



Is the Subaltern Indigenous? Rethinking Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in Settler Colonial Contexts

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Abstract

Postcolonial theorizations of the "subaltern" have had a significant impact on critical debates on marginality, representation, and voice. But its relevance to Indigenous contexts, especially in settler colonial settings, is problematic. This paper explores the extent to which the subaltern captures the sovereignty, political autonomy, and epistemic difference of Indigenous peoples. Using the lens of settler colonial studies and Indigenous political theory, the paper will contend that the subaltern category is used to focus on silencing structures, although it seems to subsume Indigenous struggles within a general discourse of marginality, thus obliterating the claim to sovereignty and nationhood. Reflecting on the politics of representation, voice, and the ontological differences between subalternity and Indigeneity, the paper puts forward a recasting of Spivak's phrase in relation to Indigenous resistance and self-determination. Ultimately, it suggests that Indigenous peoples are not only subaltern but sovereign political actors whose struggles are not merely subaltern.

Keywords: Subaltern, Indigenous sovereignty, settler colonialism, representation, epistemic violence, political agency.

Introduction

"Can the subaltern speak?" is a decisive question in postcolonial studies, emphasizing the exclusionary practices of subaltern subjects and the role of intellectual discourse in collaboration with epistemic violence (Spivak). When considering Indigenous peoples in settler colonial settings, the explanatory power of this approach is undermined. Indigenous communities are not simply marginalized subjects, but nations with distinct political identities, lands, and ways of knowing (Coulthard 7).

This leads to a question: Does the subaltern category encompass the realities of Indigenous people, or does it conceal the Indigenous sovereignty demands? This paper argues that despite the subaltern model emphasizing the processes of exclusion, it nonetheless misidentifies political identities of the Indigenous peoples through the identification of sovereignty with subalternity.



Subaltern and the Problem of Representation

The subaltern is crucially a question of representation for Spivak. In her groundbreaking claim, the subaltern is more than a socially and economically marginalized individual. The subaltern is, rather, a subject that does not have the voice to speak within the structures of knowledge, power, and representation. The subaltern not only cannot speak because it is silent, but, when it does speak, it speaks only through the mediated, translated, interpreted, or appropriated language of the dominant institutions. Colonial archives and histories, nationalist narratives, academic language, the law, and intellectual elites' perspectives, for example, often claim to speak for the subaltern, yet, in doing so, prohibit the subaltern from appearing as a speaking subject. As such, Spivak's oft-cited question, "Can the subaltern speak?", does not literally mean that the subaltern does not or cannot speak. It is rather a provocative inquiry into the conditions of intelligibility, legitimacy, or power of their speech within the dominant regimes of knowledge.

This point is significant as it reveals the violence of representation. Representation is always mediated. To represent is also to categorize, interpret, translate, and certainly manipulate. The subject of the subaltern, thus, is represented only mediately. The subaltern voice is translated through the discourse of the state, the academic, the reformist, the colonizer, and/or the nationalist. Spivak's analysis allows us to see the way colonialism not only rages over bodies and lands but also the way in which the colonial subject can be known, portrayed, and understood.

But it is problematic to apply this argument to Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples must not just be thought of as subjects that speak through hegemonic representation. They have always voiced their political, cultural, spiritual, and land claims in many ways. These include oralities, rituals, collective memories, treaty-making, lawsuits, protests, land claims, artworks, and all forms of cultural acts that continue to occur in Indigenous communities. As Audra Simpson writes in *Mohawk Interruptus*, Indigenous peoples have spoken, through refusal, resistance, and declarations of political life (11). Designating "speech" is not the act of its entry into imperial archives or academic production; it is the act of Indigenous political and cultural communities. This means that it is not the lack of the Indigenous voice. Rather, it is the sovereignty of Indigenous voice that may be denied. Yes, Indigenous peoples speak, but settler states and the world of dominant institutions don't often listen to such speech as the voice of a self-determining Indigenous people. Their speech might be reduced to cultural troubles, minority entitlements, or claims of welfare or identity. This misrecognition of Indigenous speech is based on denying its politics of land, law, nation, and sovereignty.

