

# “Can the Bourgeois Theorist Hear?”<sup>30</sup>

## Revisiting the Spivakian Critique of Colonial Epistemes of Modernity

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**Abstract:** *First published 35 years ago, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is regarded as a foundational contribution to postcolonial thought and remains an influential force to be reckoned with in both the humanities and the social sciences. The following text is a reappraisal of this legacy, underscoring the imperative to disruptively critique and problematize hegemonic understandings of modernity and global power configurations that engender epistemic violence and material injustices, in addition to provoking possibilities for cultivating counterhegemonic imaginaries and strengthening emancipatory practices.*

**Keywords:** *Critical Theory; Critique of Ideology; Epistemology; Knowledge Production; Postcolonialism*

The following paper advances a discussion and alternative reading of one of the most influential works of classical postcolonial thought. Written by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and first published 35 years ago, her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (CSS) sets forth an agenda of problematizing established understandings of modernity and global power configurations that reproduce epistemic violence and injustices (Spivak 1988; 2010; cf. Morris 2010). Central to her analysis is the complicity of contemporary knowledge production in deliberately silencing, displacing, and abandoning marginalized perspectives from critically challenging these very con-

victions (ibid.).

Scholarly engagement with such an agenda has proliferated since then; and indeed, postcolonial interventions in the social and political sciences have been gaining ground, with their disrupting presence becoming more and more discernible especially in the past decade.<sup>31</sup> In line with this tradition, the following article argues for a renewed application of Spivak’s radical imagination and interrogations. This entails going beyond a sheer recognition of her contemporary relevance and towards mobilizing the nuanced complexity of her work to excavate the possible reparative tools that would enable us to recon-

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<sup>30</sup> “Perhaps the challenge for subaltern studies has always been ‘can the bourgeois theorist hear?’” (Rao 2013, 279)

<sup>31</sup> A case in point would be the American Sociological Association’s annual conference in 2021 that centered on the theme of reclaiming the compelling legacy and emancipatory sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois, which aimed at challenging the parochialities of the discipline’s dominant perception of the modern world (see Morris 2022). This is a goal that has also been underscored by Gurinder Bhambra in her sketch of how postcolonial-decolonial approaches had amplified the project of centering global imperial histories in analyzing the advent of modernity (Bhambra 2014, 115ff.).

structively problematize modern knowledge production and engage in its transformative critique.

The first part of this article scrutinizes contemporary reflexive accounts of modernity and modernization, contending that while such social theories have succumbed to critical-theoretical pressures to finally recognize multiple frames of reference for (re-)conceptualizing modern social change, an analytical shortfall remains wherein there is limited space in adequately problematizing and reassembling the deep-seated imperial conceptual edifice of modernity *per se*. I then discuss anti-imperialist responses to this problem, emphasizing the imperative to genuinely incorporate an ideologized postcolonial critique aimed at sociopolitical transformation.

The paper then turns its attention to what such an ideologized postcolonial critique looks like by dissecting CSS and Spivak's radically multifaceted approach of "Marxist-feminist deconstruction" (cf. Castro Varela, Dhawan 2020, 161ff.). Beyond reiterating conventional interpretive readings of her canonical text, I gesture towards Spivak's challenges of reimagining the modern postcolonial conjuncture characterized by imperial epistemes. Confronting their hegemony necessitates demanding a change in the recurring discussion from a concern to "decolonize" to "de-subalternize" domineering epistemological orders. And as I further reconstruct in this piece, Spivak's critical oeuvre is further underscored by a multidirectional evolvment that provokes possibilities for cultivating counterhegemonic imaginaries.

As a final note, I illuminate how such provocations underscore the disruptive po-

tential of critique—of subversive theorizing that engages in an "imaginative activism" (Spivak 2021b, 150) which leads to strengthening emancipatory practices of obstructing dominant constellations of power. And such transformative undertakings remain a vital imperative to sociologically understand and critically overcome the recurring crises of modernity and modern knowledge production that we—students, scholars, theorists, agents of knowledge production—remain complicit in.

