

## Foreword: Cosmopolitanisms and the cosmopolitical

Cultural Dynamics

24(2-3) 107–114

© The Author(s) 2012

Reprints and permissions:

[sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav)

DOI: 10.1177/0921374013482350

[cdy.sagepub.com](http://cdy.sagepub.com)

**Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak**

Columbia University, USA

Before the scientific awareness of space as we know it, ‘cosmos’ was closest to what we would call the ‘globe’. Cosmos is neither ‘world’ nor the idea of many cultures coming together. To use ‘cosmopolitanism’ as a multidisciplinary project of forging identities that are not focused specifically on ethnic identities is excellent. We should, however, also attempt to look at the second part of the word ‘cosmopolitanism’, not as if it comes from the word ‘cosmopolis’ but as if it comes from *cosmopolitheia*.

*Politeia – Constitutions* – is a book by Plato (1990). The title was mistranslated as *Republic* during the Renaissance, and no one corrected it. The *res publica* comes in only with the Romans. Plato’s book actually is called *Constitutions – Politeia*. It is well known that there is no particular favour shown there for what we call democracy.

Most people today go back to Immanuel Kant (1963) when they wish to entertain new ideas of *cosmopolitheia*. Kant’s thinking of *cosmopolitheia* was connected to the rise of monopoly capitalist colonialism. As a result of the colonization brought about by the demands of the expansion of industrial capitalism, Kant’s generation of European intellectuals felt, as we do as a result of the network society attendant upon capitalist globalization, that they had access to a world. Goethe talks about *Weltliteratur* – world literature. Kant trumps Plato, who only knew the city-state, because his contemporary Europeans had the world. From *politheia* we advance to *cosmopolitheia*, from mere constitutionality to world governance.

Kant’s idea of *cosmopolitheia* could really not go beyond the nation-state having its own colonial states. But we cannot rebut this through mere regionalism: by showing the Europeans that there were lived cosmopolitanisms in Asia and theorizing them. That gesture legitimizes Euro-teleology by reversal. As a result, people will patronize you and not take you seriously when you are not there.

I was invited to Nepal in December 2011 because in South Asian studies, India is the 800-lb gorilla in the room. My hosts were not interested in Nepal studies; there is already important Nepal studies in existence. And they were not interested in South

---

**Corresponding author:**

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1150 Amsterdam Avenue, 602 Philosophy Hall, MC 4927, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, USA.

Email: [gcs4@columbia.edu](mailto:gcs4@columbia.edu)

Asian studies ‘from a Nepalese perspective’. Then they uttered the sentence that I just used: ‘people will patronize us or, when we are not there, they will forget us’. They proposed different kinds of regionalisms, and now, I am collaborating with them. They proposed Himalayan studies, they proposed studies that would give to economic associations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, Association of Southeast Asian Nations and so on – some kind of cultural thickness, politico-cultural, linguistic thickness, multidisciplinary thickness. This is the beginning of a good thinking of regionalism.

I want to go beyond this today. In addition to thickening mere economic regionalisms, what I want to suggest here is that we must also correct the tradition of the Enlightenment, even as we recognize its power. We must not just propose an alternative, endlessly pointing out that there were people living cosmopolitanism in Asia but will also theorize it. That still brings with it the idea of ‘we live it, they think it’, now we too think it. What happens to Africa? Latin America? Is this cosmopolitanism in today’s globality? No.

I would like to think about the second part: *politheia* – world governance. We are complicit with a certain kind of world governance; yet thinking littoral cosmopolitanisms, we fall back upon the discourse of the postcolonial conjuncture reterritorialized for the metropolitan migrant: ‘hybridity’, ‘hybridization’, ‘syncretism’. Then comes the idea of the cosmopolitan citizen. Have we thought through the social contracts presupposed by a citizenship on the cosmopolitan register? Have we thought of the cataclysmic systemic changes needed for such a claim to be politico-structurally feasible? Or is this a psychological fantasy?

What is at stake in claiming cosmopolitanisms? This is the question today, here, now. And this is where I come to when I think about cosmopolitanism, even as I am mindful of your distinction between civic and ethnic cosmopolitanisms. The larger political question, of citizenship within a world government, will not go away.

