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Editor-in-chief Neda Andrić

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## **A DEADLY SILENCE: SPIVAK'S SUBALTERN IN CRITICAL CULTURAL STUDIES**

***Abstract:** Over twenty years have passed since Professor Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak invited us to consider how our scholarly practices might be helping to silence the subaltern. Professor Lough invites us to reconceptualize our silencing of the subaltern as part of a much longer and deeper project to silence the body as such – the body of language, the body of knowledge, the body of literature. Recuperating this body will require more than talk. It will engage our bodies.*

***Key words:** Spivak, the subaltern, critical cultural studies*

### **Introduction**

It is difficult today to find a literary scholar or linguist unfamiliar with Professor Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak 1994). Indeed, most would eagerly own their sympathy for her project. And, yet, perhaps at no other time in history have our institutions and our teaching, our scholarship and our publications, displayed greater hostility toward the subaltern than they do today. Professor Spivak counseled us to attend to the body of language. And yet we continue to focus our attention on language disembodied. The cause for our Janis-faced appreciation for and appropriation of Professor Spivak's critique is seated in our failure to adequately understand the formation of our own science and its complicity in undeterred political project of globalization, neo-colonialism, and imperialism. Coming to terms with our complicity however is no easy manner. It will require first that we grasp the social and

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historical mechanisms that first led to the isolation of the sublime from its material form of appearance in fourteenth century western Europe. We will then have to explore how this initial fragmentation of the body of language gave rise to a discourse about language and about the body that continues to haunt our discipline.

To scholars of a certain age — I am 57 — the mere mention of Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and her best-known article is enough to bring wistful tears to the eyes and understanding nods to the head. Do you remember? I do. That was because when I entered graduate school in 1990 with an eye to becoming a critical theorist everything French was the rage: not simply Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jean-François Lyotard, and Roland Barthes, who were already dinosaurs, but the newcomers: Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Jean Baudrillard; and, for the as yet unconverted Marxists — there was always Pierre Bourdieu. Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Jürgen Habermas — the Germans in general? — all dead; all that is except for *Messr. Heidegger*. Which is no doubt why our professor, the feminist cultural theorist Professor Leora Auslander, had us read Professor Spivak's essay.

It was as though someone had thrown ice cold water in our theoretical *visage*. Had *we* silenced the subaltern? Was it at *us* that she was directing her criticism?

Briefly — for it has no doubt been some years — Professor Spivak takes the two French icons Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze to task for their refusal to critically interrogate their own complicity and the complicity of post-structuralist cultural studies in the premature emancipation — which is to say the silencing — of the subaltern. In order to expose this complicity, Professor Spivak directs our attention to texts long ago dismissed by her colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic; texts composed by Karl Marx.

Marx had fallen into disfavor within critical cultural studies not only on account of the political excesses of comrades Lenin and Stalin, but also on account of the profound deficiencies

evident in Marxian critical theory *per se*. Marxian critical theorists seemed incapable of thinking outside of a binary code that it ought to have instead been their object to critique. Instead of emancipating labour and emancipating society from labour, Marxian critical theorists were still found for the most part anticipating a future in which all would equally be bound to this peculiar form of self-domination; and, instead of articulating a clear and compelling case against the role industrial expansion had played in colonialism and imperialism, Marxian critical theorists had simply folded both of these monstrosities into the inevitable stages of economic development, soon to be overcome with the defeat of the bourgeoisie and its replacement by the industrial working class; to say nothing of the hopelessly productivist framework within which most Marxian critical theorists plied their trade.

Making all the more astonishing Professor Spivak's favorable invocation of Marx in her ground-breaking 1988 article "Can the Subaltern Speak?", an article whose own theoretical framework owed more to Derrida than to Marx or his theoretical successors.

### **Why Karl Marx?**

The problem, as Professor Spivak laid it out, was that critical cultural studies had not yet articulated ways to come to terms with either capitalism or imperialism, except to fault power as such and to speak and write imperiously of the need to free the victims of capital and empire from the categories imposed upon them by "the West" and so allow them the room to speak for themselves. In other words, they did not seem the least aware that their failure to offer a substantive critique of capitalism as such and imperialism as such — indeed, their dismissal of all criticism of these historical forms as naïve and simplistic — was itself a part of the academically sanctioned mechanism that enforced the subaltern's silence.



“White men are saving brown women from brownmen” (Spivak 92) was the sentence Spivak developed to capture the extent of critical cultural studies’ blindness.

