

PRACTICAL POLITICS OF THE OPEN END
AN INTERVIEW WITH
GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK

Sarah Harasym

Envoi

In these pages, I have repeatedly emphasized the complicity between subject and object of investigation. My role in this essay, as subject of investigation, has been entirely parasitical, since my only object has been the *Subaltern Studies* themselves. Yet I am part of their object as well. Situated within the current academic theatre of cultural imperialism, with a certain *carte d'entrée* into the elite theoretical *ateliers* in France, I bring news of power-lines within the palace. Nothing can function without us, yet the part is at least historically ironic.

What of the post-structuralist suggestion that *all* work is parasitical, slightly to the side of that which one wishes adequately to cover that critic (historian) and text (subaltern) are always "beside themselves?" The chain of complicity does not halt at the closure of an essay.¹

There are important allegories about the production of knowledge to be read with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her important work on, and in the reception of her work within, the academic theatre of cultural imperialism. As the parasitical "host" of this interview, it is these allegories that I hope to open for reading. This interview was recorded in Pittsburgh, Penn., where Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an Andrew M. Mellon Profes-

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sor of English and an Invited Affiliate of the Department of Philosophy, on October 31/November 1, 1987. As we proceed, I ask the reader to question why it is that although Spivak's pre-eminence is acknowledged, judging from the numerous references to, and "rumours" of, her work, from the visiting professorships she has held at prestigious universities in different parts of the globe, and from the large audiences that attend her lectures at professional meetings and at conferences, her work is rarely discussed in detail.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was born and received part of her formal education in Calcutta, India. She came to the United States as a graduate student of Paul de Man's at Cornell University, where she received an M.A. (English) in 1962 and a Ph.D. (Comparative Literature) in 1967. Although Spivak's first book, *Myself I must Remake: The Life and Poetry of W.B. Yeats*² was published in 1974, it was the publication in 1976 of her introduction to and translation of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*³ that signed her "*carte d'entrée* into the elite theoretical *ateliers* in France." The 1987 publications of *In other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Production*, a selection of her important papers, and "Can the Subaltern Speak?"⁴ effectively chart Spivak's interventional force within Marxism, feminism and deconstruction. Forthcoming books include: *Master Discourse, Native Informant* (Columbia University Press), a book length study of Deconstructive Practice, a book on International Feminism and a book length study of Jacques Derrida.

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HARASYM: In a number of your essays ("Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value," for example⁵) you discuss the history of the epistemic violence of imperialism as crisis management. I would like to begin with two questions: To what extent does the question of value when it is determined by the "idealist" predication of the subject as consciousness and/or by the "materialist" predication of the subject as labor power manage the crisis of imperialism? Could you outline what some of the theoretico-political or politico-theoretical implications/problems are that arise when the question of value is determined by a "materialist" subject predication such as Marx's?

SPIVAK: What we have to keep in mind when we are thinking of the so called "idealist" and the so called "materialist" predication is that these two adjectives can never be entertained as final. But, any way, if we decide we are going to make a distinction between them, we have to remember that "value," the word "value," the concept or the metaphor "value," means two different things in the two different contexts. Very loosely speaking, in the context where the human being is defined with consciousness as its specifically defining characteristic or, to put it on another register, where the subject is predicated as consciousness, if we call it the idealist predication, in that context, the word "value" means, in shorthand, the old fashioned three values: "Truth," "Beauty," "Goodness" — Weber's or Habermas's three value spheres, cognitive, aesthetic, ethical. So that basically what we see is that the part of the world which implicitly claims that the history of human consciousness has found its best fulfillment in it is, also, the *site* which is the home of the axiological, the home of the values. And the rest of the world is measured against that. So that, in fact, to qualify for the subjectship of ethics, that can choose between right and wrong imagining that it is *the* human subject, one must be located in that part of the world where the history of human consciousness has found its fulfillment. So that even access to critique of the position is available, for example, through a position like *mine*, a position which has gone through that itinerary. The crisis of the other part of the world wanting perhaps to claim, or the possibility of their wanting to claim, that they have indigenous homes for an axiological program, can be managed by this particular presupposition. So that one says, for example, that access to nationalism is part of the cultural effect of imperialism, that access to critique of this kind is, again, through the cultural itinerary of imperialism and so on. That's crisis management from the so-called "idealist" predication: consciousness as the defining predicate of the human being.

On the other hand, if you take the so called "materialist" predication of the subject as work, work which subsumes consciousness within it as, also, *a* kind of work, value is that mediating, and to quote Marx, the "slight and contentless" [*Capital*, Vol. 1] "Inhaltlos" thing: the mediating and "contentless" differential which can never appear on its own, but it is always

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necessary in order to move from labor to commodity, in order to move from labor to the possibility of its products being exchanged. Now if this is ignored, and it has been ignored, dismissed, for example, by economists who have wanted to claim Marxism back into the discipline of economics — I'm speaking now of, let's say, the Sraffians. If one attends to this instead of ignoring it as either "metaphysical" or too "starry-eyed political" or not theoretically astute enough, if one attends to this "slight and contentless thing" that is the mediating possibility between labor and commodity and the possibility of exchange — and I'm not going to spell out the whole argument for you because this *is* Marx's basic argument — if it is attended to, then there is a possibility of suggesting to the worker that the worker produces capital, that the *worker* produces capital because the worker, the container of labour power, is the source of value. By the same token it is possible to suggest to the so called "third world" that it *produces* the wealth and the possibility of the cultural self-representation of the "first world."

