

# Transnational Justice, Counterpublic Spheres and Alter-Globalization

Nikita Dhawan

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Junior Professor of Political Science for Gender/Postcolonial  
Studies, Goethe University Frankfurt  
E-mail: [dhawan@soz.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:dhawan@soz.uni-frankfurt.de)

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## Abstract

Uneven distribution of resources and unequal access to power in the current phase of postcolonial late capitalism has spurred a range of critical discourses globally that has led to the formation of “transnational counterpublic spheres”. These counterpublics facilitate interests of disenfranchised groups to become visible and audible. However, counterpublics are also spheres of power that replicate mechanisms of exclusion. My paper aims to explore, on the one hand, to what extent transnational counterpublic spheres succeed in facilitating resistance and agency, enabling marginalized collectives to find a “voice” in international politics. On the other hand the mechanisms of exclusion will be investigated that obstruct the inclusion of subaltern groups.

Keywords: Transnational Justice, Counterpublic Spheres,  
Alter-Globalization, Postcolonialism, Subalternity,  
World Social Forum

## **Counterpublic Spheres and Agency**

As a form of collective exercise of political power, one of the cornerstones of democracy is the public sphere as a site where citizens can problematize conditions of inequality and question their exclusion from socio-cultural, political, and economic arrangements through a principle of societal deliberation. Critical research on issues of transnational justice, global democracy, and human rights increasingly focuses on the public sphere as a site of intervention and contestation (Benhabib 1992; Fox and Starn 1997). In current scholarship there has been increasing critique of the Westphalian framing of the public sphere for its Eurocentric bias and for excluding the perspectives and interests of marginalized groups, especially from the global South. Given that not everyone has equal access to the bourgeois public sphere, counterpublics emerge as dissident spaces, which articulate resistance and alternatives to dominant publics by facilitating the development of self-consciously dissident discourses. They emerge when social actors perceive themselves to be excluded from dominant

publics and challenge this marginalization in the form of contestation instead of deliberation. This warrants a shift of focus from the dominant publics to the counterpublics of the marginalized.

First appearing in 1972 as a critique of Jürgen Habermas' understanding of the public sphere, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1972) introduced the term *Gegenöffentlichkeit* (anti-publicness) in their work to posit the proletarian public sphere as a counterpublic. Subsequently it was employed by Rita Felski as a feminist critique of public sphere theory. She speaks of "partial publics" as that which consciously concerns itself with the "private" interests of particular groups, like women, and not with universal human emancipation (Felski 1989, 167). The addition of "transnational" is to signify discursive arenas and communicative circuits that "overflow the bounds of both nations and states" (Fraser 1997, 7). As a critical force, it seeks to disrupt the universalizing and homogenizing processes of globalization, so that the proliferation of counterpublics deepens and widens discursive contestation in stratified societies (Fraser 1997, 82). The focus here is to explore "the contingent, particular constructions of counter entered into by participants in the public sphere" (Asen and Brouwer 2001, 10). Transnational counterpublics are marked by a departure from leader-centred approaches to dissident identities, practices, and discourses that emerge in response to dominant publics. One

could conclude that: “Every dominant public sphere almost inevitably calls up an anti-publicness” (Verstraeten cit. in Downey and Fenton 2003, 188).

Resistance and agency have been differently interpreted in diverse counterpublic sphere theories (Asen 2000). One approach locates the “counter” in the identity of the persons who articulate oppositional discourses, thereby foregrounding identity politics and a “politics of recognition” alongside a “politics of redistribution”. “Feminist Counterpublics” (Felski 1989), “Proletarian Public Spheres” (Negt and Kluge 1972), “Black Counterpublics” (The Black Public Sphere Collective 1995), “Queer Counterpublics” (Warner 2005) or “Transnational Islamic Public” (Salvatore 2007) are some examples of this. In contrast to traditional understandings of community patterned on family and kinship relations, such collectivities are built on shared experiences of marginalization and exploitation, leading to solidarity and reciprocity. These do not emerge from pre-given affiliations based on narrow understandings of kinship; they are rather products of complex processes of identity constitution, which facilitate articulations of shared struggles against domination.

Spaces that foster counterpublic discourses are another important focus of debate. This is warranted by the addition of “sphere” to counterpublics. According to Foucault, “space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (Foucault 1986). Subjects

are embedded in a system of spatial effects of power, wherein they are in a certain relation to power and to each other. Resistance to dominant spatial formations entails the ability to produce counter-spaces that elude and contest apparatuses of domination. Foucault's notion of "heterotopia" is particularly central to the study of power, resistance, and space (ibid.). Popularly interpreted as "counter-spaces", heterotopias are not only "other than" everyday spaces, but are composed of "hetero" and "topos", namely, heterogeneous other spaces. Even as heterotopias contest dominant ways of ordering and sites of power, they do not lack order or are not intrinsically "spaces of emancipation"; rather their ordering is "different". Across the disciplines, the study of space, power, and agency has undergone a profound and sustained transformation with increasing focus on how "counter-spaces" both reproduce or subvert specific relations of power.

