

# THINKING ABOUT THE HUMANITIES

## A TALK

### GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, University Professor and Director of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University, teaches English and the Politics of Culture. She was educated at the University of Calcutta, and came to Cornell University in 1961 to finish doctoral work. Her books are *Myself Must I Remake* (1974), *In Other Worlds* (1987), *The Post-Colonial Critic* (1988), *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993), *A Critique of Post-colonial Reason* (1999), *Death of a Discipline* (2003), and *Other Asias* (2007). *An Aesthetic Education: or, Globalizing the Curriculum?* is in press. She has translated Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976) and Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps* (1994), *Breast Stories* (1997), *Old Women* (1999), and *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* (2002). She has received honorary doctorates from the University of Toronto and the University of London, as well as many other honors. She is active in the International Women's Movement, the struggle for ecological justice, and rural literacy. Her influence has been felt in art and architecture, law and political science, in curatorial practices here and abroad. Her work has been translated into many languages. Her focus remains on education in the humanities as the best lasting weapon to combat imperialism.

In 1929, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Bengali feminist, wrote a book called *Abur-oddbashini*, published by the Feminist Press in English translation as “The Secluded Ones.” (The more correct translation would be “Prisoner,” in the feminine gender.) This is how she opens her book: “We have been imprisoned so long that we are quite used to it. Therefore we—and especially I myself—have nothing against imprisonment. If one asks a fisherwoman, ‘Does rotten fish smell good or bad?’ how will she answer?”

Some time ago, I realized that my situation regarding the humanities was comparable. I have for so long been convinced of the value of the humanities that I wouldn't smell the rot. In an attempt to see ourselves as others see us, to prepare myself to think about the humanities, I started to address strangers on the question of the humanities, without necessarily revealing that I was myself involved in teaching them. (I think people thought I was inquiring after my children's future.)

At any rate, the general answer I got from about fifty interlocutors was that in these times, the humanities were “irrelevant.” That's the word that invariably turned up: “irrelevant.” It is in response to that collective response that I started thinking about the humanities.

We can think many more and different things now from Classical Greece, medieval Europe, Muslim and Christian, the Age of the Enlightenment, when Europe studied the human condition—*humanitas*. If we charted how it moved from free man and boy to straight man of property to straight white Christian man of property we would have another story to tell. Everything I say this evening is marked by that imperative. At any rate, we seem to do things differently now. We don't do research, we Google. We don't go from store to store, we buy online. We have much more sophisticated ways of describing how we think. With genomics and neurobiology we have extended the domain of what “thinks” in us. Yet, all this immense technological paraphernalia that lends awesome speed and breadth of information to us, all the scientific calibrations that measure and heal us, are prosthetic. We think as we always have and this is where the humanities are still relevant. They train, enrich, and strengthen thinking—improve its range and scope—in its own terms, not by prosthetic devices that are out of synch with it.

This transcript is from a Columbia University lecture given on March 21, 2007.

I will use here a crude analogy that I often use. The humanities exercise the mind in the same way as workouts exercise the body. Just as without exercise the body has no strength and suppleness, so does the mind wither without exercise, with respect, as I mention above, to its range and scope. To take the mind beyond the confines of self-interest, to expand its range and scope beyond itself, as it were, we need the sort of training that is institutionally provided by the humanities. And this is why, as scientists like David Botstein and John Duprè themselves urge, we must bring to bear upon the problems raised by neurolaw and genome research an unconditional ethical model where the humanities are at full play, rather than so-called rational choice models borrowed from economic behaviorism.

But, you will ask, are there not a great many people in today's world who are interested in others, and thus reach beyond self-interest? How much, if we tally their educational records, have they been formed by the humanities? I cannot answer this question, of course. Yet, one guess I will make. A great deal of this interest in others is a top down effort to make others over in our image, make other societies over in our image. The humanities train the imagination. The imagination moves us toward entering other ways of thinking, willing, valuing. Here we are helped if we can enter these ways of thinking, willing, valuing through the language of those whom we are benefiting.

Doing good to others is a difficult thing. Just giving them the wherewithal to be rich and healthy may be resisted or the gift stolen and traded if the entire transaction is done by remote control, through interpreters and academic cultural informants. The relationship between those who know some smattering of English or a European language and our beneficiaries is at worst one of contempt and at best one of a difference in the culture of class. Academic cultural informants are almost no use at all. Their cultural difference from the lowest strata of their own society is belied by their apparent linguistic competence. We are not speaking of linguistic *competence*. We are thinking about deep language learning. There is no other way to access a cultural infrastructure. We proceed through mistakes. Doing good to others is a process requiring a good deal of patience, for language is learned slowly.

