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When the subaltern speak: radical imagination, disruptive power, and the growing authoritarianism of liberal democracies

In her seminal essay, [Can the subaltern speak](#), Gayatri Spivak, a literary theorist and critic, pondered the nature and the possibility of speech for the marginalized. Spivak argued that under colonialism the oppressed face ‘epistemic violence’- a practice of silencing peripheral voices and knowledges– and as such they can neither speak on their own terms, nor be heard or understood. While Spivak has been criticized, among other things, for undermining the political agency of the oppressed, she has been a crucial interlocutor in many academic subfields – from postcolonial studies, to feminism to the historical project of subaltern studies¹. Bringing Spivak’s conceptualization of the subaltern closer to home, an American critical theorist, Nancy Fraser proposes to rethink the liberal understanding of the democratic public sphere, as tolerant, unitary and accessible to all. This dominant perspective owes much to the work of Jürgen Habermas, who defines the public sphere as an area of critical debate for all citizens through which public opinion is formed. Fraser takes a different position, arguing that the public sphere operates through exclusions of certain forms of expression, and that social inequalities do not allow for participation in deliberation on equal terms for all. Thus, in order to speak, those on the margins - the disadvantaged and disenfranchised - create their own ‘subaltern counter-publics’: discursive spaces where, in [Fraser’s words](#) “members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs”.

These broad issues of power and knowledge production, and differentiated abilities to speak and be heard are more than a matter of academic debate. They reverberate loudly in struggles around the world that push forward non-Eurocentric ways of knowing and being in the world: from indigenous land struggles, to student movements questioning the [whiteness of universities’ curricula](#), to protesters toppling monuments of [slave-owners and colonizers](#). In what follows we will sketch briefly the myriad ways in which movements carve out their own spaces to speak, and how by doing so they may contribute to the reshaping of normative orders, of the material organization of public space, or property relations. Looking through the lens of popular struggles, we point to the possible forms of expression for those devoid of the institutional power, while highlighting the growing repression of these critical engagements.

As the global pandemic and the politics around it have laid bare existing injustices and disparities, we have witnessed waves of spectacular mobilizations: the Black Lives Matter movement, [Amazon workers’ strikes](#), and [farmers’ protests](#) in India, to name just a few. Social movements have immediate goals, but they also build narratives; in fact, telling stories that reinterpret the present and envision different futures is central to their work. This labor of imagination, as [Robin Kelley](#) calls it, can be observed in movements’ demands, speeches, and manifestos as well as in their cultural production and aesthetic practices. The [abolitionist visions](#) that circulate today in protests in the US and UK, such as calls to defund the police,

¹ Subaltern studies emerged in India in the early 1980s as a project of re-writing Indian history from below, in a way that centered voices and actors previously neglected or erased by an elite-biased, national historiography.

are a powerful example of how social movements offer tools of analysis and generate new discourses. These movements propose visions of freedom and equality outside of the existing modes of liberal politics, urging us, among other things, to think about public safety in new ways and to reconceptualize restorative justice and reject the carceral state. Counter-hegemonic visions are also being expressed in feminist mobilizations across the world, climate justice movements, and the many struggles for ‘the commons’, which seek to challenge the privatization and commodification of natural resources, public space, and public services such as healthcare and education. Perhaps, as Ashon Crawley writes evocatively, the common denominator of these multiples struggles today is their hope for [‘the otherwise’](#):

To begin with the otherwise as word, as concept, is to presume that whatever we have is not all that is possible (...). The otherwise is the disbelief in what is current and a movement towards, and an affirmation of, imagining other modes of social organization, other ways for us to be with each other. Otherwise as plentitude. Otherwise is the enunciation and concept of irreducible possibility, irreducible capacity, to create change, to be something else, to explore, to imagine, to live fully, freely, vibrantly.