## Contextualizing Sociological Understandings of Modernity

In sociology and social theory, *modernity* is a key concept that invites reflections on historical processes that have shaped contemporary world society. Mainstream conceptions of modernity revolve around assumptions of societal development built on "socio-economic", "politico-institutional", and "cultural-intellectual" progress, which according to Peter Wagner (2010, 55-56; cf. Wagner 2009), led to innovative understandings of the social world. It is assumed that Western societies—Europe and North America in particular—were the pioneers of this societal progression. Such an assumption reinforces a narrative that conflates the "rise" of the West with "becoming modern", and in turn the achievement of "progress", while the rest of the globe's developments were seen as external. Moreover, Bhambra (2014, 115ff.) underlines how this insular historiographical frame had been the Eurocentric grand narrative (*ibid.*; Bhambra 2011, 653-656) promoted to exclude particular histories.

Although faced with challenges, there has been a paradigm shift nonetheless due to

subversive pressures from postcolonial theorists as well as reflexive sociologists to critically engage with said Western-centric grand theories and narratives (cf. Castro Varela, Dhawan 2020; Bhambra, Holmwood 2021; Morris 2022). One of the manifestations of such engagements in sociology is the “multiple modernities paradigm” that speaks of “varieties of modernity”. Wagner builds on such a paradigm through scrutinizing modernity’s divergent trajectories, elevating the notion of modernity as both experience and interpretation of societal “self-understandings”, which “provides a more tenable underpinning” (Wagner 2010, 56) and reconceptualized notion of society, encompassing its collective identity and the communication between its members on shared knowledge, rules, and resources.

Wagner’s proposal of a new sociology of modernity builds partly on postcolonial theory to the extent that it promotes the inclusion of multiple perspectives of histories as well as recognizes the role that colonialism and empire played in the formation of modernity. While such an approach is important, it is nonetheless an analysis that falls short as it effectively makes the multiple modernities paradigm a project of recognizing and diversifying multifarious perspectives without problematizing and reconstructing the conceptual architecture of modernity itself (Bhambra 2011, 661-662).

This shortfall, as underlined by Bhambra, is reflected in the paradigm’s tendency to uphold the Eurocentric origins of modernity while acknowledging Eurocentrism’s problematic aspects, therefore promoting a pluralization within a generalized normative framework that itself remains unques-

tioned and unchanged (*ibid.*). It is therefore tantamount to a recognition deprived of transformation, considering that while the paradigm’s approach is inclusive or recognizing of differences, it fails to disentangle itself from the (neo-)colonial foundations of traditional social theory (*ibid.*; cf. Bhambra, Holmwood 2021), thus enabling such theoretical cornerstones to stay intact and, to echo Spivak, “give [themselves] yet another legitimization in [their] ‘civilizing mission’” (Spivak 2010, 50).

Suspicion of this paradigm particularly in the German-speaking academic context subsists as well (Castro Varela, Dhawan 2020, 7ff.), with references to postcolonial thought being modestly acknowledged, all the while downplaying the need for its genuine application, consequently softening its disruptive potential. Such an approach can be seen, for example, in authoritative introductions to sociology that do mention postcolonial-decolonial critiques of dominant social-scientific perceptions of modernity (cf.: Bogner 2023, 125ff.; Kruse 2018, 298ff.), but then stop short of actually problematizing the impoverished conceptual groundwork of said perceptions, and hence retreating to what María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan (2020, 12) depict as an “unimaginative” reflexive self-criticism that simply reinforces the self-legitimizing argument that any epistemic agenda to “decolonize” remains “not yet in sight” (Bogner 2023, 129-130).

Remedying this deficit in the aforementioned paradigm shifts and their theoretical underpinning entails a deeper problematization and subsequent reconstruction that aims to both transform the existing dominant framework and enable new frameworks to challenge or undermine prevail-

ling concepts and assumptions that continue to be grounded in (neo-)colonial logic. Ideologized postcolonial interventions take to this task, and Spivak herself has contributed to revolutionizing this intellectual undertaking ever since her publication of *CSS* (see Spivak 1999).