This afternoon at a women's graduate student's conference where I was running the workshop on international students, there was present a small group of young white American women who clearly with a lot of benevolence, but completely unexamined benevolence, were suggesting that there was perhaps something wrong in our not acknowledging that we were getting all of these benefits of the U.S. education system, that we were only talking about our problems within the institution. I argued then, following this argument, although I tried to keep it as unpolitically vocabularized as possible, I argued then that if one looked at the documents of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, if one actually looked at the way in which budgets were established etc., one would know that to an extent the position from where the U.S. educational system, the university system is able to make itself so technically and qualitatively well endowed, a lot of it is produced by the "third world", and if you want to work it out, you have to work it out from the argument of value: that "slight and contentless" mediating differential between labor power and commodity. Now, the way in which it is produced, on the other hand, is not visible because most people do not read those kinds of economic documents. What they read is ideological stuff in journals and newspapers written by people who are not aware of this fully. On the other hand, the fact that all of these foreign students are at universities is eminently visible, and the fact that they will go back and themselves perhaps work to keep this crisis management intact is an added bonus. But, it is only through the argument that there is this contentless, mediating differential which allows labor power to valorize value that is, the possibility of exchange and surplus, that we can grasp that the manipulation of Third World labor sustaining the continued resources of the U.S. academy which produces the ideological supports for that very manipulation.

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If one attends to this and I'm sorry if in order to make this "absolutely" transparently clear I would really have to say just read Marx's texts carefully. Those thousands and thousands of pages, in fact, explain only this over and over again to the implied reader: who is, of course, the worker within capital logic. Just know that *you* produce capital, and you can only know this if you forget about your concrete experience simply as what gives you the picture of the world. Think it through and you will see that you are producing capital, and no one is giving you anything like money or wages in exchange for something. In fact, what you are getting is produced by you and it's being shuffled back to you so more of it can be produced to keep the capitalist alive. O.K. That's what the so called materialist predication of the subject as labour power can do in terms of our understanding crisis management. It really changes the subject-position, altogether, whereas, the "idealist" predication manages the crisis by saying that the history of consciousness found its fulfillment in this part of the globe. If you don't attend to it, attend to this value question, then, of course, you work back . . . you fall back into the notion that the "first world" countries are helping the "third world" countries to develop, and, of course, you don't really have to be this theoretical to know that if you simply read the appropriate documents you will see that each aid package comes with certain kinds of requirements for buying certain kinds of goods, percentage of the nationality of workers on the different levels that can be employed this way or that, etc., etc. It's too obvious even to enumerate. But, in fact, when you don't read that, and you believe that you are helping the other side of the world develop itself, the philosophical argument that can make you understand that it is exactly the other way around, it the notion of the concept-metaphor of value and this can be explained in class to students. I would say that that's how the two predications relate to the crisis management of imperialism.

You ask me what might be some of the problems? I think part of the problem might be to turn the theory of value into an analogy for consciousness which is done by many theoretical people, or, on the other side, if you decide to identify value with price rather quickly. That can make a real problem and that can be done if you don't read this carefully enough. The final problem that can arise is to feel that only value-producing work, work that produces commodities that can be exchanged, or, which is even worse, work that produces value that can valorize itself — which is capitalism — is real work. If you feel that only value producing work is real work that's a problem, or on the other side, if you feel that only use-values, that goods that are produced for consumption by the producer, that only that is good, that's a problem.

HARASYM: Over the past few months, there have appeared in Canadian newspapers a number of articles about the "forgiveness" of debt to "third

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world” countries. Is this so called “benevolent” gesture of “forgiveness” the management of a crisis?

SPIVAK: Well, you see that the way in which the answer to this question has to be considered is by looking at, as I have said — there is an ideological relation between that a set of newspapers, what a set of government documents that are released for publication and what you find in the actual document of the World Bank and the I.M.F. The forgetting, the forgiving of public debt — what one has to look at are what are the conditions that ride on these particular things that are being described as being forgiven. In order to see how crisis is managed, you would have to see — this is absolutely incumbent upon someone who wants to do this kind of theorizing (as in any other case, to be a theorist of something, you have to look at the documentation in detail) that’s what has to be looked at, at the individual cases as they are presented in hard terms rather than as what the public policy statements are. I follow this more in the case of India than in the case of other countries, and I’m always struck by analyses of what is said: how it’s represented to the general Indian public, how it is represented to the first world countries, and what, in fact, it looks like if you look at the details of each of those gestures.

HARASYM: To many contemporary Marxist (deconstructive and/or feminist) thinkers Marx’s mode of production narrative is problematic. Although Marx deals in a very schematic way with the problem of colonization, it would appear that Marx’s mode of production narrative is, perhaps, complicit with the imperialist project. How do you approach this narrative in your work?

