

Planetary Utopias

Angela Davis and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak
in conversation with Nikita Dhawan

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Nikita Dhawan: Let me begin by asking you about your understanding of the role of the intellectual in nurturing habits of thinking and imagination that would facilitate postimperial politics. You warn against tales of heroic individualism and the Messiah-model of leadership, which erases the contribution of collectives as agents of social change.

Angela Davis: We have the habit of assuming that 'leaders' must correspond to a masculinist notion of individualism – they must be heroic individuals. Interestingly, during the Ferguson protest in 2014, when some of the veteran Civil Rights leaders visited Ferguson, they weren't well-received because of the way they foregrounded assumptions about movements and leaders that emanated from their experiences in the Civil Rights Movement. Their position was that the Ferguson protesters lacked leadership, that they needed a single recognizable leader. 'You have no recognizable leader', the protesters were told. In fact, there was leadership and most of the people in leadership were women. To the veteran 'leaders', the idea of women in leadership was equivalent to no leadership. In the era of Black Lives Matter, not only are women assuming positions of leadership, young activists today are also exploring different leadership paradigms – for example, what it might mean to develop collective forms of leadership. In this we have little experience. Even those of us who have been involved in revolutionary activism for many years, were schooled in these notions of the heroic male leader. And so I am learning a great deal from the younger generations who are trying to imagine new forms of leadership – leadership that invites people to participate in unprecedented ways, unprecedented because they are invited to bring their whole selves into the movement. They are invited to come with their pain and their traumas. As revolutionary activists in the past, we were asked to leave everything behind except our revolutionary commitment. And so I think that this moment is very exciting, because we are witnessing new forms of leadership – collective leadership, empathetic leadership. In my presentation, I intentionally used the example of Lauren Olamina, the character in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and her hyper-empathy syndrome. These new leadership approaches attempt to incorporate what is often referred to as self-care – I think we need a better word for that, because that has become so jargonistic – into the process of conceptualising and organising movements for radical change.

Gayatri Spivak: I would agree and I would also say that in the postcolonial world the real problem

is what Frantz Fanon, in the third chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, wrote about using the English word 'leaders'. They can use the democratic structure to keep what Weber would call a neopatrimonial society going. Today because of this voting as body count, these are the leaders we know: Duterte, Erdoğan, Trump. This is now no longer exclusive to the Third World, for Europe is also turning to the right in that way. In our village schools¹ we try to discourage the tendency to breed 'leaders', in this special sense, who will then become agents of violence. This is what the students learn from the usually avaricious rural middle class. So they fall for that. I will say, for example, to someone, a nice kid who knows the answers and is constantly putting up his or her hand: 'Hey, you know, who is really smart knows how to be quiet. See, I know all the answers. I'm not saying anything. So, let you and me be quiet together and see if everybody can come up with what you say.' My teachers are also trained to discourage someone answering all the questions. It isn't that they are not being rewarded for being intelligent. They are being told what intelligence is. This is what Abiola Irele said in his book, *The African Scholar*. He asked me to introduce his final book just before his death, for which I feel extremely honoured. In that book he calls it followership, because good leaders follow in every sense of the word. An unexamined idea of leadership is all around. You really have to see what's coming out from all of the people who are doing something, rather than telling them, 'you ought to do this, movements are like this, we know'. This is what I've called feudality without feudalism. Feudality, loyalty. So I am with Angela, I totally am.

Nikita Dhawan: Another extremely instructive lesson that we have learnt from you is to adopt a critical posture towards the tools, concepts, vocabularies and organising practices that characterise landscapes of struggle. There is this wonderful, possibly apocryphal, quote that 'The last capitalist we hang shall be the one who sold us the rope.' What do we do with this double bind that the instruments we have to use to change unjust structures are inherited from these very structures?

