

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

An Interview

*Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was born in Calcutta. She now teaches English and Culture Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. Her translation of Derrida's **Of Grammatology** (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), with a long and authoritative introduction, remains a controversial event in the recent history of philosophy and cultural theory, as does her recent **In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics** (Methuen, 1987). In November 1988 she visited England to participate in the Radical Philosophy Conference, 'Politics, Reason and Hope', and we took the opportunity of recording this interview.*

RP: You have described yourself as a 'practical deconstructivist feminist Marxist'. What kind of relation do you see between these different aspects of your work?

SPIVAK: Marxism is the project of looking at how capital operates, whereas feminism has to do with theories of the subject – the development of men and women as subjects – as well as social practices dealing with definitions of sexual difference. This is not organised in as abstract and theoretical a way as Marxism. So it seems to me that the Marxist and feminist projects cannot be thought of as operating together, although they do relate. As for deconstruction: it is really the name of a way of doing these two things – or any kind of thing. It is much less substantive than these two projects. It is more of a way of looking than a programme for doing: a way of looking at the way we do things so that this way of looking becomes its doing.

RP: So one could be a deconstructive conservative, for example?

SPIVAK: I believe so.

RP: Would you say that you began by learning the deconstructive approach and then went on to apply it in particular projects?

SPIVAK: I don't think so. One of the peculiar things about deconstruction (or the stuff Derrida writes) is that people who are taken by it will quite often say: 'That's what I was already thinking.' When I first read *Of Grammatology*, I felt I had understood what it was saying, and that it was a better way of describing what I was already trying to do. As to whether I was right or wrong, I've no idea.

For a time I felt ferociously angry with deconstruction because Derrida seemed not to be enough of a Marxist. He also seemed to be a sexist. But that's because I was wanting

deconstruction to be what it isn't. I have realised its value by recognising its limits – by not asking it to do everything for me. I no longer feel that I've got to go out and bat for it in every field. I have very little patience with people who are so deeply into deconstruction that they have nothing else substantive to think about. On the other hand, I believe that I am now much more deeply influenced by it than I was when I was so angry at it for not being everything. All my practice is turned by it.

RP: Your introduction to *Grammatology* established you as a person of full professional competence in philosophy and the history of philosophy, yet you repeatedly say that you are a literary critic, not a philosopher. What does this mean?

SPIVAK: It means that I take disciplinary boundaries very seriously. If you want to do interdisciplinary work, you have to admit that all those years of training in a discipline make a difference. You need to infiltrate the other disciplines. Graduate students in philosophy come to my classes and they say: 'I don't understand you.' What they mean is: 'You aren't meeting my condition for intelligibility; therefore your work is not worth anything.' It's very hard for them, who have learned this worthless, dogmatic, door-shutting remark, and we should not underestimate the difficulties.

There is a great deal of 'nothing-but-ism' practised on Derrida within philosophy in the United States: nothing but Heidegger, nothing but Hegel, nothing but the poor man's Nietzsche, nothing but mysticism, nothing but Wittgenstein even.

I don't say that I am *just* a literary critic. I say I *am* a literary critic.

RP: Many people think that left-wing theoretical activity in the United States lost its way some time in the last twenty years, that it ceased trying to reach a large public, so that it became an academic discipline of its own. What do you think of that analysis?

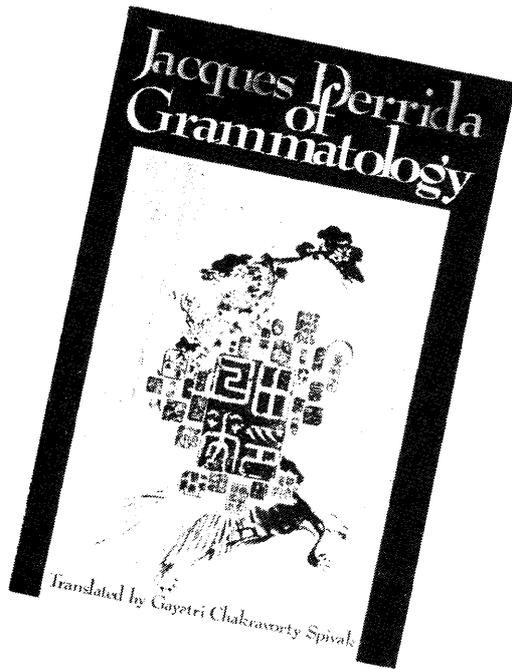
SPIVAK: Was it a question of the left losing its way, or the right knowing its way? Some people in Europe seem to think that the United States is the future of the intellectual enterprise, because the very heterogeneous tertiary education system there isolates a few elite institutions where these people can come and go, where there is a lot of radical chic. There is a practical political left in the United States, but it has, at best, a tenuous connection with the academic left, the cultural fringes of which are fully disciplinary.

