

## Introduction to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 2001 Oxford Amnesty Lecture, 'Righting Wrongs'

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There are plenty of academics in this world, but amongst them there is no one quite like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. She stands alone, unique. For many years now, in her lecturing and writing, Gayatri Spivak has challenged the accepted, the assumed, the expected. In her work, *In Other Worlds* (1987), *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993), *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999), she has contested the ways in which dominant power groups in many different fields represent the world, and assert *their* world, *their* perspectives, as the visible embodiment of humanity in general. Spivak's theoretical work is at the same time exceptional in the ways in which it crushes theory against material circumstance, against the material inequality and deprivation which every day we silently consent to allow others to suffer.

Spivak is also very well known for the ways in which she has inflected metropolitan feminism with an awareness of its responsibilities towards the emancipatory struggles of other women outside the restricted homogeneous radar screen of metropolitan concerns. Although herself a compelling performer, as a political-intellectual her politics are far removed from the contemporary preoccupation with identity as performance. Idiosyncratic, breaker of rules, focussed on the dynamics of pedagogy at the local level, Spivak has been at the forefront not of the institutional study of marginalisation, but of the intrusion of a radically different politics and

epistemology into the academy itself. Spivak's engaged theoretical work is designed, above all, to contribute to the creation of empowering processes of ideological and social transformation. She has decisively demonstrated that it is possible to make effective political interventions within and beyond one's own disciplinary field by developing significant connections between the different forms of intellectual engagement and activism in the world today.

All these qualities become rapidly evident in her lecture. Few issues produce such an immediate and antagonistic response in first world-tricontinental relations than human rights. Whereas the west typically identifies human rights with its central political ideologies of freedom and democracy, on the three continents the discourse and implementation of human rights are frequently criticised on the grounds of eurocentrism in conception, and instrumentalism in terms of the selectivity of focus on where (and by whom) human rights abuses are alleged to take place.

It is in the context of such differences that in this lecture, Spivak characteristically reorients the debate about human rights towards a different perspective, suggesting that the significant distinction is not so much that between the first world and the three continents of the South as the 'class apartheid' between the elites and subalterns across the first world and three continents alike (inequality of income distribution is one defining feature of third world countries, a hidden part of the general statistic whereby the world's richest 1% collectively earn more than the poorest 60%). The problem with human rights for Spivak is that they invariably tend to operate in a top-down power structure, in which the empowered—whether political activists, aid workers, or NGOs, with access to the global public sphere—are positioned

as agents, and take the burden and responsibility of human rights agency upon themselves. Significant as successful challenges at the national political and legal levels are, the gap between the empowered and disempowered often remains at the point of implementation where oppressive local power structures remain intact. How, then, to theorise and implement a subaltern strategy for human rights? Spivak here defines as subaltern those without access to lines of social mobility, which leads her to focus on the rural poor—a choice which problematically excludes the urban poor, but which remains true to the original Maoist, Naxalite origins of the Subaltern Studies project. The widespread prevalence of peasant rebellion today across the three continents, whether in Assam, Bolivia, Columbia, Ecuador, Mexico, Nepal, Paraguay, Vietnam, or Zimbabwe, suggests the continuing refusal of the rural poor to submit to conditions of impoverishment, exploitation and oppression, and here the demand for basic human rights, which begins not with abstract notions of freedom but with the right to basic material resources—food and water—features as central in a way that can only be chastening for anyone fortunate enough to have the means to be involved in Amnesty International.

Spivak's interest begins at that point also: specifically, with the need for a new water pipe to deliver clean water to a community of tribals in rural India. For Spivak the ability to achieve such a humble, minimal objective—as yet unsuccessful—begins with a different kind of agency from that customarily invoked in postcolonial academia—that is, with literacy, and the forms of political agency and understanding that literacy can bring. The need to achieve effective forms of literacy drives Spivak on to a preoccupation with the processes of teaching. What she proposes here is not the liberal account of the teaching of humanities in the west or another narcissistic

reflection on the role of the intellectual: instead Spivak argues for a pedagogy of the oppressed designed to enable empowerment, the righting of wrongs, through a dynamic dialogic model of education as the means to cultural and political action.

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