But why Marx? Was it only because of Marx’s own refusal to ontologize and universalize the social subject; and his methodological refusal therefore to transhistoricize anything like an emancipatory subject? Was this it? Or was it not also Marx’s insistence upon theories grounded in practice and therefore his instance upon theories that preserved the social and historical specificity both of emancipation and of the object of his critique?

In the end, Spivak is drawn to Marx on both accounts: both on account of his refusal to ontologize or universalize social subjectivity and practice; and on account of his instance on historical and social specificity. This meant, however, that the theorist is never outside of the object of her or his critique. Authorization to speak bears a heavy cost. It entails relationship. For when I critique I must also acknowledge and theorize my own complicity in the silencing of the subaltern; which is never only a linguistic silencing, but is always a social and historical silencing as well. Silence is inscribed on the “body of knowledge.” Silence invites us to notice and to decipher its “body language.”

In their deference to the muted voice of the subaltern, their reluctance to address either capital or empire; in their methodological predisposition to theorize always and only at dusk, when, according to Hegel, all cats are grey, they just as effectively silence the subaltern as if they had sold and bought shares in the Royal East India Company themselves.

We will consider in a moment Professor Spivak’s cryptic story about the tragic Sati-Suicide and how this act of defiance might loose the tongues of the silenced subaltern; or, in any case, illuminate a path leading toward such loosening. Yet, it is one of the few shortcomings of Professor Spivak’s otherwise extraordinary piece that she herself offers only glimpses of why and how France’s intelligentsia, and, as it so happens, the last half century of critical cultural studies, has found itself aiding and

abetting the production of a silence they might instead have helped critique.

This conference of ours, "Word Across Cultures," obviously demands such a critique. But, if Professor Spivak is correct, and I believe that she is, we cannot hope to offer such a critique without shedding a critical light on the production of our own deadly silence.

As an initial attempt at a kind of recuperation or recovery of voice, I would like first to revisit the lineages of our own science and its complicity in the composition of our silence. The theme I have selected around which to organize this intervention is "the sublime"; and not just any sublime, but more specifically, the Kantian "sublime" — *das Erhabene*. "Erhaben," writes Kant, "is that, the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense" (Kant 172 §25).

My reason for selecting the Kantian sublime as my point of departure is that it opens up in a particularly clear manner the way that western Europeans in the 18th century felt compelled to isolate the sublime from its material forms of appearance. This compulsion, I will suggest, was not purely or even primarily instrumental. Rather was it an attempt to intellectually account for a practical transformation that had already insinuated itself among all ranks of men and women in all corners of society; a *de facto* isolation of the sublime from its material form of appearance with which, by the late eighteenth century, western Europeans were finally beginning to come to terms. Yet, since this entailed also coming to terms with close to eight millennia of written and oral tradition that had closely linked the sublime to the body, that had believed the two inseparable, isolating the sublime from its body also required a critique of human experience as such.

We will see in a moment how and why the sublime emerges in thirteenth century Europe and how and why it is compelled to isolate itself from its body. For the moment, what is significant is how this isolation sets the stage for the isolation of regimes of knowledge transmission, which we as academics

compose; isolation of knowledge, that is, from both the bodies whose practices generate this knowledge and from the bodies that in turn are subjected to these regimes of power and knowledge. In this mutual constitution of the sublime and its body we are invited to discern and deconstruct the deadly silence that continues to haunt our disciplines. But first to the constitution of the Kantian sublime.

### **The birth of the sublime**

It is no secret, of course, that western Europe was for centuries regarded as the backwater of the known world — a region without learning, without science, without law, without culture — occupied by roving bands of wild and violent barbarians. Nor was this simply the opinion of scholars in India, China, Africa, or the Islamic Mediterranean, who universally excoriated the backwards peoples of the European west. It was also the opinion of those handful of Churchmen who, having some knowledge of classical languages and some familiarity with the world outside of Europe, knew that western Europe lagged hopelessly behind the rest of the civilized world (see e.g., O'Shea).

Like elsewhere, the forces that shaped the every day rhythms of life for Europeans were broadly defined by nature herself — by the movements of the constellations, by the lengthening and shortening of the day, by migrations of animal life, by the ebb and flow of tides, by seasonal weather patterns and, therefore, by rhythms of planting and harvest or, for most peoples, by their own migratory patterns, covering large territories and hundreds of years in duration. In these respects Europeans were quite similar to other communities elsewhere. And, yet, perhaps on account of its harsh weather and a dearth of good soil, northern Europe in particular never became the object of desire of other transcontinental empires. And when crusaders marched to Jerusalem to reclaim it for their God, they too were made aware of how utterly backward and uncivilized western Christendom was when compared to other places on the globe.

