

# Can the Subaltern Speak and Other Transcendental Questions<sup>1</sup>

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Althusser insisted throughout his work that a philosophy must be judged by the effects that it produces, all the effects, whether internal or external to whatever disciplinary boundaries might be thought to impose their jurisdiction on it. For Althusser history no more forgives the "misunderstood" or "misinterpreted" philosopher than it does the defeated revolutionary. From a materialist standpoint there is no more a "court of final appeal," as Machiavelli put it, in philosophy than in politics. To grant philosophy a material, practical existence in this way is to admit that "misinterpretations" are not subjective errors (whether malicious or benign) in the minds of one's readers but are rather the objective effects of one's own work, not of course of the intentions behind it but in its real existence and in its unforeseeable encounters with other works, and other forces. It hardly needs to be said that few philosophers have openly endorsed such a position, just as few philosophers have ever written books with the phrase "self-criticism in the title. And more disturbing than the narcissistic injury that results from the recognition that one is not entirely master of one's words and arguments, no matter how painstakingly constructed, is the idea that truth is not enough, that false and harmful ideas are held in place by relations of force that can be changed only by opposing force. In other words, Plato was right to see philosophy as the site of a war that can have no end insofar as one must constantly confront the unforeseeable consequences of one's own work.

Not that Gayatri Spivak needs to be told any of this. Her essay "can the Subaltern Speak?" (which exists in several forms--I'll be examining the longest version, which appears in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*) displays a dazzling array of

tactical devices designed to ward off or pre-emptively neutralize the attacks of critics. We might say of Spivak what Althusser said of Lacan--that the legendary difficulty of the essay is less a consequence of the profundity of its subject matter than its tactical objectives: "to forestall the blows of critics . . . to feign a response to them before they are delivered" and, above all, to resort to philosophies apparently foreign to the endeavor "as so many intimidating witnesses thrown in the faces of the audience to retain the respect." To acknowledge this does not automatically imply a criticism of Spivak (which is precisely why I cited the case of Lacan the importance of whose work for me at least is unquestionable): after all, tactics are dictated by the features of the concrete situation.

Of course, the difficulty of the essay cannot be reduced to a matter of tactics alone. Its difficulty is also a consequence of the fact that Spivak carries on several struggles simultaneously. The first, and perhaps the most important, is her intervention in the debates surrounding the field of Subaltern Studies as it existed in India in the early eighties, particularly as represented by the work of Ranajit Guha. As a critical supporter of Subaltern Studies as a project, Spivak seeks to point out a discrepancy between its research and the way its practitioners theorized that research. In particular, she objects to the notion that Subaltern studies seeks to allow the previously ignored voice of the subaltern finally to be heard and that its objective can be to "establish true knowledge of the subaltern and its consciousness." The notion that the subaltern is a kind of collective individual, conscious of itself, an author, an actor, in short, the classical subject, allowed the movement to differentiate between the subaltern and the representation of the subaltern by imperialism, and thus to call attention to the blank spaces imperialist discourse. The subaltern studies movement did so, however, only by suppressing the heterogeneity and non-contemporaneity of the subaltern itself, that is, by assigning it an essence and therefore falling into a metaphysical abyss from which Spivak seeks to rescue it.

And according to Spivak they found themselves in some very distinguished company in that Abyss. The other major objective of the essay is to intervene in a quarrel not so much between Foucault and Derrida (who did engage in a philosophical debate which Spivak curiously neglects to mention) as between their champions, acknowledged and unacknowledged, in the U.S. A third figure, Deleuze, also comes to play a part, if a minor one, in this scene as Foucault's accomplice. In particular, she seeks to lay to rest the "received idea" that "Foucault deals with real history, real politics and real social problems; Derrida is inaccessible, esoteric and textualistic." She will show, in contrast, that "Derrida is less dangerous" than Foucault, who not only privileges "the 'concrete' subject of oppression" but even more dangerously conceals the privilege he thus grants himself by "masquerading as the absent non-represented who lets the oppressed speak for themselves." While this may seem a surprising charge to lay at the feet of Foucault, who, after all, asked the famous question, "What is an Author?" and in doing so had a few things to say about Derrida that Spivak might profitably have consulted, she invokes "the labor of the negative" to sustain her accusation. Foucault's critique of the subject is itself a ruse of subjectivity. The ruse is so clever that its work cannot be glimpsed in any of Foucault's major texts where it labors to dissemble the negation of the subject that it will finally itself negate. Accordingly, Spivak must turn to what she calls "the unguarded

practice of conversation," i.e., an interview to discover Foucault's thought. Of course, one might be tempted to argue that it is not only possible but inevitable that Foucault would contradict himself not only in interviews but in his most important works, unless that is, we assign to Foucault the position of Absolute subject, whose writing, despite the appearance of contradiction, possesses total coherence and homogeneity. Spivak, however, suggests that what Foucault utters in apparently "unguarded" moments can only reveal a truth kept carefully hidden under a veil of appearance; such a procedure of reading resolves the apparent contradiction to restore Foucault's work to the bad totality that it has always been.