As such, the problem is one of politics and recognition, not speechlessness. Indigenous speech is translated or not in accordance with the expectations of the settler state. When Indigenous people speak the languages of culture, heritage, or diversity, they may be given some voice. But when they speak as citizens with sovereignty and claims to land, jurisdiction, treaty rights, and self-determination, their words may be ignored as unruly or excessive. But what appears as silence can be a refusal to meet certain demands of recognition.

Consequently, care should be taken not to apply the subaltern model to Indigenous subjects. Indigenous peoples are not speaking subjects, dependent on other people to speak on their behalf. They are political bodies who have their own economies of knowledge, memory, law and politics. It's not a question of Indigenous peoples speaking, but of colonial powers recognizing Indigenous speech as sovereign. This allows us to change the conversation from representation to recognition, and from silence to political authority.

Settler Sovereignty

Settler sovereignty is key to understanding why Indigenous peoples cannot be defined simply as subaltern because their subalternity cannot simply be explained away by their suppressed politics. Settler colonialism is not the same as classical colonialism insofar as its purpose is not just the exploitation of labor, wealth, or natural resources by colonial officials. But rather to create a new political community on Indigenous land, by displacing and replacing it with settlers. Here, Patrick Wolfe's definition of settler colonialism as the "logic of elimination" is crucial because it suggests that elimination is not just the physical removal of Indigenous peoples, but also the eradication of Indigenous peoples as political, spatial, and knowledge subjects (Wolfe 388). While elimination



might take the form of conflicts, forced removals, assimilation, legal dispossession, boarding schools, conversion and appropriation, it might also involve a conversion of Indigenous land into settler property.

Settler colonialism's agenda is thus permanent residence, not "temporary" occupation. Settler sovereignty rests on the normalization of settler land ownership. For a settler state to appear to be legitimate, Indigenous claims to sovereignty, law, economic relations, and memory must be eradicated or undermined. Indigenous sovereignty is a threat to settler sovereignty by reminding the colonial world that land was never uninhabited, naturally pre-given, and never freely given. Therefore, settler colonialism not only subordinates Indigenous peoples, it seeks to erase their political world with a new political world. The settler state is presented as original, legitimate, and as a whole, while Indigenous sovereignty presents it as historical, violent, and deficient.

In this situation, the term subaltern does not apply. A subaltern is defined as an aspect of social politics, but the term also refers to a marginalized figure in a structure of domination, denied access to the processes of representation, power, and institution-building. However, Indigenous peoples are not simply "internal minorities" to the settler state. They are people who are prior to the colonial order. Their demands are not demands for a more representative place within the order; they are demands that outlast and outdo orders. Indigenous political claim-making disturbs the pretension to sovereignty of the colonially formed state because it involves claims to older and ongoing relations to land, law, governance, and community.

That is why Indigenous claims are often not demands for inclusion, but claims with respect to prior status. Whereas settler states identify with the notion of the "new nation," Indigenous political claims are about asserting original nationhood, autonomy, and land-based sovereignty (Alfred 45). Some prefer to speak of a struggle for access to settler institutions as citizens of a lesser status. They want to remain people with political rights before and after colonization. They want to maintain and renew their relations to land, treaty, jurisdiction, and governance; to revitalize Indigenous life-worlds. These claims are not about social mobility, cultural representation, or representation justice.

Consequently, it is not clear that describing Indigenous peoples as subaltern will not conflate two situations: social marginality and political dispossession. Social marginalization is exclusion from the state; political dispossession is the dispossession of territory, sovereignty and jurisdiction. Indigenous peoples may well be marginalized and impoverished, racialized and excluded from social institutions, but this is because of larger colonial dynamics. The problem is that the issue is not so much that Indigenous peoples have been excluded and marginalized from settler society, but that the attempted removal of Indigenous sovereignty is foundational to settler society.

As such, settler sovereignty needs to be seen as a work in progress, not as a historical truth. The presence of Aboriginal peoples remains politically challenging because it calls into question the natural right of the settler state to rule. They are not subjugated subjects who need representation, but they are independent sovereign peoples whose prior existence undermines the authority of colonialism. Concerns that they are only subaltern obscure this truth and undermine the political significance of Indigenous resistance.