If our stakes are no more than a Euro-critical regional identitarianism, I must speak as a member of a sometimes violent majority and think about the depredations of politically mobilized identitarianism; this is one of the most threatening things in the world. From these angles, then, I ask: what is at stake, even oppositionally – is it in opposition to Kant or to contemporary politics – that we are saying – we are claiming – lived cosmopolitanisms? Cosmopolitanism is never nationalist. It cannot be just about a cosmopolitan Malaysia, in the past and the future. *Cosmopolitheia* is a way of world governance. Our responsibility is to think this one through.

To take notice of this view, the fact that the cosmopolitical is a concern about a constitution for the world, world government, is also to ask what is at stake at this time, in this place, in claiming cosmopolitanisms; not one, but many; not theoretical or practical, but descriptive; occluded under the value-laden word ‘lived’ by the custodians of ideology, the humanities.

I approach this by way of Gramsci’s ‘organic intellectual’. This phrase is not automatically positive. Most people who cite this phrase think that this means you are a good person or you are a good intellectual. In the study by Gramsci (1971), the adjective means ‘determined by an organization’, meaning the organization of a specific mode of production or value (p. 10). We think the word ‘organic’ – especially those of us in ‘Brit

lit' – through Coleridge (1959: 33–47) and the human as organism. For Gramsci, it is the organization of political economy determining how you are going to think about the world. It is an epistemico-epistemological kind of charge. The mode of production within which you live makes you organic to it.

Like all of Gramsci's work after imprisonment, the idea of the organic intellectual is in notes. Gramsci's prison notebooks or journals are an open text, it asks you to do something with it. Gramsci died too soon to write the book he planned for in jail.

The stakes of claiming 'lived cosmopolitanisms' relate to the de facto existence of a capital-intensive world governance system: the UN Security Council, the International Criminal Court and – more important – the international banking system anchored by central banks of various nation states, secretly protected by entities such as the Bank for International Settlements, the International Organization of Securities Commissions and the World Economic Forum. And supported by non-banking financial institutions such as insurance firms, pawn shops, cashier's cheque issuers, cheque cashing locations, currency exchanges, micro-loan organizations and the like, which are free of any national and international regulatory efforts: this is our active *cosmopolitheia*, world governance. This is what makes the world go round.

Kuala Lumpur is a major player in it. To remove interest and involvement with these cosmopolitical instruments, the organic intellectual of globalized world governance proposes the interesting idea that we should rediscover worldliness in unlooked-for places historically. If we grasp this, we supplement what we do with an active interest in involving ourselves with an education that can ask the question of the performance of such cosmopolitical institutions.

Again and again, to my tongue comes that other adjective: cosmopolitical. Cosmopolitics is not a question of syncretism. It is a question of the organization of global governance. That is what 'cosmos' means. Kant was not there yet. Therefore, we should correct and take forward the Kantian Enlightenment from another perspective altogether. Now that globalization makes North and South fluid, that is where I think our task lies, including the task of people in the humanities.

In the humanities, we must take note that languages do not globalize. Languages must come through to supplement the uniformism that is the condition and effect of globalization. Only capital and data globalize. Everything else is damage control. In the spirit of the damage control of today's world governance – determined askew by the demands of capitalist globalization – we must, of course, look at the past in our own way. But we must also take into account other cosmopolitanisms ignored by official history, for example, of the first African pan-Africanisms, before de-colonization.

We have to think about Africa as we think about our own region, because Africa is generally ignored in general arguments. Let me give you a description of something that some of us are at work on. It is very hard to get funded for this because the funding agencies only want to give to Africa clean water and HIV/AIDS relief and not these kinds of intellectual resources unless it is to South Africa, which, on the university level, remains an imperial enclave – with some organized internal resistance, to be sure – separated from Continental Africa. This particular idea, that we can see historically, in shared syncretisms, leads to a different description of globalization and that is what is coming back to work as 'culture' because European colonialism was a relatively brief

and contained – though intense and transformative – phenomenon; this is hard for funding agencies to understand.

I sometimes think of Socrates who said to the city fathers: ‘you have to kill me, because I will never be able to produce a proposal that’s going to please social engineers; you won’t like what I have to say’. He was the gadfly on the backside of the huge horse, the *megalohippos* that is the state (Plato: 30E).

