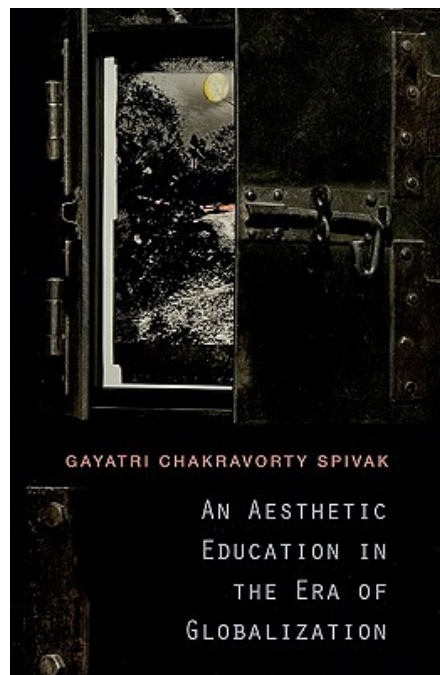




An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

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During the past twenty years, the world's most renowned critical theorist—the scholar who defined the field of postcolonial studies—has experienced a radical reorientation in her thinking. Finding the neat polarities of tradition and modernity, colonial and postcolonial, no longer sufficient for interpreting the globalized present, she turns elsewhere to make her central argument: that aesthetic education is the last available instrument for implementing global justice and democracy.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's unwillingness to sacrifice the ethical in the name of the aesthetic, or to sacrifice the aesthetic in grappling with the political, makes her task formidable. As she wrestles with these fraught relationships, she rewrites Friedrich Schiller's concept of play as double bind, reading Gregory Bateson with Gramsci as she negotiates Immanuel Kant, while in dialogue with her teacher Paul de Man. Among the concerns Spivak addresses is this: Are we ready to forfeit the wealth of the world's languages in the name of global communication? "Even a good globalization (the failed dream of socialism) requires the uniformity which the diversity of mother-tongues must challenge," Spivak writes. "The tower of Babel is our refuge."

In essays on theory, translation, Marxism, gender, and world literature, and on writers such as Assia Djebar, J. M. Coetzee, and Rabindranath Tagore, Spivak argues for the social urgency of the humanities and renews the case for literary studies, imprisoned in the corporate university. "Perhaps," she writes, "the literary can still do something."

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"Literature buys your assent in an almost clandestine way and therefore it is an excellent instrument for a slow transformation of the mind" (38)

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If ours is an age that privileges information command above the sustained practices of reading and knowing, and surely it is just such an age, then Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's book is an important one. Against the audacity of hopeful, or hopeless, sentimental nationalisms and an equally sentimental postnational globalism, Spivak offers a different and difficult vision; to productively undo the legacy of the aesthetic, an inheritance of the European Enlightenment.

To productively undo, suggests, Spivak, is to look at the fault lines of what was done without excuse or accusation; "with a view to use." (1) This is not an exercise in hope because of the false hope that looms large in the figure of globalized, and therefore, homogenized knowledge. Spivak marshalls the resources of nearly a quarter-century of writing into a kind of continuous self-criticism. The book is a collection of essays, spanning from various times and contexts within her career. Into each of the essays she weaves her present voice, as self-reflection, discovery, and critique.

The purpose of these interjections is to elucidate, in form as well as content, a "distracted theory of the double bind." (ix) The phrase double bind is taken from Gregory Bateson's "Steps To an Ecology of Mind." On the one hand the need for a cure, and on the other the need to recognize the healer. At the heart of democracy, says Spivak, there is the double bind of the "universalizability of the singular" and it is here that aesthetic education can take its proper place. She envisages aesthetic education as an epistemological preparation, a training marked by regional characteristics that both cohabits and resists the legacy of the Enlightenment. The Babel Tower of mother-tongues provide a refuge against the onslaught of the top-down knowledge management.

Here the double-bind is read as a salvaging, or in her words sabotaging, of Schiller's concept of play, itself a displacement of Kant's critical philosophy. Schiller represents an obsession with balance, an attempt to resolve the double bind, especially around the concept of beauty, and to fill in the forbidden gap between transcendental and empirical deduction.

Against Schiller's basically idealizing aesthetical education, Spivak proposes a more open ended preservation of double-binds, maintaining tension and difference, through a reading of Bateson together with Gramsci. It is perhaps Gramsci's vision of the instrumentalized intellectual, more than anything else, that spurs her

writing. She may not believe in his hope, but she quotes it, and so will I: The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence...but in active participation in practical life,...superior to the abstract mathematical spirit; from technique-as-work one proceeds to technique-as-science and to the humanistic conception of history, without which one remains "specialised" and does not become "directive" (specialised and political.)(10)

Configuring aesthetics together with ethics and politics, without conflating or sacrificing one of them, is the difficult task Spivak sets for herself. It is carried across issues of theory, translation, Marxism, world literature, and gender. An unapologetically difficult read, Spivak provides considerable ground-work in the art of "learning to parse the desires of collective examples of subalternity." Of course, to consume the examples of subalternity, still from the perspective of the dominant, is precisely not to learn this lesson. What I can say, definitively, is that I have not learned all the lessons this difficult book has to offer. Should it be said, as Spivak does, that it is her "false hope" that any reader would "waste their time" in learning this art? A question arises as to how much force borrowed hope can have, and whether it can arouse the unflagging commitment required to pursue the kind of open-ended and difficult aesthetic education that, undoubtedly, can still do something.