Yet, among the objects these crusaders brought back with them is a device that will completely change their world: the Chinese escapement mechanism (Landes 53-66). The escapement mechanism in China is used to calibrate the movements of the heavens with the movements inside the Imperial City around whose Emperor, of course, the Heavens naturally turn. Transported to the rocky, inhospitable and uninhabitable West, the escapement mechanism will serve a different function. It will tell brothers and sisters in cloistered communities when they need to pray; because the brothers and sisters in these communities have a problem. For much of the year, their water freezes and so they cannot use water clocks to measure the intervals between times of prayer. For similar reasons — because it is dark — sun dials are also of little use. The escapement mechanism when fixed to weights or to a metal spring will mark equal intervals of time at night and in daylight, when temperatures are below freezing or when they are unbearably hot. A peg fixed to a chain that is pulled through the escapement mechanism will cause a small bell to ring. The small bell will awaken Frere Jacques; and Frere Jacques will then ring a larger bell that will awaken the entire community for prayer.

By the late thirteenth century such devices had already begun to proliferate in cloistered communities everywhere throughout Europe. Which was a problem, because, as we already noted, Europeans were accustomed to rhythms governed by nature — in this case by the rising and setting of the sun. So that if you happened to be among the vast majority of Europeans who were not accustomed to praying seven times a day, who were accustomed to awakening with the rising of the sun and bedding down when the sun set, it was a terrible annoyance to be awakened by Church bells many hours before the sun rose, and equally annoying to be awakened after settling down for sleep.

Time, everyone knows, is variable. Even for us, EP Thompson reminds us, not all rhythms are governed by clock-time (Thompson 79). For the two or three years between birth and childhood, parents contend with the natural rhythms of their

children. People living in coastal regions must deal with tidal patterns whether they like it or not. And there are differing rhythms as we move from regions with high to low unemployment. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, variable time was the only time. Clock time did not yet exist. As David Landes tells us, it had not yet been invented.

The noise produced by the church bells must, therefore, at least initially, have been unbearable. And, yet, eventually we know exactly what happened. Eventually, entrepreneurs in the textile industry began to peg the workday less to diurnal rhythms than to the church bells. We know this because of the resistance textile workers displayed when they were forced to begin and stop work at “unnatural” times — either before or after the rising or setting of the Sun. And we know this because of the churchmen who came to workers’ defense when employers began to pay their workers not in accordance with the just wage established by the church, but according to the hours they had worked; which, of course, were not “real” hours, hours as marched out by the real Sun, but deceitful hours, false hours; hours chimed out at arbitrary times that failed to coordinate with the movements of God’s created order (Postone 202-215).

What was happening is that the authority to authorize time, to judge it, to measure it, was being stolen from the heavens and was being privately and individually deployed solely for personal gain. Time was being privatized. But that is not all. Already in the fourteenth century, new laws were appearing governing the regulation of time, the regulation of clocks, the regulation of bells. So that public attention — not only of those working in the shops or in the fields — but also of those working in the towns; public attention was being turned away from the natural rhythms set by Sun and Moon, stars, seasons, waters, plants and animals, and was being turned toward these abstract units. Prior to the thirteenth century, public rhythms had been negotiated among the leading corporations of society: the clergy, the nobility, the trades, the monarchy, and, increasingly, the towns folk. Now, or so it appeared, these negotiations were being

eclipsed by time itself. For when any of these corporations challenged the new measurement, they were immediately silenced by the undeniable, incontrovertible, observation that no one was being short-changed of time so long as the units of time marched out by the clocks were accurate.

And herein was born the Kantian sublime. For what else is the Kantian sublime than this practical isolation of value, value marched out by equal units of time, from its material form of appearance? As individuals labored in the fields and in the shops, as they came to view their action as the equivalent not of a just wage negotiated among all corporations, but as the equivalent of some number of minutes and hours marched out on a clock, they also began to experience value pulling free from the bodies in which it had once been contained; value pulling free from bodies and now finding itself inscribed in equal units of abstract time. Bodies, which once ruled, or which in any event held their own in a commerce among many bodies and their fields, now suddenly found themselves subject to the disembodied sequence of temporal intervals bound to human actions (Lough 21-38).

We know that this is what happened from several independent sources. Take, for example, the field of philosophy in general, or the philosophy of precious metals. Here, of course, for much of the Middle Ages, Plato was King. Metals hold the value they do on account of the substances they contain. Yet, as the new regime of time took hold, nominalism, which had always been a minority philosophy, began to pick up adherents. Precious metals held the value they did not on account of the substances they contained, but on account of the value with which we credit them (Weber 1996; Sargent 2014).

