Global Justice and Solidarity

Nikita Dhawan

Postcolonial Critique in Germany

Let me begin with the oft-cited assertion from Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*: "The trouble with the English is that their history happened overseas, so they don't know what it means". I would argue that this is also the case with Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The German-speaking context distanced itself from postcolonial critique for a long time with the argument that neither Germany nor Austria nor Switzerland were major colonial powers. As I often encounter suspicion, skepticism and hostility when speaking about the relevance of postcolonial critique in the German speaking context, I have three examples to counter this approach: Firstly, I ask the audience whether there is anyone who does not wear cotton or eat potatoes or chocolates? These are all colonial products that continue to be produced under super-exploitative conditions in the global South. Secondly, when the German scholar Jürgen Habermas (1990), following Immanuel Kant, links the flourishing of coffee houses and salons with the emergence of bourgeois public spheres as sites of deliberative democracy in Europe, he fails to mention the exploitative conditions under which coffee and tobacco were produced for European consumption in the colonies. The infrastructure for the European Enlightenment was financed through colonialism. As Frantz Fanon points out: "Europe is literally the creation of the Third World" (1961: 58). Thirdly, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1966: 155, 206, 223), a key work for postcolonial studies, Hannah Arendt noted the entanglements of colonial and Nazi imperialism. For Arendt imperialism's racist and genocidal ideologies and practices established precedence for Nazism. Arendt characterizes this as imperialism's "boomerang effect", whereby dehumanizing strategies in the colonies eventually returned to infiltrate European domestic politics. Linking the gruesome atrocities committed during colonialism and the Third Reich would help to develop a more nuanced and deeper understanding of whether colonialism and the Holocaust signal a failure of European Enlightenment or whether they are both outcome of the "Project of Modernity"; whether the European Enlightenment in fact provided the tools to contest imperialism and fascism. And how memory politics and geopolitics might be transformed through a simultaneous analysis of the legacies of colonialism and the Holocaust.

In light of these considerations, I would argue that it is imperative to negotiate the legacies of colonialism when we focus on the accomplishments of European Enlightenment. It is important to point out that postcolonial critique of the Enlightenment is not its rejection, but

an effort to critically engage with its ambivalent legacies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak considers the postcolonial in terms of a "child of rape." "Rape is something about which nothing good can be said. On the other hand, if there is a child, that child cannot be ostracized because it's the child of rape. To an extent, the postcolonial is that" (1994: 279). The challenge is how is one to learn to love a child of rape, an act of violence?

The other concept, which is helpful in understanding the difficult relation of postcolonialism to the European Enlightenment, is the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's (1981: 103) notion of *Pharmakon,* namely, how the Enlightenment can be both poison and medicine. The historical narrative of colonialism as *mission civilisatrice* mobilized Enlightenment values as alibi to justify European superiority. Rudyard Kipling infamously described colonialism as a "white man's burden". The distinctive European ability to "civilize" the world by imposing its capital, commodities, ideas, and values on other cultures, could only be celebrated, if the coercion and violence that accompanied these practices were disavowed. The paradox of Europe's self-perception as a "civilizing force" is that this positive self-assessment is only possible through historical amnesia about the costs of this mission in the form of slavery, exploitation, plunder and genocide in the colonies through military, material and epistemic violence. Thus, the enabling legacies of the Enlightenment like norms of equality, freedom, justice, human rights, cosmopolitanism, sovereignty, democracy, rule of law, can function as medicine, but also as poison insofar as they legitimize neocolonialism. The challenge is how to convert poison into medicine to realize the project of decolonization.

One World, One Pain?

In recent years, an increasing number of global citizens' movements have taken "justice" as their explicit goal. In contrast to those who, committed to domestic justice, contribute to the wellbeing of their immediate communities and fellow citizens, theorists and activists in the field of transnational justice argue for a broader and deeper commitment that would encompass strangers both within and beyond state borders. They argue that in a globalized world our duties and responsibilities are not limited to our fellow citizens. A concurrent effort emphasizes the economic, political, cultural, and sexual aspects of injustice.

In the face of growing global interdependence, there is rising expectation that powerful actors, organizations, and nation states have an ethical responsibility towards the more vulnerable sections of the world population. The demand that transnational elites act beyond narrow territorial-based understanding of self-interest in order to 'protect' victims of injustice, seems convincing, at first glance. However, given the long and violent history of colonial

intervention in the non-Western world, current attempts to act in the 'interests' of the distant others often invoke suspicion and distrust. Euro-American supremacism and paternalism are reinstated once again with them acting as dispensers of rights and justice.