SPIVAK: If we want the proper development toward international socialism to take place, we must put every country through the regular stages of one mode of production following the other, and where we have an example of such a thing is in Western Europe. This is basically the understanding of Marx’s argument upon which is predicated the notion that it is complicit with imperialism. Capitalism as a way to . . . monopoly capitalist imperialism as a way to bring social change into the countries so that they could move toward socialism. Now I would certainly not disagree that there is a certain plausibility of this. If one looks not only at the Lenin-Luxemburg debates or the various kinds of writing on imperialism that have been produced by first and second generations of Marxism involved in politics. Although I would not say that there is such a possibility, I would also say that if one looked at the writings then of people a generation later — Victor Kiernan or Harry Magdoff — one begins to realize that that is only one way of dealing with Marxism and the question of imperialism. Then, if one goes even further and back to Marx, then one can see in order to produce a reading which is politically more useful, rather

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than a reading that would simply throw away an extremely powerful analysis because it can be given a certain kind of reading, one would see that in the postface to *Capital* I, for example, what Marx says is that Germany could not develop political economy because in Germany capitalism is not developed in the way it developed in England. So then, Marx says, it is not possible for Germany to develop political economy, the professors of political economy in Germany are creating nonsense out of the paratheoretical petit bourgeois consciousness, but there *is* a possibility in Germany for a critique of political economy. Because the discipline could not develop in Germany critique cannot be located in the bosom of the theorists, it will come from the disenfranchised. The relationship between Marxism and the developing countries might usefully be drawn on this model. There has also been a certain "historical" tendency toward ignoring the problem of woman within revolutionary protocol that has more to do with what I said in answer to the first question. That there is a tendency to assume that the "materialist" predication of the subject means that only value producing work, or only that work which produces self-valorizing value is real work. It is repeatedly said by Marx, that to make that identification is estrangement. In fact, whenever Marx tries, certainly in the early Marx, but it is also in the later Marx, whenever Marx tries to find an example of how to understand this estrangement outside of capital logic, he thinks about the relation between men and women. You can say that Marx is a heterosexist, but that you can say about many feminists too who are not necessarily prejudiced against male or female homosexuality but who occupy a heterosexist position. That's a different issue. To say that Marx in fact said that value-producing work was the only real work, or that work that produces self-valorizing value was the only real work, and, therefore, ignored the relationship between men and women, it is almost like saying, on an analogy, psychoanalysis is no good for literary criticism. When in fact, Freud and Lacan and certain other analysts have looked at literary texts as something that could be an explanatory model for psychoanalysis. I would say that that's at the bottom of the feminist objection which certainly related to the fact that within revolutionary traditions also there has been room for this misunderstanding. I think then what one has to cope with then is the sexism of radicals as well as reactionary males, rather than something *specifically* wrong with Marxism or with the modes of production narrative. And I think if you take the modes of production narrative as a norm, to the extent Jameson does, Jameson whose work I admire greatly in many ways and whose politics I support greatly in many ways; what happens — and I'm not the only one to say this. Apparently (I haven't as yet looked at it. I was in India when it came out) there was a whole issue of *Social Text*⁶ which shows a critical position towards his judgement of Third World Literature as allegories of Nationalism. Now that comes from taking the modes of production narrative as normative because nationalism, itself, which is very much within a cer-

tain history of European norm is seen as an unquestioned good that these "third world" countries should now be aspiring to. That's a problem.

Now another thing that one could find in Marx, for example is a morphology which talks about self-valorizing value as a kind of *thing* whose form of appearance [*Erscheinungsform*] you see in the history of the development of the modes of production of value. You see how value valorizes itself. What happens, O.K., that's morphological semi-narrative. To back this up, you have various 18th century styles where everything fits — you've seen this in Rousseau, you've seen this in Condillac, you've seen this in all the great 18th century Enlightenment proto-anthropological thinkers who make a certain kind of very broad stroke, universal narrative fit with a morphological argument. But, that's not all there is to Marx. When Marx goes toward discussing actual "historical" events like his discussion of class struggles in France, like his discussion of 1848, like his journalistic stuff, you see that the moment he talks about those kinds of narratives, the relationship between the normative morphology and the unfolding narrative becomes much more ambivalent. So that one can't just take Marx in terms of the first two things.

So you ask me what I do with the modes of production narratives? Well, I, since my general tendency — this is an idea I have published elsewhere and it would take too long really to hold forth on it at the moment⁷ — since I really believe that given our historical position that we have to learn to negotiate with structures of violence, rather than taking the impossible elitist position of turning our backs on everything. In order to be able to talk to you, in order to be able to teach within the bosom of the superpower, in order to be, in whatever way, as a citizen of India, some kind of corrective voice towards nativist cultural history there, I have to learn myself and teach my students to negotiate with colonialism itself. I say to upwardly class mobile feminists, generally the leaders, to learn to negotiate with phallogocentrism because they do it anyway. In the same way, I look at this narrative of the modes of production and I negotiate with it, rather than simply take it as normative, or say that if I were to take it as normative my hands would not be clean. As if one could *not* take it as normative living as one does. One's own social relations prove over and over again that whatever one says, however, one makes *visible* the normativity of that narrative. Therefore, one must learn to negotiate.

