theories and methodologies

On "Nationalism and the Imagination"

JEAN FRANCO

IN HER ESSAY "NATIONALISM AND THE IMAGINATION," THERE IS A TANTALIZING GLIMPSE OF GAYATRI BEFORE SHE WAS GAYATRI SPIVAK. WHEN SHE gave the essay as a talk at the biennial meeting of the Commonwealth Association for Languages and Literature in Hyderabad, India, and at the Center for Advanced Studies in Sofia, Bulgaria, her two audiences, though completely different, were evidently asking the same questions about nationalism in a supposedly postnational world. But what is most fascinating for me about the talk is that it hints at the autobiography to come, the story of a girl born in Kolkata whose earliest memories include "the great artificial famine created by the British to feed the military in the Pacific theater in World War II" (276). Would she be surprised to know that, coming from Depression-era northern England, I too have early memories of, if not famine, seeing the skeletal bodies of a family starving in the dying heart of the empire? Meanwhile, at school we made daisy chains and were told that the yellow center was Britain and the petals the colonies. There is nothing subtle about empire.

Spivak has a great story to tell about the violence and the shock of Partition and the aftermath, when "the nationalist message in the streets created schizophrenia." She recalls the moment when the Muslim neighbors became the enemy, when there was "blood on the streets," when Partition uprooted millions, and when the "seeds of Hindu identitarianism were sown." Her term "reproductive heteronormativity" refers to "ancient claims" to the shared ancestries on which nationalism depends. She asks how the "love of mother tongue, the love of my little corner of ground," becomes the "nation thing," and she looks for, if not resistance, a stubborn otherness in those least integrated into the nation: the immense tribal population. Nationalism is certainly not founded, she writes, "on the loss of the comfort of language and hope" that was the experience of the subalterns, an experience that left them with a "feeling of helplessness, loss of orientation, dependency" (277–80).

In an essay on national identity, *Quand les murs tombent*, Édouard Glissant comments that anticolonial resistance appeals to "une

JEAN FRANCO, professor emeritus at Columbia University, writes mainly on Latin America. Her most recent book is *Cruel Modernity* (Duke UP, 2013).

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identité racine unique" ("a unique root identity"), that new nations "ne progressent que difficilement vers une conception de la nation qui ne soit pas liée à un impératif identitaire rigide et exclusif" ("progress only with difficulty toward a conception of the nation that is not bound to a rigid and exclusive identitarian imperative"; Glissant and Chamoiseau 3; my trans.).

If the elephant in the room is nationalism, defining it as Hindu is particularly perverse because of Hindu nationalism's exclusion of those like the tribals who have other gods. Although the nation operates in the public sphere, its power, Spivak argues, is derived from the private as an affect, and woman, "metonymized as nothing but the birth-canal," is "its most primitive instrument." However, in the orally transmitted culture of the subaltern women who, unlike their men, have little contact with the outside world she finds "a thinking without nation" (281). She describes herself walking with tribal women and joining them in singing "India is my country," which, rather than being a nationalist statement, she understands as exemplifying the poetic license of oral cultures, the ability to plunder and transform (284). Michael M. Nagler says that "the oral poet . . . at the moment of performance makes spontaneous, and therefore original realizations of inherited, traditional impulses" (qtd. in Ong 19). And the magpie skill of such culture has long occupied critics, including the Jesuit Walter Ong and, in my own field, Latin American scholars interested in how the cultures of indigenous groups become a strong weapon of resistance to blind incorporation. In the orally transmitted culture of the subaltern, appropriation does not reproduce a nationalist ideology, and when the subaltern women with whom Spivak walks shout, "India is my country," they do not necessarily affirm national pride but may choose the phrase for its rhythm. She is concerned therefore not with "preserving" a culture but with letting it live and learning from it. That is perhaps why, although she introduces the subaltern women into her essay to highlight their inventiveness and their distance from the mainstream, she does not dwell on their impossible lives. Look up "Adivasi" online, and you find pornographic sites, suggesting that the Adivasis' outsider status is a sexual lure. This does not take away from Spivak's focus on what nationalism cannot contain, nor can their degradation be ignored.

What is at stake in the era of globalization is not simply the loss of linguistic diversity (although this is, indeed, a serious threat) but also the degradation of the human and particularly of women on many levels. In Ciudad Juárez, on the border of the United States, women who had just been given access to the workforce were raped and murdered by groups who were never identified and who were protected by powerful interests. Rape, an expression of hatred of women, is a scandal throughout the world, and so is the brutalization of workers. In Bangladesh, shoddy buildings collapsed, killing hundreds of women workers in the textile industry. These are the "wasted lives" that Zygmunt Bauman talks about, lives unhonored because seen as dispensable. It is unlikely that the nation meant much to them.

In Latin American literature, nationalist aspirations have been replaced by an equally questionable embrace of the international marketplace, now flooded with translations from every language. The danger then becomes the smoothing out (or even the elimination) of cultural differences. Spivak's words resonate here: we need to restore the relief map of the world, flattened under one imperial formation (277) and, one might add, smoothed out by neoliberalism. Ambitious Latin American writers want to cultivate an international style, want to get beyond what they perceive as provincialism, whereas for Spivak the privileged heirs to Western culture need to look critically at its source and rethink the Enlightenment.

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Nationalism does not work "with the founding logic of the public sphere that all reason is one" (281). It appeals on a more affective level, to the private, to the accident of birth, to reproductive heteronormativity. It is here that we can understand the importance of Spivak's remembering the time before Partition and the "India is my country" spoken by aboriginals, for the identification of Hindus with the nation would suppress these. Nationalism opposes everything she has hoped for, including linguistic diversity, care in the reading of cultural texts, and the all-important aesthetic education, which demands a combination of understanding, feeling, and perception. The irony is that while nationalism still flourishes, the nation-state has been weakened and is penetrated not only by global capital but also by international organizations legislating human rights.

How to avoid the flattening effects of neoliberal universalism and the hollow response to them in nationalism? Her hope lies in an aesthetic education and in the humanities, which may flourish when linguistic diversity is recognized and one learns to speak a new language without referring back to the old (287). She is also realist enough to recognize that this is not likely to happen in India and the United States, where the "humanities are progressively trivialized" and "the imagination will not be nourished" (288).

Underlying the shifts from personal to programmatic in this and her other essays, I detect disillusion and perhaps despair. The global changes that she endorses—a regional coalition of the global South, the strengthening of the humanities, responsible reading—are put forward again and again, but a road to their realization cannot be traced. The flattening that affects the teaching of the humanities in general she calls a "cultural death" (288). And she is right to be alarmed. There are warning signs that the reform of Britain's education system is turning it into a servant of a neoliberal society by testing its "products" for their social and financial value. In the United States, the humanities are a shrinking outpost peopled by students who may be less likely than previous generations to find work in the academy. As she writes in her introduction, "The Enlightenment is sick at home" (27). But while she acknowledges the illness, she cherishes an obstinate hope for aesthetic education, for rigorous reading and understanding that may, with luck, outlast the present disaster, although, like Derrida, she acknowledges waiting "without horizon of expectation" (Derrida 211). Like many of her readers, I suspect, I prefer to imagine quicker solutions, while recognizing that hers is the more honest assessment.

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