### Contextualizing Postcolonial and Anti-Colonial Thought

Contextualizing postcolonial theory entails interrogating what the “post” in postcolonialism is supposed to signify. Semantically speaking, it would refer to the period after the end of colonial rule and empires. But this simplistic description of the term is deficient and antithetical to its normative assumptions and commitments, which is to further expose and dismantle empire’s remnants, afterlives, and other colonial continuities.

“Postcolonial” is therefore, drawing on Homi Bhabha (1984), a “fighting term”; and postcolonial critique is moreover seen as a “theoretical weapon” against existing colonial structures, imperialist policies, and hegemonic discourses. Furthermore, according to Rahul Rao (2013, 282-283), it is a theoretical weapon in a sense that it is a tool to engage questions of historical interpretation and provide channels towards social and political transformation. In this sense, the “post” in postcolonialism does not only mean *after* colonialism, but also *anti*-colonialism, thus giving it an *ideological* character (ibid., 271-272). Hence, in addition to historicizing the concept, it is given a politicized element true to the emancipatory goals and commitments of the practitioners of national liberation struggles during the era of decolonization. Indeed, ack-

nowledging postcolonialism’s ideologization not only situates it within the broader tradition of anti-colonial political thought, but it also entails seeing it as both a method of ideology critique and an object of ideologized analysis and discourse.

Putting this understanding of postcolonialism in conversation with the multiple modernities paradigm entails acknowledging how colonialism has brought with itself the set of “*problématiques*” (Wagner 2010, 56-59) that both colonizer and colonized have addressed and have yet to address. This is because colonialism entailed “the physical violence of [political] conquest and economic exploitation [as well as the] epistemic violence enacted by particular forms of knowledge tethered to imperial power” (Rao 2013, 272), a point emphasized by Edward Said in his foundational work, *Orientalism* (Said 2003 [1978])—a book that would influence a generation of postcolonial theorists in underlining how societal self-understanding is seen to rest upon a certain knowledge or style of thought. This was manifested in the West’s method of “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” and producing and managing the Orient “politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively [...]” (ibid., 3).

Said’s work has been expounded and further enhanced by both Bhabha and Spivak, with the former taking on a more nuanced view on the prevailing critique against *Orientalism*’s deterministic assumptions of power being under the monopoly of the colonizer (Rao 2013, 274-277). In Bhabha’s alternative reading, colonial discourse was mired in ambivalence and mimicry (cf.: Bhabha 1984; Naipaul 1980), characterizing the complicated and contradic-

tory tensions of allure and revulsion in the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized (ibid.; Rao 2013, 274-277).

Indeed, ambivalence is an aspect of post-colonial discourses on the nation, where a “narrative of self-colonization” is brought to the fore (Castro Varela, Dhawan 2020, 240), and wherein nationalist elites tend to ideologically mimic their former colonizers in their discursive strategies of violently exercising power and authority in governing as well as viewing and representing the decolonized nation. This particular point is further complicated by Spivak in her deconstructive critique of colonial and postcolonial narratives and discourses. In CSS, Spivak interrogates the tendency that within both colonial and anti-colonial discourses, subaltern groups (i.e., non-hegemonic groups or subordinated social groups at the margins of society and history) have been systematically silenced, thus providing us with an inadequate idea of how to “read” subaltern agency and self-understanding.

### On Spivak’s Radical Interventions

The original text of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” was widely published in 1988 in an edited volume (entitled *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*) that anthologized neo-Marxist perspectives, and Spivak’s contribution is arguably among the most

influential ones for reinvigorating the debate on the issue of politics of representation. Methodologically, she primarily engages in discursive-analytical and ideology-critical approaches, which are interpretative modes of investigating how idealized representations of social relations morph into normative knowledge. Such methods are an immanent “critique of domination” (Jaeggi 2009, 65) that build on the assumption that “meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination” (Thompson 1984, 194), and that unpacking the ideological dimensions of normative knowledge entails leveraging “inherently unstable ideas as an ‘anchor’ to situate transformative social struggles within existing social reality” (Ostrowski 2022, 147).

