

I EXPERIENCE THEREFORE I AM

An Essay on the Politics of Subaltern Identity

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"Experience" has always designated the relationship with a presence, whether that relationship had the form of consciousness or not. At any rate we must, according to this sort of contortion and contention the discourse is obliged to undergo, exhaust the resources of the concept of experience, before attaining and in order to attain by deconstruction, its ultimate foundation. It is the only way to escape the "empiricism"

Jacquese Derrida

It is hard for me to remember everything that's happened to me in my life since there have been many very bad times that, yes, moments of joys as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.

Rigoberta Menchu

Can the subaltern speak? This question assumes rather than specifies the identity of speaker, as if it does not matter. The omission is telling. It tells the story of an invisible hand that *writes*. It constructs, as it accomplishes the task of knowing the real other, yet without asking – do they exist? They never reply to what was never asked; they are thus assumed to be *silent*. Everything has been said and done. But when "I Rigoberta Menchu" speaks, the question is not about who speaks but also *how* she is speaking. "My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans My experience is the reality of a whole people" (Menchu, 1984:1).

This statement encapsulates the fundamental *possibility of an impossibility*, i.e. of speaking through one's experience, which

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remains inseparable from the people. Taking this possibility out of the familiar context of *testimonio* and side-stepping the debates spinning around the aesthetic-ideological functions and status of literary genres, I will read this statement as an example, and the exemplary possibility, of a more general epistemological claim made in the name of experience as reality. Taking it as a point of departure, I will explore the various possibilities of 'recovering' experience for the construction of a subaltern identity.

My first argument is that any project granting the subaltern experience an epistemological privilege rests on two sets of central assumptions. First, it presumes the possibility of an objective *reality* (or truth) that can be represented through language. Second, it assumes the possibility of a definite subject status or *ontological identity* of the subject that can claim consciousness. It is the concept of experience that links the two assumptions, leading to a self-knowing subject that can claim consciousness of reality and can represent it through language.

Reading them against their grain, I will argue that these assumptions can be challenged in the face of the deconstructive critique of the 'metaphysics of presence'. Consequently, the project of granting the subaltern experience an epistemological privilege, so they can speak through their experience becomes not only an empirical but a theoretical impossibility.

II

Let's proceed to the possibilities of speaking through one's experience by asking the first question. Why should we theorise experience?

Arguably, experience is a word we cannot do without. Not only because it is so much part of our everyday language, so implicated in our narrative that it seems futile to argue for its expulsion or substitution, but also as Gayatri Spivak, the Marxist-feminist-deconstructivist once said "To make a new word is to run the risk of forgetting the problem or believing it solved" (Spivak, 1976:xv).

The problem begins in the present age which can be defined, following Deleuze, by the potency of *simulacrum*, where the distinction between the real and fake can no longer be made on the basis of psychological and representational modes. As Diana Fuss (1989:114) succinctly put it:

Belief in the truth if experienced is as much an ideological construction as belief in the experience of truth.

Notwithstanding the problematic nature of experience at the conceptual levels, various subalterns, gendered or otherwise, uniting under the banner of essentialism, privilege their shared experience with a view to construct a 'unified' identity in the cause of political resistance to the hegemonic West or overpowering patriarchy. However, they ought to face the fact that "the stand against the historically sold alliance between truth and experience has been a stand against humanism", to which Alice Jardine, a feminist philosopher, hastens to add "a positive step in most ways, but with a *twist*" (Jardine, 1985:146, emphasis added). Perhaps these twisting moments have raised cries of the "risks of essence" as echoed in Gayatri Spivak (1987) and Stephen Heath (1978).

