



Epistemic daring: an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Gianmaria Colpani & Jamila M. H. Mascot

To cite this article: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Gianmaria Colpani & Jamila M. H. Mascot (2022) Epistemic daring: an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Postcolonial Studies*, 25:1, 136-141, DOI: [10.1080/13688790.2022.2030600](https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2022.2030600)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2022.2030600>



Published online: 18 Apr 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1091



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

INTERVIEW



Epistemic daring: an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak^a, Gianmaria Colpani^b and Jamila M. H. Mascot^b

^aDepartment of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University, New York, NY, USA; ^bDepartment of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands

Gianmaria Colpani (G.C.) and Jamila M.H. Mascot (J.M.): Let us start this conversation from a rather conventional place: the matter of prefixes, which relates to substantial problematics of periodization and historiography. As we know, the ‘post’ in ‘postcolonial’ has long been debated, especially through the 1990s.¹ From those debates two key understandings of the ‘post’ emerged. On the one hand, it has been argued that the postcolonial is also post-anticolonial, that is, postcolonial theory inherits a world radically transformed not only by the processes of decolonization but also by their limits and failures. On the other hand, the ‘post’ in ‘postcolonial’ is paradoxical as it registers both ruptures and continuities between the colonial past and the postcolonial present. There has not been an equivalent debate about the ‘de’ in ‘decolonial’, so less effort has been put into clarifying the periodizing and historiographical work performed by this different prefix. Could you situate yourself in this discussion and speak about the frictions you see between the two approaches?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (G.C.S.): I cannot situate myself in this discussion. Postcolonial is for me a descriptive word which is problematic in the colonized nation-state because national liberation was brought in by a progressive bourgeoisie that was out of touch with what would be the largest sector of the electorate; and in the various diasporas it is often a battle cry. ‘Decolonization’ to me is liberal-radical fantasy. I cite here Marx and Engels commenting on 1871: ‘One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that “the working class cannot simply occupy the ready-made State-machine, and set it in motion for its own goals”’.² I am much more interested in the fact that these debates are held within (subsumed) in a new conjuncture in the self-determination of capital – finance capital, cloud capital, informal economies. Capitalist globalization ideologically encourages a lingering within discourses of colonialism because, even as it attempts to run capital outside of the boundaries of states, it secures itself by indexing states in the name of ‘development’.

G.C. and J.M.: On the one hand, critics such as Benita Parry, Aijaz Ahmad and Neil Lazarus have blamed postcolonial scholars for emptying the postcolonial theoretico-political landscape of any significant reference to anticolonial nationalism as much as any significant analysis of (postcolonial) processes of state-formation and socio-economic

relations.³ On the other hand, decolonial scholars like Walter D. Mignolo have the tendency to consider the nation-state as a mere by-product of European modernity that has been globalized through colonialism and imperialism, leading to the creation of ‘colonial nation-states’ in which ethnicity has played a major role as a matrix of power.⁴ Since anticolonial struggles never actually managed to get rid of the structure of the state, decolonial authors emphasize the urge to dismiss the structure of the state and imagine alternatives (to be found in local forms of small-scale self-governance, as in the example of Zapatismo). In a 2009 essay in *Radical Philosophy*, you suggested considering the state (dangerous but useful in a fractured globe) as a ‘locus of redress ... if only as a transition’.⁵ What would be your stance on this point today?

G.C.S.: This discussion seems a bit dated in today’s planet-disastrous context. I find Professor Mignolo’s position somewhat golden-ageist. It has to be understood that so-called national liberation is not a revolution. Today, in the pandemic context, for example, the absolute need for the socialization of Big Pharma relates to a much broader regulation of capital, in the context of which the nation-state, with a democratic social contract, is the only weapon we have which can move us toward a socially just world. For this, once again, we should think about the way in which the largest sectors of the electorate can be epistemologically integrated in the institutions of democracy and not just remain democracy as body count. This is particularly true if you are working with subaltern groups in close hands-on activism, as I have been doing for the last 40 years. This entire nation-state effort has to work within an awareness of the absolute control of digitally globalized capital, the economically restructured nation-state managing global capital rather than constitutional redistribution. This applies also to so-called ‘developed’ states coping with migrants.

