the Room: New and Selected Poems*, Random House: NY, 2001, at page 87.

Professor Arif Dirlik, are you aware that Professor Sangeeta Ray has said that you "apostrophized" Homi Bhabha by reducing him to "the" master of obfuscation and mystification?

"Yes, I'm aware of it, and indeed I was utterly mystified by the word 'apostrophized.' It's totally ridiculous – or as you say, 'irreducible.' I don't apostrophize people; I never apostrophized anyone. I *critiqued* Bhabha, and that's the end of it."

I see. You deny apostrophizing Bhabha, but did you apostrophize Professor Gayatri Spivak?

"Of course not. However, I should perhaps criticize myself for failing to make it more clear in the essay in question, to which Professor Ray refers, that the mastery of obfuscation and mystification applies equally to Spivak. I did examine, discuss and criticize some of Spivak's work in that essay, but as for apostrophizing, no; its simply not my style of work. But I do appreciate your apostrophizing me here in your essay. In fact, I should very much like to apostrophize Professor Sangeeta Ray now. . . . Professor Ray, why did you make this obscure, obfuscating allegation? Why do you confuse critique with apostrophe? Why do you go so far as to substitute apostrophe for critique? It's absurd, irreducible! How you ever got to write a book about anything – or *not* 'about' anything or anyone, or anyone's work, or 'this or that' theorist – is totally amazing."

Thank you, Professor Dirlik, for helping to clarify this question. You can get back to your work now.

"Goodbye." And Professor Dirlik would then walk away. . . .

If Professor Sangeeta Ray can't distinguish between criticism and apostrophe, there's little else that can be done. But alas, perhaps in her defense (indeed!) we can take a page from Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*²⁴

The pertinent scene occurs in the second part of chapter three. Verochka (Vera Pavlovna) and Dmitry Lopukhov have now married and reside in a very modest apartment owned by their somewhat nosy, gossipy landlords Petrovna and Danilych. One day Verochka's friend Julie, along with her lover Serge, pay a visit to Verochka.

supplies energy for a whole lifetime" (quoted in the Introduction by Katz and Wagner, at page 32).

²⁴ Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, trans. Michael R. Katz, annot. William G. Wagner, Cornell UP: Ithaca, 1989. Lenin said of this book, "After my brother's execution, knowing that Chernyshevsky's novel was one of his favorite books, I really undertook to read it, and I sat over it not for several days but for several weeks. Only then did I understand its depth. . . . It's a thing that

Julie and Serge, as usual, are dressed very well and arrive in a beautiful horse-drawn carriage. Having seen them arrive and enter Verochka's home, the landlady Petrovna later reports the curious events to her husband:

"Well, Danilych," she says, "it seems that our tenants must be descended from important people. Today a general and his wife came to visit them. She was dressed so well that I don't even know how to describe her, and he had two stars on him" (176-77).

Chernyshevsky now interrupts their conversation and tells us:

It was truly amazing that Petrovna had seen two stars on Serge, who didn't have any at all, and, if he did, he probably wouldn't have worn them while escorting Julie. But that she actually saw two stars and was neither mistaken nor bragging, it's not she who so testified, but I who vouch for it. She did see them. You and I know very well that he had no stars; however, from Petrovna's point of view, it was impossible not to see two stars on someone with that appearance. And so she saw them. I'm not joking when I say that she really did. (177)

Petrovna is like our Professor Sangee, who sees apostrophe where there is no apostrophe because it's impossible for her not to see it. Such is the dialectics of vision in class struggle.

Capitalist ideology and inaccuracy, or, the capitalist-roader as capitalist-reader

As we have seen, the irreducible mentality is inaccurate, and this is because its trivializing method of reflecting reality is "one-sided." That is, rather than "read and study seriously," as Mao said, irreducibility gives priority to tid-bits and fragments while diverting critical inquiry away from the relationships and interconnections in which they occur — especially the way they occur within the historical system of class relations. There is no such thing as "Old" Virginia Slims, for example, but Professor Ray nonetheless "feels" like this dim-witted pseudo-recollection is important enough to trumpet; and the fact that Arif Dirlik did not "apostrophize" Homi Bhabha makes no difference to her whatsoever. Irreducibility is in this sense — in its nonsense — the opposite of dialectical materialism.

