Is the Islamist Voice Subaltern?

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In her well-known essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), Gayatri Spivak makes two key arguments. Firstly, she argues that postcolonial studies, although its aim is to help the oppressed, risks perpetuating a neo-colonial exploitation of the economically and politically dispossessed. Postcolonial studies, Spivak argues, ironically risks reinscribing colonial imperatives of political domination and cultural exploitation. The post-colonial scholar wants to help the oppressed, but ends up doing the opposite. This happens because the postcolonial scholar attempts to improve the subalterns’ condition from the outside by granting them collective speech. This attempt creates a situation where the subaltern depends upon western intellectuals to “speak for” them. Instead of being allowed to speak for themselves, they are spoken for. Furthermore, they are treated as a group with a collective cultural identity: the identity of being dispossessed. This situation, Spivak argues, will in fact re-inscribe their subordinate position in society. Because if they were not subordinate, there would be no need to speak as a collective group or to be spoken for in the first place.

Spivak sees this academic understanding of the subaltern, as a unified group that needs to be spoken for, as a form of epistemic violence that continues the ethnocentric western imperialist domination of the world, or, in Spivak’s words, “an extension of the Western logos” that does not take into account the heterogeneity of the colonized body politic. Spivak concludes that postcolonial intellectuals must understand that their privilege is their loss. That is, as soon as one has gained the platform to speak for the oppressed, one does not represent them anymore (Spivak 1988).

This would of course be true for someone such as myself. As a male, rich, healthy, white, heterosexual, academic in my mid-thirties, I am a prime example of an absolute non-subaltern. So why do I address these issues? The same question could of course be posed to the theoretical giants whose names are imbued with subaltern auras, such as Gayatri Spivak herself, Homi Bhabha, and Edward Said, all of whom have had an enormous impact on the way scholars think of these matters. One of their critics, Martin Kramer, writes ironically about Said: “positioned within taxi distance of the media’s Manhattan epicenter … Said [complained] that Palestinians were
systematically denied ‘permission to narrate’ their own story” (Kramer 1992).

Thus, speaking for the dispossessed, one risks reinscribing their marginalisation. This takes me to the second argument that Spivak puts forth in her article, namely, that the subaltern simply cannot speak. Because if you are subaltern, she argues, no one will listen to you, and if they do, you are not subaltern anymore. If the two arguments are brought together, it seems as though there is no way whatsoever that the subaltern can be heard. Subalt- terns can neither speak for themselves nor can anyone else speak for them without reinscribing their marginalization.

I believe that Spivak is right. It is by definition impossible to speak and be heard from the margins of a discourse. The subaltern cannot speak. Maybe, however, this is only true as long as we are discussing speech within a chosen discourse. If we mean that one will not be heard on a certain arena as long as one speaks from the margins of that very same arena. But what happens if one completely ignores the arena? If one builds another one and refuses to adjust to the language, rules, and codes of the first arena? What happens if the realization of one’s subalternity results, not in striving for a position in the centre from which one is excluded, but in the establishment of a new, alternative centre?

This is the main question of this paper, and it is connected to another query: how do we as predominantly western scholars interested in postcolonial perspectives react to the establishment of such alternative centres? I will argue that we often react to it with indignation because of its seeming unawareness or disregard of what we see as our central position. I will exemplify this with the case of Islamism.

By the term “Islamism” I refer to the religious and political movement that strives for the establishment of modern states built on the principles of Islamic revealed law. A product of the twentieth century, Islamism is one of many responses to the colonial and post-colonial situations in the so-called Muslim world.

It could be argued that Islamism represents a conscious attempt to establish an alternative arena for politics and culture as well as for academic discussion. Islamism is an attempt to provincialize Europe and thereby make its adherents able to speak. A closer look at the Islamist movement on both elite and popular levels seems to support such an interpretation.

On the elite level, the formulations of Islamist ideologists are interesting. Seyyed Qutb is one prominent example. He was one of the early leaders of the Muslim brotherhood and has since his execution in 1966 remained an immensely influential Islamist ideologist. An important notion in his work is that everything positive that has come from “the West” is already to be found in Islam. Muslims, he argues, need not make the detour through Europe to find the tools to build a good society. Hence human rights, social
justice, and care for the environment, are brought forth as originally Islamic ideals (See, for instance, Qutb 1974).

Ruhollah Khomeini is another example. He was the founder of the Islamic republic of Iran and an outspoken critic of western imperialism and secularist ideologies. In many of his speeches he also criticized the domination of the imperialist western discourse on a meta-level. “The trouble with arguments against the use of familiar and time-honoured vocabulary,” he said on one occasion “is that it is expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary” (qtd. In Sayyid 1997:114). What Khomeini called for, in this quote and elsewhere, is an abandonment of the view that the western discourse, or vocabulary as he calls it, is the language one should use in one’s critique of “the West.” Khomeini seemed to argue that one can never defeat a discourse by using its own vocabulary. Western imperialism will not be conquered by a Western-style criticism but by an Islamic one, he argued, as he led the revolutionary Iranian movement in shouts for “independence, freedom and Islam.”

