

Diaspora, Intellectuals, and the State

Timothy Brennan

NO AREA OF PUBLIC CONSCIENCE ILLUSTRATES THE ANXIOUS MEETING of state policy and cultural mythology more than illegal immigration. As once-confident national polities in Europe and the United States suffer a series of economic shocks, a backlash has gathered momentum, targeting the imported labor that in many ways symbolizes the soft core of the old regimes' economic foundations. A variety of extremist political actors have sprung up to declare an invasion of immigrants corrupting the homeland. Umberto Bossi in Italy, Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands, Pia Kjaersgaard in Denmark, and Nick Griffin in Britain are not simply the latest prophets of social fear but key players in well-funded electoral parties. They have added their names to the list of better-known figures in the annals of European xenophobia such as Jörg Haider in Austria and Jean-Marie le Pen in France and made significant inroads in their respective parliaments and city halls.¹ The resurgence takes place at the very moment that the European Economic Community is rattled by a series of debt crises, and as conservatives in Italy, France, and, above all, Germany make a bid to rewrite Europe's long-standing social democratic pact by way of punishing austerity measures. The climate of extremes sets the stage for a ramped-up rhetoric against various enemies within.

Timothy Brennan works on the relationship between comparative literature, world literature, and global English. He is a member of both the departments of Cultural Studies & Comparative Literature, and English at University of Minnesota. He is also affiliated with the Institute for Global Studies and the Institute for Advanced Studies. He is the author most recently of *Secular Devotion: Afro-Latin Music and Imperial Jazz*, and edited, introduced, and co-translated the first English edition of Alejo Carpentier's classic study, *Music in Cuba*. His other recent books include *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right*, *Empire in Different Colors* and *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*.

¹ Accounts of the rise of the New Right in Europe and the continent's changing policies on immigration have been particularly well treated by the Institute of Race Relations in London and its journal, *Race and Class*. See, e.g., Paul Gordon, "Immigrants, Migrants and Refugees in Europe: A Bibliography," *Race and Class* 32, no. 3 (January 1991): 153–60.



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The American version of this agony can be seen against the backdrop of similar calculations. Arizona law SB1070—currently under challenge in American courts—has placed a half million *sans papiers* of Arizona in fear of imminent deportation and brought with it heightened police and vigilante harassment. Vilified by progressives as the rash act of an outlaw state, the law might be seen rather as an American version of a now broadly Western reaction, embodied in the United States by well-heeled Tea Party “mavericks” like Christine O’Donnell and the Reverend Terry Jones. Crucially, the economic jolts that fuel the anxieties are the outcome of policies engineered by a postnationalist corporate and financial sector working in concert with government. Massive unregulated speculation by Wall Street and the predictable collapse that followed effectively transferred money from the Treasury to private hands, contributing to the desperation already felt by those on the losing end of the job drain to global low-wage zones. While leveraging US bonds with Chinese money, the government publicly endorses the harsh border Wall in the American Southwest even as it quietly encourages a mobile force of guest workers needed for cyclical labor demands, notoriously unsafe industries, or low-status service jobs.

Everything in this scenario seems to justify the focus in cultural theory over the last few decades on the cosmopolitan subaltern.² Often criticized for being irrelevant or arcane, the humanities of the university have been, in this area at least, ahead of events. Within that formation, it is especially work on diaspora that has seemed prescient, standing as it does not only against monocultural biases or racism in the media but for diasporic peoples remaking themselves in the often-hostile setting of fortress Europe and post-Ellis Island America. Questions of labor and economic policy have come in for analysis as well, although rarely with an interest in the changing character of the state that accompanies these developments, or the political actors seeking a new role in that state on behalf of a reassertive right-wing nationalism in competition with its social democratic alternative.

And that, I would like to argue, is a problem. For, despite its proximate causes in civil war, ethnic slaughter, dictatorship, and famine, immigration has grown exponentially because of new strategies of labor mobility, the destruction or weakening of foreign states, and the consequences of the structural inequalities in trade laid down along older imperial pathways. As I will explore at the end of this essay, there are aspects of immigration and diaspora that recast the question of intellectuals and the state in precisely these terms, but that our discourse seems unable to encompass. I am referring to the US policy not of limiting immigration but of encouraging it when the immigrants are former allies from US military operations abroad. In this sort of example, which is customarily treated in feature journalism or the exposés of the alternative press rather than in a theory journal, we find a different kind of diasporic subject, fitting less well within the familiar model of immigrant mobility, fluidity, and the transgression of borders. The police—to adapt Rancière’s term—is not so much the antinomy of radical democracy but its fulfillment. For no theory of equality before the law, and no analysis of the part played by “illegals” in a democratic polity, can achieve depth without exploring the state in this, its coercive and ideological dimension.