In *Cultivating Humanity*, the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum writes: "The world around us is inescapably international. Issues from business to agriculture, from human rights to the relief of famine call our imaginations to venture beyond narrow group loyalties and to consider the reality of distant lives. . . . Cultivating our humanity in a complex, interlocking world involves understanding the ways in which common needs and aims are differently realized in different circumstances." (1997, 10).

At first there seems to be nothing blameworthy about this demand that we, as citizens of liberal democracies, take on responsibilities beyond the limits of our narrow self-interest, particularly in the face of growing global interdependence. Cosmopolitanism, again based on the normative espousal of an expansive global consciousness, opposes such narrow and limited territorial loyalties. To counteract the financialization of the globe, transnational citizens movements envisage the establishment of democratic global institutions that would facilitate direct participation in a global political life. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck points out that, because we live in an increasingly interdependent world, we face common threats to our ecologies, finances, and security, so that any violation of rights in one part of the world is felt everywhere. This "globalization of risk" unites us in our equal vulnerability, providing the basis for the "cosmopolitan moment" of a world risk society (Beck 2007, 27). In response to the question "How can the relationship between global risk and the creation of a global public be understood?," Beck discusses a "globalization of compassion" (ibid, 114), as seen in global media events such as the Haitian earthquake and the tsunamis, spectacularly demonstrated by the unprecedented readiness of citizens in faraway countries to donate to relief efforts. World risk society's shocking threats open up questions of social accountability and responsibility that cannot be adequately addressed either in terms of national politics or the available forms of international cooperation. The protagonists of international civil society, indispensable to the implementation of cosmopolitan values, will initiate a more just alter- globalization.

Although Nussbaum and Beck enthusiastically endorse cosmopolitanism as a "solution" for past injustices and a "promise" of better times to come, I want to emphasize the complicities between liberal cosmopolitan articulations of solidarity and the global structures of domination they claim to resist. Detractors of liberal cosmopolitanism highlight the specter of global capital, seen as the necessary precondition for the emergence of contemporary

cosmopolitan sensibility. They argue that cosmopolitanism leaves intact the privileges of the global elite by erasing the continuities between cosmopolitanism, neocolonialism, and economic globalization. Postcolonial feminists, in particular, locate the shortcomings of transnational alliances by unpacking how they can be mobilized in service to predatory global capitalism and imperialism (Grewal 2008, 178f.).

I object to the project of cosmopolitanism, because it fails to seriously address the historical processes through which certain individuals are placed in a situation from which they can aspire to global solidarity and universal benevolence. Nussbaum, to her credit, is trying to explore ways of improving people's lives. But that itself is the problem. Her attempt to act in the interests of distant others, to look beyond her position and make everyone have as good a life as "ours," disregards the connection between the well- off "here" and the impoverished "elsewhere."

In contrast to Nussbaum's faith in cosmopolitanism's self-correctional reflexivity, Spivak diagnoses in the cosmopolitan call to align ourselves with our fellow citizens a shift from "the white man's burden" to the "the burden of the fittest" (Spivak 2007, 177). This revision of social Darwinism defines the "unfit" as unable either to help or to govern themselves. The distance between those who "dispense" justice, aid, rights, and solidarity and those who are simply coded as "victims of wrongs" and thus as "receivers" remains a signature of historical violence (Spivak 2008a, 14f.).

Conversely, Beck proposes that our common vulnerability in the face of risk brings us together. But as we all know, though we might be facing the same storm, we are not all in the same boat, and that makes all the difference. For Beck, the tsunamis resulted in the "globalization of compassion"; but, as an instructive contrast, I would like to consider a moment in Spivak's narrative of a major cyclone in Bangladesh in 1991 and the subsequent intervention by Médecins sans frontières. The msf workers, none of whom spoke the local language, were obliged to work through interpreters. When Spivak later arrived at one of the villages where she had worked actively in the past, some of the villagers ran up to her, saying, "We don't want to be saved, we want to die, they are treating us like animals" (Spivak 2008b, 26f.). In a situation like this, and without any common language, can we even think of solidarity?