There's also the question: in what kind of state does the

intellectual have any real voice in the affairs of the state? In the newly de-colonised areas, the elite national bourgeoisie think of themselves as more political. They have a much stronger voice in the construction of national identity.

RP: You spoke earlier about the problem of deconstruction failing to meet certain people's conditions of intelligibility. Doesn't this cut it off from practical political activity?

SPIVAK: Why privilege the conditions of intelligibility established by analytical philosophy departments? That's what I was talking about. Deconstruction is good in contact politics, not in broad planning. It's good for tactical situations, people one-on-one. In electoral politics it's not much use at



all. It works much more strongly in the highly diversified politics of feminism and anti-racism. It can also be useful – although unlike Marxism or feminism, deconstruction here should lose its proper name – in the broader areas of collective political activity, as I suggested in my talk at the conference.

RP: Derrida has spoken of deconstruction in terms of the idea of 'responsibility towards the trace of the other'. Some people have sought a role here for deconstruction as a kind of critique. Yet Derrida insists that deconstruction is not a form of critique. What do you think of the attempts which have been made to understand deconstruction as a form of ideology-critique?

SPIVAK: The problem with the idea of deconstruction as a form of ideology-critique is that deconstruction is not really interested in the exposure of error. At the beginning of *Grammatology*, it may look as if Derrida is a young hot-head exposing the error of Lévi-Strauss. But what he is really saying, contrary to Lévi-Strauss, is that the Nambikwara *also* had writing – because there are other ways of writing than ours. This is a bit like what Marx says about dissolving the mystery of money in the first chapter of *Capital*: that money is only a convenient way of measuring equivalences. We work with equivalences whenever we exchange anything. It's like Monsieur Jourdain speaking prose.

Derrida is interested in how truth is constructed rather than in exposing error. You could say that the text is addressed to the Nambikwara as much as to Lévi-Strauss. Deconstruction can only speak in the language of the thing it criticises. So, as Derrida says, it falls prey to its own critique, *in a certain way*. That makes it very different from ideology-critique, even from auto-critique. The investment that deconstruction has to make in the thing being deconstructed is so great that it can't be made simply as the result of a decision that something must be deconstructed. It is a matter of looking at how one is speaking, knowing that one is probably not going to be able to speak in a very different way. If it is an auto-critique, then it is so in a much more complicated way.

If you want to get to the other side – as you sometimes, indeed always, must – then you must give up hope of doing it fully deconstructively. That is the double bind written into deconstruction: that it *cannot* lead to the vanguardism of a practice supposedly adequate to theory. You cannot even *want* to deconstruct the person you want to ideology-critique. Deconstruction comes in when you flout your ideology-critique. The only things one really deconstructs are things into which one is intimately mired, like the desire to engage in ideology-critique.

By what means does [one] calm within [one]self the desire to be everything? ... the disguised suffering which the astonishment at not being everything, at even having concise limits, gives us. A suffering so difficult to acknowledge leads to inner hypocrisy, to solemn distant exigencies. (Bataille, Preface to *Inner Experience*)

This is where deconstruction is lodged.

One must not think that deconstruction is the only game in town. You can't say, as some real brief-holders for deconstruction would say, that it necessarily allows you to practise better. No, sometimes it stands in the way. But I'm not so sure that that's necessarily a bad thing. The straight road to practice has led to too many nightmares.

RP: In the Preface to *Grammatology*, you wrote of Derrida's use of the expression 'totality of an era'. Do you think that some conception of the 'history of metaphysics' as a whole is indispensable to defining the project of deconstruction?

SPIVAK: Yes, I do. And it applies not just to deconstruction but to poststructuralists generally. They need a name for the general principle which seems to them to define things, though they keep changing the name. But it seems to me that 'the history of metaphysics' was a *bad* name. Derrida never really finished, or even undertook, that much-promised deconstruction. He hasn't been Son of Heidegger in that respect.