Although there is no symmetry between them, it is important to concede at the outset that cultural theory shares with the New Right a tendency to cast economic and political conflicts in

² See, e.g., Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Legal Common Sense* (London: LexisNexis Butterworths, 2002), 458–93; Stephen Morton, “The Subaltern: Genealogy of a Concept,” in his *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity, and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2007); Homi K. Bhabha, “Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism,” in *Text and Nation: Cross-Disciplinary Essays on Cultural and National Identities*, ed. Laura García-Morena and Peter C. Pfeiffer (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996), 191–207. An international conference on the cosmopolitan subaltern was held at Humboldt University in Berlin, June 6–8, 2008.

cultural terms. As Francis Mulhern has argued, the displacement of an everyday understanding of political organization and struggle by a theory of *culture* tends to see the former as tainted by the vulgarity of democracy and the trivial pursuits of modernity, and the latter as a more authentic, popular genius of the arts and intellectual life.³ This gesture, Mulhern shows, derives from the conservative traditions of *Kulturkritik*, extending from late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century figures like Johann Gottfried Herder and Matthew Arnold up through twentieth-century eminences like T. S. Eliot and Thomas Mann. This was a tradition of grand polymaths and influential celebrities, often with old-world ties and significant class connections, who were antagonistic to the leveling forces of the market, especially its making the uneducated masses new arbiters of value, thereby obliterating the organic societies of the past based on the merit of distinction with a concept of civilization based on empty progress. Mulhern finds that the media critique and discourse theory of Birmingham cultural studies (it is only one of his examples) in some ways carries on the outlooks of these unlikely predecessors. Stuart Hall shares space with intellectuals like Julian Benda and F. R. Leavis in the sense that both groups mount an angry campaign against bourgeois utility and power politics, dismissing them in favor of the power/knowledge of cultural self-fashioning, symbolic practices, and the critical dissection of dominant discourses.

The New Right, in this account, has a great deal less to do with this older conservatism than the cultural Left. For the former deploys the rhetoric of culture precisely to mobilize its organizational work. If the Right speaks of the absolute and nonnegotiable differences among cultures, cultural theory speaks, in an apparently resistant way, of transborder, hybrid, make-do forms of creative cultural heroism. The Right, in locating cultural incompatibility as the social ill to be eradicated, seeks to realize its vision by way of state policies that restrict immigration, defund integration, and redline minority communities, while the Left has no parallel organizational response. It has only critique. In other words, the cultural focus shared with the Right has no political counterpart apart from the culture *as* politics borrowed from *Kulturkritik*. What it might have shared with the New Right but does not is a willingness to address the energetic and disgruntled constituencies that seek to revamp, rather than wish away, the national state by identifying globalization as a betrayal of the commonwealth. In most cultural theory, however, this take on globalization is considered conservative since it associates the politics of cultural identity (often practiced by minority professionals) with a conservatism of its own (as Mulhern argued). At any rate, for us it is not the focus on “identity” that is the problem—indeed, why so many of the disenfranchised are drawn to the Republican Party, or seek solutions in attacking vulnerable immigrants, *identifying* with these positions, is crucial to work out. The problem is that our concept of identity is not broad enough to include political positions.

In his invaluable, if underread, book *The Sociology of Culture* (1981), Raymond Williams makes a case for viewing society as being a mutually constitutive network of institutions, class fractions, schools, and customs—what he calls a “realized signifying system”—in which no clear demarcation exists between culture, politics, and the economy.⁴ Apart from offering a much sharper and more comprehensive model of analysis than exists in *Kulturkritik*’s counterposing of culture to politics, or in cultural theory’s exaggeration of culture *as* politics, he uses the instruments of cultural sociology to discuss where humanist researchers like himself fit in this complex of institutions. He looks more closely at the self doing the seeing and speaking, where “self” is seen not as a national or racial identity alone but also as a field of interests and positions. This is a

³ Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).

matter, as I have argued elsewhere, of what we might call cultures of belief.⁵ Let me dwell on the phrase “cultures of belief” itself, since it is at the heart of my argument about diaspora and the subaltern in the rest of this essay and casts my opening comments about recent flashpoints over immigration in an appropriate light.



The great fear over immigration, legal or not, is not usually juridical. It dwells rather on the offensive culture of intruders, on the religion of Islam, polygamy, exotic dress, illiteracy. In this way, the charges replay claims of a domestic divide among citizens (white and nonwhite) on political grounds. This divide, albeit political itself, is so fundamental that it attains for them the status of the natural, unthinking, fully internalized behavior typically invoked by the term “cultural.” All possible points of departure and all sense-making are nonfungible for them, and so it is not two enemies—liberals and foreigners—they mean to oppose, but a single, fused, beyond-all-here-ness. We need to dwell on the significance of this fusion. Political value and racial ontology are here inseparable. If spurious beliefs draw liberals to the feel-good dramas of racial victimology, so too do minorities tend, when permitted by law or the local police, to vote on the left side of the ledger. What, then, are the implications of inserting into this mix the idea of a culture of belief?

First, it is not belief that is at issue, but cultures of belief—solidarities of outlook and affiliative ideological or aesthetic bonds that create ways of speaking, gestures, verbal tells, and communal patterns of exchange that distinguish humans as types, just as one can spot the differences between most Europeans and Americans in the way they handle silverware. Like-thinkers who have never met can pick one another out of a crowd before anyone has uttered a word. Over time these communities can take on all the solidity of family, racial enclave, and place of origin and can be as marked as identities of body, birthright, and blood. Ways of dressing, speaking, and moving situate cultures of belief as strongly as they do nationalities or ethnic groupings. Even in a simple gesture there is a betrayal of one’s values and social outlooks, and more than a few job interviews, fraternity applications, elections, or marriage proposals have been determined by means other than the usual dossiers of gender, skin color, social connections, or socioeconomic status.