HARASYM: Since the 1960's one of the questions addressed by French post-structuralist thinkers is how to combine the contributions of post-structuralist thought with a Marxist/feminist program. To what extent is this gesture in its turn the management of a crisis? Where would you situate your work on the critique of imperialism and on the heterogeneous production of the gendered subaltern subject in relation to this gesture?

SPIVAK: Well, you see everything is crisis management in a certain sense. One could make it an extremely broad category. The management of crisis is not necessarily a bad thing. I think it includes, as Derrida would say, the "ethical" as well as the "non-ethical." It seems to me that the most important contribution of post-structuralist thought towards the projects of Marxism as they understood it, has been to point out the presence of metaphysical categories in Marx. It has taught me, — and you know how much I have learned from that essay by Derrida, "The Ear of the Other."⁸ Well before I had read this essay, in my early two essays on Marx after Derrida, I was looking for critical moments in Marx that would open up his texts to something other than simply a program set down by these metaphysical presuppositions. I think that's one of the strong contributions of post-structuralism, and, later, when you ask me that question about "practice," I will come back to this. I think, also, the insistence that a subject does not always act in his own interest, most of the post-structuralists have talked about this, that the nature of the subject, thanks to psychoanalysis, is marked by a bar or by an oblique itinerary so that one cannot, in fact, identify the product of epistemological cleansing and the constituency of social justice. But, as de Man says in that wonderful sentence, "You cannot blame anatomy for not curing mortality." If we paid attention to that we can't of course get our elegant solutions. In fact, the solutions become nonsensical after awhile, after you have chosen them they fall apart. The contribution of post-structuralism to feminism has been simply the critique of phallogocentrism itself. But, then, the historical state of being woman, is something that post-structuralism has tried to appropriate a little, in order to articulate for itself a space, that is not phallogocentric. I think that Derrida's position in the essay called "Geschlecht — différence sexuelle, différence ontologique,"⁹ is somewhat marked — although I do not want to launch into an analysis of this text, but it is somewhat marked by that gesture. I've talked about this at a greater length in an essay that is about to appear in a collection edited by Teresa Brennan.¹⁰ That essay is on the relationship between deconstruction and feminism. I would say, yet, that the use of the (historical) figure of the woman is one way to manage the crisis of phallogocentrism, and even, indirectly of the crisis of the party line communism and socialism in France, if you like. Perry Anderson in *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*¹¹ has suggested that because in Marx's thinking itself, the relationship between subject and structure was not clearly thought through, in that fissure post-structuralist notions of subject and practice took root. I don't know what to make of this, but it seems to me that that is also an account of that broad concept-metaphor: crisis management. And here the figure of the woman has been manifestly useful.

I've already articulated how it helps me with Marx. In the context of de-colonization the only things you have to work with, are the great narratives of nationalism, inter-nationalism, secularism, and culturalism. These

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were *alibis* for decolonization used by that class in the colonies, which was, itself, enabled to change the indigenous power structure in terms of what the colonists imposed. They themselves, as not always unwilling objects of a certain kind of epistemic violence, negotiated with these structures of violence in order to emerge as the so-called colonial subject. If in that context and in de-colonized space, one looks at the genuinely disenfranchised who never had access to these grand narratives anyway, as a teacher one thinks of a pedagogy on a very generally post-structuralist model: without destroying these narratives, making all of their structures one's own structures, nevertheless, one takes a distance from them and shows what incredible and necessary crimes are attendant upon them: not just aberrations but necessary supplements. One does not, then, produce some kind of legitimizing counter-narrative of nativist continuity. And within this frame, the one most consistently exiled from episteme is the disenfranchised woman, the figure I have called the "gendered subaltern." Her continuing heterogeneity, her continuing subalternization and loneliness, have defined the subaltern subject for me. And I have been helped by the varieties of her representation in the fiction of Mahasweta Devi.¹²

HARASYM: My next question or rather series of questions has to do with institutional responsibility and with the production of knowledge. If, as you write in "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value," "the complicity between cultural and economic value systems is acted out in almost every decision we make" (166), and if "economic reductionism is, indeed, a very real danger" (166), what place should and do academics occupy within the political economy? What does our institutional responsibility amount to?

SPIVAK: I need an adjective before academics, when you say "what place should and do academics occupy." Academics are not homogeneous either. In India, for example, with a nationalized system of education, and access to education much limited by class, the university as a place of classic mobility is both very important and not important. In the United States, where the university system is run more or less like a private enterprise (arguably even in the case of the state universities) you have more than 4,000 tertiary institutions that are extremely hierarchized from junior colleges to senior colleges to your Harvard and Yale. In France, you have a highly centralized nationalist educational system where academic radicalism has taken place almost outside the basic university structure organized by an elitist and homogenizing structure. And so on. It seems to me that there is no such thing as *the* academic and I think that there is a real danger in identifying one's own position with one of these institutional models, and then thinking of *the* academic. But, given that caution, I would say that in one way or another academics are in the business of ideological production, even academics in the pure science are involved in that process. This pos-

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sibility leads to the notion of disciplinary as well as institutional situation, and then to the subtler question of precise though often much mediated functions within the institution of a nation state. Thus one can, not canonize one's own discipline and say "I don't have to know, I'm a theoretical physicist" or "I don't have to know I'm a philosopher;" etc. Don't canonize the disciplinary divisions of labor. Some of us need to know this. Our institutional responsibility is of course to offer a responsible critique of the structure of production of the knowledge we teach even as we teach it. But, in addition, we must go public as often as we can, especially when we have gained some permanence in the profession.