Or take the Virgin Mary; or, in particular, take her breasts. In the Middle Ages, Mary's breasts play a huge role in in spiritual iconography. Mary's body is a central feature of Medieval piety and spirituality. Thousands of sermons are told each year about how the Virgin seduces the Father with her Body to produce the Son. Yet, once the sublime began to practically separate itself from its material form of appearance, we begin to see a similar

bifurcation in the Body of the Holy Virgin. On the one hand, the Mother of God's Body is handed over to common pornographers and becomes a source of inspiration for something more than simply prayers. On the other hand, where the Virgin remains a source of spiritual sustenance, her body is compelled to retreat into the background and disappear. Mary becomes an Angel and is no longer permitted to disrobe and feed the church with her mother's milk (Ellington 2001; Miles 2008).

Or take the wounds of Jesus received upon the Cross. For most of the Middle Ages, in holy iconography these wounds are permitted to survive the resurrection and glorification. Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father, blood spilling from his side and cleansing his people below. Yet, with the introduction of abstract time and abstract value in the early modern period, a separation can be observed. On the one hand there is the all-too-human earthly body, covered with sores, eaten by worms, broken, bleeding, blistered, and subject to decay. On the other hand is the risen and glorified Lord, in whom no bodily distortion or imperfection is permitted and therefore on whose body no gory wounds, disease, or decay can be perceived (Widdicombe 2003).

Or, finally, of course, there is the Holy Eucharist itself. Modern day Catholics would of course like to believe that they embrace the same beliefs as their Medieval counterparts. They all believe in the Real Presence. But they don't. Yes, the Medieval practitioner tastes the Body and Blood. Yet, it is noteworthy that Saint Thomas, when he writes about the Holy Eucharist in his *Summa Theologica* (TP Q73), is anxious to explain why God is to be tasted only in this Bread and Wine. Why, since God is everywhere and in everything, why is God experienced only in these seven sacraments? Because, the fact is that Medieval Catholics did experience God in all kinds of natural phenomena; in weather patterns, in mountain streams, in forests, in herbs and in animal life. Since the sublime was not yet isolated from its material form of appearance, there was no reason not to experience the sublime everywhere and in everything.

But, then, as though on cue, in the fifteenth century all across Europe, wherever the new clocks were installed and the new time regime had been implemented, community after community suddenly realized how foolish they had all been to mistakenly feel that the eternal could be contained in and under mutable bodies in time. And all across Europe religious subjectivities suddenly shifted to fit the new regime of practice.

An earlier archeology (Weber 2002) held that this shift had itself been the trigger for the change in practice; that the new religious subjectivity had predisposed social actors to adopt what Max Weber had called a kind of “this-worldly asceticism.” What instead appears to have happened was that as ever larger numbers of individuals calibrated their actions and subjectivities to the new rhythm of time marched out first on clocks installed in monasteries, but then on clocks installed in towns, social subjectivity itself had undergone a dramatic transformation. Martin Luther’s 95 Theses were not so much the cause as much as they were a symptom of this broad social transformation (Lough 2006).

So that when three centuries later Immanuel Kant radically isolated the sublime from its material form of appearance he was in fact doing no more than calling attention to a *fait accompli*, an indisputable, objective truth already long ago inscribed on the bodies and in the practices of nearly all Europeans. If the sublime is ineffable, immaterial, everywhere and nowhere, dismembered, fragmented, lacking form, location, content — this fact is not simply an invention cooked up by latter-day Nietzscheans disgruntled by modernism’s many oppressive totalities. The free-floating signifier is already there in the 15th century; already there in the practices of ordinary towns folk and country laborers who have grown accustomed to the new regime of time and labour. But this also means that the deadening silence had also already set in; not simply the muting of bodies, but the isolation of value from its material form of appearance, so that this value is no longer able to identify the practices or the bodies to which it might otherwise be related.



### **The double concealment**

I noted earlier how we are complicit in the composition of this silence. For Professor Spivak, our complicity consisted in our unwillingness or inability to squarely face the ways our interpretive categories, along with the rituals of our interventions, actually serve to reinscribe the violence, but therefore also serve to enforce the interdiction on speech, upon those we have already muted. Loosing the tongues of the muted would, in Professor Spivak's case, at the very least involve foregrounding the roles that class and gender domination, and imperialism play not only in silencing subjects of class, gender and imperial domination. It would also entail critically interrogating the roles we and our institutions play in reproducing such forms of domination and so enforcing the silence.