The risk to which Jardine alluded also has to be taken in face of necessity, as Derrida (1981:34) said in an interview "a necessity which says that one must always yield, that one has to go where it calls, at the risk of never arriving." The risk of one's speaking through experience has to be taken, not by assuming an identity in the name of essentialism but by treating the subaltern experience as a figure of *aporia*, "an aporia which cannot simply be endured as such [because] The ultimate aporia is the impossibility of aporia as *such*" (Derrida, 1993:78, emphasis in original). Given the impossibility of endurance of aporia as such, one must yield to its impossibility. This would involve using experience conceptually, not as the 'structure of presence' but as the 'traces' of 'absence-of-apresence'

III

The post-positivist defence of experience is an attempt to rescue it from the devastating critique of what Satya Mohanty calls "theoretical post-modernism". As a feminist critic her position is representative of a version of post-positivism. She argues for the epistemological status of experience by outlining the naturalist-realist account. She suggests that experience is theoretically and socially constructed: "our access to our remotest personal feelings is dependent on social narratives, paradigms and even ideologies" (Mohanty, 1995:44). Anticipating the possible criticism that the organization and interpretation of experience is subject to arbitrary choices, determined by social location or ideological commitments, she unashamedly claims that experience (anger in this case) can be "assessed" and "legitimised", if one has access to the "right theory" and "relevant information" to be shared (Mohanty, 1995:50).

Mohanty supports the view of feminist theorists that women's experience is the repository of oppositional knowledge but qualifies

it by saying that it doesn't serve to ground women's knowledge but "articulates their material and epistemological interests" (Mohanty, 1995:51). Allying with the feminist 'stand point' theorist, for Mohanty the production of knowledge is not a matter of disinterested theoretical inquiry but is "tied to social and historical conditions" (Mohanty, 1995:51). She considers objective knowledge as achieved through experience rather than having been founded on it. Denying any notion of an "authenticity" of experience, she emphasises the "need to explore the possibility of a theoretical understanding of social and cultural identity in terms of objective social location" (Mohanty, 1995:54). She argues, therefore, for a *cognitivist* status of experience that can enable us to see and experience as "a source of both real knowledge and social mystification" by subjecting it to empirical and theoretical information of social and political arrangements (Mohanty, 1995:54). In the final analysis, it is the realistic assessment of one's own experience that can lead to the identification of a proper social location from where identity can be constructed.

The brief summary of Mohanty's arguments enables us to read her position in the following series of schematic statements: There is a Truth. The Truth is Real. The Real can be Represented. Representation is the Truth. Therefore her argument dictates (from the above scheme) that a personal experience is true (or its truth can be established via objective social location), which can be represented through language and on the basis of it an identity true-to-itself can be constituted. She concludes by grounding the experience as reliable episteme for the move towards the construction of subaltern identity. It is, therefore, the assumption of the Truth, as tied to objective representation, which experience can reveal as the condition upon which the epistemic privilege of the subaltern has to be based. The valorisation of experience as the ultimate arbiter of the subaltern identity can only be thought if we assume the identity of truth and truth of identity.

IV

Mohanty's analysis of experience and its relationship with identity presents a number of problems, some of which we discussed. Even her definition of experience as "referring very simply to the variety of ways humans process information," (Mohanty, 1995:45) and the usage of visual metaphors in statements like "emotions are what we see the world in terms of," (Mohanty, 1995:4) crop up not only to reveal the "innocence" of experience but also to demonstrate the unproblematic relationship between experience and the 'reality'.

These definitions enable us to read her account of experience according to the second set of assumptions, by which the experience (as cognitive faculty) must presume the presence of a knowing subject. But as Joan Scott (1993:400) has argued, any argument which takes experience as the point of origin establishes the prior existence of subjects:

the project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the working of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (.... as fixed identifies), its premises about what categories mean and how they operate and of its notion of subjects, origin and causes.

In trying to justify Scott's criticism, we note the uncanny absence in Mohanty's account of any constitution of the subject. For instance, in referring to feminist philosopher Naomi Scheman, Mohanty goes to great length to describe the process by which the emotional experience of a subject, denied in a patriarchal environment is theoretically constructed in a consciousness-raising group and whose essential identity is therefore already assumed (Mohanty, 1995:48-56). In doing so, Scott (1993:399-400) argued:

the evidence of difference becomes the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates and how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.

As a result, Mohanty fails to come up with any explanation of how the subject's perception of her identity (or subject-position) was primarily constituted. In the absence of any such explanation, her arguments become teleological: different or "new" experiences can construct the subject identity, which is always foregrounded by earlier experiences, *add infinitum*. Jonathan Culler (1983:43) captures the point rather effectively, though Mohanty quotes him in a dismissive tone:

Experience always has a duplicitous character: it has always already occurred and yet it is still to be produced an indispensable point of reference, yet never simply there.