As I thought of the apparent irrelevance of the humanities in today's world and how much they were needed in preparation for human rights and international civil society work, I asked myself: what are the humanities today, in our space? We have only heard

of the classical tradition of the humanities. I also asked myself: is the training of the imagination only through language learning?

I will take today's humanities to be the philosophy camp (here I include religion and the soft side of history) and literature (and here I include the soft side of anthropology). I use philosophy in the sense of something that teaches you how to philosophize, teaching how to ask questions about knowing, meaning, being, willing, living and dying, doing, and so on. And this is even true about ordinary language philosophy. For "literature" I must think orature, film, hypertext, videography, and more coming everyday. Literary instruction teaches us how to read.

If humanities are about anything, they're about teaching. Everything else can move fast; humanities teaching, except for the first stages of language learning, cannot move fast. It's no use trying to do humanities teaching by distant learning methods. I am not a technophobe. I'm a great admirer of the digital universe—but there are some things that you cannot use for certain kinds of efforts and that's one of them. Policy must move with a certain dispatch, globalization must seek uniformity and produce interesting cultural pastiche, but, in order to educate toward a just world, the work of the humanities—preparing minds to deal with material change democratically—must proceed at its own speed.

Thus the learning of foreign languages is only one of the activities that exercise our imagination. And it is the imagination, the philosophizing imagination, the reading imagination that I really want to think about.

The humanities hark back with some grandeur to European classical antiquity. The pedigree of a thinking of the imagination is of shorter length, at least in the chunk of Europe that we call "Europe," and in Britain. It would be a grand comparativist project to trace the itinerary of the thinking of such a faculty in the cultures of the world, high or low, without reference to the European model as the standard. But that's a project that already assumes the humanities to be relevant, so I will not go there now. Let me just comment on the fact that in Europe the theory started even as theories of self-interest, admittedly not the nasty varieties afoot today, were just coming up, as the fantastic social possibilities of capitalism were being glimpsed. These also mark the beginnings of European feminism. If you are as obsessed with the idea of the double bind as I am, you will think that double bind is asserting itself in putting a mighty contradiction in place over against self-interest. The swing between imagination and self-

interest is the biggest double bind in our lives, individually and collectively. In English, its name is ethics. Theories of ethics (part of philosophy) that tell us we must take the facts into consideration and make a rational choice swing more toward self-interest. Those that say we are defined and determined by others swing more toward the imagination. As the humanities are becoming less and less relevant in our educational systems, that second swing can be understood less and less.

Here a word about the double bind. For me it is a general description of all doing, all thinking as doing, all self-conscious living. Contradictory instructions come to us at all times. We learn to listen to them and remain in the game. This is the double bind. When and as we make a decision, we know that we have broken the double bind into a single bind, as it were, and that change will have to be undertaken soon, or things will change. If we don't know this, our self-congratulation is typically followed by denial or bewilderment. I will come back to this later.

The imagination is not invariably tied to the ethical. The literary or artistic imagination takes pleasure in exercising itself by itself. Such is the theory of the European eighteenth century. We want to find a trace of this in Aristotle's notion of *poiesis*, in the broad Sanskrit idea of the *Kavi*, in the embellishments of the *Popol Vuh* or African oral history, but the experts caution us against such anachronisms. I am a European modernist; let me stick to the European eighteenth century.

It is at this point that I thought of another distinction. The imagination of the poet and the artist is not the same as the imagination of the reader. And it is to the second that the humanities tend. The arts allow creative students and colleagues to bring forth their plays, poems, fiction, film, and visual material, not to mention multimedia; and the humanities train the imagination to be able to appreciate them. Otherwise, art often remains frozen on the circuit of spectacle and investment and corporate social responsibility.

Ideally, training the imagination in the humanities classroom consists of teaching the student to suspend herself into the text. This gives the mind a suppleness, which allows that critical distance from itself that is the mark of—dare I use the word “democracy” here, though in the European eighteenth century, the word of preference would be “civilization” or “culture.” The Germans were best at thinking this through and *Bildung* was their word, halfway between education and culture. The philosopher Immanuel Kant, in a sense the prophet of this period and this thought, develops the

theory of the imagination as *Einbildungskraft*.