HARASYM: What political interventional force could or does deconstruction have in the political rewriting of the ethico-political, socio-historical text and its destination?

SPIVAK: Deconstruction cannot found a political program of any kind. Deconstruction points out that in constructing any kind of an argument we must move from implied premises, that must necessarily obliterate or finesse certain possibilities that question the availability of these premises in an absolutely justifiable way. Deconstruction teaches us to look at these limits and questions. It is a corrective and a critical movement. It seems to me, also, that because of this, deconstruction suggests that there is no absolute justification of *any* position. Now, this is not the final say about the position. Deconstruction, also insistently claims that there cannot be a fully practicing deconstructor. For, the subject is always centered as a subject. You cannot *decide to be* decentered and inaugurate a politically correct deconstructive politics. What deconstruction looks at is the limits of this centering, and points at the fact that these boundaries of the centering of the subject are indeterminate and that the subject (being always centered) is obliged to describe them as determinate. Politically, all this does is not allow for fundamentalisms and totalitarianisms of various kinds, however seemingly benevolent. But it cannot be foundational. If one wanted to *found* a political project on deconstruction, it would be something like wishy-washy pluralism on the one hand, or a kind of irresponsible hedonism on the other. That's what would happen if you changed that morphology into a narrative. Yet in its suggestion that masterwords like "the worker", or "the woman" have no literal referents deconstruction is again a political safeguard.

For, when you are *succeeding* in political mobilizations based on the sanctity of those masterwords, then it begins to seem as if these narratives, these characteristics, really existed. That's when all kinds of guilt tripping, card-naming, arrogance, self-aggrandizement and so on, begin to spell the beginning of an end.

A deconstructive awareness would insistently be aware that the masterwords are catachreses . . . that there are no literal referents, there are no

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"true" examples of the "true worker," the "true " examples of the "true worker," the "true woman," the "true proletarian" who would actually stand for the ideals in terms of which you've mobilized. The disenfranchised are quite often extremely irritated with that gesture of the benevolent towards them which involves a transformation through definition. They themselves do not like to fit into a category like the "true worker," "the true woman," etc. I often cite a story by Toni Cade Bambara, "My Man Bovanne," a story in which she actually deals with this phenomenon very beautifully. In national liberation movements, for example, there is a critical moment when a deconstructive vigilance would not allow a movement toward orthodox nationalism.

HARASYM: How is this political interventional force related to what you describe in the final footnote of "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Values" as a practical politics of the open end?

SPIVAK: You will remember that I am talking there of Derrida's essay "Of An Apocalyptic Tone."¹³ I made those remarks with reference to a piece that is very abstruse, very beautiful, but extremely difficult, and I'm going to answer you here in as easy a way as I can find. So when you ask me to refer specifically to the last footnote, there will be this gap. I think that a practical politics of the open-end can be understood through this analogy. For example, when we actually brush our teeth, or clean ourselves everyday, or take exercise, or whatever, we don't think we are fighting a losing battle against mortality, but, in fact, all of these efforts are doomed to failure because we are going to die. On the other hand, we really think of it much more as upkeep and as maintenance rather than as an irreducibly doomed repeated effort. This kind of activity cannot be replaced by an operation. We can't have a surgical operation which takes care of the daily maintenance of a body doomed to die. That operation would be identical with death. This analogy, like all analogies, is not perfect. It applies to the individual, and, if one applied it directly to historical collectivities, one might be obliged to suggest that there are Spenglerian cycles to civilizations. This analogy, itself catechetical, can help us understand the practical politics of the open-end. It is not like some kind of massive teleological act (the surgical operation) which brings about a drastic change. Now, in all my thinking about practical politics I have always emphasized that there has to be both these two kinds of things, each, to anticipate something we are going to talk about later, each bringing the other to crisis. Because quite often this tooth brushing style of daily maintenance politics seems to require acting out of line. On the other hand, the massive kind of surgery, surgical operation type politics which can go according to morphology, seems to deny the everyday maintenance of practical politics. When each brings the other to productive crisis, then it seems to me you have a practical politics of the open-end: neither is privileged. In fact, the relationship between

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feminism and Marxism, the fights that arise, even with people such as Sheila Rowbotham, quite often are based in a misunderstanding of this. So that feminism sees itself as one kind of practical politics wanting, also, to be the other kind. That's just divisiveness, and, just as the disenfranchised "know" that the labels that describe them are catachretical; this kind of practical politics of the open-end, too, is something quite familiar. That's one of the beautiful things about deconstruction: that it really, actually, points at the theoretical implications of the familiar. And so, we in fact know this, but it is always considered an aberration: it is strategically excluded when one is talking theory.