V

If the duplicitous character of experience makes it an unreliable *episteme*, which always presupposes an identity, how can it be used for the construction of identity? It is useful to dwell a little further on Scott's position who argues in claiming to have formulated a 'non-originary' concept of experience [by *historicizing* it], yet without

proceeding from the prior assumptions of identity. In her essay, Scott (1993:401) argues that in order to know how differences are constituted:

we need to attend to the historical processes that through discourse position subjects and produce their experience. It is not individuals who have experience but the subjects who are constituted through experience.

In this formulation, experience becomes not only the subject but also the object of inquiry. The experience of the subject does not emerge as a privileged episteme which has direct, unmediated access to reality, rather like Spivak, Scott takes the complicity of the subject's position into account and immerses it in the construction of identity. Analysing the various uses of experience in the accounts of historians, Scott points out that British historian E. P. Thompson (who considered experience as constituting social and consciousness and class identity) ignored the fact that "when class becomes an overriding identity, other subject positions are subsumed by it, those of gender, for example" (Scott, 1993:404). The emphasis on unifying aspects of experience tends to favour "as selective reordering of information" which legitimised certain experiences. Thus, instead of making experience a foundation of subaltern identity, Scott (1993: 401) would suggest "historicize (experience) as well as to historicize the identities it produces"

Ignoring their differences, Scott's criticism of Thompson, who attempted to historicize subaltern identity (in terms of class) echoes Spivak's position on different register. As Spivak pointed out essentialising the subaltern experience can have the effect of instituting subaltern identity as an ontological foundation, on the basis of which the claims to situate ontological essence as the epistemological means of production of identity and knowledge can be made. Spivak (1987:254) then well serves the caution that this essentialising moment:

cannot be held as theoretical presupposition either, for it predicates the possibility of knowledge on identity (and) whatever the political necessity of holding the position knowledge is made possible and is sustained by irreducible difference, not identity.

In a similar vein, Scott pointed out that, in the case of Thompson, an analysis which essentialises subaltern experience institutes it as the ontological foundation of subaltern identity, history and politics. As in case of Spivak, Scott (1993:405) argues that the desire to privilege arises from the impulse "to establish women's

identity as people with agency." It is political necessity of marking one's space of identity, which leads to a masking of the discursive character of experience.

VI

Noting these overlaps between Spivak and Scott, should not stop us from seeing the significant differences between Spivak's reading of subaltern experience as identity and Scott's take on subaltern material. Scott's concern with the discursive character of experience and her scepticism with regards to the motives of essentialism (that which tends to reify and naturalise the subject, thus solidifying the ideological process of subject-construction), does not allow her to appreciate the notion of consciousness as "a strategic use of positive essentialism". Her objection to the Spivakian use of essentialism is that "whether strategic or not, essentialism appeals to the idea that there are fixed identities, visible to us as social or natural facts" (Scott, 1993:48). But this very objection assumes a categorical opposition between essentialism and anti-essentialism. In contrast, Spivak displaces the very opposition between essentialism and anti-essentialism as an affirmative gesture of deconstruction and Fuss (following Spivak) denies any essence to essentialism (Fuss, 1989: 21).

Second, Spivak's use of "strategic" in essentialism, if understood as deconstructive, cannot 'exceed the meaning' because as Derrida (1982:7) argued,

In the delineation of *difference*, everything is strategic and adventurous. Strategic because no transcendent truth presents outside the field of writing to govern theologically the totality of the field.

The point is that Spivak's strategy is without a *telos* or an end, it is untotalizable: "A strategy suits a situation: a strategy is not a theory." In contrast Scott, while thinking in metaphysical oppositions, retains the essence as a dialectizable contradiction, thus repeating all the essential motifs of metaphysics and so does not escape the deconstruction.