So, in what might our complicity consist now, twenty-five years later? If in 1988 we already felt the walls closing in upon us, now, today, the doors and door frames have all been removed and the walls plastered over. We now occupy fully privatized, fully neoliberalized departments and institutions in which speaking risks almost certain banishment. Better therefore to maintain our silence willingly and to deploy our interventions quietly, obliquely, under the radar. We will foreground difference. We will explore the fragment. We will recover the trace. But we will not, we must not, foreground the regulatory regime that has transformed our institutions of learning into thinly- or not-so-thinly veiled bastions of privilege. We will not, we must not, call attention to the efficiencies extracted from laborers whose temporal rhythms compose both their and our silence. And we must not expose the self-enforced censorship with which we purchase the privilege of maintaining our own silence.

But how have we — ambassadors of the most talkative of professions — been silenced?

Let us suppose that the story I related just now about abstract time and value was in fact a story about the formation of capital and its sublime value form. And let us further suppose

that among the lessons this story might teach us is how some practices hold the power of concealing the conditions of their own possibility — covering their tracks so to speak — leading sublime value to openly and noisily disavow its connection to the body by which it has been composed. If this is so, then this authorizes us to speak of a two-fold concealment.

In the first concealment, the institution itself, the university and its department stands under an interdiction prohibiting it from speaking openly about the oppressive conditions that account for its perpetuation — the investment of its resources in private and public ventures around the globe whose *modus operandi* entail the extraction of labour in exchange for the right to simply to live, to say nothing of the right to live well or live free. Were we to point this out or were we to organize and pressure our presidents, our rectors, or our boards to disinvest and to reinvest in public ventures that aimed at the public good, we would surely be criticized for introducing politics into the educational venture; but we also might be punished for our unprofessional conduct, conduct unbecoming our title and responsibilities. And so our silence.

But alongside this first concealment is a second to which the first is intimately related. In this second related concealment on purely methodological grounds we prohibit ourselves — or are prohibited by our colleagues — from crossing the barrier separating the sublime from its material form of appearance, from looking for or finding the sublime once again in the bodies from which it has so recently been liberated. This liberation from bodies is often portrayed through a lens cut in the pragmatic isolation of narrative from scientific discourse — *a la* Jean-François Lyotard (1989) — where scientific discourse is itself conflated with its uniquely modernist form. Bodies are then mistaken for their nomothetic models and liberation from these models is then equated with liberation from the oppressive law-bound quality felt to adhere to all bodies in time and space. The least curiosity over the paths that might lead from the sublime to its material body and back again, or over the practical regimes by

which these paths might have been obscured, is often met with accusations that we are attempting to reintroduce structuralism surreptitiously back into the canon; or, worse still, that we are displaying Marxian or even Marxist tendencies in our research. At the very least, we are found guilty of the many flaws of modernism for which we must and will be duly punished.

This double-concealment then — the first institutional, the second methodological — helps account for the noisy silence that has become characteristic of our science. We speak but in a manner that silences on whose authority we speak. We speak but only so long as we pay homage — whether directly or indirectly — to the freely floating signifier speaking through us; absent its body. And herein we reinscribe at a much higher level a discourse about discourse — and so a metadiscourse — that silences the already muted bodies over which it rules with imperious resolve.

The initial attempt to recuperate or recover voice leads us to the statement: we are looking for the bodies of the sublime value form of the commodity.

But to this initial attempt at recuperation must be added a second; because the first attempt might still leave us only with the fully intact, fully recovered two-fold form of the commodity. So that our second attempt at recuperation or recovery of voice takes as its point of departure Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's reflections on the *Geist* whose production of the world — which is identical to its self production — Hegel likened to divine self-pleasuring or Godly masturbation.

In the famous "Preface" to his *Phenomenologie des Geistes*, Hegel attempts to resolve the phenomenological rupture disclosed in Kant's third critique, by taking objective spirit or mind as his point of departure. Not a sublime spirit isolated from its material form of appearance, therefore, but a spirit that is always already embodied, differentiating itself from itself, positing itself as its own objective presence, losing itself or very nearly losing itself in this self-differentiation, which is simultaneously and for this very reason a return to its own body.

The living substance, further, is that being which is truly subject, or, what is the same thing, is truly realized and actual solely in the process of positing itself, or in mediating with its own self its transitions from one state or position to the opposite. As subject it is pure and simple negativity, and just on that account a process of splitting up what is simple and undifferentiated, a process of duplicating and setting factors in opposition, which [process] in turn is the negation of this indifferent diversity and of the opposition of factors it entails (Hegel 1977:10).