A further aspect in the discussion on transnational counterpublic spheres is the focus on rhetoricity and virtuality (Hauser 1999; Downey and Fenton 2003; Wodak and Koller 2008). Counterpublics seek to draw attention to issues such as imperialism, capitalist exploitation, homophobia, and racism. They aspire to disseminate their struggles to ever widening arenas through a "publicist" orientation (Fraser 1997, 124), which is composed of a dialectic of withdrawal and engagement with dominant publics. If rhetoric is an instrument of power for

hegemonic groups, then dissident rhetoric is an essential element of counterpublics (Cox and Foust 2009). Here digital technology is considered to be of great importance for radical politics, connecting actors across borders, creating alliances, and organizing solidarity (Garnham 1992; Calhoun 1992; Verstraeten 1996). It is proposed that through deterritorialized forms of publicity, critical voices and practices in the periphery can access and contest dominant publics via digital technology thereby intervening in hegemonic discourses (Downey and Fenton 2003, 196). Digital technology holds the promise of augmenting information sharing and accessibility, even as information literacy as a precondition can hinder certain actors and groups from accessing and contributing to virtual counterpublics (*ibid.*, 189).

A final important aspect is how counterpublics practice both outward and inward address in response to the experience and discernment of exclusion (Asen and Brouwer 2001, 7). Jane Mansbridge (1996, 57) explains this as an “oscillation” between “protected enclaves” and “reigning reality”. Multiple locations and multilinguality of resistance works against privileging any particular political actor or position. Rather than a uniform interpretive community, one can speak of coalitions of “overlapping subcommunities” (Felski 1989, 171), which participate in “multiple processes of articulation across different kinds of difference” (Conway and Singh 2009, 72). The

proliferation of struggles and political mobilizations facilitated by the counterpublics has led to a de-centered notion of agency. Moreover, struggles waged in public spheres are not only over political issues, but also over the norms of debate itself, thereby contesting the formal, structural, and cultural exclusionary mechanisms (Ylä-Anttila 2005, 428). In sum, these theoretical approaches emphasize the emancipatory effects of counterpublic spheres in that they aim to include marginalized voices, enabling them to challenge and transform dominant forms of rule, which manifest themselves in multiple ways in the economic, cultural, and socio-political arenas.

The political theorist Nancy Fraser identifies counterpublics as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (Fraser 1992, 123). Instead of separatism, counterpublics indicate “spaces of withdrawal and regroupment” as well as “bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (ibid., 124). As antidote to homogenization of public spheres, Fraser proposes the notion of “transnational subaltern counterpublics” (1997, 82) as a direct critique of the Habermasian public sphere understood in terms of a body of “private persons” assembled to discuss matters of “public concern” or “common interest”. Mediating between society and state, bourgeois public spheres function as a counterweight to

totalitarianism by making the state accountable to its citizens. This involves access to information regarding the functioning of the state apparatus so as to facilitate critical scrutiny through generation of public opinion. Via legally guaranteed free speech, free press, and free assembly, public opinion is then transmitted to the state (Fraser 1992, 112-3). Public spheres promise the possibility of free and fair deliberation for all participants by virtue of being open and accessible to all citizens, by suspending inequalities of status and rendering private interests inadmissible. Habermas of course admits that the full utopian potential of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere has not been realized in practice. Amongst the many reasons for this are the fragmentation of the public into competing interest groups and the emergence of welfare-state mass democracy wherein instead of reasoned public debate, mass media monopolizes the manufacture and manipulation of public opinion.

Fraser highlights several limits in Habermasian public sphere: from his idealization of the liberal public sphere to his exclusion of categories of race, gender, religion etc. One of her strongest objections is that it allows bourgeois men to present themselves as the “universal class” thereby justifying their fitness to govern (*ibid.*, 114). Deconstructing the public/private divide, Fraser unpacks the conflicts that are a constitutive aspect of the emergence of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere,

which she critiques as a “masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule” (ibid., 116). In contrast Fraser argues that people are hindered from participating because it is impossible to simply “bracket off” one’s social status. In stratified societies, social inequalities impede free and fair deliberation. She proposes that “transnational subaltern counterpublics” intervene in asymmetrical discursive relations among differentially empowered publics through a proliferation of a multiplicity of competing publics, in which subaltern groups can invent and circulate counter-hegemonic discourses and identities. As socially vulnerable groups are not able to have their interests represented in political systems with the same ease as the more privileged actors, transnational subaltern counterpublics enable subaltern agency by extension of democratic voice to previously marginalized groups. By inserting new actors into the political stage through reappropriation and resignification of political discourses, this instigates deliberation on issues of redistribution, recognition, and representation as well as on the constitution of a new social grammar.