It is not clear at first why this sort of ethnography matters in a discussion of the state or of intellectual habitus, except for the massive legal and political ramifications of this large category of allowable discrimination. In the US context, after all, belief is sanctioned only insofar as it refers to a belief in God, and the only legal and civic protections for believers—the only constitutional guarantees against prejudicial treatment—have to do with religion. One is completely free to dismiss students, employees, or candidates based on their political beliefs but not their religious ones. One need not bother complaining to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission if one receives no raise or is denied promotion because one’s last book was too “political.” In legal terms, American society is secular, but its Constitution is far more restrictive in the rights it grants than the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was written (with significant input from intellectuals from Latin America) in 1948 in the wake of World War II when the most famous right-wing political party that ever existed was roundly defeated, and when many

⁵ This idea is developed in my *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

European countries were poised to install socialist, Labour, or left social democratic governments. The systematic murdering of leftists is a fundamental feature of the postwar period without it ever having been the focus of a genocide convention; and the familiar list of the victims of Nazism almost never includes communists, its first and primary targets. This and the profoundly global character of the war itself moved the Universal Declaration to recognize that most cases of the harassment, killing, torture, and exiling of citizens, as a matter of a simple head count, are the result of one's political beliefs, and so it explicitly guarantees civic and secular forms of freedom of conscience.

This reluctance to name, and then to think through, secular cultures of belief is therefore bound up with the problem of intellectuals and the state, for it relies on the monopoly of one kind of identity at the expense of another, serving in that way to forestall or delegitimize certain kinds of dissidence by portraying them as willed, uninherited, carefully fashioned, or simply artificial. In other words, there is a troubling homology between the ethnocentric gesture as such and the liberal antipathy to nonmainstream political belief.

The logic of affiliation this reasoning involves is similar to the one described by Walter Benn Michaels in *The Shape of the Signifier*, where he takes issue with the unthinking triad "class, race, and gender" by pointing out their incommensurability. Capitalism can tolerate the equality of races and genders even if they are at present treated unequally, but it can never allow the equality of classes. Class *means* inequality; that is its very essence, and the whole point of the distinction. Intellectuals instinctively endorse the struggle that does not marginalize them, argues Benn Michaels, that leaves them well within the scope of official sentiment, in part (as they complexly, but effectively, argue) because identity for them really means the *identification* (the making identical) of a politics of the physical body and the physicality of the literary text. The latter's meaning is, in their account, entirely subject to the subject reading it—to the body-in-the-world, physically, in its textual presence.⁶ For Michaels, then, literary and aesthetic culture of this sort reenacts as ideology and as metaphor the suppression of belief-as-political-position in favor of bodily identities. The relativism of literary meaning is the counterpart of a denial of affiliations based on shared positions where each individual creates the meaning of the text that bears witness to his or her presence in reading it.

The notion of a culture of belief, on the other hand, exposes an ideological loophole in the very scope of identity by marking a certain fluidity between choice and environment, will and performance. Above all, it forces us to contemplate the gaps in our laws and the impoverishment of our politics by demonstrating that communities of secular belief not only have a collective personal style but can be, and often are, condemned or extolled by others who do not hesitate to target its members as distinct social *types*—as peoples with a cultural identity passed along from one generation to another: a *people*, in short. Whatever success the older, more restrictive, politics of identity had, it frequently welcomed the already-existing limited rhetoric of rights set up to defend bodies so long as they were innocent and passive—a practice that tended further to displace the significance of belief in matters of discrimination. What had happened in this earlier version as an inevitable but unintended corollary has become in its latest manifestation a deliberate policy. And so now the political has more and more become in cultural theory a way to designate, even prescribe, a kind of passivity with ethical intent. This is expressed by a variety of

⁶ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

theorists today and constitutes a significant contemporary trend.⁷ It is captioned nicely by an emerging scholar at a prestigious US university who advocates in a well-received book a “refusal of action,” “inaction,” and “*letting nothing happen*”—a corollary of the rhetorical obsession in theory of positioning oneself only in a positionless way, with the view to qualify, to suspend judgment, and to ironize in order to mark the insufficiency of the human and the valuelessness of its arrogant claims to reason.⁸ To this degree, belief (as argument, conviction, affiliative gesture) has not simply been overwhelmed or neglected but singled out by a theoretical outlook that effectively culture-jams the political position as such.

It is perhaps first clearly in Georges Bataille, but later in others such as Paul de Man, that indeterminacy and the ineffable came to be sovereign principles rather than the result of the insufficiency of knowledge that one wanted to overcome.⁹ The latently theological found throughout Bataille’s work, and, of course, at the very core of deconstruction’s fascination with hermeneutic mystery, has lately given way to the militant religiosity of so-called secularism studies.¹⁰ Among other things, the latter wants to challenge the public/private distinction altogether by claiming (and not for the first time) that secularism is itself a religion: the most intolerant one of all, in fact, since it seeks to occupy a position of arbiter in order to regulate religious belief.¹¹ This view, which has become a trend, seeks to present itself as a bold and innovative enterprise following the leads provided by Charles Taylor’s influential book *A Secular Age*. But the argument that secularism is an oppressive new religion is that of the interwar philosophical Right and finds itself expressed in the work of, among others, Alexandre Koyré, Alexandre Kojève, Martin Heidegger, Bataille, and (somewhat later) Raymond Aron.¹² One can see how this focus on inheritance, on the *not chosen*, exists in harmony with the posthumanist, and later posthuman, emphases of the interwar Right, from which so many of the themes of cultural theory today come. The panoply of positions in this field whose purpose is to deny the subject’s agency is a symptom of its self-portrait as a responsible New Left. This responsibility is manifested, in its eyes, by re-

⁷ I examine this trend in some detail in “Running and Dodging: The Rhetoric of Doubleness in Contemporary Theory,” in “New Sociologies of Literature,” ed. James English, special issue, *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 277–301.