Angela Davis: This is what we have and we have no other choice than to use them and to simultaneously question them. And so the process of developing critical habits, habits of self-questioning, is a process that never ends. And we are learning a great deal now especially, given the activism of transgender communities. We are learning a great deal about what it means to challenge categories that we have considered to be so normal that they aren't even worth questioning. But they actually constitute the arena, the ground of our thinking. Thus when we look at movements around transgender issues, movements against the violence directed against transgender women of colour, we realize that they constitute *the* sector of the population that is the target of more forms of violence – state, personal, individual, etc. – and more consistent violence than any other group. So we are learning how to challenge the binary structure of gender even though there is often a telling awkwardness, especially in instances where you are asked to introduce yourself with your preferred pronouns. And that awkwardness is good and productive because it makes us question that which we haven't previously known how to question. So I don't think anything is immune from that process, even the ways in which we are formulating this question about how to be critical regarding that which we consider most normal, that which otherwise is ideologically constructed. And I guess it's about education, about the kind of education that Gayatri was speaking about, as opposed to the education that simply wants to produce skilled subjects who are able to participate well in the machinery of global capitalism. The last thing I would say is that we have to really beware of these terms that are supposed to carry the entire weight of struggles for justice. Sara Ahmed was talking about the term diversity yesterday and I really hate

that notion. I cannot stand the notion of diversity, because it means largely the effort to make the machine run more effectively with those who were previously excluded by the machine. Who wants to be assimilated into a racist institution, when the institution continues to maintain its racist structure? This is why we always have to be hyperconscious of our vocabularies. This is a practice that I want to carry to my grave.

Gayatri Spivak: Yes, it is legitimation by reversal. Before they were all bad and now they are all good. This is why I find 'Global South' to be a reverse racist term. I mean there are some real self-constructed native informants selling themselves from these places. But this issue of having only a tainted methodology with which to work, I find that to be completely ok. You work with what you can: an affirmative sabotage. When Audre Lorde said that you can't break down the master's house with the master's tools, she was extremely angry because of the treatment she had received at NYU. A thing like 'The subaltern cannot speak' – these are enraged declarations. Many take it as an excuse for avoiding homework. 'No, no, we don't have to read any of the master's tools. No, the house will not be broken down.' Lorde was not giving a formula for saving intellectual labour.

In that context I would say that the masters had the leisure of the theory class. They had all the leisure on our backs – and some of us also collaborating with our tongues hanging out, so let's not just do a finger-pointing – to develop these theories. And also, they had such a very long time in early capitalism that they could do this slowly, whereas many colonial places got the mode of exploitation without the mode of production, so they couldn't do it from inside. We should take those well-developed methods, make our former masters our servants as it were, put them on tap rather than on top, inhabit them well, turn them around. Don't accuse them, don't excuse them, use them for something which they were not made for.

I mean, I could give you such an Indian thing right now and you'd say 'Oh Gayatridi, Yoga!' Look what's happening in India. My religion is becoming genocidal, it's a theocracy, and every Global South elite person is selling alternative epistemologies. No Sir! (It's very good to do descriptive alternative epistemologies; I don't censor work.) But one more thing. You know how I teach English to my students in India. Of course, without English they are going to go to hell. There are no books in their houses. They shit in the woods. I mean, they don't know colonialism. They know the caste system, right? So they have not seen white people. When Ben Baer first went they thought Ben had a disease. Most of my students and their parents haven't seen trains, and at least one teacher has not been on a train. So I say to them, our alphabet is so extraordinarily beautiful. I mean, it's true. As Todorov told me so long ago, the structuralists almost died when they discovered it was from 500 BC, or whenever Pānini's date is. All beautifully structured. And I say to them, look, it's extraordinarily well-structured, but we don't even use these things. And the people who have made the books, they don't even realise that this is what the language is. They just screw it up. We love our mother tongue. It's our mother, it's a wonderful language. And I say, 'Hey, but why did English win, hey? Look at this map, this is the little place where we speak Bangla and everybody in this whole huge place is speaking English, why did they win? Because there are just 26 letters, man.' And they can just do anything with them. You put the E at the end and 'cut' becomes 'cute' and 'plan' becomes 'plane'. I am a teacher of English and I am going to deprive these kids? So, I say to them, 'look, in our vowels, we don't have a long A, but English has a long A. P-L-A-N is plan and P-L-A-N-E plane has a long A. We have just got OI and OU, they have an AI.' So I make them excited about this. ...