Robert Young describes the dilemma that benevolent Europeans face as follows: "If you participate you are, as it were, an Orientalist, but of course if you don't, then you're a eurocentrist ignoring the problem" (1991, 227). Spivak counters: "It's not just that if you participate you are an Orientalist. If you participate in a certain kind of way you are an

Orientalist and it doesn't matter whether you are white or black" (ibid). She goes on to say that if one does one's homework, progressing beyond a merely superficial interest in the Third World, then it is commendable. But "[y]ou can't just be a revolutionary tourist and be the Saviour of the world on your off days" (ibid). This sounds very harsh, but warns against romantic notions of unreflected solidarity.

For these reasons, the Sri Lankan feminist Malathi de Alwis (2010) has asked if we are truly capable of empathizing with the pain of others, and even if we should be allowed to witness their pain if this witnessing only serves to affirm our humanity and our capacity to care. Correspondingly, of course, we need to find "authentic victims" who truly deserve our benevolence. What do we do with our "will to empower" the "disenfranchised and the vulnerable," and how do we deal with those who refuse to be interpellated as appropriate objects of our solidarity?

Decolonizing Enlightenment

In his 1795 treatise *Eternal Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that all "world citizens" should have a right to free movement, a right which he grounded in humankind's common ownership of the earth. One can hardly imagine a right that has been so extensively violated as the right to mobility. In this sense, the migrant is the bearer of Kant's message for the cosmopolitan right to move fearlessly and freely across borders, even as the humanitarian disaster unfolding at Europe's doorstep signals European betrayal of Enlightenment principles.

Kant proposes cosmopolitism as a guiding principle to protect people from war and wishes to morally ground cosmopolitan right in the notion of universal hospitality. Promoting sociality and humanity, cosmopolitanism symbolizes a transcultural competence of negotiating cultural difference, a move beyond narrowly territorial understandings of identity and belonging. Irrespective of national, religious, ethnic, and gender differences, people appear as belonging to a single global community based on their shared pasts and entangled futures. According to Kant, a world citizen acts from the pluralistic standpoint of humanity as a collective actor, and not as an egoistic individual. Thus the Enlightenment notion of cosmopolitanism has as its normative ideal the pursuit of the perfect civil union of mankind.

The recent boat tragedies at the shores of Europe signal a failure of Enlightenment commitment to humanity and humanitarianism. We are once again witnessing a crisis of European claims to being upholders of global justice, human rights and democracy. The disenchantment with Europe in the aftermath of colonialism and the holocaust looms large

anew. Current EU border politics amounts to letting migrants die in the name of securing European territory.

In his deconstructive reading of Kantian cosmopolitan ethics, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida discusses how Kantian hospitality is temporary in nature and hinges on the entrant not causing any trouble (2000: 3). Derrida traces elements of hostility intrinsic in Kantian reflections on hospitality and speaks of the "hostipitality" (namely, hostile hospitality) inherent in Kant's "conditional hospitality" (2000: 1, 15). According to Derrida, a truly cosmopolitan ethics would entail absolute hospitality, which is unconditional and is not qualified upon the guest fulfilling certain criteria or duties to receive it.

The vulnerability of those at the mercy of the sea is testimony to the fact that the progressive goals of the Enlightenment are at risk in Europe, the purported place of its birth. To counteract the pervasive disenchantment with the lofty principles of the Enlightenment necessitates rescuing norms of cosmopolitanism and humanitarianism from the cynical approach of EU migration policy. The recent Mediterranean boat disasters are a grim reminder that not only the migrants but also Enlightenment ideals are endangered in postcolonial Europe.

This is not a rejection of the Enlightenment inspired norm of cosmopolitanism, but an appeal to transnational elites to rethink their politics of cosmopolitan solidarity. In an interesting interview titled "What Is Enlightenment?," Spivak juxtaposes Kant and Foucault's essays to explore the question, "What went wrong with the best of the Enlightenment?" (2004, 179). Describing access to the European Enlightenment through colonization as an "enabling violation," she proposes that one must strategically use the enablement even as the violation is renegotiated (Spivak 2008a, 263). The relation of postcoloniality to the Enlightenment—and its legacies of modernity, secularism, democracy, human rights, science, technology, hegemonic languages—is diagnosed as a "double bind," whereby Spivak advises that one should neither accuse European philosophers nor excuse them; rather, one ought to enter the protocols of the canonical texts of the Enlightenment to see how it can be used if turned around on its own terms toward a more just and democratic postcoloniality (ibid, 259).