⁸ I am thinking of Anne-Lise François, *The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), but I do not mean to single out one person. Similar examples of the outlook can be found in Jacques Rancière’s *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) and *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), in theories of “surface reading,” and in Derridean cultural studies.

⁹ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vols. 2–3 (New York: Zone Books, 1988–91); Paul de Man, “The Concept of Irony,” in his *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 164–84.

¹⁰ Ian Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn ‘Arabi* (London: Routledge, 2004); and Ian Almond, “How Not to Deconstruct a Dominican: Derrida on God and ‘Hypertruth,’” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 2 (June 2000): 329–44.

¹¹ E.g., Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Janet R. Jacobsen, with Ann Pelligrini, “Dreaming Secularism,” *Social Text* 64 (Summer 2000): 1–27; Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). The critique of secularity in this formation, although presenting itself as unprecedented, fails to draw on, or even acknowledge, the long tradition of self-critical work on secularity found, among other places, in Max Weber, in William James, or, more recently, in Edward Said’s “secular criticism.”

¹² For an overview of this period and the rise of antihumanism, see Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

jecting not simply the political goals of earlier generations but the very possibility of thinking in terms that might reproduce the assault on the liberal state that was once represented by cultures of belief as varied as the Levellers, Jacobins, Mau Maus, and communists. At a deep genetic level, in other words, this Left would like to disable the concept of belief as a secular project of rational controversy. But without a commitment to accountability for one's positions, theory tends to devolve into position-taking and becomes an echo or dissimulation of the insurrectionary intellect.

The more obvious salience of the word "belief" in this context, though, needs to be brought to the fore in order to appreciate some of its many valences. In the media and in a number of popular nonfiction books, the term is usually a code word for "faith" and is prompted by the Christian revivalism that came into its own in the United States during the Reagan era and its aftermath. In this reappearance of a turbulent and assertive monotheism worldwide, a number of themes have emerged. For our purposes, the principal one took the form of a confession that intellectuals in an age of religious reassertion needed to rethink their utopian projects in the face of an irrationalism that could not be ridiculed or even argued away. It had its own internal, subaltern logic, often portrayed as welcome humility before the world's intractable riddles.

To invoke secular belief in *this* framework (Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Rustom Bharucha, Jacques Rancière, and Ashis Nandy have done so as well, although somewhat differently) is to contradict the idea that faith—conceived as dedication, passion, or commitment—is religion's monopoly.¹³ But here we confront a problem that speaks to the reasons for the religious turn in cultural theory. For it came about exactly to forestall what were perceived to be the crimes of earlier Left *doxa*, which were seen as dedicated to winning arguments by way of masculinist debates and doctrinaire programs that needed to be formally, not only substantively, rejected. Some of the attempts to counter the new intolerance of militant monotheism emphasize the valuable uses of the transcendent and the irrational for political movements of transformation—ideological outlooks that can be, and have been, written off as coercive or supercilious.

But leaving that particular antagonism to the side for a moment, the struggle is now more basic: namely, to preserve the idea of argument and persuasion at all, and in any form, and to make the point that the end of truth as a matter of reason and evidence is not the uncontroversial reality of some discovery by the Copernican revolutions of theory but the credo of a marketplace of images working hand in hand with a repressive apparatus of the state and its educational and media institutions.

Cultural theory's reception of Jürgen Habermas, one of the most insistent defenders of political agency and secularity, is instructive in this regard. His *A Theory of Communicative Action* (or at least the idea of it, since it is not clear that it was actually read) was summarily dismissed throughout the 1980s and 1990s, its vision of a controlled encounter among interlocutors who limit semantic indeterminacy in pursuit of real debate was generally considered a fictional ideal, and almost comically inadequate when compared with the semantic play of Derrida. Apart from the fact that these criticisms simplified the linguistic dimensions of Habermas's grasp of communication in speech-encounters in favor of a vernacular deconstructive credo, they also missed

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001); Alain Badiou, *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics* (London: Verso, 2005); Rustom Bharucha, *In the Name of the Secular: Contemporary Cultural Activism in India* (London: Athlone, 2000); Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* (New York: Verso, 2006); Ashis Nandy, *Bonfire of Creeds* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

the fundamental point that the effort to communicate—that is, the desire to do so in order to perform mutual tasks—is itself a factor in the realization of any communicative goal. The invocation of an ideal situation transforms the real limitations by creating a thought-form to which real actors in the messiness of the actual can subscribe. Above all, the criticism missed what Habermas himself overlooks as well: that seeing critique as illusory in this way is the creation of a belief-culture of innovative liberalism in which the veil of semantic indeterminacy now steps in as a variant of the chorus of conflicting views enshrined by a more traditional liberal account of democratic tolerance. These views are encouraged by having to survive in a political environment where a more formidable challenge to debate exists than either communicative dissonance or cultural incommensurability—namely, repression and censorship. Here, again, vulgar political facts force their way into the refinements of a theory that is not whole without them. And so we are brought back again to the state, the intellectual, and the problem of the political position, which I would like to illustrate now using concrete examples.