The English classes in my schools are for people who have no sense of English at all. When

a Chinese guy said to me that you speak English well, because the British had their boots on your neck, I said 'Brother, you are right. And you are here because the WTO has its boots on your neck. But the thing is, we defeated the English by loving the language. So that's what I will tell you. There is no way that a language is just a criminal language. You turn it around.' Really it's these kids who have taught me this way of approaching the language. Taught this way, it is an extension of their mother tongue. I have argued with Wai Chee Dimock that that is how the great Arab translators of Greek classics translated, making the so-called 'foreign' language their own, rather than 'foreignising' them. Here, historically, the teacher can make elite and subaltern meet.

Nikita Dhawan: À propos contaminated structures and 'affirmative sabotage', I had this conversation with Angela in Frankfurt and I think we agreed to disagree about what to do with the state. So to Gayatri, my question is what is the relation of planetarity to the state? Angela, you propose that we need to reimagine and envision other ideas of justice and punishment as the state is heavily invested in the prison-industrial complex and through its monopoly on violence, reproduces social and political forms of violence. Angela, would you describe your position as anarchist, and your utopia as a post-state world, where the state withers away? Or can we hope for a state that is capable of representing the interests of vulnerable citizens, so that these subaltern citizens can make a claim on the state to serve them?



Angela Davis: It depends on how far into the future you are thinking about. Because certainly there are instances now where it is really important to compel the state to speak to the needs of people, and I am really excited about the fact that in the US people are demonstrating outside of detention centres all over the country. But I think ultimately the model of the bourgeois nation state, ensconced as it is in capitalism, will never do the work of guaranteeing justice. While we will have to deal with the state for the time being, we have to engage in the kind of organising and activism that teaches and encourages people to imagine something very different from this

institution that only guarantees the rights of a very small minority of people. The nation state serves a world, as Gayatri was pointing out, where the overwhelming majority of the wealth is concentrated in a few hands – eight billionaires own more than half of the world's population.

Gayatri Spivak: Bill Gates owns 93 billion dollars.

Angela Davis: Yes, I mean, you can't even imagine that. Jeff Bezos of Amazon just bought Whole Foods. I mean, capitalism, maybe this is the beginning of another conversation ... you know, this kind of acquisitive nature of capitalism that makes people want more and more and more. So, no, I don't think that we will be able to retain any aspect of that state.

Gayatri Spivak: Ok, I give support to this, but I am also a little bit different, because if I have a model, it's Rosa Luxemburg-style social democracy – so, not the usual, not even a Marxist party. They voted in the war credits for the First World War, right? Luckily Marx was dead by then. I consider Angela's position a very serious position that is not opposed to mine. We certainly do think of the ones who think that we must be able to envisage the uselessness of the state in the future as our allies. But in the meantime the state is both medicine and poison, because the so-called international civil society – as I have said before, the word 'civil society' simply means they went to civics class in school, they know that anything that's not government is civil society – has no social contract. They are self-selected moral entrepreneurs often based on corporate funding. History is larger than personal goodwill and Marxism is not about kneecapping. So, I am not questioning the good will of people who work within the NGO system. I know many good people, for example Mpho Ndebele, who are working totally within an NGO. She is using that bad instrument to good ends: affirmative sabotage. So, this is not personal. But I would say that if the state is ignored, then the fuzzy side of the state, nationalism, which is based on the world's wealth of languages, we won't be able to hold it at bay. Therefore what I very much suggest is a more regional version of the abstract structures of welfare that the state cannot use under the contemporary conjuncture. Now the state is managerial of global capital. Neoliberalism removes the barriers between global capital and state capital. And then the human rights people come and shame the state, thinking that the state is supposed to be bad anyway.