HARASYM: When you were lecturing in Alberta (1986) you gave a very interesting reading of the "living feminine" and the problem of determination in Derrida's text, *The Ear of the Other*. What place does the "living feminine" occupy in this text? Is it structurally similar to the position of the feminine in Derrida's other texts? What is useful in this text to your own work?

SPIVAK: In "The Ear of the Other", the living feminine seems to me to occupy a place with many other articulations in Derrida's other texts. I think that woman, or the feminine, is a kind of *name* for something in Derrida. It is, as he has insisted elsewhere, neither a figure nor a kind of empirical reality, and the best I have been able to do with my careful reading of his texts is that it is a kind of *name* for something in Derrida. It is, as he has insisted elsewhere, neither a figure nor a kind of empirical reality, and the best I have been able to do with my careful reading of his texts is that it is a kind of name. Just as Foucault in his most interesting texts suggests that power is a name for a certain complex. In the paper that's going to be in the Brennan anthology, I have tried to discuss some of the problems and some of the positive and the useful elements in Derrida's use of the name "woman" for a whole *ensemble* in his morphology: I think the place occupied by the "living feminine" in *The Ear of the Other* is simply the place that stands over against the pact between autobiography and death. The possibility of autobiography is related to death through the fact that autobiography is not life, even biography is not life, and the autobiographer grasps at a name, a name which is bequeathed by the father. What is over against it is the "living feminine, which subtends the nameable, the father's part". O.K. But, if one really wanted to pull out the logic of the concept-metaphor one would see that the "living feminine" once it is named the mother, already has within it a certain kind of repetitive structure. And perhaps, Derrida is looking at *that* when he looks at the contradictions in Nietzsche's texts around the "living feminine." I'm not quite sure of it. I'll have to look at the text again to tell you what I think. It seems to me, also, that in the earlier, much earlier pieces like "Speech and Phenomena,"¹⁴ One of the most interesting things that he shows us

is that any conception of a “living present” for the human subject has to assume the subject’s death, for this “living present” must have existed before the subject and will exist after the subject. And to an extent, I would feel happier if that kind of thing already encroached into the “living feminine.” Otherwise, the “living feminine” becomes a sort of a methodological supposition which is given a name. Now this play between history, the historical place of the name of the mother, as it were, and morphology, the feminine on the other side of difference, etc., this is what I’m trying to attack in that piece for Teresa Brennan.

What is useful to my own work? I like this text a great deal. What is supremely useful is Derrida’s articulation of the new politics of reading: that you do not excuse a text for its historical aberrations, you admit that there is something in the text which can produce these readings. That is extremely useful. But then making the protocols of the text your own, you tease out the critical moments in the text and work at useful readings — readings that are scrupulous re-writings. I have repeated this to students and in talks many times, and I don’t want it to become a formula. That’s the problem, you know, these wonderful things become formulae, and then people just kind of — it’s like a dance step. But, nonetheless, trying to teach Marx this semester, remembering the history of Marxism, remembering the problems, not trying to excuse Marx or on the other hand, trying to simply turn my back on him has been a very, very useful, a very productive exercise. I remind myself of this essay as I go on.

HARASYM: In “Imperialism and Sexual Difference”¹⁵ you both borrow and show the limits of borrowing uncritically a strategy of reading articulated by Paul de Man. Please correct me if I am wrong. But, whereas Paul de Man’s readings *tend* to stop at various aporias, your readings — here, I am thinking in particular of your work on cultural self-representation — your readings stress the necessity of thinking beyond the aporia as they focus on the situational specific forces of the opposition in order to find a place of practice. What are your thoughts on this reading?

SPIVAK: I think I would partially agree with what you’re saying. However, in de Man, the later suggestion: that in order to act you have to literalize the metaphor is important because it takes one beyond the perception of de Man as attempting to reside in an aporia. People like us learned the predicament of discovering an aporia in a text, and then moved in other directions with the aporetic structure. Whereas, since he was articulating it, it took him a long time simply establishing it in text after text, and, indeed, I think it is not to undermine his excellence to say that in the texts of the period of *Allegories of Reading*,¹⁶ one might feel that that’s all he is doing. But, I think, again, to read him with a new politics of reading, not to excuse the fact that it can lead in people who are blind followers, into a celebration of what Wlad Godzich,¹⁷ I think incorrectly, although

normally I think he is a very astute reader, what he's called "cancelling out" in de Man. I think one can get to a position like that, but, on the other hand, it's also possible to see that in every text there is a signal that aporias are never fully balanced. So that you know that even in the *Allegories of Reading*, the text on Proust, "Reading," when he's discussing metaphor and narrative, you can see that, in fact, in the way he's talking the metaphor is privileged, so that one cannot have a full aporia. De Man always marks the moments of asymmetry in *Allegories of Reading*. But, then, in the later text, "Promises" where he suggests that in order to act you turn the metaphor, you literalize the metaphor, then he's out of simply articulating aporias. This is the work he was on when he died: The work of moving from the description of tropological and performative deconstruction to a definition of the act.