In this sense, the Spivakian critique carries on as well as transcends the Marxist tradition by harnessing feminist and deconstructive approaches to interrogate the effects of hegemonic discourses that characterize modernity’s colonial epistemes. It is moreover an ideologized postcolonial critique that, as mentioned earlier, engages questions of historical interpretation and providing pathways for social and political transformation. Spivak’s contribution was also therefore, to be more precise, a multi-directional post-Marxist intervention that, at that time, innovatively harnessed post-colonialism to interrogate dominant critical-theoretical paradigms of thought.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Spivak at that time was also already an established figure of the leftwing Subaltern Studies Collective, the Indian/South Asian current of postcolonial studies. And according to Rao (2013, 277-280), this epistemic advantage of hers helped contribute to deconstruct as well as “fracture monolithic images of the colonized and to elaborate more complex hierarchies of domination and subordination” (ibid., 279). This elaboration entailed problematizing the aforementioned dominant politics of representation while centering the role of marginalized subaltern groups and focusing on their gendered locations in the “Third World”—thus incorporating a Marxist-feminist critique in assessing oppressive structures “between patriarchy and imperialism [...] under postmodern capital” (Spivak 2010, 61-62).

Spivak's Marxist critique is itself a kind of postcolonial *Ideologiekritik* built on Karl Marx's (1852) text, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in which he set forth differentiated notions of the politics of representation. Applying it in CSS, Spivak underscores the point that "the production of theory is also a practice" (Spivak 2010: 28) and scrutinizes a public conversation between French poststructuralist philosophers Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze on the role of intellectuals and their claims of representing the marginalized (ibid., 23-35; see Foucault, Deleuze 1977 [1972]). Spivak exposes how these engaged public philosophers had abandoned the intellectual duty of genuine political representation (Spivak 2010, 28-29), and instead settled for its aesthetic-philosophical form (ibid.). In her critique, Foucault and Deleuze conflate both—with the implication that speaking about them (instead of speaking for them) is sufficient because "the oppressed can know and speak for themselves" in any case (ibid., 34), thus insinuating that marginalized subaltern groups are themselves coherent political subjects capable of empowering each other on the same level as the generic privileged intellectual.

Such assumptions by Foucault, Deleuze, and similar trailblazing intellectuals touch on an unfamiliarity with how representations of those on the deepest fringes of society are inescapably "mediated and shaped by [these intellectuals'] favorable historical and geographic localities" (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale et al. 2018, 145), ultimately contradicting the Marxist notion of dislocated class consciousness that characterize the manifold experiences of people at the

margins (Spivak 2010, 29-30), which would lead Marx to proclaim that these groups "cannot represent themselves [and instead] must be represented" (Marx 1852, 62). By abdicating this responsibility of representation, the French poststructuralists misconceive the interests and desires of the subalterns as well as disavow "the role of ideology in reproducing the social relations of production: an unquestioned valorization of the oppressed as subject" (Spivak 2010, 27-28), thus reinforcing intellectual complicity in "consolidat[ing] the international division of labor" in the globalized capitalist moment.

The division of labor in the Marxist sense is associated with societal conflict, causing social alienation and class inequalities (cf. Marx 1932). Spivak builds on this and globalizes it, referring to the international division of labor as a planetary phenomenon that reinforces exploitative production processes established during colonialism (Spivak 2010, 24), further deepening the inequality gap of North-South relations. From here, and centering the political economy in this ideologized intervention, Spivak sets forth the imperative of recognizing a post-Marxist internationalist response to the current conjuncture.