As for how deconstruction actually operates, it fixes on small things: margins, moments, etc. But something unifying is needed ...

RP: As a fiction?

SPIVAK: As a necessary theoretical fiction which is a methodological presupposition. But the possibility of this fiction cannot be derived from some true account of things. If you take the theoretical formulation of deconstruction, you have a stalling at the beginning and a stalling at the end (*differance* at the beginning, and *aporia* at the end), so that you can neither *properly* begin nor *properly* end. Most of the people who are

interested in deconstruction are interested in these two things. But I'm more interested in what happens in the middle; and I think the later Derrida is too.

RP: When you spoke about humanism at the *Radical Philosophy* conference you seemed to suggest that difference might itself be thought as the unifying moment of a universal humanism.

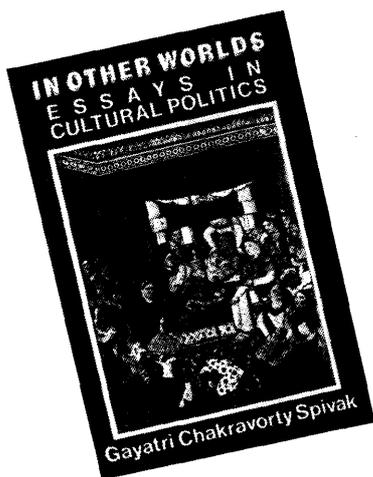
SPIVAK: People are similar not by virtue of being similar, but by virtue of producing a differential, or by virtue of thinking of themselves as other than a self-identical example of the species. It seems to me that the emancipatory project is more likely to succeed if one thinks of other people as being different; ultimately, perhaps absolutely different. On a very trivial level, people are different from the object of emancipatory benevolence.

RP: Nonetheless, you accept that emancipatory projects require identity at some level, even if it is difference which must itself be taken as the name for this identity?

SPIVAK: Yes.

RP: Your warning about the necessity for some kind of identity here sounds very like Adorno's idea that totality must be 'both construed and denied' within a materialist dialectic. Doesn't this point to some kind of deep theoretical coherence between deconstruction and Marxism?

SPIVAK: I don't want to agree with you. There isn't that coherence between deconstruction and Marxism – no way. The relationship between a reading of Marxism enhanced by deconstruction, in the broadest possible sense, and the extraordinary richness of the Marxian project is a much more interesting one than a mere coherence. There is a danger in making deconstruction coherent with Marxism. Everything that's useful in deconstruction will bite the dust, transformed into something that *seems* more radical. And everything that's expandable in Marxism in all kinds of different contexts will shrink into an extremely history-specific, race-specific, class-



specific, trade-specific way of talking about doing things. A coherence between them would be worth no more than the satisfaction of coherence.

RP: How have you changed in the last twenty years?

SPIVAK: I ask less of deconstruction and I value it more. There is a real difference between my own agenda with deconstruction, and what most admirers of Derrida do with his stuff. I read Derrida much more as someone who is related to an extremely important arena of practice: the production of philosophical writing and teaching, a critique of the elementary ingredients of the Euro-American ethical universal. In the field where I make my living, deconstruction teaches me that the politics of teaching rampant in the academy is a *bad* politics – a politics of refuting, following your master, etc. It is more interesting to enter into texts so that the moments of bafflement can become useful.

The other thing that's happened is that although I'm against sexism I cannot think about women's solidarity *because* they are women. And although I find in Marx's analysis of capital the most powerful way of understanding what's going on in the world, I'm not particularly interested in privileging the class struggle; although to forget it has its own agenda. Similarly, in the case of the history of imperialism, I'm much more interested in the enabling violation of the post-colonial situation than in finding some sort of national identity untouched by the vicissitudes of history. It seems to me that that's the change that's taken place as – after twenty years of reading Derrida – some things have lasted in the wash. I am always in search of left-out places. That's enough to take up all your time.

Interviewed by Peter Osborne and Jonathan Rée

A revised version of Spivak's talk at the *RP* Conference, 'Remembering the Limits: Difference, Identity and Practice', will be appearing in Peter Osborne (ed.), *Socialism and the Limits of Liberalism*, to be published by Verso in 1990.