

Balamohan Shingade

GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK ONCE

confessed, 'Identitarianism scares me.' It scares me too. 'Identitarianism is a denial of the imagination. The imagination is our inbuilt instrument of othering, of thinking things that are not in the here and now, of wanting to become others.'¹

The debate between identity and difference is ancient, and its familiar face is the ontological problem of the One and the Many – that is, whether the substance of being is fundamentally one or two or many. But being is more properly put as the problem of the One and the Many, and Many in the Many.

We are, each of us, differently divided, differently connected. We are constituted, conceived, created variously by that which, in this language, we see as outside ourselves: our genealogies and kinship networks, the culture of our milieus, the preferences and politics of those around us and between us, the lands from which we are born and barred, the severing-connecting oceans, the changing temperaments of the weather, the stray dogs and insects, sewers, fences, air-conditioning... Naturally, everything inside and outside of our minds and bodies we perceive as separate, separable, but at the same time we fuse with these others and are beholden to them for our very functioning. Our becoming, in other words, is an instantaneous worlding of ourselves and all other things.

In a recent lecture, Carl Mika put it this way, 'The totality of the world, the thing that happens to be its emissary and the human self are all co-commissioned!² In a co-commissioning world, or in a world in which we inter-become, it is difficult to think of our identities in essential terms, as fixed or border-bounded, or even something to call our own. To be sure, this is not a denial of selfhood, but rather a re-remembering of self and world. We are the world, and yet we are not. Selfhood is something strange, because this life is not one to call mine even as I live it. After all, my becoming is symptomatic of a worlding-thing, a world that is at once process and thing, a process by which it produces itself as things and all other beings.

How can we be confident of our constitutions, our identities, of processes and things not at all our own? It is a compost heap from which we are composed. It is not personal, but if it must be, then the whole world is a personal process and thing. If there is an abundance of others for us and in us, then how might we familiarise ourselves with and attend to the claims of the others in ourselves? Selfhood is a recalling of oneself as commissioned by the world as the world,³ as its particular modifications or attributes,⁴ as simultaneous or continuous with the worlding-thing.

Searching for a proper identity within these already improper forms of our selfhood is therefore a distraction. Our selfhood is improper inasmuch as it is possible to sever ties or create boundaries within this worlding-thing, to reconfigure ourselves from the scattered, scrambled, solidified particularities of our biography and so transform identity categories. It is a contrary impulse but not a contradiction to assert that each thing or person is different and differently dis/connected, a singularity, but that each thing, person, singularity participates in the same worlding-thing.

Sameness is a spook that haunts the impasse of identitarianism and identity politics. Although there is more to a form of life than the expression of any identity category—male or migrant, for example—and although we are not exhausted by the categories of identity, it remains an abstraction to which we appeal in order to leverage our capacities in the world. For this reason, the spook of identity appears useful,⁵ even seductive, but it is a construct and we must be cautious.

To be sure, my fear of identitarianism and identity politics is not to elide struggle or deny the reality of the lives of oppressed peoples. This is not a critique of specific theories or practices focusing on race or gender oppression. What is troublesome about identity politics is its appeal to identity categories to define morality, codify values and police boundaries of belonging.

For some, justice lies in the recalibration of identity categories, or in an inversion of categorical privileges. This is not enough, because it does not liberate us from the spook. All identity categories are violent if they possess us, even those properties we align ourselves to, which shape us and which we shape ourselves into. Systems of oppression based on identity proceed by way of a false categorical logic. The error is not in taxonomy, but in valuing and imposing identity traits, which are necessarily fragmentary, over the instance of a person who may or may not share in the characteristics of that classification. The according of value based on the spook of identity renders a person as an un-person if one happens not to share in those values even as one may share the category. In other words, the error is in treating the instance of a person not as a singularity who is differently determined, but as an instance of a category. It is the opposite of the formula, 'I am woman, therefore women.'⁶

Defining a person based on a category is always alienating, whether it is as white, woman, whatever, because the spook of identity stands in her place, it represents her essence, and by a sly turn, she is stripped of the 'she herself', which is the fullness of her being commissioned by the world as the world.

In identity politics, her value beyond the example of that category is often rendered unimportant. What is more, the valuing and devaluing of those who fall altogether outside the logic of a given identity category, or more properly the spook of identity, is fundamentally erroneous.

Interpreting this analysis as akin to the movement which turns Black Lives Matter into All Lives Matter would be an offensive misstep, a gross blunder. It misses the first point of all forms of life as differently divided, differently connected. To clarify, the insufficiency of identity politics is that if identity is what binds, then it is also what can and does unbind. If identity binds in the name of community, conjuring a version of solidarity and belonging, then it also unbinds, releases, expels, banishes. And when it does the latter, it is not always emancipatory, by ways of letting go or setting free. The expulsion is an exercise of power that depends on barriers, borders, boundaries, in order to guarantee certain modes of containment. But we are never outside ourselves, a form of life, even when we are exiled in such ways.

To give a basic example, white privilege is never a personal privilege, even if one passes as white, because his or her being is not identical with whiteness. There is an excess of being that is elided by the spook of whiteness in identity politics. The privilege of being a man or white is the privilege of the spook, not of all worlded white men. An incarcerated white man, for example, or one who is residing and labouring illegally, is privileged not in the same way. In this instance, identity politics based on race discounts those differently stratified by the state or capitalism. There is a surplus of others and other things that cuts across and against identity categories. If the real becomes subordinate to the abstract, if the spook of identity fragments is prioritised over and above the worlding-thing, then it becomes impossible to recognise and attend to the other. It leads to the problem of exclusion, and by extension, a devaluing of the other in us.

An alienating impulse haunts the activity of communities based on identity, of solidarity premised on a spook, which gets in the way and blocks belonging as such. How then do we relate to one another outside the bounds of identity? Is it possible to exist in our everydayness without mortgaging ourselves to false categorical logic? To follow Giorgio Agamben, how can 'the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging'?'⁷

To be sure, this is not to collapse the divisions of race, class, gender etc., but rather to form a community that is composed via relations across and against these categories, alliances to sideline communalism, individualism and separatism. For Spivak, the leap consists in introducing imagination into existence, or for Frantz Fanon, invention: 'I am endlessly creating myself.'⁸ In this whatever-community, in a coming-together and commoning

of those with nothing in common, imagination and invention are first steps in attending to the other in us, those others who compose us and whom we ourselves compose.

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- 1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 405–6.
- 2 Carl Mika, 'Dealing with the Indivisible: A Māori Philosophy of Mystery' Lecture, *Ipu ki uta, ihu ki tai*. Auckland: ST PAUL St Gallery, 17 August 2017.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley. Penguin Books, London, 1996.
- 5 Translation of the German concept *spuk* as it appears in Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, trans. Steven T. Byington, Benjamin R. Tucker, New York, 1907.
- 6 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, op. cit. p. 136.
- 7 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 86.
- 8 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles L. Markmann, Grove Press, New York, 1967, p. 204.