One of the most celebrated examples of a “transnational subaltern counterpublic” is the World Social Forum (Santos 2005). As a counter-event to the World Economic Forum in Davos, meetings of the WSF are applauded for enabling diverse marginalized collectives to find a “voice” in international politics. As an “open space” for “critical utopias”, the World Social Forum

has emerged as one of the most important and influential transnational counterpublic spheres, which opens up possibilities for dissident voices to formulate critique against the neoliberal bias of global norms and international institutions. In the next section let us examine how alter-globalization movements in general and the World Social Forum seek to address struggles of marginalized groups.

### **Another World is Possible: Transnational Counterpublics and Alterglobalization**

Economic globalization has led to deregulation and privatization of markets resulting in the increasing movement of transnational capital, goods, and also people. Popular notions such as the “global village” evoke images of a world “shrinking” due to advanced communication technology. Corporate values are established at the epicentre of our socio-political systems further consolidated through international and national structures, which facilitate the mobility of capital and speculative finance. Economic policies focus primarily on the competitive benefits for businesses, whereby social and economic well-being of the masses is rendered secondary to the interests of the corporate sector and transnational elites. The nation-states, especially in the global South, have been forced to accept and are sometimes even actively pursuing globalization.

International corporations pressurize them to create favourable conditions for free movement of capital, the lack of which leads to trade embargoes and international isolation. Thus, the world is being shaped to meet the demands for predictable, market-friendly conditions wherever corporations and investors choose to operate. The consolidation of the dominance of multinational corporations has been accompanied by the erosion of legitimacy of nation-states with corporate managers becoming more powerful than democratically elected representatives. On the other hand, politicians are continually recrafting the state to attract foreign investment, which is justified in the name of enhancing national interests (Sklair 2008, 219). The discourse of national competitiveness in the global market has led to alliances between globalizing politicians, the transnational capitalist class, and the corporate sector. Most social institutions like schools, universities, hospitals, are being corporatized (*ibid.*). Critics of neo-liberal globalization draw attention to the dangers of the new ‘market fundamentalism’ that corrodes democracy.

Champions of globalization, however, view it as the emergence of a new, complexly networked, disjunctive order that cannot be explained in terms of centre-periphery models. This contests understandings of globalization as simply the Westernization or Americanization of the world. In contrast to the “cultural imperialism” of older forms of globalization, current manifestations promise to “provincialize Europe” through

hybridization and difference, which enable the articulation and enunciation of a new transnational imaginary, thereby challenging homogenization and standardization. The focus here is on the influence of local practices and struggles on global politics as well as the strategies deployed by postcolonial societies to negotiate with as well as contest the imperial centre. It is contended that mobility - material or virtual - facilitates hitherto excluded groups to contest dominant publics, thereby disrupting one-way imperialism. This holds the promise that globalization is diminishing Western hegemony instead of consolidating it. It enables subversion of hegemonic orders by facilitating decentred narratives to emerge in transnational spaces outside the boundaries of the nation-states, which are no longer considered as adequate frameworks for opposing contemporary capitalism. As a process of profound unevenness that is deeply contradictory, globalization has spurred wide-ranging social, political, and economic transformations.

Transnationalism, however, is not only a monopoly of multinational capital or of multilateral agencies like the IMF or WTO, but is also claimed by several oppositional socio-political formations. Such forms of “globalization from below” function as a collective counterweight to the symbolic and material power of globalization from above by contesting neoliberal fantasies of a borderless world in favor of progressive forms of transnationalism (Loomba et al. 2005, 16). It is argued that it is impossible to

transform a system that operates on a world scale through regulation and administration of the nation-state, whereby inequalities at the global level cannot be eliminated from a nation-state level. Global justice movements have intensified discussions on the relation between global and local, whereby they seek to map shifting configurations of these complex relations. 'Glocalization' (Robertson 1995) describes the relation between the local and the global as one of interaction and interpenetration rather than of binary opposites. Thus one finds the presence of the global within the local, even as the local contributes to the character of the global.

In the last decades there has been a turn from class-based struggles to the new social movements (queer-feminist, ecology, peace, human rights), with the international civil society actors being considered the most promising agents of social transformation. The WSF, which represents one of the most prominent contemporary global justice movements, serves as an important meeting point for alter-globalization activists. Addressing wide-ranging issues including neo-colonialism, neo-liberalism, sustainability, food sovereignty, intellectual property rights, its supporters oppose predatory forms of globalization. "A different kind of globalization is possible" is the optimistic cry of the WSF, which is a hope for a globalization in solidarity, a globalization without marginalization.