The idea of the cosmopolitan subaltern expresses the sort of conflict I have been exploring. The phrase, of course, is oxymoronic since the lower orders are not conventionally associated with cosmopolitanism, whose connotations rather suggest urbanity, refinement, and the kind of effortless world travel possible only in a culture of intellectuals and middle-class tourists, researchers, and businessmen (both Ulf Hannerz and Zygmunt Bauman have done much to clarify this aspect).¹⁴ But the self-contradiction is here meant, of course, to be intentionally transgressive, signaling the idea that the forgotten and the discarded of the world can also be an elite inasmuch as they are an ethical model for all of us. Pluralism and inclusivity are no longer reserved for the highly educated and the wealthy.

But one of the strengths of the term “subaltern” is also its weakness: it can mean wealthy nonwhite professors at Ivy League universities as well as the outcasts of the world census. Let us suppose for a minute that we are referring to people more like the latter—to landless farmers in Malawi, maquiladora workers in Tijuana, or the homeless on the streets of Washington, DC. Can the subaltern speak? Their political views, after all, are expressed with simple words if one cares to go into poor communities to lend them an ear; with patterns of behavior in tax revolts, industrial sabotage, and crime; with noncooperation in the case of voting (or, more properly, nonvoting) patterns in US elections. Speaking, with or without words, has been a feature of the subaltern classes in Latin America, India, and China for centuries, as a number of early studies and fictional re-creations have amply shown, and in Europe since the religious wars of the Middle Ages, later the English Civil War, and, of course, the French Revolution, when they were noticed by an elite that had earlier taken their silence and invisibility for granted.¹⁵ Historically,

¹⁴ Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996); Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

¹⁵ See, e.g., Euclides da Cunha, *Rebellion in the Backlands (Os sertões)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944); John Reed, *Insurgent Mexico* (New York: D. Appleton, 1914); Sergei Tretiakov, *A Chinese Testament* (London: V. Gollancz, 1934); and B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste: With a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi* (Bombay: B. R. Kadrekar, 1937). Rancière, among others, analyzes the origins of the concept of the “people” in his *Voyages to the Land of the People*, trans. James B. Swenson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

movements of revolt have successfully based themselves on this emergence of the subaltern as an eloquent, self-conscious agent.

We should recall, of course, that the question “can the subaltern speak?” was originally intended by Gayatri Spivak, the author of a widely read essay with that title, as a welcome reprimand, calling the bluff of intellectuals whose claim to speak for the people appealed to a vision of insurgency that was abstract or dubiously derived from their own political ends. As she has made clear in response to early criticism of her essay, she did not literally mean that the disenfranchised had no voice. She had in mind certain tendencies in the handling of primary materials among the subaltern studies historians and their problematic representation of the views of the peasants on whose authority they were drawing. But the question remains troubled, above all in the way it was taken up in postcolonial studies, not only because of the historical counterevidence I alluded to above, but because it doubles back on itself in unacknowledged ways. For the very act of asking it intensifies the separation of intellectual and people and implicitly asserts a theory of cultural incommensurability. To insist on the intellectual’s distance from the popular can also be taken—and really should be in this context—as an injunction that intellectuals resist appropriating for themselves the unearned honor of *being* subaltern.

The question, then, is at once naïve and strategic. It is naïve to the extent that it mystifies the subaltern, turning him or her into an occult presence, since the intended answer to its hypothetical is “no”—the subaltern cannot speak—or, rather: of course “it” speaks, but what it means is inaccessible to “us.” The dignity ostensibly given to subaltern identity is offset by the obliteration of the subaltern’s humanity, since he or she is sublimated—is no longer a person but has rather become a model of the postintellectual rediscovery of simplicity, the purity that comes with powerlessness and (in some cases) religion. And so we are back to the original abstraction, although this time with the stricture that the intellectual should refuse to trespass on the no-man’s-land dividing constituencies separated by class and education. The idea is to call upon intellectuals to lose some of their intellectuality in order to learn from subaltern subjects and to follow their leads. The ethics of this familiar move is to erase the conflict of interests inherent in political confrontation. It has the great corollary advantage of also leaving intellectual privilege intact. For what good would there be in trying to bridge constituencies or build movements when the subaltern cannot speak, since it is always only represented by those who misuse its name? From this point of view, all we can do to avoid doing harm is to recognize difference.

But the question is also strategic in that it creates a deliberate rhetorical feint. It is a brilliant example of poststructuralist double entendre in that it is not asking what it is literally asking. As posed in the environs of academic postcolonial theory in the 1980s, it played on an ambiguity in the term “subaltern” itself—which, as Gramsci originally meant it, referred to those social sectors that in a given relationship were subordinate to one party but not necessarily to all.¹⁶ That is, even a landowner could be subaltern in relation to the colonial administrator, so although subordinate in a strictly relative sense, a *zamindar* is hardly of the lower orders (not, in other words, the landless peasant in Malawi whom I referred to above).

And yet, the conflict concealed by this expansive interpretive act is a deeply political one. The base of support for the postcolonial intellectual in the metropolitan university is founded exactly on this confusion between types of subalternity, where the professional from a wealthy family from a former colony stands in for an earlier colonial relationship of direct subjugation.

¹⁶ Antonio Gramsci, “Some Aspects of the Southern Question,” in his *Pre-prison Writings*, ed. Richard Bellamy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 313–37.

The problem of representation, then—a dubious word in any case—was to be found not in its sense of political misrepresentation but in the more casual sense of this ambiguous subaltern from a middle- to upper-middle-class background and with numerous connections embodying the marginal as a synecdoche of entire peoples.