Again Ni Chih-fu offers a guiding light. He says, "All things in the world are interconnected and at the same time different from one another. . . . Everything in the world is changing and manifests itself at a certain stage in the process of its development." This method of understanding and reflecting reality is dialectical and materialist, and it is the opposite of irreducibility. "The fundamental way to overcome empiricism," Ni says, "is to study Marxism conscientiously." But since irreducibility disconnects rather than connects things, the kind of "knowledge" it propagates is, as Ni suggests, "like trees without roots and water without a source." Such pseudo-knowledge is thus the opposite of conscientious and serious study; it is, in short, inaccurate and arrives at "nothing but confusion and lies." ²⁵

Engels dealt with these very problems in *Anti-Duhring*, ²⁶ referring to the old saw of neglecting "the wood for the trees" (28) and the "slovenly"(145) methods of Herr Professor Eugen Duhring, who reproached Marx for "Chinese erudition" (38), that is, accuracy, conscientiousness and seriousness. Attacking Herr Duhring's "persistent habit of quoting falsely" and "quoting from memory," Engels says,

A man who is so totally incapable of quoting correctly . . . may well lapse into moral indignation at the "Chinese erudition" of other people, who without exception quote correctly, but precisely by doing this "inadequately conceal their lack of insight into the system of ideas of the various writers from whom they quote." Herr Duhring is right. . . . (144)

In other words, Duhring is "right" (correct) only by virtue of his ingeniously slack methods of misquotation, distorted memory, slipshod summarization, and the "foisting," as Engels puts it, of his own words into the mouths of others; he is "right" because he is wrong, "correct" because what he has said is false and incorrect. While Duhring has the nerve to criticize accuracy in others (particularly Marx), it turns out that his very attempt at quoting accurately is itself inaccurate – as Engels says, a "free creation and imagination on the part of Herr Duhring" and "products of Herr Duhring's own manufacture" (144). Or again, as Engels puts it:

²⁵ Ni Chih-fu, quoting Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Irreducibility can also be grasped and summarized, as Mao says in "On Practice," as "the breach between the subjective and the objective" and "the separation of knowledge from practice" (quoted in Ni's essay).

²⁶ Frederick Engels, *Herr Eugen Duhring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Duhring)*, trans. Emile Burns, ed. C.P. Dutt, International Publishers: NY, 1972.

... Herr Duhring succeeds in making Marx speak pure nonsense. And then he has the cheek to describe as *comic* the nonsense which he has himself fabricated." (138)

This is the "intellectual" factory of irreducibility, the manufacture and fabrication of irreducibility. In its conventional meaning, irreducibility refers to a phenomenon that is not susceptible to, or cannot be subjected to, any further "reduction" or simplification, any further change or transformation; it therefore suggests that a thing is "just the way it is," and it's futile as well as incorrect to try to change it. But who judges what is incorrect? As Mao pointed out, this is exactly the viewpoint of the "wise old man" who ridiculed the "foolish old man" for undertaking the historic task of removing (reducing, clearing the obstruction of) the two mountains of imperialism and feudalism.²⁷

This "wise" viewpoint is an ahistorical as well as apriori way of thinking about "things." If a phenomenon has reached the point of being irreducible, this means that it has already passed through a series of prior "reductions." So the question then arises, how can one say that this process of changing and transforming has now become final? This is ahistorical thinking because it asserts that history itself has ended. And this is apriori thinking because the conception of the phenomenon in its purportedly irreducible state is asserted as the only possible conception, without the need for further (or any) investigation and without further (or any) examination of proof or evidence. Apriori forms of "knowledge" assert truths and conclusions without investigation, without observation or experimentation, without any genuine trial of proof and evidence in combination with reasoning; instead there is only conclusory "reasoning" in the abstract. Apriorism is therefore closely associated with "prejudice" (to judge beforehand) or prejudgment – that is, the making of a judgment without serious inquiry and without a testing or trial of the relationship between reasoning (subjectivity) and facts, experience or practice (objectivity).

²⁷ See Mao Tse-tung, "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains," a speech delivered on June 11, 1945 at the Seventh National Congress of the Communist Party of China, at http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_26.htm, accessed 07/22/2011.