Spivak advocates ab-use of the Enlightenment (ab in Latin is "from below") (Spivak 2007, 181). This is neither a misuse nor an abuse, but a critical relation to the structures that we so intimately inhabit. She remarks that when oppressed minorities ask for civil rights and political rights, they are making a demand within what we call enlightenment discourse. Thus, rather than any wholesale rejection of the Enlightenment as dangerous and in bad faith, she recommends "using it from below." "In order to make its good structures habitable by all, I

must open the Enlightenment to what it was obliged to exclude, but not in an uncritical way" (2008a, 259). She understands enlightenment as a code word for the regularizing of the public sphere and of the defeudalizing of the polity.

Against a cultural relativist denouncement of the legacy of the Enlightenment or an ethnocentric search for "pure" non-Western knowledge systems, it is more interesting to explore the entanglements of Western and non-Western theory productions. Against this background, it would be interesting to address the following questions: How is one to confront the paradox that the Enlightenment, in spite of its white, bourgeois, masculinist bias, is eminently indispensable? As has been the experience in many postcolonial contexts, the critique of modernity has strengthened conservative nationalist political orders. How can the Enlightenment be taken beyond the confines of Europe and be made to work for the Other, and what are the difficulties that we continue to face in trying to make concepts like the public sphere, with its Westphalian frame, our own? As colonial "gifts," they are both presents and poison, as Derrida reminds us. Such a project would entail saving the best of the Enlightenment and rethinking its relation to "delegitimized knowledges" and their role in the project of decolonization. This would mark a departure from the orthodoxies of anticolonial critique; it is important to remember here that nationalism is a product of imperialism and is implicated in its violent structures. Thus, the banal opposition between European Enlightenment and postcolonialism is an act of bad faith, which needs to be problematized by exploring how far our sense of critique is shaped by the Enlightenment, even as it is not limited to it. At the same time, the postcolonial experiences in the global South offer important lessons for the future of critical theories. Instead of a "politics of blame" (Said) or a postcolonial antimodernity, it is challenging to revisit the question that the black feminist Audre Lorde posed: Perhaps the master's tools can indeed be employed to dismantle the master's house? (1984, 110).

Literatur

Arendt, Hannah, 1966: *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* New York: Harvest, Harcourt.

Beck, Ulrich, 2007: Weltrisikogesellschaft. Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Sicherheit. Frankfurt/M.

Derrida, Jacques, 1981: Dissemination. London: The Athlone Press.

Derrida, Jacques, 2000: Hostipitality. In: *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 5 (3): 3–18.

Fanon, Frantz, 1961: *The Wretched of the Earth*, London: Penguin.

Grewal, Inderpal, 2008: "Amitav Ghosh: Cosmopolitanisms, Literature, Transnationalisms". In: Krishnaswamy, Revathi/Hawley, John (Hg.): The Post-colonial and the Global. Minneapolis, 178-190.

Habermas, Jürgen, 1990: *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit - Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Kant, Immanuel. 1795. Zum Ewigen Frieden. In: Gesammelte Schriften. Ausgabe der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (AA). Berlin: de Gruyter. vol. 8: 343–86.

Lorde, Audre, 1984: "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House". In: Dies.: Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Berkeley, 110-113.

Nussbaum, Martha C., 1997: Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education. Cambridge.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 1991: "Neocolonialism and the Secret Agent of Knowledge: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak". Oxford Literary Review. 13. Jg. H. 1-2, 220-251.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 1994: "Bonding in Difference". In: *The Spivak Reader.* London/New York: Routledge. 15-28.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 1999: A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present. Kolkata.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 2004: „What is Enlightenment?" Interview with Jane Gallop. In: Gallop, Jane (Hg.): Polemic: Critical or Uncritical. New York, 179-200.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 2007: „Feminism and Human Rights". In: Shaikh, Nermeen (Hg.): The Present as History: Critical Perspectives on Global Power. New York, 172-201.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 2008a: Other Asias. Malden.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 2008b: „Die Macht der Geschichte. Subalternität, hegemoniales Sprechen und die Unmöglichkeit von Allianzen". Interview von Sushila Mesquita & Vina Yun. Frauensolidarität. 104. Jg., 26-27.