What Foucault and Deleuze, First World intellectuals, share with the subaltern studies group is the notion no less dangerous for being naive that "the oppressed . . . can speak and know their conditions." And thus to the general plague of essentialism which in truly internationalist fashion circulates freely between the First and Third Worlds, Spivak proposes the antidote of a single question: can the subaltern speak? It is a testimony to the power of Spivak's essay that this question has come to dominate an entire theoretical field to such an extent that the vast majority of responses have consisted of answers to, rather than examinations of, her question. It is as if there exists a simple dilemma before us: either we argue that the subaltern can indeed speak, in which case according to one's perspective we have either brought agency back in or, in contrast, lapsed into essentialism; or we argue with Spivak that the subaltern cannot speak, which means for some that we have silenced the oppressed, which for others we have refused the myth of the originary subject. Few have ventured to question the question itself, to ask how such a question functions and what are its practical effects.

A recent exception has focused on the putative subject or non-subject of speech: the subaltern. Chakrabarti and Chaudhury have criticized Spivak's use of the term as suppressing class antagonisms, not simply essentialistic or reductive ways of understanding these antagonisms, but class contradictions *per se*. In fact, if we examine the essay closely we can go even further to say that Spivak has elevated the contradiction between the First World and Third World as opposing blocs to a position of strategic and political dominance, as if the working classes in the West (and it appears that only the West has working classes--from the essay one would think that India was a primarily peasant society rather than one of the largest manufacturing economies in the world) is structurally allied more closely to its own bourgeoisie than to those forces traditionally regarded as its allies in the nations outside of Europe, North American and Japan: workers, rural laborers, landless peasants, etc. Thus, the idea of international alliances between the working classes East and West is for Spivak only a relic of so-called orthodox Marxism, it is even more menacingly a component of the strategy to maintain the domination of First World over Third World by subordinating the interests of the subaltern to those of their privileged counterparts. It is worth remarking that this is hardly a new position: on the contrary, it has a long history in the socialist and communist movements. Lenin flirted with it in his attempts to explain the capitulation of European social democracy in the First World War, Stalin embraced it and its very language derives from the period of the Sino-Soviet split and the consolidation of Maoism as an

international current. Accordingly, those who hold this position might want to draw their own balance sheet of its real political effects.

My objective, however, is to question the question itself, "Can the Subaltern Speak," which even if we replace the subaltern with another noun of our choice (the working class[es], the people, the oppressed, etc.) rests on an obvious paradox. Of course the subaltern speak and write; the archives of the world are filled not only with the political tracts of their parties and organizations, but there are literary texts, newspapers, films, recordings, leaflets, songs, even the very chants that accompany spontaneous and organized protests all over the world. To all appearances, there is speaking and writing always and everywhere and even more where there is resistance to exploitation and oppression. But here we must be very careful; Spivak does not ask whether the subaltern *does* speak but whether it is possible for them to speak. Her question is a question of possibility which as such functions as a transcendental question, akin to Kant's famous question: what can I know? That is, what we take to be the subaltern speaking may in fact be determined to be only the appearance of their speaking, if our theory deems it impossible for them to speak. Such transcendental questions thus necessarily produce a distinction between appearance and reality: if what is, is impossible then it must be declared no longer to be what is and a second real reality substituted for it.

Even more curious than this transcendental turn itself is the argumentation Spivak musters to support her declaration, against all appearances, that the subaltern cannot speak. And she has called forth some very intimidating witnesses on her behalf, the primary one, of course, being Derrida. Who better than the translator of *Of Grammatology* to remind us of the relevance of Derrida's critique of Western logocentrism and phonocentrism to political life and to show the utter folly, if not the disingenuousness, of Foucault's call to publish the writings of prisoners as an integral part of the movement against the prisons, or the attempt to set up and archive for the workers' voices as part of the project of proletarian self-emancipation (a project which Spivak has already criticized in categorical terms)? It appears, however, that no one has thought to ask whether Derrida's argument's (especially in *Grammatology*, the work in which such questions are most extensively examined, lead to such conclusions). Is there anything in Derrida's critique of logocentrism that would allow us to say the subaltern cannot speak but must be spoken for, that is, represented both discursively and politically by those who can speak, those who are real subjects of speech? In fact, it would appear that Derrida's argument leads in precisely the opposite direction. For if we accept Derrida's arguments against the speaking subject as ideal origin of speech, present to its utterances as a guarantee of their truth and authenticity, that is, that speech is always already a kind of writing, material and irreducible, we are left only with the fact that there is no pure, original working class or subaltern (or ruling class), possessing a consciousness expressed in its speech or for that matter its acts. There is speech and writing (although these are only modalities of action which are in no way privileged) always and everywhere. It is precisely in and through the struggles that traverse these fields of practice that collectivities are constituted. The question of whether or not the subaltern, or to use the Leninist term, the masses can speak cannot be posed transcendentially but only

conjuncturally by the disposition of opposing forces that characterizes a given historical moment.

To recognize this is to recognize that Spivak has carried out a double displacement: not only has she replaced the question of whether the subaltern does speak at a given moment with the question of whether it is possible for them to speak at all, she has even more importantly substituted speech for action, as if, again, there exist opposing worlds of language (in which we are trapped) and being (which remains inaccessible to us). Had she not carried out this substitution, her essay would have been far less effective; for the subaltern or the masses never cease to resist and rebel even as they are constituted by these actions as the masses. Here we must draw a line of demarcation: on the one side, the transcendental questions that declare what exists impossible so as to declare necessary and inevitable the representation of the masses by others; on the other a materialism that recognizes the irreducibility of what exists, including the voices and actions of the masses as they wage their struggles for self-emancipation with or without intellectuals of the Third and First World at their side.

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#### **Editor's Note**

1 This essay was originally presented at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association, December, 1997, in Toronto, Canada.