But that was the eighteenth century, nearly as distant in our minds as European classical antiquity. And indeed, this eighteenth century was generally gentrified into a combination of isolationism and self-confidence, which has sometimes been described as “American humanism.” This tradition thrives heroically, in the face of general trivialization, in the “just literature” enclaves of universities all over the world. To tell you the truth, I have sympathy for these pugnacious colleagues. At their best, they teach us how to read closely, how logic and metaphor help to produce meaning, how the history of the language is at play in today's language use and much else. And so, when I try to think about the humanities with reference to the general sense of their irrelevance, I feel a bit rueful. As my friend and critic Professor Terry Eagleton warned me in Trondheim, Norway, a couple of years ago, while we were discussing globalization, the heritage of these theories of the imagination did not do much to build a just world although there was much talk. I told him then, as I tell you now, that my definition of the imagination is infinitely simpler. By imagination I generally refer to the ability to think something absent and not mine. It is almost the definition of thinking itself.

This, then, is what the literary and the philosophical humanities do at their best: teach how to think fully rather than only step by step by an impoverished model of reason. The most gifted people in the other disciplines, and indeed in the world, have this as a gift. But in a democratic world, if people in general get their imagination systematically neglected because the humanities are progressively trivialized as irrelevant and not worth support, the mind shrinks and thinking is no longer a pleasure. Let me bring back that simple analogy with the gym. With systematic neglect of exercise it is like a general cultural obesity of the mind.

As I continued to think about the humanities, I added something even simpler to the bare-bones definition of the imagination with which I was working. I touched my mother tongue at the simplest level. I remind myself that in order to find correspondence for the humanities in my immediate background, I didn't have to fetch far. As I often repeat, in my mother tongue, the common language expression for child-rearing, “bringing up,” is *manush kora*, making human. That is what the humanities do: they make human by constantly training the mind to enter absent spaces, beyond self-interest, even into a feeling for animals and nature. And indeed, it is not only on the university level that the humanities have to be protected because of their always untimely rele-

vance. The process begins in school and earlier. I once quoted a passage to the Oxford chapter of Amnesty International:

children are never too young to start grasping the fundamentals of money management...Even toddlers understand the concept of "mine!" In fact, it's the idea of owning something they like that sparks their interest in investing. Rest assured, you won't turn your child into a little money-grubber by feeding that interest. Through investing you're going to teach him more about responsibility, discipline, delayed gratification, and even ethics than you ever thought possible!

Here is training for, at best, the kind of top down impatient benefaction that I have been considering. Incidentally, the impatience is generally disguised and defended as speed of achievement. If we go back to my description of the double bind, we will mark the bewilderment when these speedy solutions come unstuck. We do not have the training (here the humanities can come into play) to imagine the bewilderment of those upon whom one version of "modernity" is imposed, or indeed the corruption of those who are charged to implement the imposition. In the little time that I have with you, I will quickly say that both may be due to the fact that nothing much was done to understand the power-hierarchies in place except by the foregone conclusions of contrast to "our West" or through our own strategies of power-play; and nothing certainly was done to access defunct ethical systematic possibilities. In other words we silenced their own double binds on the ground. Thinking about the humanities, I knew that such preparation could not be prescribed for those who attack, with infinite courage, the terrible problems that require immediate attention in our world. What I am speaking of here, deep language-learning and a training of the imagination, is a preparation for the long-term, the *longue durée* of a school of historians who work with these skills of the humanities. It is in this spirit that I put the training of child investors over against child labor. In the passage I quoted above you will notice that the difficult move from learning to say "mine" to the ethical is not developed. In other words, it is precisely the making-human terrain of the humanities that is taken for granted here. This is, to borrow a phrase from within humanities jargon—you'll notice that I haven't done so far—a legitimation by reversal. Child investors here, child laborers there.

I have written at length elsewhere about how to understand child labor and the cruel absence of follow-up when it is removed. That work is of course related to accessing cultural infrastructure—corruption and its acceptance. To discuss it further here will take us too far away from the place of the humanities in education.

Let me tell a tiny story before moving from this. A very good friend of mine sets educational policy in a very large developing country, which shall remain nameless. She has been moving from state to state indefatigably for over two years, talking to teachers and students alike, in town and country alike, wishing to set an environmental education component in every possible subject taught, rather than teach it separately, as a separate subject. "We must change the children's habit of mind!" she kept saying, with great excitement, in a conversation last week. Yes, this is the epistemic shift that the humanities perform at their best, I thought, an un-coercive rearrangement of desire. My friend is herself a scientist. Imagine my delight when she added: "and you know, it is humanities and social science students and teachers who are much more amenable to this." (Social science on this level is of course cousin to the humanities.)