In the Marxist theory of knowledge, this is nonsense because history itself and the history of any particular "things" are nothing other than a continuous and unending process of changes and transformations. Duhring's attack on Marxism by way of distortion is a way of "reducing" Marxism to a final and incorrect form, that is, to render Marxism irreducibly worthless and intrinsically mistaken. Duhring's basic idea was that "whatever" Marx was saying was ridiculous – as if he were saying, in essence, "forget about it." As Engels points out, Duhring's "thought-content" could itself be reduced to the argument that "contradiction = absurdity" (132), as Duhring himself states, "There are no contradictions in things, or, to put it another way, contradiction applied to reality is itself the apex of absurdity" (131, Engels quoting Duhring). This is nothing more than an apologia for the status quo, a way of explaining away the interpenetrating contradictions and absurdities of the status quo; it is Duhring's "socialitarian" theoretical precursor to the "end of history" argument. 28 As Engels makes clear throughout his book, Duhring was not interested in the transformation of capitalism as a social system, but was rather interested in preserving capitalism without its flaws; he propagated reformism, not revolution.

This point is brought out very clearly in Wang Che's excellent essay, "How Engels Criticized Duhring's Apriorism." Wang says,

As Engels made clear, Duhring did not raise, even in the slightest way, any criticism of the capitalist mode of production. Duhring thought it was very

²⁸ See "End of History," in *Dictionary of Revolutionary Marxism*, Massline.org website, http://www.massline.org/Dictionary/E.htm#end of history>, accessed 07/14/2012.

²⁹ Wang Che, "How Engels Criticized Duhring's Apriorism – Notes on Studying 'Anti-Duhring,'" Peking Review, No. 10, March 10, 1972, 5-9, http://massline.org/PekingReview/PR1972/PR1972-P 10a.htm>, accessed 08/09/2011. Opposing and contesting aprioristic irreducibility (not Wang's word), Wang points out that the revolutionary theory and practice of Marxism, Leninism and Maoism "has in no way exhausted truth but ceaselessly opens up roads to the knowledge of truth in the course of practice." Wang also quotes Engels on apriorism in Anti-Duhring: "... the old favourite ideological method, also known as the a priori method, which consists in ascertaining the properties of an object by logical deduction from the concept of the object, instead of from the object itself. . . . The object is then to conform to the concept, not the concept to the object." See page 106 in Engels' book. Engels also points out, "Mankind therefore finds itself faced with a contradiction: on the one hand, it has to gain an exhaustive knowledge of the world system in all its interrelations; and on the other hand, because of the nature both of man and of the world system, this task can never be completely fulfilled. But this contradiction lies not only in the nature of the two factors – the world, and man – it is also the main lever of all intellectual advance . . ." (44). This is a contradiction, but it isn't absurd; it is the making of history in and through the dialectical interrelation of practice and theory. Engels likewise says later in this same work: "Mere knowledge, even if it went much further and deeper than that of bourgeois economic science, is not enough to bring social forces under the control of society. What is above all necessary for this, is a social act" (345).

fine. He only fancied that capitalist society could eliminate its defects. This obviously is neither scientific socialism nor utopian socialism, but utopian capitalism!"

Utopian capitalism is the summation of all reformism. It is the final decree of the irreducible line in thought and politics: the *reductio ad absurdum* of irreducibility itself. In other words, irreducibility's absurdity rests on the denial of contradiction – fundamentally the contradiction of class antagonism, which is the central "defect" of capitalism – in the very argument that "contradiction = absurdity." This is what lurks underneath Duhring's irreducibly superficial fabrications of Marxism. The factory of irreducible consciousness is the factory of utopian capitalism: it is a "fetter" or obstacle to the production of knowledge to change the world.