Accompanying Spivak's Marxist critique of the aforementioned poststructuralist thinkers is her own poststructuralist-deconstructive<sup>33</sup> criticism of early subaltern studies (ibid., 37-46). In this respect, it is also a reflexive critique against the vanguardist Marxist position that Spivak herself had elevated in her previous intervention. In this part of CSS, Spivak builds and expounds further on as well as critically en-

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<sup>33</sup> For a straightforward encyclopedic definition of this method, see Eward-Mangione (2020).

gages with Antonio Gramsci’s political thought, in particular on the emancipatory potential of subaltern agency and “de-subalternization”, which should aim at the subalterns’ “cultural and political movement into the hegemony” (ibid., 37). This means that there is an intellectual responsibility to undertake a process of dismantling the conditions that keep subaltern groups at the margins towards enabling them to put forward a counter-hegemonic “narrative (of truth)” (ibid.).

However, such an agenda is not as straightforward as it seems, especially when contextualized in the (post-)colonial setting and “further complicated by the imperialist project” (ibid., 38). Spivak elaborates on this point by specifically deconstructing Indian Marxist historiography’s tendency to promote a subalternized “history from below” to counter both colonial and (post-colonial) bourgeois-nationalist narratives. While she is sympathetic to the cause of promoting a counter-history of those from the margins, i.e. history as experienced by peasant rebels in the Indian countryside resisting colonial rule, she nevertheless exposes how it disregards the heterogeneity of subalterns and ignores differentiated (i.e. gendered, sexualized, racialized, caste-based) factors of subalternization (ibid., 38-39), not to mention the multiformity of social systems.

With this, her multidirectional intervention exposes the shortfalls of a downright Marxist-inspired revolutionary project—a project that “hides an essentialist agenda” (ibid., 39). Such essentialist approaches are bound to misconceive “the sheer heterogeneity of decolonized space” (ibid., 65), leading to flawed recognitions of subaltern experiences and misinterpretations of his-

torical developments such as those involving anti-colonial resistance movements. Spivak is indeed particularly cautious about this point, warning about the tendency of essentialisms to succumb to universalisms, i.e., the tendency to “accommodat[e] unacknowledged privileging of the [subaltern experience]” (ibid., 44). And “[w]ithout a theory of ideology”, she adds, “it can lead to a dangerous utopianism [that would] work against global social justice” (ibid.).

Another crucial intervention that Spivak sets forth in CSS is her radical feminist critique (ibid., 46-63). Drawing on feminist epistemology that foregrounds situated knowledge (cf. Anderson 2020), she emphasizes how subaltern women, through their lived experiences, are accorded with a more pertinent perspective into their plight and situations of subalternity. This feminist intervention goes further, however, in her harnessing of postcolonial-Marxist thinking which, as mentioned earlier, radically tears down the established monolithic assumptions about marginalized sectors of (postcolonial) society in an effort to “elaborate more complex hierarchies of domination and subordination” (Rao 2013, 279). Concretely, Spivak unpacks imperialism’s tendency to instrumentalize gender-based violence for self-legitimization (Spivak 2010, 52). Her critique underscores the gender-blindness of both colonial and anti-colonial discourses and exposes how women’s bodies serve as “ideological battleground[s]” (ibid., 54) for both patriarchal and imperialist power and dominance.

Indeed, Spivak’s complication of the Gramscian notion of the subaltern is evident in her emphasis on the subordinated gendered positions of subaltern women in

the “Third World”. The issue in this complication is not so much that there are less women participating in resistance movements and are thus underrepresented in radical revisionist narratives of history, but rather, as Spivak puts it, “both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the contest of colonial production, *the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow*” (ibid., 41 [emphasis added]).

### Against the Hegemony of Colonial Epistemes

It is worth revisiting “Can the Subaltern Speak?” more than three decades after its publication especially against the backdrop of the growing calls for what Aníbal Quijano describes as the “epistemological decolonization” of “distorted paradigms of knowledge” (Quijano 2007, 177). And in viewing the postcolonial constellation as a convergence of (neo)colonial and patriarchal discourses and structures, Spivak offers an alternative perspective of re-imagining postcolonial modernity.