Let us stop here. "As subject it is pure and simple negativity." That is to say, as the simple sublime — as the ineffable, the unspeakable, the mute, the disembodied — it is pure and simple negativity; the not-body. And so it is not a living substance, not realized and not actual. There is no positing of itself and so also no self-mediation. Which helps to explain why, to continue with Hegel's account:

True reality is merely this process of reinstating self-identity, of reflecting into its own self in and from its other, and is not an original and primal unity as such, not an immediate unity as such (Hegel 1977:10).

Again, let us pause. Because it would be easy at this point to slip back into pure identity. Except that clearly this is not at all what Hegel is contemplating. Rather am I reflecting into my own self from the vantage point of my other, which is not other than my now differentiated self. And it is for this reason that Hegel insists that this "is not an original and primary unity as such, not an immediate unity as such."

There is no intending, initial, establishing event here pointing to an end. Rather, says Hegel, is there a purpose disclosed in this end, which we can then deduce is its purpose. "It is the process of its own becoming," writes Hegel, "the circle which presupposes its end as its purpose, and has its end for its beginning; it becomes concrete and actual only by being carried out, and by the end it involves."

Not idealism, therefore, but the critique of idealism. The recovery or restoration of the body to the sublime. And so we need to note here how the path that we can travel here, from the end to its beginning, we cannot travel without attending to the body. But to what can we liken this journey backwards, as it were, this search for origins? Hegel leaves no doubts as to what he likens this journey. It is according to Hegel the journey of divine self-pleasuring or Godly masturbation. "The life of God and divine intelligence," writes Hegel, "then, can, if we like, be spoken of as love disporting with itself," or so the English translation reads. The German is much more explicit. "Das Leben Gottes und das göttliche Erkennen mag also wohl als ein Spielen der Liebe mit sich selbst ausgesprochen werden" (Hegel 1907:13). Thus love pleasuring itself; or divine self-pleasuring.

In the end, therefore, as we can see, Hegel resolves Kant's isolation of the sublime from its material form of appearance by the self-objectification entailed in self-pleasuring or masturbation. The body of the sublime is restored. But since it is the commodified body that lies at the end of this process of restoration, it is a body that is always already subjected to and therefore submissive to the sublime value form. The body made whole by capital; or, which is the same thing, the masturbating body.

So, what is the outcome of this second attempt to recuperate or recover the voice of the silenced body? It resolves into the statement: the bodies of the sublime value form must be seen but not heard; or, which is the same thing: they must only speak when they are spoken to.

This too, however, is inadequate. For even though we are now permitted to explore the body of the sublime, as Hegel has observed just now, we are only permitted to explore this body from the vantage point fixed by the sublime value form's own curriculum vitae; reading, as it were, the history of this body backwards from this unfortunate end. But because this end entails the destruction of this body in its complete annihilation — that is to say in its consumption — its voice is once again drown

out by the value form and by its self-valorization. And it is this voice, the voice of self-valorizing capital, we are now permitted to hear and repeat, in all of its brilliantly, spectacularly, commodified forms.

There is a text in the 1930 edition of the *Der Grosse Brockhaus* that reads as follows:

**Sublime:** an object or process whose inner excellence abnormally heightens or threatens to shatter its material form of appearance. The force it exerts must be greater than normal. Examples: the stormy sea is sublime in contrast to other powerful expressions of nature, the expanse of the heavens is sublime in contrast to other experiences of space; the art of an Aeschylus, Dante, Michelangelo is sublime because in it humans are drawn up into the superhuman. As subspecies of the sublime, we often include “dignity,” the “solemn” and the “pathetic.” If we explore the subjective meaning of the sublime, we find many terrors, even fear, but always inner ennoblement, a certain compulsion to transgress the boundaries of normal everyday experience (*Brockhaus* 633).

So, once again, we are brought face to face with the threat the sublime poses to its own material form of appearance — the threat that the sublime will shatter this body, will transgress its boundaries — and, so finally, we again face our deadly and deadening silence.