The contradictions of accuracy in reading "a Spivak"

We return to Professor Ray's book to examine the particularity of her contradictory dealings with "accuracy." She ponders how she would write her book on "a Spivak" and a "terrain in which Spivak could be discovered" (1). It is as if we were reading a book by an earnest admirer of Herr Duhring. "I felt the task to be impossible," she says. "How would I tackle the vast subject that is Spivak, the collection of works that arrive in every page in a dense prose that seems often impossible to parse?" And "how would I write her without diminishing her presence – always excessively present – in that prose" (1). "Would I vanish," she asks (or, as she asked herself), "in trying to write Spivak, reduced to an emulating disciple, whose role would be to enable an 'accurate' reading of Spivak?" (1) Thus Professor Ray knowingly begs the question – is an "accurate" reading of Spivak (or anything) even possible, or even desirable? How to "parse" such genius, such a "vast subject"?

Professor Mustapha Marrouchi has offered quite a different interpretation of why Spivak is, in Ray's misleading and pretentious diction, "often impossible to parse":

... Gayatri Spivak is probably the most dazzling and, as she seems keen that we should know, the most highly paid figure in the US's overheated market for academic reputations. ... She writes in a pointlessly obscure and convoluted style. ... so bewilderingly eclectic, so prone to juxtaposition

rather than synthesis, that ascribing a coherent position to her on any question is extremely difficult. One might be impressed at the range of her reading until one starts noticing how regularly references to the same texts (including her own) are recycled; and how inaccurate these sometimes are. . . . Spivak's sheer carelessness can at times be exasperating. She refers airily to someone called "Fröbel Folker." Could this perhaps be a distant relative of the German economist Folker Fröbel? Otto Kreye becomes Otto Kreve. . . . she refers to Helene Cixous as "a Creole." Her attempts to lecture Americans on Indo-British culture are both risibly inaccurate (she goes on about what she calls "Indy-Pop," by which she apparently means not only the Tindersticks but Bhangra) and insufferably pompous. . . . Most tiresome of all is the intensity of self-regard constantly concerned to track her own progress, proclaim her own status. . . . good old-fashioned showing off.³⁰

Likewise, an anonymous reader of Spivak and Judith Butler's *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* offers a compellingly accurate parsing of their "conversation" book:

In a revealing exchange, when Butler asks Spivak to clarify what she means by critical regionalism, Spivak careens from Evo Morales to East Asia to South Asia to Habermas, to undocumented workers in the United States, to Iran, to NATO, to Russia in 5 pages to make the wafer-thin conclusion: "It [critical regionalism] goes under and over nationalisms but keeps the abstract structures of something like a state." No other scholar would be allowed to hang an argument on this flimsy peg, but she can and does. . . . To think that

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Mustapha Marrouchi, Letter in the *London Review of Books*, Vol. 21, No. 13, July 1, 1999, in response to Terry Eagleton, "In the Gaudy Supermarket," reviewing Spivak's *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, *LRB*, Vol. 21, No. 10, May 13, 1999, 3-6, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n10/ terry-eagleton/in-the-gaudy-supermarket, accessed 12/31/2011. Professor Judith Butler's letter in response to Eagleton also appears just prior to Marrouchi's, but her zealous defense of Spivak is also reminiscent of Herr Duhring's certainty of his own "grand" gift to humanity. In Butler's view, Eagleton's "refusing to read and engage" Spivak, like his criticism of her "writing in an inaccessible style," merely shows his ignorance of her "influence . . . unparalleled by any living scholar . . . her acute and brilliant contributions . . . her critical interrogation of the political status quo in its global dimensions . . . activist thinking and writing that challenge us to think the world more radically . . . the difficulty of her work is fresh air . . . Luckily for us, . . . staying, temporarily, the death of thought . . . so provocative and indisputably important." Anything less, Butler suggests, is mere "spoon-feeding" and "confines" theorists to "writing introductory primers." By all means, let no one restrain the theorists!

it was Spivak who first charged her interlocutors with "sanctioned ignorance." ³¹

In a way, exemplary

But presumably these rudely accurate texts on Spivak would be mere apostrophizing in Professor Ray's eyes. She proceeds to tell us that "My own encounter with Spivak is, in a way, exemplary" (2). In a way? . . . "As a graduate student, I discovered Spivak in the covers of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*" (2). Such intrigue and innuendo, and "I discovered . . . that I liked theory" (2). In a note following the "in a way" sentence, Professor Ray says:

I might as well also admit that I did meet Spivak over drinks – actually, she drank tea, I drank a martini – where I discussed the contours of this project [her Spivak book]. I bring this up because at this meeting Spivak had left her wallet in the hotel room. I paid for the tea and the drink and she said humorously, "Is this going to end up in the book?" And I said, of course and it may become one of those legendary Spivak stories depending on how I tell it. I tell it here simply without hyperbole. (23, note 1)

This juicy tale, "simply without hyperbole," from someone who "liked theory." Now does this story have anything to do with the idea that her encounter with Spivak was "in a way, exemplary," given that the footnote follows that sentence? If so, even if only in part, or even if only "in a way," *why* is it exemplary, *how* is it exemplary? Why does Professor Ray say that she "might as well also admit" this? She says, "I bring this up because . . ." – Spivak forgot her wallet, Ray paid for their drinks, Spivak says something humorous, Ray responds humorously, and now the story is in her book. . . . What's the point? There is no point, and that's precisely what's exemplary about it: it is only "in a way, exemplary" of Spivak's Elvis-like status. However much or in whatever way Ray "liked theory," her irreducibly

³¹ Anonymous Reader, "Simulacra Scholarship," posted at Amazon.com, Nov. 26, 2007, reviewing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Judith Butler, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging*, Seagull Books: Calcutta, 2007, http://www.amazon.com/Who-Sings-Nation-State-Language-Belonging/dp/1905422571, accessed 12/29, 2011.

scattered³² version of logic is anchored in the classic whateverisms of the "in a way," "might as well," and "depending on how I tell it."

Gauche . . . and gosh!

You might suppose that someone with the "cheek," as Engels put it, to enlighten her readers with such bologna would be rather careful about finding fault in the work of others. But this is not the case at all. On page 3 Professor Ray continues her rendition of self-reflexivity by reviewing what she "could" have written about Spivak. Without identifying Colin MacCabe by name, she suggests a light postcolonial scolding of MacCabe's highly enthusiastic "Foreword" to Spivak's first collection of writings, *In Other Worlds*. ³³ Ray says,

I could use another critic's quite gauche sculpting of Spivak as "the model product of an Indian undergraduate and an American graduate education – probably the most scholarly combination in the planet" (*IOW*, ix), as a way to

. .

³² Although the student response website "Rate My Professors" is inherently subjective and unverifiable, it's nonetheless interesting to note that out of eight ratings for Professor Ray, three students from three different classes each described her teaching as "a bit scattered" and "sometimes scattered." See http://www.ratemy.professor.com/ShowRatings.jsp?tid=569871&all=true, accessed 01/16/2012.

³³ See MacCabe's "Foreword" to Spivak's book, In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics, Routledge: NY, 1987, at pages ix-xix; since 2006 Spivak's Other Worlds has been published in the "Routledge Classics" series. In MacCabe's effort at "locating Spivak's work" in relation to Marxism, feminism and deconstruction, he says, "The problem is also to stress the provisionality . . . to remember/encode the fact that this homogeneity is, in each case, wrested from a heterogeneity which is forever irreducible to it but which cannot be grasped except as a limit, an excess beyond which, for a particular discourse, intelligibility fades" (xi). In each case, wrested from a heterogeneity which is forever irreducible to it but . . . except . . . beyond It sounds like the prelude to a sci-fi horror film starring Ethel Merman. Well, "O perspicacious reader!" (Chernyshevsky, supra, at page 208 et seq.). Now you can just imagine here that only if Mao had "grasped" and "encoded" such an oracular formula as this in 1927, he surely could have saved himself a lot of work on his Hunan Report. See Mao Tsetung, "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan," Selected Works of Mao Tsetung, Vol. 1, Foreign Language Press: Peking, 1967, 23-59, analyzing social, political, economic and ideological relations among, e.g., local tyrants, evil gentry, lawless landlords, corrupt officials, middle and small landlords, Kuomintang right-wingers; rich, middle, and poor peasants; among the poor peasants, the utterly destitute, and the less destitute; handicraftsmen, tenant-peasants, rich tenant peasants, semi-owner-peasants, poverty-stricken intellectuals, clan bigwigs, middle-of-the-roaders, and other long-gowned gentlemen; state/political authority, clan authority, religious authority, and the authority of the husband, etc. Professor MacCabe's long-gowned sentence is a brilliant example of poshlost' (see Chernyshevsky, supra, at page 145, note 56, "self-satisfied mediocrity") and can be duly itemized in what the revolutionary Hunan peasants called "the other register" (see Mao, "Report," at page 26). Given such an extreme poverty of dialectics, the fact that he even managed to spell homogeneity and heterogeneity within the same sentence is totally amazing. Playing "a" leading postcolonial intellectual, however, Professor Sangee describes this sort of thing as "sculpting" and politely (but smugly) labels it "gauche." As Marx said, this "shows plainly how capitalist production acts on the brain-functions of capitalists and their retainers" (Capital, supra, at page 246, note 3, emphasis added).