I think you're right, when you describe my stuff, as you do. Given what I think my usefulness is, I tend to emphasize the asymmetry in terms of the opposition. That's just *my* political style as opposed to theirs. I think without learning from them, this political style would be less, would begin to resemble more and more a kind of old fashioned understanding of dialectics.

HARASYM: In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" you argue that if the critique of the ideological subject constitution within state formation and systems of the "political economy" and if the "affirmative practice of the transformation of consciousness" are to be taken up, the shifting distinctions between representation as *Vertretung* (political representation) and *Darstellung* must not be effaced. Could you elaborate on this distinction and indicate what place the double session of representation occupies within your work on the gendered subject?

SPIVAK: First, about *Vertretung*, stepping in someone's place, really. *Tritt* (from *treten*, the second half of *vertretung*) has the English cognate *tread*. So that might make it easier to look at this word as a word. *Vertretung*, to tread in someone's shoes, represents that way. Your Congressional person, if you are talking about the United States, actually puts on your shoes when he or she represents you. Treading in your shoes, wearing your shoes, that's *Vertretung*. That's *Vertretung*, representation in that sense: political representation. *Darstellung*, *Dar* there, same cognate. *Stellen* is to place, so placing there. *Representing*: proxy and portrait as I said, these are two ways of representing. Now, the thing to remember is that in the act of representing politically, you actually represent yourself and your constituency in the portrait sense, as well. You have to think of your constituency as working class, or the black minority, the rainbow coalition, or yet the military-industrial complex and so on. That is representation in the sense of *Darstellung*. So that you do not ever "simply" *vertreten* anyone, in fact, not just politically in the sense of true parliamentary forms, but

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even in political practices outside of parliamentary forms; when I speak as a feminist, I'm representing, in the sense of *Darstellung*, myself because we all know the problems attendant even upon defining the subject as a sovereign deliberative consciousness. But then if you take the sovereign deliberate consciousness and give it an adjective like feminist, that is, in fact, a rather narrow sense of self-representation, which you cannot avoid. But, what I'm saying is that this shifting line between treading in the shoes of all the disenfranchised women in my corner, and if I were very hubristic I would say, in the world. That way of representing: I speak for them and representing them. *Darstellung* them, portraying them as constituencies of feminism, myself as a feminist. Unless the complicity between these two things is kept in mind, there can be a great deal of political harm. The debate between essentialism and anti-essentialism is really not the crucial debate. It is not possible to be non-essentialist, as I said; the subject is always centered. The real debate is between these two ways of representing. Even non-foundationalist philosophies must represent themselves as non-foundationalist philosophies. For example, you represent yourself when you speak *as* a deconstructor. There's the play between these two kinds of representations. And that's a much more interesting thing to keep in mind than always to say, I will not be an essentialist.

I heard when I went to Alabama to listen to Derrida talking on Kant, that apparently in the morning, and I was unable to be present at the session in the morning, the speaker had referred to an expression of mine in that *Thesis Eleven*¹⁸ interview, "strategic use of essentialism." Hillis Miller actually told me this and he said well you know people talked about you and it was stressed that Stephen Heath had actually said this before you and that you had learned it from Stephen Heath. I said, well I might have but not through reading the text. I don't know how then. I thought that I was thinking about this myself but who knows. Then, he said, that the point was made that you had said that feminists have to be strategic essentialists. I said, well since I wasn't there, I don't know what was actually said. But, I, myself, had thought I was saying, that since it is not possible not to be an essentialist, one can self-consciously use this irreducible moment of essentialism as part of one's strategy. This can be used as part of a "good" strategy as well as a "bad" strategy and this can be used self-consciously as well as unself-consciously, and neither self-consciousness nor unself-consciousness can be valorized in my book. As for Stephen Heath, I don't know. The relationship between the two kinds of representation brings in, also, the use of essentialism because no representation can take place, no *Vertretung*, representation, can take place without essentialism. What it has to take into account is that the "essence" that is being represented is a representation of the other kind, *Darstellung*. So that's the format, right, and I think I've already said enough about the format to show how this would apply to representing the gendered subject also.

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One last word. The reason why I am so devoted to the fiction of Mahasweta Devi is because she is very careful about — and now since we are talking about literary technique, our terms take on a slightly different meaning; she is very careful about representing the gendered, subaltern as she represents her. So that single issue bourgeois feminists, who want to represent themselves as *the* people, I'm now quoting Marx on the typical gesture of the petit-bourgeoisie when they want themselves to be understood as *the* people, so that the "real" people can take short shrift; they are very irritated about the fact that Mahasweta Devi doesn't do this herself, and speak *as* the gendered subaltern *herself*. But the strength of her texts is that this shifting play between the two kinds of representation is always intact there in various ways. That is what gives them their difficulty and that's what given them their power.

HARASYM: When you were lecturing in Alberta you argued that Marxism, feminism and deconstruction must critically interrupt each other. Could you comment on this program?