G.C. and J.M.: Within the broader power formation which they term modernity/coloniality, decolonial scholars grant a privileged place to the coloniality of knowledge. So, not unlike postcolonial theory, the decolonial option might be characterized first and foremost as an epistemological intervention; or, to put it more precisely, as an intervention in the regime of knowledge understood as a regime of power. The form often taken by this intervention within the decolonial field is what Mignolo has termed ‘delinking’.⁶ Decolonial critics usually argue that all knowledges emerged from European modernity must be rejected in the struggle to decolonize, and that to imagine a non-colonial world through critical categories inherited from the European tradition will lead to failure and, worse, recolonization.⁷ This stands in contradiction to the practice of ‘affirmative sabotage’, which seems to characterize your work, and to some extent the postcolonial intervention at large. Could you comment on the apparent contrast between the two practices of ‘delinking’ and ‘affirmative sabotage’?

G.C.S.: I think delinking is a luxury that can be recommended (though not practised) by the Europeanized elite. To delink is the kind of backward looking nativism which precisely denies that the history of colonialism practices epistemic violence on the subaltern, which continues the violence practised pre-colonially by the hierarchies within the colonized space. In my own practice, ever since I re-entered the world of activism in 1984, when I discovered that left and right were inevitably linked, nothing can be achieved

without the acknowledgement of complicity, in the sense of being folded-together with the other side, not the romanticization of a past-riddled power play. Finger-pointing at a colonialism whose benefits we, as a class, enjoy as we deny, is not an alternative for me.

G.C. and J.M.: Following up on the previous question, some decolonial critics put particular emphasis on the fact that delinking from European/modern forms of knowledge means taking equal distance from liberalism and Marxism. Thus, Marxism tends to be viewed as organic to the constitution of modern colonial Europe. To be sure, the place of Marxism in postcolonial theory is equally debated and controversial. Yet starting from your own work, could you comment on this decolonial framing of Marxism as a form of Eurocentric knowledge?

G.C.S.: Eurocentrism for me is so useless as a goal of opposition that this question is almost impossible for me to answer. You look at people like Fanon and Marx and Gramsci and forget those proper names – see what is irreducible – not spending extra time on this, to see if their thinking will be helpful in situations where there is no access to any sort of public collective behaviour. I am not talking about movements like Zapatism, but situations where any identitarian talk is absolutely divisive. Don't forget, the caste system is strong among the subalterns as well. If you look at books like Raymond Buell, *The Native Problem in Africa*,⁸ you will find reference to actual imperialist legislation in Africa that encouraged ethnic identity differentiation in order to prevent emergence of any Pan-African sense of a social contract. George Padmore, in 'Constitution Development and Tribalism in Nigeria', in *Pan-Africanism or Communism? The Coming Struggle for Africa*,⁹ will bear this out among many other texts relating to other parts of the decolonized world. In the Indian context, Anand Teltumbde's *The Republic of Caste* is the signature text.¹⁰

G.C. and J.M.: In place of European/modern knowledges, decolonial scholars often appeal to 'other' knowledges as their epistemological point of departure. Mignolo takes care to specify that these 'other' knowledges are not 'pre-modern', as they continue to exist and develop to this day despite modern/colonial aggression.¹¹ But they are non-modern. He also clarifies that they do not lay outside the historical reach of imperialist capitalism, as it is the latter which produces them as 'other' in the first place. Thus, in his view, delinking means 'to think and argue from the exteriority of modern Westernization itself. Exteriority is not an outside of capitalism and of Western civilization, but the outside created in the process of creating the inside'.¹² What is your take on this formulation? Can a 'constitutive outside' function as a place of exteriority from which to think? Of course, what we have in mind here is your work on the problematic of retrieving subalternity, which this decolonial approach seems to by-pass.

G.C.S.: 'Alternative Epistemologies' from the 'Global South' are on sale. I have written on this phenomenon in a piece called 'Celebrating Bimal Krishna Matilal: A Give and Take'.¹³ I have no inside/outside notions on this. Once again, I know that pre-colonial times may not be pre-modern because that way of thinking is still being practised – but once again, I cannot deny that colonial historical crimes were often a rewriting of historical crimes in existence in pre-colonial polities. Here I think I agree very deeply with the Comaroffs. I have been trying for 40 years to access cognitive machines