underline her movement from a middle-class family in Calcutta to the upper echelons of academia in the United States via an initial stay in Iowa and a few visits elsewhere. (3)

Gauche! . . . And Professor Ray, did this other critic really use the phrase "in the planet"? It turns out that she is offering us here a quotation from memory. Let's compare. MacCabe's allegedly "gauche" text (that is, lacking social polish, awkward, inept, inelegant, etc.) actually says, in relevant part:

a model product of an Indian undergraduate and an American graduate education – probably the most scholarly combination *on this* planet." (ix, emphasis added).

Quoting from memory error number 1: not "the model product" but "a model product."

Quoting from memory error number 2: not "in the planet" but "on this planet." Quoting from memory error number 3: not "the planet" but "this planet."

Thus we see that in trying to quote twenty words correctly, and even providing the correct page citation (absent the author's name of course), our scholar manages to get seventeen words correct. It's "in a way" correct. Calculating the relative accuracy here, Professor Ray scores 85 percent! Yet she has the cheek to call MacCabe's text "gauche." In fact Ray herself *proves* that she could *not* "use" this other critic's "quite gauche sculpting" of Spivak because she can't even quote it accurately. And so, the gauche calls the gauche gauche – the pot calls the kettle black: hypocrisy and incompetence masquerade as criticism.

The logic of hypocrisy extends further into Professor Ray's own, supposedly improved and less "gauche," portrait of Spivak's genius. Spivak's colossal importance simply can't be "reduced," according to Ray. Immediately following the sentence quoted above in which she blunders through her "upper-crust" British criticism of MacCabe, she asserts that "trying to capture the life and times of Spivak, and reducing her contributions to a pithy defining sentence, is impossible" (3). Spivak's grandiosity, in other words, as MacCabe also attempted to point out, is irreducible. But Ray continues:

"Spivak is a literary theorist, a postcolonial critic, translator, feminist, Marxist, and deconstructionist. She has published on every significant social, political, and cultural topic that has engaged our times, while never losing sight of the role of the teacher in the university and beyond, to rural enclaves in Bangladesh and China. . . . Her commitment to a planetary ethics has produced trenchant criticisms" (3), and so on and so on.

Is this gauche? – every significant social, political, and cultural topic that has engaged our times, . . . planetary ethics? What is meant by this quaint notion of "our" times? What has Spivak ever had to say about the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution? Was that "significant"? Does it count as a "topic" that Professor Ray recognizes at all? Yet for Ray this is the stuff of "legend" and accuracy at once.

Gauche doesn't quite capture it. The only response to this is: *Gosh!* Or as our friend Gomer might also exclaim – *Shazam!*

Here we bid farewell to Professor Sangeeta Ray's fairytale of critical scholarship in which she "adheres to the spirit of a Spivakian methodology." But we'll let her *In Other Words* have the last word to give further evidence of this grand, incredulous "spirit" of irreducible bourgeois ideology. Having quoted a passage (correctly perhaps, but maybe not – nevermind!) in which, *inter alia*, Spivak casually recalls, "I was a luscious nineteen-year-old" and "I was a 'communist' so early, right?" (4), Professor Ray tells us:

Reading this passage always makes me giddy. . . . "

Right, whatever you say. We accept Professor Sangeeta Ray's declaration as truthful. Perhaps she should also be raised to the level of "a" Professor Sangeeta Ray. But we shall see in practice whether she feels so giddy when she sees real communists, when she sets her eyes on the real wall of bronze in the socialist revolution.