As the problem of the subaltern was posed in the 1980s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” the targets of the attack were, in addition to those I mentioned above, well-known French intellectuals of high theory who had been influenced by Maoist thought. They were accused in that essay, quite rightly, of Eurocentrism. But there was another dimension of the question that was widely recognized, although not explicitly articulated. For what the question meant to do, frankly, was displace the white radical with the brown professional, transforming a problem of the popular/elite and of political position into a problem of race and cultural fealty. This particular postpolitical undercurrent of cultural theory today plays a large role in the discourses of cosmopolitanism as well, where race has quite unnecessarily been pitted against the dissident political position by inserting itself into a mainstream discourse of ameliorative social policy and calls for a more salutary foreign policy.¹⁷

Of all the euphemisms Gramsci might have chosen for “worker” or “peasant” to evade the prison censors, he chose a term that was specifically military. For us this should be very significant. The subaltern is literally a commissioned officer below the rank of captain. There was, one might say, a deliberate attempt on Gramsci’s part to conjoin militant organization with low social status in order to speak on behalf of those political operatives who represent interests by articulating them and, of course, by fighting for them. This legacy of tactile, situated thinking is absent in today’s postcolonial theory for many of the reasons I have been suggesting, and this is true in cultural theory more generally. For along with genuine feelings of empathy for the plight of refugees, exiles, and migrants, the discourses of diaspora and diasporic subjects today have another, less evident advantage. They shift the focus from interstate rivalries and popular mobilizations against neoliberal policies to powerless individuals. One should look at this move in two ways. The powerless have, one could argue, a greater need to be defended; on the other hand, defending them is cost free and more virtuous *because* it flatters the status of powerlessness itself and holds it up as a safe, ethical end.

An example of how this works can be found in the calls for papers, conference announcements, and departmental events featured in any number of institutions today, both within and outside the academy. The examples I cite here are quite arbitrary and easy to find, indicating the systematic limitations of a larger intellectual terrain more than of particular individuals or groups. But the point cannot be made without mentioning specific instances. To take one such case, the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto has spoken of “the complex problems of identity and experience to which these movements give rise as well as the creative possibilities that flow from movement.”¹⁸ Underanalyzed here is the metaphoric slippage of diaspora’s most elementary feature—movement—which is given an unproblematically positive charge and linked (as we might suppose in a social discourse influenced by the humanities) to “creativity” and “complexity,” seen as uncontroversial intellectual values. The

¹⁷ This is particularly evident, for example, in Anthony McGrew and David Held, eds., *Globalization Theory: Approaches and Controversies* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007); and Ulrich Beck, *Cosmopolitan Europe* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006).

¹⁸ http://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/~registrar/calendars/calendar/Diaspora_and_Transnational_Studies.html (accessed October 2010).

often traumatic and always uncomfortable and unwanted conditions that force people to uproot themselves to flee political terror or to find work are here cast as a kind of permanent *style* of unsettledness and remaking. Such a representation is, to that degree, uncomfortably and even arrogantly detached from the violence of the operation and indicates as well the distance of the intellectual from the immigrant.

To what degree, we might ask, is this language itself an inheritance of our literary and intellectual trainings? To my knowledge, this kind of question is almost never posed. Think, for example, of the fact that the prehistory of the concept of diaspora in the early twentieth century was primarily aesthetic and avant-garde, linked to forms of exile that were larger and more anonymous than that represented in US undergraduate classrooms, where the works of famous American literary expatriates to Europe are among the ones typically taught. The era from just before World War I to the decade following World War II saw a semipermanent relocation of artists and intellectuals, many of them political revolutionaries from India, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa, to new cosmopolitan capitals in Paris, London, Zurich, Moscow, and Mexico City. As a consequence, allusions to South Asian epic, African visual form, and Chinese history found their way into the poetry of urbane disillusion. All these allusions arose, of course, in the most direct way from World War I itself and for the first time placed intellectual leaders from Eastern Europe and Latin America at the center of European consciousness. These intellectuals worked in explicitly international groupings, moving freely from one “center” to another.

After World War II, the new cosmopolitan capital of New York took the artistic and cultural place of these predecessors. Here, mobilizing a specifically American rhetoric, intellectuals latched on to the trope of the immigrant in a salvational spirit and sought to popularize and extend the lessons of modernism in an explicit return to the anxieties over culture first referenced by turn-of-the-century social theorists like Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, and Oswald Spengler.¹⁹ They expressed the clash of first and third worlds as allegories of a modernism now based on the image of the foreign. The modernism derived from afar was meant to stand firm as a more expansive, less parochial value against a monolithic culture industry at home.

It is not hard to see why in this spirit the Institute of Diaspora Studies in San Diego applauds the “construction of diasporic identity” and wishes to “map its futures.” A restrictive legal designation is here recuperated by focusing on a subjectivity that has been heroically devised. The agents in this equation have been in this way interchanged; the active element—the oppressive state border enforcement and ethnic or racial targeting—reemerges in the form of an act of redemption performed by the critic, who is enabled by the passive assistance of his or her diasporic other. In “mapping the future,” the critic allows time (dynamic, fluid, historical) to become space (fixed, natural, visual), but since it is the future we are mapping, the static is presented as exciting and filled with potential.