damaged by the denial of the possibility of intellectual labours by the caste-system millennially, and it embarrasses me to acknowledge that colonialism, in some areas, corrected the terrible inequities of caste. I was educated by Christianized ‘aboriginals’ and outcastes who were treated like animals by us pre-colonially. And today, there are large groups of Dalits who prefer the British to our Gandhi-raj. These things are complicated and you can’t adjudicate enjoying the welfare provided to the upper middle class in the United States and ‘exteriority’ which will give you good practice. And today in 2021, even the US Research-1 universities, corporatized to control the faculty, destroying the Humanities, are taking away that position of welcoming imagined exteriorities as places of redress. This entire position needs a reality check. Exploratory trips into modern exteriority are becoming less and less possible as the Humanities become nothing more than bargaining terrains. In another part of my work, I collaborate with a small new rural university in Nigeria to look at the survival skills of unsystematized languages and there too if you get close, you can’t say that it is an uncontaminated outside that you can choose rather than historical complicity.

G.C. and J.M.: Your work on subalternity goes hand in hand with your work on the function of the intellectual. More broadly, postcolonial theory has produced a significant amount of reflections on intellectual labour (Edward W. Said and Stuart Hall immediately come to mind). Decolonial scholars have been less systematic in analysing the figure of the intellectual, yet some insights are discernible in their literature. For example, Catherine Walsh has argued that the decolonial intellectual must pay attention ‘to the ways we assume political positions that make possible “other” philosophical work and open spaces of praxis and of theoretical production otherwise’.¹⁴ Mignolo offers perhaps a more complicated account of intellectual labour when he speaks of Subcomandante Marcos as a ‘translator’, whereas translation is conceptualized as a multi-directional process taking place between Marxist and Mayan epistemologies.¹⁵ In general, the decolonial intellectual appears as a figure whose function is to amplify subaltern voice. Drawing on your own reflections on intellectual labour as well as your intellectual and pedagogical practice, how do you relate to these decolonial portrayals of the intellectual?

G.C.S.: You will by now be able to predict that I do not follow the decolonial portrayals of the intellectual. I know that when I work for the subaltern, my super-education, and commitment to intellectual labour, make me muscle-bound. Trying to find another voice without losing it all is painful as I and my co-worker check constantly to see from the responses received, how far we are succeeding. This is back-breaking work and does not allow me to transcode for fellow-academics what we should do within our intellectual sphere, although I do also enjoy writing for my peer group, always telling myself that, if ‘translated’, they should be coherent with what I am unable to learn in the subaltern sphere. Although, I should also add, that writing for my peer group is now delayed by a decade because of this other effort. I would recommend the pieces written by younger Zapatistas in *Visions, Voices, and Practices of the Zapatistas* where they recognize the problem with taking Zapatism as a model for practice in a vastly politico-economically, historico-linguistically diversified globe.¹⁶

G.C. and J.M.: Within the postcolonial field, one of your multiple contributions is to have significantly advanced a feminist conceptualization of the relations between

colonialism and heteronormative patriarchy. Within the decolonial field, it was María Lugones who brought gender onto the agenda. Drawing critically on Quijano's notion of the coloniality of power, Lugones has written about the 'coloniality of gender',¹⁷ to emphasize that the heteronormative gender binary itself must be understood as a colonial construct. In decolonial queer and feminist literature, this analysis often leads to the identification of pre-colonial and non-colonial (or non-modern) formations of identity and desire as sites of potential counter-hegemony. What is your take on the possibility of politicizing pre-colonial and non-modern identities and desires against the modern/colonial constructs of gender and sexuality?

G.C.S.: What do I know, perhaps there were wonderful worlds out there where all gender problems were nonexistent before colonialism. But for me, it is absolutely necessary to remember that history is long, and colonialism – by which is meant European colonialism – is more or less 500 years long. I think to be engaged with nothing but colonialism today, is to be ideologically driven by capitalist globalization and our sense of what we can recover from before colonialism also needs a reality check. We must also remember that colonialism is not monolithic, at home we deal with Bengali cultural imperialism, in East Asia they deal with Japanese and Chinese colonialisms. Flora Shaw's 1906 book *A Tropical Dependency: An Outline of the Ancient History of the Western Sudan with an Account of the Modern Settlement of Northern Nigeria* still remains persuasive on the subject of Islam as a pre-colonial imperial formation in parts of continental Africa.¹⁸ In fact this ignores Islamic Europe altogether. C.H. Alexandrowicz, who is reprimanded by younger scholars for being too partisan against Europe, is judged by the same scholars to be telling us that 'colonialism did not influence the evolution and development of international law in a singular way'.¹⁹ Even within European colonialisms, as Du Bois and Angel Rama knew, beyond the broad difference between mercantile capitalist and monopoly capitalist colonialisms, each colonizing nation-state had a difference in racio-economic gendered and classed cultural policy. I have not yet worked at María Lugones' work on gendering and will make a merely general remark here, as follows. Although the sense of 'woman' as possessive individualist is tied to British imperialism (see my early essay, 'Three Women's Texts and A Critique of Imperialism'),²⁰ heteronormativity is bigger than colonialism. Indeed, it has biotic connections. I am influenced by the early Derrida's endorsement of an empiricism without guarantees. My critique of postcolonialism is to be found in my book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.²¹ It is time to move, claim complicity, keep using what's at hand, turn things around, rather than stockpiling unreal polarities that find in colonialism every malpractice that has destroyed our world. Beware of identity politics, it mocks the meat it feeds on, and thinks it is the solution to a phantasmatic Eurocentrism. The task today is a different kind of epistemic daring: to learn to imagine that the Anthropocene imposed a world at the beginning of agriculture on soil not-quite-not-yet imagined as commons.