The great universities, I was thinking, must protect the humanities, picking up the relay from primary and secondary schooling. Reading and philosophizing, the two great humanities skills, try to enter the space of the other mind, the text or work of art being read, watched, heard; and pull out the consequences. As they do so, since they learn to work with no guarantees at their best, change happens in a way that may escape the very plans that the investigation is following. If we oblige the humanities, never competitive with economics, policy, or spectacular special events, to beg, and lose, it is this critical, world-changing capacity of the humanities that we ourselves will lose. Society will begin to resemble the self-interest of the most materially successful. Socrates in his defense had asked his judges to consider him a foreigner. Many explanations have been offered for this. I would like to think that part of this at least was because he thought of the fact that the forming of mind carries, indeed, must carry, a principle of change that the self-interest of social preservation cannot accommodate.

How are the humanities accommodating themselves to this rejection? I am not speaking of any particular institution here, but of a general trend. We tend to advise our students to keep their dissertations to the lowest common hiring denominator, because the terms for hiring have been altogether timid and tend to discourage innovation. I believe we should ourselves try to change this and not allow adverse circumstances to

make us even more seemingly irrelevant, and to restrict our students' futures. Thinking about the humanities, I am only thinking through the ways in which we might be relevant. On the other hand, we must remember Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's warning. I am only a fishwife, I don't smell the stink.

Let me summarize this first part of my remarks and move on to globalization: the humanities can train for a better world. They take time and patience. They are not competitive. Educational institutions must protect them. Policy must move with a certain dispatch, globalization must seek uniformity and produce interesting cultural pastiche, but, in order to educate toward a just world, the work of the humanities—preparing minds to deal with material change democratically—must proceed at its own speed.

In conclusion, I stop on globalization. As long as we think global thought comes about through other people learning English, the rest of the world will continue to think global thought is American thought and will not love America, in different degrees. We may be bewildered by this lack of love but the solution may not be simply to agree with Susan Sontag that "We live in a culture committed to unifying greeds," with "everyone on the planet feeding at the same trough of standardized entertainment and fantasies of eros and violence." However small an effort it might seem, I urge you to think of the physical therapy analogy. One solution, at least, lies in acknowledging that the humanities cannot be global in the sense of electronic globalization, and therein lies their strength.

I have already suggested that all the technology that lend speed and breadth of information to us, all the scientific calibrations that measure and heal us, are prosthetic, that the way we think is still the same. Heidegger wrote with some asperity, "No result of any science can ever be applied *immediately* to philosophy." It is upon that "immediately" that I placed my emphasis.

Yet mind-sets do change. And I have also emphasized the slow curricular process of the humanities as the instrument for change. In the context of globalization, many claims for mind-change are made. In our discipline, books such as *Empire and Multitude* claim that a worldwide collective revolutionary mind-set has developed as a result of the Internet. Another well-known set of books on the network society claims that those of us who matter think now of space rather than place. A more popular book such as *Radical Evolution* claims that "fifteen years from now...changes in human nature [will be] available in the marketplace."

Perhaps these things are true or perhaps they are wishful thinking. One thing is for sure: mind-sets do not change at the same tempo as institutions. There isn't a simple cause-and-effect relationship between mind-change and institutional change. Queers, women, and men don't change the same way. What humanities offer us is other-directed expansion, not just enhancement and change.

Yet, globalization also seems to expand our possibilities of movement. When, however, we notice the culture of globalization in the humanities, we tend to remark upon the unusual couplings—Japanese Jazz, African baseball, Pakistani taxi drivers in New York City. Anthony Appiah has suggested that, although we think of globalization as making everything the same, what it introduces in global life is a mixture of people from many countries. I suggest that the humanities take a position away from this phantasmagoric task of describing globalization—from Sontag's gloom to Appiah's cheer—but rather take up the work of what I call "supplementing" globalization. Here again, a certain relevance for the humanities may perhaps be glimpsed.

We have all learned to be cautious about globalization driven by the International Monetary Fund. And, whatever our political drift, we know that economies are restructured around the world to fit the needs of globalization. I will, for the moment, lay these considerations aside and give globalization the full benefit of the doubt and describe it as a process that wants to banish differences of race, class, and gender, create a level playing field for all countries, and establish a global economy under global governance—the true meaning of cosmopolitanism—with the same legal and civil rights for all. This rosy picture shares with Sontag's dystopia one characterization alone: uniformization. (I fear Appiah's comment on people of various national origins ignores the march of generations.) This uniformization and the emergence of a few interchangeable languages cannot be compromised if globalization is to succeed. It is this existentially impoverished world that the humanities, with its insistence on linguistic diversity, as I have outlined above, can supplement.