The ‘otherwise’ cannot be reduced merely to a list of demands; what is enacted, lived and practiced may be as significant as what is spelled-out. Consider for example, the unauthorized cross-border movement of millions of people, who due to a [global apartheid regime](#) are not allowed to move freely, but claim their right to move despite all odds. The critical legal scholar Tendayi Achiume, describes this border-crossing as [“decolonial acts”](#) through which equality and inclusion are enacted rather than requested. Viewed in this vein, rather than ‘forced’ or ‘illegal’, migration can be viewed as acts of freedom, creativity and rebellion, through which people avoid surveillance, seize mobility, and make claims to space.

Squatting in cities, the appropriation of public spaces or the construction of alternative infrastructures are other examples of disruptive, often spontaneous, acts that can contest and transform the established orders (of citizenship or property relations). Even when apparently speechless, these acts produce meanings and communicate them, and as such they too contribute to the discourse. Sometimes these acts simply stem out of necessity, but they also belong to a long tradition- from anarchist movements to DIY and mutual-aid groups to Occupy Movements- of experimenting in different, more horizontal, societal organization. These types of day-to-day practices, whether they take the form of [grassroots community spaces](#), [food-sharing programs](#) or environmental direct action, can be referred to as prefigurative politics, whereby people not only demand the change they want to see, but also live that change on a micro-scale in their everyday lives: these are attempts to rehearse utopias in the present. They may also constitute efforts, in particular for members of stigmatized groups, to build [autonomous spaces](#), where they can exist and speak on their own terms, and not merely in reaction to dominant discourses.

While appreciating the modalities of creative expression and imagination, we also have to remember about those whose humanity is not fully recognized. The condition of sub-humanity that we most readily associate with the slave trade persists today. It is particularly pronounced in the deaths of black and brown people in the Mediterranean, but also into today’s refugee camps and detention centers, where degraded populations live in unlivable conditions. Kept out of sight, and silenced, their bodies are often their only means through

which they can communicate their demands: they refuse to eat, they self-harm, or like the [8-month pregnant woman in the Moria camp](#), they set themselves on fire.

At a time when different global emergencies are intersecting, there is a yawning gap between the language and solutions offered by political elites and the radical imagination of counter-publics. The criminalization of dissent, the fortification of borders, and other increasingly repressive measures faced by activists, engaged scholars and displaced people attest to the disruptive threat that they pose. To take a recent example, when a group of British activists, locked their bodies to the runway of London's Stansted airport and stopped a deportation flight, they were charged [with terrorism-related offences](#) (they were found not guilty in court). Also in the UK, [a new bill](#) has been proposed recently that aims to curtail the right to protest, and give more powers to the police to further securitize public space. It is only because of the mobilization on the streets that the bill has been halted so far. In France, ['global security'](#) legislation is being discussed, that would increase surveillance and forbid citizens from filming police officers, making well documented and frequent instances of racism and violence ever less accountable. Restrictions pertain also to the critical debate within university spaces. Across Europe, gender, critical race and postcolonial studies have been under attack as they challenge the self-image of European nations as progressive, tolerant and color-blind. In France, scholars who are engaged in anti-racism work, oppose Islamophobia or unveil colonial foundations of the French republic have been accused of ['islamo-gauchisme'](#) (islamo-leftism), a label that suggests their support for terrorism. These accusations bring to mind the infamous, antisemitic trope of 'judeo-bolshevism', that blamed the spread of communism on Jews in the 1930s.

Finally, if activists are under attack for the ideas they embody and articulate, they can be also chastised for how they speak. The case of current protests in Poland – where women have called on the ruling politicians to “get the fuck out”- is a perfect illustration. Both conservative and liberal commentators criticized the protesters for their language, saying they were too vulgar, too offensive, that their call was strategically misplaced, sent the wrong message and potentially incited hatred. Of course, this is not unique to Poland, and speaks volumes about the policing of women's bodies and the expectations of how women should behave in public spaces. More broadly however, this possibly reveals, as [some have suggested](#), that dissent is tolerated when it is 'respectable', and freedom of speech is cherished, as long as it does not cross the boundaries of the norm, or cause disturbance to the predefined order.