On a popular level, the establishment of an independent Islamist arena can be seen in the refusal of Islamist activists to recognize the rules of the hegemonic western discourse. The Mohammed caricature incident in January, 2006, is a case in point. In this controversy, Islamist groups held the Danish government to be responsible for the publications of an independent Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*. To do this is, so to speak, against the rules of a modern western democratic system. Because, in such a system, different public institutions in society are independent of each other, and prime ministers, hence, cannot, by definition, be held responsible for the publications of independent newspapers.

Muslim activists’ inability to understand this basic principle has been a source of great frustration among people in Scandinavia and elsewhere. Journalists and participants in TV debates were annoyed by the fact that Muslims did not follow the rules. Muslims may criticize *Jyllands-Posten*, but they cannot blame the Danish prime minister for its publications, the argument went. In other words: Muslims have to take the fight on our arena.

The interesting thing is that both the Islamists and the defenders of *Jyllands-Posten* know that the Islamists can never win such a fight. Muslims did not make the rules of the compartmentalized modern society and, if they are to follow such rules in their own struggle, they are bound to fail.

The history of the twentieth century gives many examples of Muslims who try to formulate their subalternity in the terminology of different European ideologies. But socialist, nationalist or democratic struggle to “catch up” with “the West” have all failed. Muslim societies are all still lagging behind. Islamism, however, although it is also dependent of these ideologies, is based on something that is truly its own, namely the religion of Islam. As such, it is a discourse that provincializes “the West” while creating a center of its own.
The core of postcoloniality is the ambition to decentralize “the West,” or western modernity. Islamism has successfully managed to provide an alternative center of moral, political and ontological focus among its adherents. This, arguably, makes it one of the most obvious examples of a subaltern postcolonial voice today.

As to the western responses to the challenge of Islamism, it is no exaggeration to say that there is a consensus about it. Everyone seems to be negative: rightwing and leftwing politicians, publicists, churches and NGOs, all unite in a condemnation of this movement which is regarded as antidemocratic, male chauvinist, and downright dangerous.

This response would seem to prove Spivak’s point. The hegemonic discourse is, as always, colonial in its attitude. The subaltern cannot speak, and those in the center will not or cannot listen. The center of the western discourse will also produce arguments that legitimate its disregard of the Islamist voice. For instance, Islamists will be labeled as undemocratic and therefore not worth negotiating with. If an Islamist organisation turns out to be democratically elected (as was the case in Algeria), it will be labeled as potentially undemocratic and for this reason excluded from the discussions.

On a theoretical or academic level, it can be argued that a sociologistic paradigm legitimates disregard of the Islamist voice. By “sociologistic paradigm” I am referring not to a particular scholarly research method but to an ontological understanding of the human condition, which is often, but need not be, entailed in that methodology. The sociologistic paradigm conceives of reality as well as our notions of what is morally right and wrong as social constructions created by humans or in human societies. It emphasizes social factors to the exclusion of other aspects. Religious world views are here spoken of as symptoms of social relations and power only. Since they are expressions of the social, moreover, they need not be taken at face value as valid expressions of, often subaltern, human experiences.

The examples of the sociologistic paradigm in studies of Islamism are innumerable. Akbar Ahmed, to take just one example, argues that Islamic “fundamentalism” is one response to the doubts that postmodernity gives rise to. Muslims who cannot cope with reality retreat back to old myths and hierarchies to strengthen their identity. Islamism is a social strategy (Ahmed 1992: 28-42).

Let us return to Spivak’s first argument and see if the sociological explanation of religiosity could be regarded as an example of the epistemic violence that she speaks of. Should we regard the sociologistic paradigm as the theoretical counterpart of the more concrete forms of violence that we find in the spheres of politics and military force?

Personally, I hold such an understanding to be reasonable. Foucault’s notion of the relation between research and power finds a clear illustration in this instance. Sociologistical explanations of Islamist beliefs and practices must be seen as a part of a deauthorisation process through which the Other
is silenced since, whether we want to or not, it provides arguments for why we need not listen to them.

Nowadays, many sociologically or anthropologically oriented scholars of islamology (such as myself) tend to think of ourselves as friends of the Muslims whom we study. We do everything not to be like the orientalist scholars criticized by Edward Said. We try not to homogenize or romanticize the Muslim world. In a sense, we see ourselves as the spokespeople for our marginalized informants. But since most of us at the same time explain the experiences of our informants in sociological terms only, we provide arguments for not listening to their own voices, whereby we continue to reinscribe their marginalization—a stance that is similar to the deauthorisation of the colonized world carried out by the much-criticized orientalist scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Recently, it has become fashionable to have a postcolonial approach in the academic study of religion. There is an outspoken ambition to listen to unheard voices and to counteract the domination of modern European thought. Postcolonial studies is both a description and a manifesto. When we declare that “the subaltern cannot speak” we also make an ethical statement, namely, that it is morally wrong that the subaltern cannot speak and that s/he should be allowed to speak. If the analysis offered in this paper is correct there seems to be a certain degree of hypocrisy in the postcolonial trend. Because if we really want the subaltern to speak, it seems inconsistent to say that s/he should do so only when s/he says what we want to hear.

Islamism is a subaltern voice. Perhaps the strongest in the world today. Our reactions to its independent agenda clearly reveals the limits of our stated ambition to let the subaltern speak.

Works Cited