In the face of the perceived failure of both nation-states and

the international system to address the adverse effects of neoliberal globalization and militarism on disenfranchised groups, alter-globalization movements seek to open up space to contest these processes (Conway and Singh 2009, 62). Given contemporary global interdependences, decisions, and changes in one part of the world have immediate and profound consequences upon people's lives elsewhere. If people's pasts and futures are inextricably entangled, it is argued, so must the struggles and strategies for emancipation. In the face of shared vulnerabilities, solidarity across borders becomes desirable and inevitable. The key issue is how seemingly discrete dissident spaces and autonomous struggles relate to each other and how the demands and concerns, which are simultaneously economic, political, and cultural, are articulated. The hope is to provide just alternatives to cultural and economic globalization *from* and *for* the global South. Through international campaigns and mobilizations with the help of huge media coverage, the proclaimed aim is to articulate critique of the systemic crisis of capitalism as well as ecological, security and cultural issues at simultaneously the regional, national, and international level. Challenging imperialist globalization is at the heart of these movements, which address concerns of groups as diverse as urban slum dwellers to sex workers, from victims of war crimes to metropolitan anarchists. It has often been pointed out that the mere proliferation and co-existence of multiple and

heterogeneous social movements is nothing new. Social movements have historically cooperated across national borders, but the intensification of global economic, political, and cultural processes has radically transformed the international civil society. The novelty of, for instance, the WSF lies in the scale of networking and the fact that despite heterogeneous goals, agendas, interests, languages, and strategies, different actors seek to relate to each other (Perera 2003, 89). The process includes a myriad of marginalized groups who are part of local and global networks and participate in regional (for example: European, Latin American) or thematic (for example: about the Palestine situation or feminist agendas) forums (Perera 2003, 74). The WSF seeks to bring together struggles of many groups excluded from public participation, for instance, Brazilian landless peasants or Indian dalits as was the case at the WSF in Mumbai in 2004. Similarly, in some of the European Social Forums “illegalized” immigrants have had the opportunity to participate and voice their concerns to global publics (Ylä-Anttila 2005, 435).

Equally diverse are the targets of their critique which include institutions like the IMF, WTO, WB, G8 countries, free trade treaties like NAFTA and GATT as well as topical issues like the “War on terror”, TRIPS, and migration regimes. Herein power and domination is understood to be global in its reach, even as they have multiple sources, manifesting themselves in context-specific

ways to not only produce particular conjunctures of oppression, but also of resistance and struggle.

Boaventura De Sousa Santos, one of the most prominent chroniclers of the WSF, relates its emergence to the crises of left thinking and practice (2006). Santos proposes that globalization of capitalism, intensified oppression, and destruction of lives of vulnerable groups is countered by alter-globalization, which seeks to create alliances and articulate struggles through “global/local linkages” (2008, 249). Working against the criminalization of social protest, the WSF provides one of the most powerful spaces for political dissidence.

According to Santos the WSF, which emerged in the global South, poses a challenge to both critical theory and left political activism, even as the social struggles that find expression in the WSF defy mainstream understandings of social transformation (ibid., 250). The left thinking generated in the global North gets provincialized by the emergence of critical understandings and practices from other parts of the world (ibid., 258). Santos critiques left thinking for its Eurocentric, colonialist, imperialist, racist, and sexist bias and proposes that in order to decolonize the critical tradition, it is imperative to learn from the anti-imperial South. In short, the WSF raises not only analytic and theoretical questions, but also epistemological questions, whereby according to Santos “there will be no global social justice without global cognitive justice” (ibid., 251).

Striking a cautionary note, feminists and indigenous activists insist that relations of inequality and coloniality have not been overcome in this pluralist, multi-centric, and non-directive “space of spaces” (Conway 2011, 221). As a “contact zone”, which is simultaneously cosmopolitan and colonial, “coloniality of power” (Quijano 2000) continues to shape the interactions in the open space of the WSF (*ibid.*). Addressing issues of imperial globality and global coloniality, Janet Conway unpacks how diverse movements (depending on whether they originate in the global North or South) encounter each other on a historically unequal playing field (*ibid.*, 218). In a direct critique of Santos, she argues that oppressive power relations globally are also at work within the WSF. She regrets that the issue of exclusion and inaccessibility has not been adequately considered in the scholarship on the WSF.

International civil society in general and the WSF in particular have been accused of contributing to institutionalization of dissent and “NGO-ization” of struggles, which marginalize vulnerable groups. A key issue here is the question of funding. With the Ford Foundation and World Bank websites promoting the WSF, its legitimacy is tainted for some radical groups. Another critique has been that elite international civil society actors and reputed figures like Noam Chomsky and Arundhati Roy have become embodiments of radical politics who manage to capture headlines for the initiative, but risk marginalizing and

making invisible the struggles of subaltern groups, even as they claim to speak about/for them. This has resulted in a legitimacy crisis of the WSF with the accusation that a small number of insiders make the important decisions. It is argued that oppressive power relations globally are also at work within alter-globalization movements.