It is in such contexts that it is important to look at these shorelines as the crossroads of the world. That may be what is coming back, not the Euro-teleological nation-state-fixed clue to modernity. In globalization, everything is modern. It is very hard to get your head around that one. We should not propose counter-modernities or counter-cosmopolitanisms; we should look at how much our ‘modern’ is the conflictual coexistence at the crossroads, even as the North in the South—masters and managers of globalization in non-European space—in Malaysia is hopelessly compromised in managing capitalist globalization.

Therefore, here is our collective work in progress: most accounts of globalization see it as having emerged from imperial and colonial era forms of internationalism, expressing a binary and teleological historical narrative in which local cultures and societies are overwhelmed and incorporated into a Europe-centred world order. Hence, we have numerous studies of the transformations drawn by French, British, Portuguese and German colonialism in Africa or Asia. Our project takes an entirely different approach, showing the ways in which our contemporary globalized world was not just produced by Europeans or simply through bilateral connections between imperial nation states and their colonial positions. Instead of moving from the imperial metropole to the colonies – here it is similar to what you are doing – we begin at the so-called periphery, from Chandernagor in India, radiating out to Saint-Louis, Senegal, and gradually include other sites. Incidentally, the Institute at Chandernagor has so far been able to show interest only in the Hexagon, cosmopolitan by default, and not in the anterior ‘lived cosmopolitanisms’ in France’s former colonies.

Although we begin with Chandernagor where, northward from Kolkata, along the Hooghly River from Srirampur through to Chinsurah, we have the outposts of six colonial and/or trading adventurers, Dutch, Danish, Portuguese, British, French and Chinese, and then consider the Hooghly–China connection from the thirteenth century, we go on to Senegambia.

Chandernagor remained a French enclave in what became British Bengal. But Saint-Louis, Senegal, offers a provocative counterpoint. The Senegal River region played an active role in the configuration and development of the Bilad-al-Sudan, a constitutive region of the Muslim Saharo-Sahelian world. The island of Saint-Louis at the mouth of the river and the region surrounding it is very different from Dakar. We were drawn into an emergent Atlantic world from the fifteenth century. Drawing Senegambian, Saharan and Atlantic intellectual, cultural and economic resources and connections of traders, teachers and pilgrims crisscrossing the Sahara and the Sahel, profiting from both the caravan and the caravel, and bound by the Senegal River to the Futa Toro and the upper Senegal Niger, Saint-Louis and its neighbours generated new civilities as they passed between French and English possession.<sup>1</sup>

This particular idea is that Saint-Louis has never been defined by the Atlantic world it helped to shape. It just passed in-between centuries-old connections across the Sahara to the Maghreb, and even Iberia, as well as ties to the worldwide community of Muslims. These connections and ties wove and continued to weave it into the texture of a global cosmopolitanism with shared juridico-legal governance and multiple routes that cannot be reduced to the European empires. The topos of the crossroads is powerful here as well.

These ways of looking at regions in the past emerge because these are the forces that are coming back in this new epistemological invitation, where the colonial/postcolonial, modernity/tradition binaries will no longer work well because something which was always true under heliocentric time has become empirically available to the consumer. With the silicon chip and global capital, it is now possible for a population that can afford to access the Internet on her desk to actually think: everything is simultaneous, everything is modern.

Let us keep the idea of littorality. Let us also think of the Indian Ocean rim, as in Kirti Chaudhuri's *Asia before Europe* (1990). With the work in Chandernagor, we add the Bay of Bengal rim, as in Rila Mukherjee's work (2006). But I must still keep in mind that cosmopolitanism is something other than the powerful topos of the crossroads.

*Cosmopolitheia* requires a borderless world. A borderless world already exists where capital roams free. Our present crisis is occasioned by unregulated capital attempting to turn finance capital across borders. This capital crosses borders in order to keep borders intact.

If, however, there were no difference between nation-state-based currencies, further divided by the G20, the Global North and the Global South, currency speculation, such as that practised by George Soros, would not flourish, for example, and derivatives would not financialize world trade. These divisions – virtual and electronic – are added to more conventional borders so that capital can travel across borders in a digitally borderless fashion.