If taken with sufficient seriousness, the humanities can continue to provide a world for globalization. The humanities are in contradiction to globalization, and that is their strength. You begin to see my argument, surely. I am moving toward the double bind. I am asking the custodians of relevance, the corporate authorities, university authorities, just plain folks and my proud co-conspirators in the humanities, to recognize the double bind between globalization and the humanities, learn to listen to their contra-

dictory instructions and stay in the game—the *Lila* or the *Spieltrieb*—of thinking a just world. Again, this is a celebratory occasion. Today is the vernal equinox, an ancient day of celebration, and I am still giving everyone the benefit of a doubt nobody deserves—a best case scenario.

“The double bind,” with its metaphor of being tied up, is not as scary as it might seem. An ancient trick of the humanities is to change metaphors to alter reality: call the glass half-full, not half-empty. Following this baseline imaginative logic, the metaphor of “the double bind” has been changed into the more palliative metaphor of sustainability. In my judgment, the metaphor of the double bind calls forth more responsibility than the metaphor of sustainability, but that’s another conversation. For now, just notice that sustainability has the same logic: a contradictory set of requirements that must constantly be balanced. So, if it is more helpful for us at this moment to think the metaphor of sustainability, let us put it this way. Let globalization sustain humanities instruction (and vice versa) in order to save itself a world. It is not the body of the world alone that needs to be sustained. Let us not destroy the minds of the world for the sake of convenience! The ancients had beautiful metaphors for this as well—the lovely phrase *anima mundi*, the world’s soul, or the secular sense of the Sanskrit *atman*, cognate with the Greek *atmos*, as in atmosphere—the breath of the world, its life, its mind. Apart from the first inhabitants of the earth, the march of civilization ravaged the earth’s body. There is some effort now to correct this trend. We might not start closing up the possibilities for the world’s mind at the same time. So, let’s learn to think a double bind—or a sustainability—between the humanities and globalization.

Otherwise we are left with the generally unacknowledged double bind between democracy and war, democracy and development. There is nothing I can say about the first double bind that you haven’t thought already. The only thing left is to rethink it in terms of what the humanities can do to break it, long term. I wrote something about Paul Wolfowitz some time ago that can only come in the Q & A.

As for the unacknowledged double bind between democracy and development, there are many examples all around us in our sad world. But today, the one that most sticks in my mind is an example from my own home state of West Bengal.

Hello, we are Hawker Sangram Committee of West Bengal as we have visited the victims they all have confirmed the number is over 150 may be 200 and above, the West Bengal Police along with CPM party cadets taken away two trucks full of dead-bodies and many bodies are thrown away in the local ponds and other places so the number of missing people are count less. the Government is tried hard to minimise the death reports. this is the situation....we are confirming that the numbers are above 150.

Regards

And we can’t pick up the message if an artist points at the distance between protest and the people. The lovely film *Bamako* by Abderrahmane Sissako is regularly read like a documentary of protest by most policy-oriented folks. Actually the film is framed by a community where only the ones who have graduated into the discursive practice of the good whites are able to “speak the truth.” The director took good care to point this out by making the subplot with a singer very attractive, by closing the film with her, focusing on her husband’s death and making clear that it has little to do with the main argument. The high point of eloquence in the film, and deliberately, if you notice the framing, is the good white guy (apparently the director just gave them the parts and said, “now speak”)—makes us think precisely about the problem. There are also the moments of grassroots choice when access to the “trial” is turned off by the young men of the village, arguably in our world and theirs, the real agents of collaboration with the destruction of the country. The bridge agents are a woman who is accused of not fitting the evidentiary structure and, on another level altogether, the traditional healer who utters (apparently in a language not necessarily understood by the “native speakers”). The complexity of the framing is evident also in the presence of the film within the film, an exaggerated eye-catching African Western.

So, the entire film can be a figuration of why resistance against the transnational agencies misfires. I could give you other examples but my time is up.

This is where I have come, thinking about the humanities. I, like Rokeya-Sakhawat Hossain, live with the fish. If we have been able to persuade you at all, you, like Ulysses among the sirens, will pick up the double bind.