In acknowledging the convergence of these power relations or processes, it becomes clear as to why and how the subalterns are not given space to articulate their concerns, demands, and interests. They do not have access to genuine resistance, and thus cannot speak (Spivak 2010, 40). But this does not mean that the marginalized are mute or intellectual inutile; on the contrary, Spivak does provoke reflections on what it signifies or what the stakes are when we say that the subaltern does or can speak (ibid., 64). Indeed, one can criticize Spivak for ignoring clear instances of sub-

altern speech, and subsequent interpretations of her text have turned the tables to ask instead if “the bourgeois theorist [can] hear” (Rao 2013, 279).

But such critiques against her slightly miss the point of her insights, and it is worth engaging instead her invitation to critically contemplate on possibilities of setting forth alternative imaginaries to counter oppressive structures that sustain relations of domination, in particular through cultivating a counterhegemonic imagination. And Spivak has been quite consistent in this regard (see Spivak 2021a; 2021b), underlining her thesis’ normative core point of the notion of “*de-subalternization*”.

The insertion of the subaltern “into the long road to hegemony” (Spivak 2010, 65), i.e., their mobilization into hegemonic structures, entails, for instance at a socio-economic and political level, establishing for them adequate access to citizenship, welfare, and institutions. At an epistemological level, it entails authentically recognizing them as legitimate agents of producing knowledge. In this respect, there cannot be genuine “decolonization” at all levels without “de-subalternization”. Eradicating subalternity should thus be absolutely desired as a consequence (ibid.). But how this concretely pans out is not so easy, considering that we would be finding ourselves in a “terrain, ever negotiating between national liberation and globalization” (ibid.)—a terrain in which the unfinished process of decolonization collides with neocolonial continuities defining world society, and in which finding ways to enable the subaltern to articulate their will and overcome their systematic silencing would prove to be evermore challenging.



It is worth pondering the question of how “de-subalternization” can manifest itself more concretely, especially in the context of engaging modernity’s colonial epistemes. How can or how should valid knowledge be established in the postcolonial conjuncture that takes into account the bitter reality of the subaltern’s exclusion from spaces of theory-building and knowledge production? If modernity is to be understood as both experience and interpretation (cf.: Wagner 2009; 2010), whose or which experiences and/or interpretations are genuinely recognized in the process?

As mentioned, Wagner’s thesis is similar to what other historical sociologists appealing for a “multiple modernities” or “varieties of modernity” approach have proposed, and this, I would argue, succumbs to accommodating what Raewyn Connell (2018, 404) critically describes as a “mosaic epistemology” that de-contests and de-prioritizes the need for a universal knowledge system that is usually grounded on Eurocentric assumptions, and instead focuses on the imperative of recognizing multiple experiences and interpretations on an equal footing. It is understood that such an accommodation deals with a pluralist and inclusive approach that can contribute to “decolonizing” knowledge production.

However, this does not convincingly address or even problematize the situation of which experiences and/or interpretations have attained hegemony of recognition over the course of history—a hegemony that Dhawan underlines as being entangled with oppressive power relations that characterize both Eurocentric and non-Eurocentric epistemic orders (Dhawan

2017, 489). Incorporating Spivak in the conversation provides a channel to confront this issue by elevating the notion of “de-subalternization”, which first manifests in acknowledging the imperative of contentiously reorienting “our understanding of who counts as a legitimate agent of knowledge-production” (ibid.).

Building both on Gramsci and Spivak, Dhawan highlights the fundamental point that “although everyone is an intellectual, not everyone in society has a function of an intellectual” (ibid.). It is therefore definitely not enough to just hear, or even just actively listen. Acknowledging subaltern speech is to recognize that the global socioeconomic inequalities surrounding epistemic agency is a symptom of subalternity that needs to be combatively confronted and eradicated.

Dhawan moreover emphasizes that a bare recognition of multiple experiences and interpretations is no guarantee for reconstructing global power relations that characterize modernity and its colonial epistemes (ibid., 490). There is thus a need for a more nuanced problematization beyond “decolonization”—beyond recognition of different perspectives and subsumption of marginalized views. This involves “a much more complex process [that] entails multidirectional critique against Eurocentric as well as elite non-European epistemic orders” (ibid.).