Resistance to excesses of government control is here rightly justified, but the discourse is unable to imagine that many hybrids hate hybridity, and it finds it difficult to conceive of those immigrant laborers (in my own community of Minneapolis, they are primarily Mexicans, Hmong, and Somalis), some of whom have neither the desire nor the intention of becoming

¹⁹ Georg Simmel, “The Stranger,” “The Adventurer,” and “The Conflict in Modern Culture,” in his *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. and intro. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 143–50, 187–98, 375–94; Max Weber, “The Soteriology of the Underprivileged,” “Socialism,” and “Race Relations,” in *Weber: Selections in Translation*, ed. W. G. Runciman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 174–91, 251–62, 359–69; Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1975); Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (1932; London: Allen and Unwin, 1959).

American nor even of earning American citizenship. They are in their own minds temporary denizens, alienated at the cultural level and resentful of the relocation forced on them by the need to find a more favorable wage environment. They are commuters, in other words, and the only thing that keeps them alive and fulfilled is holding on to a sense of the indelible differences between *here* and *home* (an attitude one recent book on diaspora—and this is not unusual—condemns for its nostalgia).²⁰

Transborder cultures of this sort can be given that name because they take place across heavily policed borders, which are not only legal and political demarcation lines of increasing severity but intractable mental landscapes: a huge and imposing binary, in other words, that seriously compromises the euphoric imagery of migrancy, diaspora, or deterritorialization and brings us crashing back to the very relationships scrupulously avoided in our cosmopolitan theories—namely, conflict and contradiction.

The problematic character of the form that many diaspora studies take is equally illustrated by a number of recent books whose titles are filled with junction words like “disjuncture, difference,” “heterogeneity, multiplicity.” The authors of one such volume are drawn to the study of diasporas, they explain, because diaspora unsettles the “demarcated parameters of geography, national identity, and belonging,” as though dislocation were a cause for celebration.²¹ There is still a sensitivity here to the pressures of war or economic exigencies that force people to flee their homes, and it is not the case that these brute realities are completely ignored. And yet, what most characterizes the outlook of the contributors is the claim that diaspora as concept and reality has “new epistemological, political and identitarian resonances” that are positive, and even if harsh and difficult, redeemed by creative inspiration. They too wish to unite two literal senses of the word, the dislocating that comes from “migration, immigration, or exile as a consequence of colonial expansion” with the “fertility of dispersion, dissemination, and the scattering of seeds,” as though a heroic positive had been, after great suffering and ingenuity, carved out of an initial negative. This view specifically sees diaspora as a “critique of binarism,” which (as I have been suggesting) is a critique, if handled one-sidedly, that only paralyzes one’s ability to recognize the Manichean practices of the police and military in the ostensibly liberal state. Identities, then, in their way of thinking, are always “negotiated”; they produce a “critical dialogism,” a “creolizing” of the “master codes” of the dominant culture. But the fiction of the corporate public sphere with its stranglehold over news and opinion formation, and its thoroughly militarized gendarmerie, is more than content to talk of democratic dialogue as one of its “master codes.” The sophistries of power are not in this way creolized—rather, creolization is its own mode of deceptive self-characterization. A meaningful negotiation, at any rate, would require leverage, but that could exist only if the numbers involved were large enough to become *constituencies*, which are not the same thing as identities in the usual sense, and so we are then back to the problem of cultures of belief that I raised above.

It is not surprising that an institute would be subject to institutional pressures or dependent on forms of corporate patronage, which are among the forces that move the resistance theorist to the language of recuperation we have been tracing above. What is surprising is the extent to which the traditions of cultural theory that would allow us to factor these pressures in, and create that portrait of the “self doing the investigating” that I alluded to above, have been disregarded

²⁰ Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, eds., *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*

(and one thinks, here, again, of the work of Williams, Lefebvre, and Bourdieu particularly).²² Such an analysis would make it more difficult to see the utterly conventional discourse of immigrant opportunity routinely circulated in American civics textbooks as undermining the “master codes of dominant culture.” Self-interrogation of this sort might make one wonder whether the subaltern itself is not, at the level of synecdoche, representing intellectuals who fashion a resistance that leaves professional identities untouched.

In the language of diaspora studies, we are often told that borders no longer exist since the borders themselves (by the acts of immigrants) “cross and criss-cross, territorialize and de-territorialize us.” When one of the well-known contributors to a volume on diaspora argues that “the new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models,” he is taking a position that is not simply empirically false but politically disabling.²³ For it once more avoids referring to the privileges enjoyed by the metropolitan center, blurring them with the use of an empty and disorienting nuance. And this nuance is not greater complexity but a reduction that ignores competing interests. Let me end, then, by speculating on some possibilities for a study of diaspora that is more attentive to contradiction.



The official character of the United States as a polity is, according to its national mythology, a haven for immigrants and refugees from throughout the world. The fact, though, is that along with a more well-publicized system of systematic deportation of illegal immigrants based on racial profiling, there has been for years a policy of political *recruitment* of immigrants. In many cases, this policy operates according to a preference for peoples forced to flee conflicts abroad in which US troops or agents have been combatants and in which the peoples fleeing have been collaborators with US forces. Once in the United States, these immigrant communities have been called upon to provide ideological support for an ongoing war of ideas against liberation movements abroad, independent countries unwilling to bend to NATO desires, or progressive politicians in foreign countries invariably dubbed “communists” by these new arrivals.