Therefore, when, in this *cosmopolitheia* that holds us, we talk about cosmopolitanisms, we have to try to change our students' desires a little, so that it is not just a fight against identity politics. We must also be able to think the abstract and consider that borderlessness needs borders of a certain sort in order to be borderless. It is within this performative contradiction that the entire problematic of immigration is lodged. Therefore, when people suggest that there is vernacular cosmopolitanism among immigrants situated in various places, either paperless or papered, I think there is something questionable in it. It is an abdication of responsibility.

Let us, I said at a conference on 'The Global Turn' last year, rescue the word into its political meaning, a constitution for the world, an abstract juridico-legal structure that must match the abstractions of globality. It is not enough to hang on a colloquial sense and suggest, as does Bruce Robbins, that vernacular cosmopolitanism is just a change of definition (Cheah and Robbins, 1998). In order for a corrective vernacular cosmopolitanism to work, there must be a world governmentalized evenly. To suggest now that global minorities, labour export, paperless immigrant women achieve cosmopolitanism is to forget that they must exist in race-class divided situations where it is impossible to feel or exercise the sense of general equality that must be the definitive predication of epistemic cosmopolitanism.



In other words, in the face of our desire to declare vernacular cosmopolitanism, we must ask: who pulls the strings or have these people become so-called cosmopolitan because of other people's demand that trade flow. The humanities question is the subject position question: who pulls the strings and what happens in moments of crisis?

The restricted solidarities, un-regarding of national origin, because of immigrant oppression, cannot be called 'cosmopolitanism'. Today's global looks more like this man, described in 'Megacity', looking out towards the IT world. And therefore 'cosmopolitan':

My informant, this relaxed, good-looking man, going slightly thick in the middle with stress and easy living, described himself, in effect, as a member of the cosmopolitan culture: very good telecom links abroad, traveling abroad incessantly, making a dollar salary but living in India, free to be globally mobile in skills with aspirations clued in. (Spivak, 2000: 11)

I had introduced him with the gender division of labour in the culture of the megacity: for the husband, business and globalization; for the wife, child-rearing and Americanization. This connection remains unmade, but this is the picture of the cosmopolitan upper class.

Thus, cosmopolitan culture with the edge of cosmopolitics worked in is not just ethnicity, culture and their crossings. The world has shifted. Globalization cannot be encountered simply in terms of Chinese opera today and Balinese cock fights tomorrow, and people travelling, and huge numbers of foreign students – who used to be called 'international' students because 'foreign' was a dirty word and now called 'global' students. These full tuition paying foreign students are global only in so far as their influx makes money for the university.

What globalization requires is a change in ourselves as instruments of knowing. Those wonderful historical approaches, 'culture wars' approaches, critique of Eurocentrism approaches, the modernity/tradition approaches, postcolonial approaches, will not serve if you are doing the contemporary as such. That is the epistemological challenge: 'how do we construct our objects of knowledge now, in the moving global now-time?'

We must construct cosmopolitanism differently. We must train our imaginations to go into a different epistemological performance when it comes to the idea of cosmopolitanism. It is not syncretism. It is not people living together. Not exchanging different nationalities. Not the shortfall at the crossroads.

Languages cannot be cosmopolitical in the sense that I am urging. We must protect the world's wealth of languages, we must protect real language learning, we must protect entering the lingual memory of the different groups that otherwise have stereotyped notions of identity based on the linguistic privilege of exclusion.

There is a sentence in one of the great poems of Buddhadeva Bose (1989), a sentence that I hope is at least partially ironic: 'These people after all are not Bengalis. How would they understand father, mother, brother, sister, husband, wife ... what these words mean?' (p. 43).

This cruel ironic question is at the centre of all culturalism that embraces others and all culturalism that destroys others. The idea of learning the languages of others with so much interest that they actually begin to replace the mother tongue when you are using

them is a great step towards the ability to win social justice for all. This is indeed Marx's (1974: 147) definition of revolutionary practice in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. His analogy is, you learn a foreign language so well that when you are producing in it, you forget the language that is rooted in you, your mother tongue. This idea will never be cosmopolitan. It is cosmopolitan in that old sense – I speak 12 languages. That is the Orient Express model. What this will do is, it will supplement our new idea of cosmopolitical engagements and multidisciplinary desires, change coming perhaps from the humanities and radiating out into the social sciences, even the hard sciences.