Despite being an “open space” located in the global South, the WSF has not been able to achieve “parity of participation” for subaltern groups, who cannot access transnational counterpublic spheres. Thus even as the WSF has been celebrated as a platform for disenfranchised groups and communities to articulate their perspective and be heard by the “ruling elites”, the continual production of subalternity within these spaces of dissidence remains a serious challenge for alter-globalization movements. Despite good intentions, the WSF remains demographically limited.

## **Politics of the Governed**

At this point it is instructive to engage with the critique put forth by postcolonial theorists like Partha Chatterjee, who delineate the limits of Western tools of political theory in understanding power, resistance, and agency. He rejects the dominant narrative of modernity and modern politics as being grounded in the formal discourse of rights and citizenship and

explores other modes in which politics takes place “in most of the world”. Presenting a powerful case against organized arenas of politics, he shifts focus to struggles of those individuals and groups that can neither access transnational counterpublics nor are part of the international civil society.

Given that only a small group of elites in postcolonial countries fulfil the criterion of citizenship invoked in the normative concept of civil society, Chatterjee conceptualizes a domain, separate and distinct from civil society. He proposes the notion of “political society” to understand the politics of those who are excluded from participation in the civil society in postcolonial contexts (2004, 38). Political society is composed of large sections of the rural population and the urban poor, who have the formal status of citizens, but cannot access the organs of the state in the same way as members of bourgeois civil society. Many of these groups transgress the strict lines of legality in struggling to live and work (2004, 40, 56). While recognizing their moral claim to survival, the claims to welfare programs of the government are not regarded as justiciable rights since the state with its limited economic resources cannot deliver these benefits to the entire population. This results in negotiation of claims on a political terrain with the state’s obligations to provide for the poor depending on calculations of political expediency. The entitlements of the marginalized, even when recognized, never quite become rights (2004, 40).

The state must maintain a fiction that all citizens are equal subjects of the law and this “fictional” element must be addressed in the actual administrative processes (Sarkar 2012, 36). Governments acknowledge that welfare and developmental functions in the fields of health, education and sanitation are essential tasks, even as the response by state agencies is often situational with the aim to deflecting opposition to the state. While the state creates the necessary political conditions for the continued rapid growth of corporate capital, it is also obligated to ensure survival of marginalized communities through anti-poverty programmes, which reverse the devastating effects of primitive accumulation of capital. Dispossession through capital growth in postcolonial economies, corporate land grabbing, setting up of Special Economic Zones, privatization of the commons, are offset by providing direct benefits to the dispossessed in the form of guaranteed employment in public works, subsidized or free food, and rehabilitation of displaced people. Electoral democracy makes it unacceptable for the government to leave those dispossessed of their means of labour without the means of subsistence, since this risks them becoming the “dangerous classes” (2004, 60). Thus the state, with its mechanisms of electoral democracy, becomes the field for the political negotiation of demands for the transfer of resources. Postcolonial democracies are characterized by elite control and popular legitimacy (2004, 49).

Political action by marginalized groups aims to draw attention of officials, political leaders, and especially the media to specific grievances and seek appropriate governmental benefits (2004, 57). According to Chatterjee, this negotiation does not take place because of the state's benevolence; rather these marginalized subjects force the state to do so. For instance, they often make instrumental use of the fact that they can vote in elections to negotiate benefits (2004, 41). Political society demonstrates the agency of the people in forcing the state to recognize them. However, governmental response to claims by members of political society is not within the framework of stable constitutionally defined rights and laws, but rather through temporary, contextual, and unstable arrangements arrived at through political negotiations.

Drawing on Foucault's ideas about the pastoral functions of government, Chatterjee argues that the regime secures its legitimacy not by the participation of citizens in the matters of the state, but by claiming to provide for the well-being of the population (2004, 34, 47). The emergence of the distinction between citizens and populations rests on the increasing "governmentalization of the state". While the concept of citizen carries the ethical connotation of participation in the sovereignty of the state, the concept of population as target of government policies provides a set of rationally manipulable instruments. Chatterjee makes a compelling case that enumeration and

classification of population groups for the purposes of welfare administration have had a dramatic effect on the process of democratic politics, with governance becoming less a matter of politics and more of administrative policy, a business for experts rather than political representatives. Lofty political imaginary of popular sovereignty has been trumped by the mundane administrative reality of governmentality (2004, 35ff.). Ideas of participatory citizenship and popular sovereignty, which were at the heart of Enlightenment notion of politics, have been marginalized by governmental technologies of delivering well-being to the people (2004, 36).