To emphasise this point we can take a closer look at Scott's treatment of identity as a discursive operation of history. For her identity as a certain subject position has to be seen as "ascribed, resisted or embraced" in order to unmask the discursive operations of history. Referring to British black cultural critic Stuart Hall, Scott (1993:409) argues that to historicise Jamaican black identity (as a

subject position) is not to make visible the assignment of a subject position (as in Spivak) or to reveal a new identity which was waiting to be expressed, but rather to mark the “particular movement or at a particular historical moment which created the ‘experience of blackness’, in order to take into account the effects of discourse.”

As a logical corollary to her argument, as we shall see, Scott (1993:409) must refuse a separation between experience and language. The experience and identity (based on experience) can only exist as linguistic events in the discursive operations of history. They can be grasped, therefore, through language which cannot determine but can arbitrate its meanings:

Subjects are discursively constituted and experience is a linguistic event but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning.

This assumed ‘unity’ grounds the possibility of the translatability of experience into reality as created through language but also spells out the task of the historian as the analysis of “categories of representation” (Scott, 1993:409):

Experience is subjects’ history. Language is the site of history’s enactment. Historical explanation therefore cannot separate the two. The question then becomes how to analyse the language.

Though Scott explores most of the problems of subjectivity, her authorization of experience as an epistemological, reliable and unsuspected category, is based on the model of experience as reflection. Despite the fact that she acknowledges the duplicitous character of experience, she remains faithful to the mimetic notion of experience. For her (Scott, 1993:409), experience is a knowable category which can be recuperated:

Experience can both confirm what is already known (we see what we have learned to see) and upset what has been taken for granted (when different meanings are in conflict) we read just our vision to take account of conflict or to resolve it – that it is what is meant by “learning from experience”

But as Jardine in outlining the post-structuralist understanding of experience, explains that for its theorist of modernity, only an empiricist could believe that language-experience-without-loss-of-reality, that it can faithfully translate experience, that it makes no difference (Jardine, 1985:151).

VII

As we have seen, Scott aiming to offer an alternate reading of the experience of the subaltern subject in a bid to construct her identity within the discourse that produces it followed the solution in historicism: “by tracking the appropriation of language in both directions, over the gap” and by situating and contesting that language (Scott, 1993:411). However, his attempt failed precisely because of her treatment of experience as the ‘structure-of-presence’, whose constitution and closure is marked off by the borders of discourse, *on both ends*, which locates the experience within the *cloture* of metaphysics. It is the experience in the field of possibility and mastery of discourse, which makes the room for its impossibility as empirical difficulty and not as impossibility as theoretical impossibility. It is the impossible dream of plenitude, as Derrida might say, which created the possibility of fencing off ‘being-as-presence’; engenders a ‘subject-present-to-itself’, to its thought and presence; which flames the desire “that resolution is (im)possible since answers to these questions do not exist apart from the discourse that produces them” (Scott, 1993:411).

In contrast Derrida argued that the structure of experience is a ‘trace’ and not a ‘presence-structure’. It does not point out to an inarticulable presence, but a lack of:

The constant of a presence-*eidōs*, *archē*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness or conscience, God, man and so forth.

Furthermore (Derrida, 1976:60),

“Experience” has always designated the relationship with a presence, whether that relationship had the form of consciousness or not. At any rate we must, according to this sort of contortion and contention the discourse is obliged to undergo, exhaust the resources of the concept of experience, before attaining and in order to attain by deconstruction, its ultimate foundation. It is the only way to escape the “empiricism”.

Experience is epistemologically suspect not only because of its duplicitous character that can afford the empirical possibility of recuperability through analysis of discourse, as Scott assumed, but also because of its fundamental relationship with presence, existence and truth. Under easure, we must think it as absence, lack-of-presence, in order to exhaust the metaphysical resources of the concept of experience. It cannot simply and as such lend itself to history, which betrays a mastery-over-experience and retains the

possibility of its recuperability, yet it cannot *simply* be endured. As a figure of aporia, we must take the risk to yield to its impossibility. Displacing the very concept of experience by putting it *sans rature*, the experience is thought as the "silence of discourse", as that which disturbs the subject-present-to-itself. A tumbling subject falls to the sounds of silence. Experience cannot recuperate subaltern's identity.

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