SPIVAK: O.K., my notion of interruption. I kind of locate myself in that idea as a place of the reinscription of the dialectic into deconstruction. It's already there — interruption. My example is, always, Marx's discussion of industrial capitalism in *Capital* vol. 2, when he talks about the three moments of industrial capitalism interrupting each other, but, thus, providing a single circuit. He is using — it so happens that the example he is using is ambiguous. Industrial capitalism is not an unquestioned good in Marx, to say the least. But, on the other hand, if one reads Marx carefully, there is also the relationship between what Marx called *Vergesellschaftet* labor which is translated as "associated labor" in English, but it's not a very happy translation because *Vergesellschaftet* is a very awkward and clumsy word; whereas, associated labor is a common word which makes us think about various worker's associations and so on. But anyway, what Marx calls *Vergesellschaftet* labor in his work learns a lot morphologically from what happens in the moment of industrial capitalism. This, unfortunately, has been narrativized into one must pass through advanced capitalism in order to get to socialism. I can't talk about that in the interview because we are focusing on something else. But, to go back to industrial capitalism, its place is dubious. But, none — theless, this morphological articulation of a necessary interruption which allows something to function is very interesting, and, just as I said in terms of the politics of the open end and the great-narrative politics, in the same way, it seems to me, that Marxism which focuses and must focus in order to be useful a) on labor that is productive of self-valorizing value and the problems of disguising that situation, and how, to use Marx's own words, how to read the proper signification of that scenario through the language of commodities, *Warensprache*, on the one hand, and feminism, on the other, is one of

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interruption. Feminism, must think of the human being predicated as work in senses other than this definition of the work that produces self-valorizing value. Feminism is involved with both anti-sexist work and transformation of consciousness outside of the Marxist project, which is to make the worker his (or her) unwitting production of capitalism. And deconstruction which is the critical moment, the reminder of catachresis, the reminder of the politics of the open-end, or of the politics of great-narrative, depending on what the moment asks for, the reminder of the fact that any really "loving" political practice must fall a prey to its own critique. This reminder is, also, and necessarily, an interruption of both of these projects.

Unless there is this understanding, there will be divisiveness in the radical camp. Crisis management in the global economy will, in fact, act according to these productive interruptions, and we, on the other side, like stupid fools will take the interruptions as divisive positions so we are at each other's throats.

And, of course, the historian and the teacher of literature is a small example, a small case, if you like, of what happens when disciplinary privileging makes us forget that we can pull together even if we bring each other to crisis. One of the great cases was E.P. Thompson and Althusser, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*.¹⁹ Another case now is Habermas' completely useless task of deriding Derrida. Habermas makes a lot of sense in the history of the West German political context. He makes a mistake by universalizing it. He also makes a mistake by confronting Derrida, whose project is quite discontinuous with his. How does he do it? By trivializing and canonizing a kind of disciplinary sub-division of labor, in his latest essay, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernism*,²⁰ where he chides Derrida because Derrida is not honoring the disciplinary prerogatives of philosophy and literature as they have developed in the European academy since the Eighteenth century. And Habermas gives to rhetoric a completely trivializing definition as literary style, as it were, and in the interest of this kind of honoring of disciplinary sub-division of labor, which is quite useful up to a point, he throws away anything which might be useful in deconstruction. Just as I said, it's not a matter of throwing away one and keeping the other but bringing the two to productive crisis. You see these examples where one is privileged so that all you have is division — people can't work together anyway; whereas, on the other side, what wins is precisely people pulling together. That's my last word. Thank you.

HARASYM: Thank you.

Notes

1. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p.221
2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Myself I must Remake: The Life and Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (New York: Pyerowell, 1974).

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3. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
4. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"
5. Spivak, *In other Worlds*, pp.154-178
6. *Social Text* 15 (Fall 1986): 3-54.
7. See, for example, Spivak, "Feminism and Critical Theory," *In Other Worlds*, pp.77-92.
8. Jacques Derrida, *Otobiographies: L'enseignement de Nietzsche et la politique du nom propre* (Paris: Galilée, 1984); *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography Transference, Translation*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken Books, 1985).
9. Jacques Derrida, "Geschlecht — différence sexuelle, différence ontologique," *Research in Phenomenology* 13 (1983). 68-84.
10. Teresa Brennan, *New Directions in Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Methuen, forthcoming).
11. Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
12. Mahasweta Devi, "Breast-Giver"; trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, pp.222-240.
13. Jacques Derrida, "D'un ton apocalyptique: adopté naguère en philosophie," *Les Fins de l'homme à partir du travail de Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Galilée 1981) pp.445-486, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy," trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. *Semeia* 25 (1982): 63-96.
14. Jacques Derrida, *La Voix et le Phénomène* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967); *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. D. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 3-88.
15. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Imperialism and Sexual Difference," *Oxford Literary Review* 8, no. 1-2 (1986); 225-240.
16. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).
17. Wlad Gozich, "Introduction: Caution! Reader at Work!" in Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. xxiv-xxix.
18. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism and the Institution," *Thesis Eleven* 10/11 (1984-85) pp.175-187.
19. Thompson, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (London: Merlin, 1978).
20. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).