Chatterjee traces an alternative history of governmentality in the global South as a result of the colonial encounter. In his view, citizenship in the West emerges from the institution of civic rights in civil society to political rights in the fully developed nation-state, only then developing the techniques of governmentality. However, this order was reversed in the colonies, where the technologies of governmentality often predated the nation-state (2004, 36). The colonial state was an ethnographic state, wherein the classification, description, and enumeration of population groups as objects of policy relating to land settlement, revenue, public health, management of famines and droughts etc. has a long history before the birth of the postcolonial nation-states.

Ideas of republican citizenship which accompanied politics of

national liberation have been overtaken by the developmental state which promises to end poverty through appropriate policies of economic growth and social reform. Postcolonial states deploy governmental technologies to promote the well-being of their populations, often prompted and aided by international and non-governmental organizations (2004, 47). Often classificatory criteria used by colonial governmental regimes continue to be employed in the postcolonial era, shaping administrative, legal, economic, and electoral policies. Political rhetoric in electoral campaigns primarily focuses on what governments have or have not done for the populations in response to the anger and moral outrage of 'the people' in the public space (ibid.).

Chatterjee argues that the postcolonial state is contradictory and indecisive in its conduct. On the one hand, it is marked by hesitancy and weakness in implementing existing codified norms and in enforcing certain legal and executive orders, while on the other hand, it can be extraordinarily violent (Sarkar 2012, 40-41). These contradictory and indecisive approaches of the state indicate a predicament which underlines the power relationships in a postcolonial country. Dipesh Chakrabarty, for instance, diagnoses a disjuncture between the pedagogy and performance of the postcolonial nation to identify the ambivalence of the postcolonial state's will to emulate the model of Western historicism and modernity. Chakrabarty cites the example of the decision after the attainment of independence to

base Indian democracy on universal adult franchise (1992, 10). This was in direct violation of Mill's prescription, who in "On Representative Government" argued that universal teaching must precede universal enfranchisement. The general lack of literacy in postcolonial India was seen as an obstacle to the implementation of the goal of universal adult franchise and yet it was ultimately decided that Indians - literate or illiterate - were suited for self-rule. This defence of popular sovereignty was and continues to be offset with the developmentalist practices of governmental institutions, whose function is to educate and develop the peasant subaltern as erstwhile subjects into modern citizens. However, this historicist narrative of development of the nation is "put in temporary suspension" every time the illiterate peasant votes (*ibid.*). On the day of the election, every Indian adult is treated "as if" he or she is already a citizen, capable of making decisions irrespective of formal qualifications. This signals an ambivalence regarding the subaltern peasant who must be educated as citizen, but who has right to full participation in the political life of the nation and instigates an interruption in the narrative of political modernity in postcolonial societies. The nation produces a political performance of electoral democracy that reveals diverse registers of power.

Chatterjee argues that the success of struggles of the political society depend on strategic interventions in the governmental machinery (2004, 66). However, far from being a mechanical

transaction of benefits and services, political claims are marked by passionate rhetoric and affective energy to protest dispossession and secure relief. Political society alerts us about various strategies that are being developed, how people use the spaces available in a democracy to raise various demands, spaces that the ruling classes are compelled to open up in an attempt to legitimize their positions of power. People are exploring new modes in which they wish to be governed and are forcing their governors to comply (ibid., 77 - 78). Thus political society as an innovative and promising political development is marked by the increased ability of those to speak in terms of the very law that is used to dispossess them.

At the same time the agency of political society is qualified (2004, 61). Firstly, the modalities of realization of rights in political society are contingent and are micro-political events. Secondly, the leverage in political society is linked with the inherent majoritarian bias of electoral democracy. Certain minorities, for example, low-caste groups and tribals, are excluded from even political society as these groups do not have the means to make effective claims on their governments (ibid.). In this sense, these marginalized groups exist beyond the boundaries of political society. This is where the notion of subalternity, one of the central concepts of feminist postcolonial theory, comes into play (Dhawan 2007).

## Transnational Subaltern Counterpublics: A Paradox?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, from whom Fraser takes the term “subaltern”, explains that when a citizen is unable to claim the public sphere, itself a creation of colonial history, a certain kind of subalternity is produced (Spivak 2008, 3, 154). Subalterns are non-hegemonic groups, in so far as their dissident political practices are not perceived to be systematic and coherent in their opposition to power. Designated as “pre-political” and sporadic, they are seen to operate at “local” levels and thus as insignificant for international politics. This is a condition of not being able to represent oneself or, to use Marxist vocabulary, to make one’s interests count (*geltend zu machen*) in the face of lack of institutional validation. Because the “norms of recognition” are not in their favor, the political claims of subaltern groups appear unintelligible and illegible. Inversely, this means that when a previously disenfranchised individual or community gains recognition as political subjects, subalternity is brought into crisis.