Epistemic Violence

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reference to epistemic violence is highly pertinent to how Indigenous knowledges were judged to be "lesser", irrational, primitive, or incomprehensible by colonial powers. Epistemic violence describes how master systems of knowledge obscure, misrepresented or discredited the modes of knowledge of those who were marginalized. Undeniably, the epistemic dimension of colonialism was not only a loss of land and sovereignty for Indigenous peoples; it was also a loss of epistemic sovereignty. Their cosmologies, oral narratives, ecological knowledge, spiritual practices, and relational philosophies were often relegated to the status of superstition or myth rather than rich sources of knowledge. And in this way, colonialism was at work not just in military and bureaucratic domains but also in epistemic ones.

This claim of Spivak about the subaltern is valuable because it reveals the way in which colonialism can speak for the subaltern whom it has already silenced. The subaltern comes to be seen as powerless, passive, and reliant on elite interpretations. But when this thesis is applied to Indigenous peoples, it must be qualified. It may be unhelpful to represent Indigenous peoples merely as not being able to "speak", as this could reproduce the



muteness of the status quo. Indigenous peoples have never been silent, amnesiac or passive, but have storied and theorized their experiences. It is not because they "cannot speak" but because dominant institutions are unwilling to listen, or recognize and accept Indigenous speech as legitimate knowledge.

Indigenous authors and academics have confronted the notion that Indigenous peoples are the "silent victims" of colonial modernity. For example, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson points out that Indigenous communities have always created knowledge from land-based practices, storytelling, ceremony, kinship, and acts of resurgence (2). In *As We Have Always Done*, Simpson suggests that Indigenous resistance is not constrained to institutional and political protests or written theoretical analyses. It also takes the form of embodied knowledge, community obligations, language lifeways, cultural persistence, and land and non-human relationships (L. Simpson 22). Such forms of knowledge may not always meet the standards of Western academic and institutional recognition, but they have their own intellectual, ethical, and political pedagogies.

This means the issue is one of recognition. Printed institutions can't always make sense of Indigenous knowledge. They insist upon translating Indigenous demands into legal, developmental, multicultural, or theoretical terms. In doing so, Indigenous sovereignty and land claims are often either reduced to metaphors, symbols, or cultural tropes. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue persuasively in their essay, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," Indigenous demands for sovereignty and land are not metaphors. They suggest that when decolonization is stripped of its material claim to return of Indigenous land and life, then the metaphorical use of decolonization as an image for social justice, diversity, and critical consciousness emerges (Tuck and Yang 3).

This is the limit of a subaltern approach to Indigenous sovereignty. Indigenous peoples are not merely subalterns waiting to be represented but also sovereign peoples with vibrant intellectual traditions, political goals, and land-based projects. Epistemic violence may thus be understood as not just silencing, but misrecognizing. Colonialism not only does not allow Indigenous peoples to speak, but it also does not listen to them in the ways that they choose to. Decoloniality ought not just speak for Indigenous peoples but listen to Indigenous epistemic modes of knowing, resisting, resurgent living, and being sovereign.

Political Agency

Indigenous sovereignty cannot be completely explained in terms of subalternity. Although the status of the subaltern is helpful for addressing issues of marginality, voicelessness, and exclusion from the dominant political representational field, Indigenous political agency is more than subaltern. Sovereignty is not marginality, victimhood, or silence. It is synonymous with political power, territoriality, collective self-determination, and the ability of a people to govern themselves in accordance with their laws, practices, and land relations. As Glen Coulthard explains, Indigenous struggles need to be understood with regard to land, recognition, and colonial power, not just in terms of wanting representation in the political institutions of the settler state (Coulthard 13). The discourse of sovereignty thus moves the emphasis away from victimhood to sovereignty, silence to governance, and representation to self-determination.