Notes

1. See Anthony K Appiah, 'Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?', *Critical Inquiry*, 17(2), 1991, pp 336–357; Arif Dirlik, 'The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism

- in the Age of Capitalism', *Critical Inquiry*, 20(2), 1994, pp 328–356; Stuart Hall, 'When Was the Post-Colonial? Thinking at the Limit', in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (eds), *Post-Colonial Questions: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp 242–260; Anne McClintock, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-Colonialism"', *Social Text*, 31/32, 1992, pp 84–98; Ella Shohat, 'Notes on the "Post-Colonial"', *Social Text*, 31/32, 1992, pp 99–113.
2. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Vorwort zum "Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei" (Deutsche Ausgabe 1872)', in *Werke*, Vol. 18, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1976 (1872), pp 95–96 (my translation).
 3. Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', *Oxford Literary Review*, 9(1) 1987, pp 27–58; Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, London: Verso, 1992; Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
 4. Walter D Mignolo, 'Introduction: Coloniality of Power and De-Colonial Thinking', *Cultural Studies*, 21(2), 2007, pp 155–167.
 5. Gayatri C Spivak, 'They the People. Problems of Alter-Globalization', *Radical Philosophy*, 157, 2009, available at: <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/they-the-people> (accessed 24 January 2022).
 6. Walter D Mignolo, 'Delinking', *Cultural Studies*, 21(2), 2007, pp 449–514.
 7. Ramón Grosfoguel, 'Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality', *Transmodernity*, 1(1), 2011.
 8. Raymond L Buell, *The Native Problem in Africa*, London: Archon Books, 1965 (1928).
 9. George Padmore, 'Constitution Development and Tribalism in Nigeria', in *Pan-Africanism or Communism? The Coming Struggle for Africa*, New York: Roy Publishers, 1956, pp 266–288.
 10. Anand Teltumbde, *The Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva*, Delhi: Navayana Publishing Pvt Ltd, 2018.
 11. Walter D Mignolo, 'Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing: On (De)coloniality, Border Thinking, and Epistemic Disobedience', *Confero*, 1(1), 2013, pp 129–150.
 12. Mignolo, 'Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing', p 146.
 13. Gayatri C Spivak, 'Celebrating Bimal Krishna Matilal: A Give and Take', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 31(3), 2017, pp 335–346.
 14. Catherine Walsh, "'Other" Knowledges, "Other" Critiques: Reflections on the Politics and Practices of Philosophy and Decoloniality in the "Other" America', *Transmodernity*, 1(3), 2012, p 20.
 15. Walter D Mignolo, 'The Zapatistas's Theoretical Revolution: Its Historical, Ethical, and Political Consequences', *Review*, 25(3), 2002, pp 245–275.
 16. David Barkin et al., *Visions, Voices, and Practices of the Zapatistas*, Oaxaca: Ediciones Uniterria, 2021.
 17. María Lugones, 'The Coloniality of Gender', *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise*, 2, 2008, pp 1–17.
 18. Flora Shaw, *A Tropical Dependency: An Outline of the Ancient History of the Western Sudan with an Account of Modern Settlement of Northern Nigeria*, London: James Nisbet, 1906.
 19. B S Chimni, 'Preface', in C H Alexadrowicz, *The Law of Nations in Global History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, p x.
 20. Gayatri C Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1), 1985, pp 243–261.
 21. Gayatri C Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).