Going beyond Chatterjee’s analysis, Spivak’s theory presents a powerful critique of alter-globalization and the role of international civil society in the continued production of subalternity (2004, 2009). She traces the slow appropriation of social movements, from their inception in the 1980s to the founding of ATTAC in 1998, by forces of international capital. According to her, the turning point was the recognition of international civil society by

the United Nations in 1994 at the opening of the NGO forum at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo (2009, 32). Spivak reminds us that the emergence of “civil society” presupposes a certain type of social contract, which is linked to the emergence of urbanity (*ibid.*). In her view, extra-state collective action like the World Social Forum is an outcome of failure of both reform and revolution, whereby these initiatives seek to attend to problems neglected by both state and party (*ibid.*, 33). In contrast to Immanuel Wallerstein’s fear that social movements would seek state power, Spivak notes that these movements bypass the state almost completely by virtue of having gained so much influence that they have taken the helm of world governance (*ibid.*). She accuses the international civil society and its vanguardism of reproducing a “Feudality without Feudalism” (2008, 8), whereby the politics of representation is plagued by paternalism. Furthermore, she urges us not to lose sight of the crucial difference between “Another Europe is Possible” and “Another World is Possible”. She argues that when it comes to disenfranchised groups, it is still within the territoriality of the nation that the subaltern struggles have to be won, as there is no other agent capable of mediating between the subaltern groups and transnational power structures (2009).

Another important aspect in the debate about alter-globalization and international civil society is the relation

between native diasporas and subalternity. Meyda Yeğenoğlu, following Spivak, traces how the conditions of disenfranchised subaltern groups of the global South are made synonymous with the diasporas in the metropolitan centres (2005, 103). Increasing focus on diasporic agency is symptomatic of a wider sanctioned ignorance of the subaltern Other, who while produced by and inserted into the processes of globalization, remains the unexamined site of globalization discourses (2005, 103). Subaltern groups are marginal to nation-building even as they bear the impact of neo-colonial globalization. According to Spivak (1999, 402) subalternity is “the Other of the question of diaspora”, whose forgetting makes possible marginality claims by the upwardly mobile metropolitan migrant. The exclusive focus on migrancy, diaspora, hybridity, cosmopolitanism, implies that resistance and agency are framed through discourses that privilege motion and travel, while neglecting the lack of access to mobility of disenfranchised communities (Yeğenoğlu 2005, 104). Their insertion into processes of globalization is discontinuous from diasporic migrants in the First World metropolis (*ibid.*). Access to globality is highly uneven, whereby even as metropolitan diasporics can claim tools of democratic rights and equality, this is not available for the underclass in the Third World (*ibid.*). Not in the circuit of mobility, forced international migration is not even an option for subaltern groups, who do not have access to even basic benefits of citizenship, even if they are

de jure citizens (ibid., 105).

Against this background, it is a challenge to reconstruct counterpublic sphere theories with an eye on the question of subalternity. In much of the postcolonial world “class apartheid” (Spivak 2008, 32) is produced by the system of education in place since formal decolonization. The largest sector of the future electorate in the world, namely, the children of the rural poor in the global South are systematically deprived of any access to intellectual labour with only their bodies being prepared to serve the ruling class. The only weapon with which the extremely deprived can fight is effectively taken away from them at a very early age as they are never taught to think that anything exists to serve them (Spivak 2007, 172). To reverse this process, the subaltern must be inserted into hegemony not through “empowerment training”, rather by “activating” habits of democracy. An immense effort is required to convince a subaltern that everyone has the same inalienable rights. This is also a challenge for the feminist postcolonial theorist to not take the public sphere for granted and understand that it is not present everywhere in the same way. In fact Spivak provocatively says that there is an overdose of the concept of the public sphere in the global North (ibid, 174).

An even bigger challenge than lack of access to public space is that the subaltern perceives its condition of disenfranchisement as “normal”. History of domination changes to the present of

exploitation, with the capacity to intuit the public space being taken away from the subaltern. Imagining oneself in the abstract as part of the nation-state is a privilege that the subaltern is robbed of, so that it is completely “unprepared” for the public sphere. The biggest task of decolonization is to bring subalternity into crisis. However, this cannot be achieved solely through making the subaltern economically independent. Poverty alleviation is of course necessary, but is no guarantee of justice and equality (*ibid*, 24f.). Following Gramsci, who argues that the problems of subaltern groups will not be solved by “dictatorship” of the proletariat, Spivak argues that she is interested in justice, but this is not simply about organizing material goods for the suffering classes. Simply having rights is not enough if there is no training in practice of freedom so that letter of law can be claimed in spirit. Otherwise political power remains an empty promise.