This kind of language learning is to supplement the idea of *cosmopolitheia* as altogether abstract. Otherwise, with the state decimated by economic re-structuring – national capitals made consonant with international capital – it becomes managerial of international capital, rather than working to redistribute income and be accountable constitutionally. With the state decimated in this way managerially, the demand that comes up is not for clean water, not for health, education and welfare, so to speak. Self-selected moral entrepreneurs, the so-called international civil society, move in to take charge. But they are impatient, the world of languages unsettles them.

My university has a large, well-meaning human rights institute. One evening, one of the leaders there, a young woman, says to me: 'Well, the state is not accountable, so ...' I went home and called my friend Romila Thapar. I said,

Romila, we used to think that the new nation was accountable to all of us. We were taught in the Nehruvian days that the citizen uses the structure of the state and Gramsci told us that the subaltern does not have access to this, and we felt that we could do something about it. What do you say, Romila? I was just talking to a young, well-meaning human rights person from my university who told me without blinking, because she felt that this was correct, that the state after all is not accountable.

However, single-issue constitutional mania, without cosmopolitical vigilance, also thrives. It is a great thing for concerned intellectuals to be particular about constitutions, but then, there has to be awareness of how constitutions function today, as a shaming instrument in the hands of the international civil society, a sentimental cosmopolitical instrument, dependent largely upon corporate generosity. And as I have mentioned, the redistributive powers of the State or the accountability of the State has been undermined by transforming the State into a managerial state for international capital. So who rules the world? And what are the stakes of making a claim to lived cosmopolitanisms today?

This is where the idea of intellectuals being organic to an organization of the mode of production may give us some auto-critique that will allow us to do the necessary historical work. This can supplement the contemporary where a certain kind of globality does not allow us to ask the question of cosmopolitics rather than cosmopolitanisms.

To your spirited attempt to correct the European account, I bring these two offerings, then: (1) think the cosmopolitical and (2) supplement the cosmopolitical global abstract with multidisciplinary language learning. To supplement you have to attend to the precise shape of the blank you are filling up. You must attend to what escapes the networked cosmopolitical. And then, the supplement introduces the incalculable, so that the gap is no longer a lack but an excess, never quite filled. We are all the custodians of that incalculable wealth – the gift of tongues.

## Note

1. Much of the detail here is provided by Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Columbia University, one of the contributors to the project.

## References

- Bose B (1989) Bideshini. In: Guha N (ed.) *Kobitaasangroho*, vol. 2. Kolkata, India: Dey's, 43.
- Chaudhuri KN (1990) *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cheah P and Robbins B (eds) (1998) *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Coleridge ST (1959) *Biographia Literaria*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Gramsci A (1971) The intellectuals. In: Hoare Q and Smith GN (eds) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
- Kant I (1963) Idea for a universal history from a cosmopolitan point of view. In: Beck LW (ed. and trans.) *On History*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill and Liberal Arts Press, 11–26.
- Marx K (1974) The eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. In: Fernbach D (ed.) *Surveys From Exile* (trans. B Fowkes). New York: Viking, 147.
- Mukherjee R (2006) *Strange Riches: Bengal in the Mercantile Map of South Asia*. New Delhi, India: Cambridge University Press India/Foundation Books.
- Plato (1990). *Apology*. In: Lamb WRM (ed.) Fowler HN (Trans.) *Plato*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 105-113.
- Spivak GC (2000) Megacity. *Grey Room* 1: 8–25.

## Author biography

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is University Professor in the Humanities and a founding member and Director of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University, New York. Her areas of specialization and interest include nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, Marxism, deconstruction, feminism, poststructuralism and globalization. She has published and edited numerous books, several works of translation, and over 200 articles and interviews. Many of her works are classics in the field of postcolonial and feminist studies. In addition to English, her work has appeared in and/or been translated into French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Finnish, Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Bengali, and Arabic. She has been an activist in rural education and feminist and ecological social movements since 1986. She is the recipient of numerous awards, the most recent of which are the Kyoto Prize in Thought and Ethics for 2012 and the Padma Bhushan in 2013.