### **Bodies of knowledge**

Let me close by offering a few words about disrupting, dislodging, and speaking into and through this silence. The first thing I would like to say is that bodies do not naturally or inevitably lend themselves to being bearers and victims of the sublime. That is because, as we have seen, this peculiar relationship between the sublime and its body, historically, speaking is quite recent; certainly no older than the fourteenth or perhaps the thirteenth century. And this means that, particularly outside of western Europe, and prior to the fourteenth century, we are authorized to look for and find evidence of bodies that

have not yet been subjected to domination by the new regime of time and labour. But we are also authorized to look for and find evidence of bodies — body language — wherever regimes of practice are not governed by abstract labor time expended. At the same time, it strikes me that we need not feel compelled in any sense to transcribe the sublime onto histories or locations from which it is absent; nor are we compelled to naturalize, universalize, or ontologize the sublime, reading it in a Hegelian manner back onto histories from which it is absent. Bodies speak, but not when they are coerced into speaking the language of abstract value.

Second, it is equally important that we not permit the sublime to naturalize itself even in those social formations that have become its natural habitat. Bodies are not the natural *habitus* of the sublime. And when we read them under occupation as though they were only self-occupied, we silence them just as effectively as we would by ignoring them entirely. Releasing bodies from their domination by the sublime and so losing their tongues therefore entails more than simply taking note of discursive variety or plenitude. This, I take it, was among the points that Professor Spivak wanted us to bear in mind. Social and historical critique are not secondary to our enterprise. Failing such critique, we effectively silence the bodies upon whose speech our entire enterprise depends.

This second point needs to be stressed because there are those at our institutions, in our faculties and in our administrations, who may feel that such criticism falls outside of our job description. We need to restrict ourselves to the sublime or to those bodies coerced into speaking on its behalf. But can we really any longer call an institution of higher learning any faculty that deliberately silences, suppresses, or excludes bodies of knowledge? Can we any longer call a faculty of higher learning any department that deliberately and knowingly does the same?

Yes, absolutely, unequivocally — this is *politics*. But it is also *politics* that seeks to silence the body of knowledge by selecting for faculty and for administrators predisposed to such

silence; or by silently or noisily threatening those faculty who still have voices with the likelihood of dismissal or refusal to advance. We must therefore say no to this Kantian gambit; to this false choice between science and power; between disembodied knowledge and bodies of knowledge.

There is nothing — absolutely nothing — that is *natural* about this isolation of the sublime from its material form of appearance; not now, not ever. So that vocal, militant, politically active criticism of this isolation and the silence that it entails is among the leading responsibilities of any scholar who claims that she or he is being methodologically or theoretically rigorous. Silencing any body of knowledge is the opposite of methodological rigor.

But, therefore, thirdly, and lastly, we are entitled and even professionally obligated to pay attention to bodies of knowledge — to what bodies are telling us and to what we may learn from these bodies. Meaning we are neither authorized nor privileged to ignore these bodies.

You will recall how a moment ago we dipped superficially into the itinerary traced by the sublime spirit in its constitution of a body suitable to its peculiar form. I want now to see whether we might translate this itinerary into a form somewhat more familiar, although still clearly estranged. Some of you will remember that it was after this passage in Hegel's Preface that Karl Marx modelled his own description of the sublime value form of the commodity. Wrote Marx:

It is constantly changing from one form into the other, without becoming lost in this movement; it thus becomes transformed into an automatic subject. If we pin down the specific forms of appearance assumed in turn by self-valorizing value in the course of its life, we reach the following elucidation: capital is money, capital is commodities. In truth, however, value is here the subject of a process in which . . . it changes its own magnitude . . . and thus valorizes itself independently. . . . [V]alue suddenly presents itself as a self-moving substance which passes



through a process of its own, and for which commodities and money are both mere forms (Marx 1990:255-256).

An older generation of Yugoslavians habitually mistook itself, the industrial working class, for this subject-object of history. And, yet, clearly here Marx would like us to entertain the idea that it is not the working class, but the sublime value form of the commodity that deserves this title. It and not the working class is the Self-Moving Substance that is Subject, the substance that finds in its end also its beginning. Or, in the alternative, it is the commodified working class, the working class in its fully commodified form, that is this Subject-Object of History. But this means that when we installed the industrial working class in the position of state actors, when we listened to this body, mistaking it for the body to whom we should listen, we were in fact only listening to another instance of the value form itself. However, there is no simple, straightforward, direct path to the body of knowledge; there is no i-device we can plug in to hear this body speak.

Put differently, if it is in their subjection to the value form that bodies are silenced, we may not anticipate their speaking to us except and until they are freed from their subjection to this sublime form. And we may not anticipate their emancipation from this sublime form until such time as human action is emancipated from abstract time itself and is permitted to again respond to the tugs and pulls of bodies that are no longer commodified.