Previous subaltern studies scholarship has focused on the question of representation: who represents the oppressed, how their voices are filtered, and how elite histories silence them. This analysis is useful in decrying narratives of colonialism and nationalism that marginalize oppressed populations. Yet, Indigenous struggles are not necessarily about seeking representation within the status quo of colonial institutions. Indigenous people do not demand equality with the nation-state, the university, the court, or the archive. Indeed, their political mobilization often goes against these institutions' very legitimacy because these institutions are perpetuated by the seizure of indigenous land and the rejection of indigenous sovereignty.

This is a vital point. Indigenous political action is more than simply about representation or inclusion; it is about colonialism. It is a struggle for the revitalization of relations with land, an Indigenous politics of governance, the preservation of Indigenous languages and ceremonies, and the assertion of collective life beyond the constraints of settler colonialism. For this reason, Indigenous resistance is not just negative but positive. It is a place of resurgence, continuity, and autonomy. Indigenous peoples are not passive recipients of recognition from



the mainstream world order; they are active political subjects who self-govern and resist through recognizing their ways of being, knowing, and governing.

Audra Simpson's saying in *Mohawk Interruptus* is particularly pertinent, arguing that Indigenous politics might mean refusing to be acknowledged. Refusal involves refusing to be governed according to the terms on which the settler state wants to incorporate, contain, or eradicate Indigenous identity and sovereignty. It is not just that Indigenous people want recognition from (within) colonial systems; they may refuse to be recognized from (within) these systems and challenge their assertions of absolute sovereignty (A. Simpson 105). This politics of refusal calls into question a liberal politics aimed at inclusion. It asserts that Indigenous sovereignty is not multicultural accommodation, symbolic representation, or representation.

Thus, to represent Indigenous peoples as subaltern is to misrecognize their struggle. It obscures the cause of decolonization as the appeal of representation. It conflates political resistance with speech. Indigenous peoples are not only demanding a say in the question of who can speak, or represent, them; they are insisting upon having political jurisdiction, legal regimes, and territorial relations that are older and more encompassing than the state. Their struggle cannot simply be to participate in the colonial domain but to refuse it, resist it, and exceed it. In this case, political agency needs to be understood as sovereign action: the exercise of Indigenous jurisdiction, memory, land, and futurity in opposition to the ongoing realities of colonialism.

Revisiting the Subaltern in Indigenous Spaces

There is a need for a critical rethinking of the subaltern in relation to Indigeneity. Though both are forms of oppression, they are not the same. Indigeneity is rooted in particular relationships to land, history, and community that go beyond the structural determinants of subalternity (Byrd xvii). Moreover, Indigenous ways of knowing contest the universality of Western theoretical approaches. As some, such as Coulthard, have argued, the politics of recognition often reproduce coloniality by categorizing Indigenous assertions as not sovereign (Coulthard 25).

Thus, the struggle of Indigenous people cannot be interpreted as a need to be included within dominant political or academic frameworks. They also tend to claim the authority of those structures by the old forms of law, memory, belonging, and collective self-determination. The risk of diminishing land-based sovereignty to subalternity and social marginality, political authority to cultural identity, is too great. A more cautious paradigm should realize the fact that indigenous peoples may be subalternized by the colonial power, but they are not subalternizable. Their resistance is also a resurgence, refusal, and renewal of sovereign Indigenous worlds.

Conclusion

The subaltern has played a critical role in highlighting practices of silencing and marginalization. Yet, its use in Indigenous struggles in the context of settler colonialism is problematic. In framing Indigenous struggles as marginal, it ignores their sovereignty and self-determination. Indigenous people are not just subaltern but sovereign people whose struggles call for a recasting of postcolonial theory.

This re-casting needs to go beyond the language of voice alone and to the land, treaty, memory, jurisdiction and political authority. Whether or not the Indigenous peoples can speak is not the issue, but whether colonial and settler institutions are willing to listen to them as self-determining peoples. Indigenous resistance, thus, is not to be narrowed down to a hunt of finding a place of representation within the dominant structures. It is also a claim to still being a nation, being epistemically autonomous and having collective futures. A more sufficient theoretical framework has to acknowledge Indigenous peoples as political actors whose demand is beyond the periphery, and shakes the very premises of settler sovereignty.



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