



Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea

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Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's original essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" transformed the analysis of colonialism through an eloquent and uncompromising argument that affirmed the contemporary relevance of Marxism while using deconstructionist methods to explore the international division of labor and capitalism's "worlding" of the world. Spivak's essay hones in on the historical and ideological factors that obstruct the possibility of being heard for those who inhabit the periphery. It is a probing interrogation of what it means to have political subjectivity, to be able to access the state, and to suffer the burden of difference in a capitalist system that promises equality yet withholds it at every turn.

Since its publication, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has been cited, invoked, imitated, and critiqued. In these phenomenal essays, eight scholars take stock of the effects and response to Spivak's work. They begin by contextualizing the piece within the development of subaltern and postcolonial studies and the quest for human rights. Then, through the lens of Spivak's essay, they rethink historical problems of subalternity, voicing, and death. A final section situates "Can the Subaltern Speak?" within contemporary issues, particularly new international divisions of labor and the politics of silence among indigenous women of Guatemala and Mexico. In an afterword, Spivak herself considers her essay's past interpretations and future incarnations and the questions and histories that remain secreted in the original and revised versions of "Can the Subaltern Speak?"—both of which are reprinted in this book.

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