This multidirectional critique necessitates the enabling of subaltern exercise of intellectual labor and empowering them to subvert and push back against the hegemony of dominant grand narratives of modernity. This is realizing inclusivity and recognition with the possibility and inevitability

of transformation, for it goes beyond merely acknowledging marginalized experiences and adding multiple perspectives. “Decolonized” knowledge is therefore insufficient without “de-subalternization”—a claim that Dhawan, evermore drawing on Spivak, urgently emphasizes in her appeal to make conditions conducive for the marginalized to authentically exercise epistemic agency (ibid., 502).

## Concluding Thoughts

It is worth reiterating that a re-reading of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” reveals the potential tools we can harness to enable us to accurately reconstruct and ultimately change our understanding of our modern world, which requires problematizing knowledge production—by going beyond its mere reflexive pluralization and towards critically interrogating the impoverished frameworks and assumptions with which we as knowledge producers operate.

Indeed, beyond performing an unimaginative self-reflexivity that simply entails a “ritualistic self-legitimation” of said depleted frameworks and assumptions (Stavrevska, Lazic et al. 2023, 3), a politically committed “radical reflexivity” aimed at a “continuous learning, unlearning, and relearning” (ibid., 16) provides a more promising path, which as a consequence brings about a “*transformation* of our own perspective” (Bhambra, Holmwood 2021, 214). Yet, a transformation of perspectives and interpretations is purely a stepping stone to overcome the material consequences of epistemic violence and injustices. Problematizing knowledge production further warrants an open-ended engagement in emancipatory theory-building that withstands any obfuscation of the actual realities of capitalist

exploitations (Scatamburlo-D’Annibale et al. 2018, 153); it warrants an ideologized critique that “rejects any politics of resistance that blurs the lines of opposition between the oppressors and the oppressed” (ibid. [referring to Freire 1978]). Such a critique would then enable a more disruptive trigger of transformative processes that are “driven by the necessity to overcome a contradictory situation and to turn it into something new” (Jaeggi 2009, 76).

Spivak’s critique of imperial epistemes has fermented such a practical process. Her groundbreaking essay has exposed fundamental epistemological flaws that undergird both colonial and anti-colonial discourses, in particular the flaws within both mainstream and critical theories that claim to represent or empower the subaltern through mere inclusion and pluralization. She has appealed for the necessity to acknowledge our intellectual complicity in muting or misreading those at the margins (Spivak 2010, 64)—a necessary task that is especially challenging for students and scholars of postcolonial social science and theory for we are continually “touched by the colonial social formations” (ibid.) as well as confronted with an ambivalence towards the current global modern conjuncture in which the remnants of empire continue to stage a presence. Indeed, as V.S. Naipaul reminds us, while these very empires were short-lived in the grand scheme of things, “they have [nonetheless] altered the world forever; their passing away is their least significant feature” (Naipaul 1980 [cited in Anghie 2005, 1]).

Such a reminder highlights the subversive potential of theory. In a more recent dialogue, Spivak discusses how theory turns into praxis, and that it is more productive

to reflect on what it means to theorize rather than to ask what theory is. This entails recognizing that its most daunting and indispensable task is to reach as much as possible a huge part of the masses (Spivak 2021b, 150), which at the same time also ultimately teaches us “an imaginative activism—suspending and resisting self-interest to access the position of the other from inside—knowing its impossibility, making its impossibility its condition of possibility” (ibid., 151–152). This puts a radically democratic element in the notion that theory is a political practice that defines the crux of engaged scholarship, considering that we are indeed elevating the act of theorizing to the level of the practice of political organizing towards emancipatory possibilities. Indeed, beyond everything the point is not to theorize the world, but to change it as Marx (1845) wrote, but critical understandings of the world are nevertheless a fundamental requisite for changing it.

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