We might be inclined to fault Hegel for theorizing a singular, even if highly differentiated, subject. In his defense, however, Hegel did capture the oppressive identity that has plagued human society from the moment abstract time and value began to coordinate all of our affairs. And when traditional Marxist theory proposed that we subject all of society to a singular, uniform subject — the industrial working class — there is little doubt but that traditional Marxists felt that this subject stood opposite, dialectically, their class enemy, the bourgeois subject and that their victory over this subject constituted the

emancipation of society. They had little appreciation for how this victory signaled no more than a mutation in the value form of the commodity. They mistook Marx's critique of this singular identity for his celebration of the same.

But since bodies by their nature are different and non-identical, recovering body language entails nearly the opposite of this traditional Marxist maneuver. It entails the recovery of difference, not dialectically, not in resistance to the same, not in opposition, and therefore not *a la Hegel*; but difference mediating difference. The suspicion, no doubt, is that this celebration of difference is no more than an aesthetic preference; or, even worse, that it is a way to surreptitiously import political opposition into what ought to be a neutral frame. But, the fact is that scholars cannot remain neutral about recovering bodies and their voices without abdicating their responsibility as scholars. We are obligated by our scholarly duties to listen to bodies; and where those bodies have been bound and silenced, we have an obligation to critically explore the mechanisms binding and silencing these bodies.

Is this political? Yes, of course it is. But so too is the ongoing campaign to bind and silence these bodies under the pretense that silence and paralysis is their nature state. Or as if our own silence and our own paralysis is the natural state of scholarship. Or, finally, as if scholarship — rigorous scholarship, cutting edge scholarship — was not always already political and engaged and active.

But, of course, our scholarly responsibility that is also therefore political also obligates us to critically interrogate our own methodologically and theoretically induced silences. Have we been too quick to disavow, ignore, or silence bodies? Have we focused so narrowly on the traces and fragments, on the polymorphous and de-centered, schizoid selves of language that we too, like Kant, are happy to liberate the sublime from its bodies?

Professor Spivak invoked Marx in her famous paper not in order to distance herself from the real progress made by her

colleagues. Her discourse is shot through with Derridean tropes. She is not inviting us to fall back upon an older and therefore more authentic analytical frame. And neither am I. Spivak invoked Marx in her paper because when Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze abdicated their responsibility to critically interrogate the roles that class, empire, gender and power had played in the composition of their own discourse, they themselves helped to actively silence the subalterns caught in the web constructed by these less than fictitious, less than imaginary forces. What Marx had understood better than Foucault and Deleuze is the necessity to recover the bodily character, the embodied character, not only of our domination, but also of our emancipation — not only of our silences, but also of our capacity to speak. For, as Spivak points out, dismissing the body does not on its own liberate the voice. Rather does it make that silence ontologically fundamental, universal, natural and so permanent.

### **Reflections on the bad sati**

When, therefore, toward the end of her essay, Professor Spivak invokes the bad *sati*, the self-sacrifice for no dead husband, and so the suicide, Spivak makes clear that she is not inviting us to witness this act either in order to condone the suicide or the unbearable domination of which it is a sign. Writes Spivak:

Bhuvanewari [the suicide-*Sati*] had known that her death would be diagnosed as the outcome of illegitimate passion. She had therefore waited for the onset of menstruation. While waiting, Bhuvanewari, the *brahmacarini* who was no doubt looking forward to good wifedom, perhaps rewrote the social text of sati-suicide in an interventionist way. (One tentative explanation of her inexplicable act had been a possible melancholia brought on by her brother-in-law's repeated taunts that she was too old to be not-yet-a-wife.) She generalized the sanctioned motive for female suicide by taking immense trouble to displace (not merely deny) in the physiological inscription of her body, its imprisonment within legitimate passion by a single

male. In the immediate context, her act became absurd, a case of delirium rather than sanity (Spivak 103-104).

Is this an illustration of the body silenced? Yes and no. Bhuvanewari was no doubt silenced. Her suicide was credited as absurd. "The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (104). And, yet, do not we no less than Professor Spivak have a professional, scholarly responsibility to recover not only this, but other "physiological inscriptions" on this and other bodies?

Because wherever we remain silent or indifferent to these bodies; whenever we disavow the bodily character of the voices we are exploring, or whenever we count their silence as natural or celebrate this silence as evidence itself of emancipation, we become complicit in the very acts through which this body is being eliminated. We join in the miscomprehension of this absurd, delirious display of insanity.

Or we can reclaim our obligation to recuperate and recover this our body of knowledge.

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