In this sense, I am talking about a very specific, though prominent, variation of diasporic communities in the actually existing political environments of the United States. Cubans in Florida and New Jersey are well-known examples of this pattern of providing narratives of American virtue and left-wing perfidy, as well as affecting the outcome of US presidential elections. They are far from alone. The 150,000 Hmong peoples of St. Paul, Minnesota (where I live), formerly of Laos, are another; as are the over one million Vietnamese former collaborators now populating large cities in Texas and California; and, more recently, the twenty thousand Muslim Kosovar Albanians coming to live with the five hundred thousand ethnic Albanians already based in New Jersey and New York. Here, in other words, are situated examples of diaspora that lie completely outside the celebratory rhetoric of diaspora studies. They exhibit the world of conflict and debate that has played so little part in the discussion, and that seems so belated in a discourse dominated by tropes of indeterminacy (although they are anything but).

²² Williams, *Sociology of Culture*; Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 2 (London: Verso, 2002); Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays towards a Reflexive Sociology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

²³ Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” in *Planet TV: A Global Television Reader*, ed. Lisa Parks and Shanti Kumar (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 40.

This policy of admitting into the country those who pass an ideological test is a bid to make the home country an embattled refuge and training ground, as though the United States were surrounded by hostile forces from without and as though the ethical high ground of immigration, once symbolized by Ellis Island, could be justifiably narrowed to include not the huddled masses so much as those who found it opportune to support American foreign policy at the expense of their neighbors. How else could one justify, in the name of democracy, the radically separate—but still related—policy of officially accepting into the United States a rogues gallery of former right-wing mercenaries and former heads of state—a practice, arguably, that began with the postwar recruitment of Nazi media specialists, army commanders, and scientists during the early stages of the Cold War but that has been carried on deliberately ever since. A partial list of this type would include the shah of Iran, Ferdinand Marcos, Anastasio Somoza, General Nguyen Ngoc Loan (the former director of South Vietnam’s national police force who became famous when *Life Magazine* photographed him executing an unarmed Viet Cong suspect in broad daylight on the streets of the capital), Emmanuel (Toto) Constant (a CIA agent who organized the forces responsible for the coup in Haiti in 1991, and who is now living as a real estate agent in Brooklyn), and Luis Posada Carriles (a self-proclaimed terrorist who bombed a Cuban airliner in 1976, killing seventy-three people). National character is expressed in these preferences. Is it not, therefore, a crucial and neglected side of the question of diaspora? These policies mark the real, rather than imputed, values of this country’s political conscience and find realization by way of specific policies conducted at the level of government, which in turn indelibly affect communal sentiments, media coverage, and voting patterns. The openness to immigration that is presented by the United States as its personal property and signature identity is shown here to be *interested* and local.

There is no reason for pessimism in this, nor am I trying to be willfully contrarian or perverse in bringing up such contrary manifestations of the diasporic subject. My point is to insist on the situatedness of truth, on the involvement of the researcher in the object of research, and, above all, on the nature of the real as contradictory and conflictual. To put this another way, the politics of knowledge is concealed by a militantly ethical, postpolitical discourse that prefers, even insists, on ignoring anything as vulgar as the examples I have given. And yet theoretical complexity is impossible without this vulgarity.

To move from the ideal to the real—to appreciate what has been realized because it has *entered the real* (which is to say, become a part of a world nonidentical with mind)—is a transformative, although not an aesthetic, process. It is transformative because it is so exasperatingly difficult and because the forces of persuasion that have altered material conditions command so much greater attention than the most persuasive argument. Every political act is an exercise of coercion, not happily, but only in begrudging recognition of the rights demanded by the real. All politics, to be politics, is to that degree invested in the state (called by any name one chooses). Politics considers the state its only end, not because it wants its own portion of the state’s emboldening power nor because it anticipates the thrill of exercising coercion nor even because it believes its force in every instance to be an expression of popular will or social contract. It does so because the state is not separable from our ability to live at all, socially speaking, which is, of course, the only way we live. In ways that are not immediately obvious, the state, although it cannot determine what one thinks, certainly affects our ability to discuss, disseminate, publish, and meet. Philosophy is always a component of the state, always working on behalf of a state, even if not necessarily this one. For the mistake of the anarchism latent in theory is to suppose

that excitement about the possibilities offered by power is already a compromise with *this* power, whereas indifference to power is the most conservative gesture possible. Every philosophy implies a political position to the degree that it characterizes the human as more or less capable of acting, knowing, doing well or ill, transforming the world or merely assuming its place helplessly within its indifferent architecture.

The very reason that some schools of philosophy rather than others hold sway in our discussions is because a certain state, in ways mediated or not so mediated, has made them available to us by way of publishing laws that permit their circulation; educational policies that reflect funding preferences; the regulation or deregulation of markets in media, printing, paper, and postage; the tax laws that allow the awarding of some savants, but not others, with National Endowment for the Humanities, Guggenheim, and Ford Foundation grants; and, above all, the setting of a stage and the effusion of a climate of value and virtue, given the state's ultimate monopoly over resources, in which some ideas, and not others, are promoted.²⁴ Freedom, not only of inquiry but from manual labor so that one has the time to do research, and freedom from violence against one's opinions are grantable in the end only by a state. It follows that freedom for some constituencies (and here I mean constituencies, not identities) relies on the coercive restriction of freedom for others. Politics is precisely about deciding one's constituency and then assuming responsibility for power, not dissimulating it or withdrawing to an imaginary space where one pretends not to wield it. A

²⁴ This assessment may seem to underplay corporate ownership and control as well as corporate freedom of movement and decision making under the current conditions of deregulation. But corporate sovereignty does not signal the collapse of the state, only its infiltration and appropriation by private, unelected owners. At the corporate level, the "private" is a legal fiction authorized, ultimately, by state power.