The relation between economic and political empowerment remains discontinuous. Formalized democratic rights do not automatically enable economically impoverished citizens, even as economic empowerment does not translate into desubalternization. Neo-liberal governmentality fabricates entrepreneurial subjects who are expected to flexibly adapt to changing market demands. This shifts the responsibility for one’s wellbeing from the state to the individual who must be self-regulating and self-disciplined. The conflation between citizens and consumers makes consumer

choices in the market continuous with the “will of the people” in a democracy.

Spivak warns that the processes of decolonization cannot be successful only through crisis-driven corporate philanthropy or impatient human rights intervention. NGOs building schools or Human Rights Watch shaming states into good behaviour is necessary but not sufficient, whereby without the ethico-political education of the disenfranchised, the project of decolonization will fail again and again (2009, 36). Following Gramsci, she emphasizes that democracy cannot mean merely that an unskilled worker can become skilled and employable; it rather entails every “citizen” being able to “govern” with the society placing him, even if only abstractly, in a general condition to achieve this (*ibid.*).

Aristotle claimed that not all persons were fit to become part of the governing class because not everyone had the necessary practical wisdom or ethical virtue. Actual governmental practices in most postcolonial societies are still based on this premise that not everyone can govern. The challenge that Spivak poses is: How can the subaltern subject be transformed into a citizen? She critiques the impatience of human rights interventionists, even as she is wary of promises of “justice under capitalism” offered by development politics. According to her, the alter-globalization lobby only copes with managing capitalist globalization as crisis, and is insufficiently oppositional.

Critiquing the “impatience of the World Social Forum and its idealist love affair with the digital”, she laments that “alter-globalization is at best based on a hastily cobbled relationship between the intellectual and the subaltern” (ibid.). She warns against regarding unmediated cyberliteracy as an unquestioned good, whereby for her electronic broadening of access does not automatically translate into epistemic transformation - “uncoercive rearrangement of desires” (ibid.). Economic empowerment is incomplete without the accompanying “epistemic change” both in the global North as well as the global South (1993, 177), so that the vastly disenfranchised will not need to be patronized by aid. We urgently need to rethink and reimagine our understanding of politics by examining how despite the best efforts of international civil society actors and institutions, subaltern groups remain objects of benevolence and not agents of transformation. A good example of this is the transnational feminist movement. Advocates of transnational feminism highlight the role of cross-border civil society networks as facilitating the participation of disenfranchised women in “global” politics. But as Spivak has repeatedly pointed out, subaltern women are located outside organized resistance and are neither part of any unified “third world women’s resistance” nor any global alliance politics. The merging of women’s local struggles to a global women’s movement in past decades has consolidated the hegemony of elite feminist agendas, with the

UN Cairo Conference (1994) and the Beijing Conference (1995) sparking intense debates on the complicities of the transnational feminist movement with imperialism. Thus even as “decolonizing feminism” remains a matter of urgency, it is no easy task for it would involve “feminists with a transnational consciousness” acknowledging their own “agency in complicity” while resisting the role of “native informant-cum-hybrid-globalist” (Spivak 1999, 399).

The relationship of democratization and decolonization to the indigenous subalterns remains tenuous. Even as they bear the impact of neo-colonial globalization, subaltern groups remain marginal to both nation-states as well as civil society. Instead of anti-statism or post-nationalism, resistance for subaltern groups resides in their insertion into the existing framework of the nation-state (Yeğenoğlu 2005, 104). Despite the crisis of legitimacy of the nation-states, it is dangerous to disregard the immense political implications of an anti-statist position, which are immensely popular in radical discourses in the West, for subaltern populations in the South (*ibid.*, 106). Postcolonial states remain the most important mediators between the injunctions of global capital and disenfranchised groups. Instead of a narrow understanding of the state as a repressive apparatus, which demands a for or against position vis-à-vis the nation-state, a different state needs to be envisaged that is capable of articulating the will of the excluded subaltern

populations (ibid., 106). To a large extent the attack on the state is driven by the dictates of neo-liberal political economy, which is positing a false opposition between ills of state planning versus the virtues of free markets. What is conveniently concealed is that neo-liberalism itself requires the state as its precondition (ibid., 114).

To conclude, instead of for and against state discussions, the focus needs to be on how the interests and demands of disenfranchised groups can be articulated in the struggle for hegemony, through institutionalization of the redistributive functions of the state (ibid.). At the same time, while critiquing the dominant mode of doing politics in the metropolis, we need to recuperate a sphere of politics that has been a permanent source of anxiety for theorists of modernity and democracy - the vast domain that exists *outside* the designated spheres of modern politics. The effort should be to enable subaltern groups to make claims on the state within the formal grammar of rights and citizenship to activate a “democracy from below”.

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