The subaltern are people who are, by Gramsci's definition, small social groups on the fringes of history. Our work is so much to insert the subaltern – so the 'subaltern' is potentially generalizable – into the circuit of citizenship. That's as far as they can go and they can work with that structure. As I say, the Angela Davises of the world with a view of the state as something that we must finally get rid of, they are our allies, they are not our opponents. But nonetheless, for the moment – and we are non-teleological even in the long run – the work with the subaltern is for citizenship. It's very hard because there has to be follow-up implementation, because the state ain't going to like the fact of citizenship being worked at in this way. How do I know this? You know, I haven't taken American citizenship after 58 years. I have a 58 year-old green card, basically because I like to vote in India, and also keep on teaching at those rural schools, visiting India as often as I can without compromising my work at Columbia, that has allowed me to participate in the voting action of hundreds of students over 54 years of teaching. Thus I can see how uneven, what a relief map citizenship is. And if that is so for me as a metropolitan world traveller, how much more for the subaltern people. Citizenship, as the world teaches us every day, is a resource we ought to protect persistently.

This is what has happened with subalternisation, with Occupy Wall Street, since the Reagan-Bush era in the Eighties – when all of the welfare structures of the New Deal, including, finally,

the Glass-Steagall, keeping commercial banks and investment banks separate – were annulled and the crash of 2007 was built on the material text of family values: ‘We love our home’, the classic mistaking of Department I, producing further capital, for Department II, producing for individual consumption. It is not an accident that in buying a house, the individual releases the largest amount of financial instruments into the circuit of capital. This is the material description of ideology, mistaking the housing industry as a resource for family values.² Therefore it is this kind of involvement one needs to work with, strategising with the state as medicine that can become poison, to heal the polity repeatedly, always only partially. And that’s why, just from the practical point of view, I follow Rosa Luxemburg, whom I admire greatly. What I say to the people who are my supervisors, my teachers, etc. is that I am your enemy in the context of the state because I am good, my parents are good, but two generations of goodness do not undo thousands of years of the denial of the right to intellectual labour which is what we have undergone. Now the state is somewhat ok with you because I am here, but what we are really trying to do is to see if the state is going to work for you without me. How can you materially come to the place where the state is your servant?

One of my supervisors was running for the Panchayat (rural local self-government unit) elections as a Communist Party Marxist candidate. He was not allowed even to put in his nomination because of Hindu nationalist violence. In that kind of context, I am not ready to give up on the state yet. But yes, regionalism rather than state competition. I am trying to think like China. I just did a thing that I called ‘Imperatives to Reimagine the Silk Road’, so that I could try to imagine myself outside of my US personship or my Indian personship, competitively nationalistic as they are. States in this effort are not bound inside their boxes fighting to see who is growing more. We must promote critical regionalism at the higher level. Regional groups such as ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) and SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) should not be just economic. NATO, for example, should not have been so poorly conceived. I could go on forever, because this is about my actual practice. I could go on to stories about land reform, for example. Let me stop here.

Nikita Dhawan: In light of these considerations, what do you think about the possibilities of international organising and transnational solidarity in the contemporary world?

Angela Davis: I have to keep reminding myself that we are in Germany where it has been very difficult to generate a vibrant Palestine solidarity movement and support for BDS – am I right?³ If we think about the solidarity work Palestinian activists did in 2014, when the Ferguson protest served as a catalyst for a very new movement, a black freedom movement, a movement for black lives, the Black Lives Matter movement, we realise how central Palestinians were to the production of a new historical moment for Black people in the US. Most of you probably know that Palestinian activists on the ground in Palestine were the very first to contact the Ferguson protesters through social media and not only offered solidarity but provided advice to the protesters as to how to deal with tear gas. Interestingly, they noticed, from visual images of the protests in Ferguson, that the tear gas canisters – made by Combined Tactical Systems in the US – were the same tear gas canisters which were used in occupied Palestine. This served as a catalyst for further researching the links between Israel and the US as they directly influence policing in black communities – the exchange of weapons, the training of small police departments such as Ferguson in the US in ‘anti-terrorist’ strategies. Moreover, Palestinian activists inaugurated the international solidarity for Black Lives Matter. I don’t know whether the US contemporary black movement would exist as we know it had it not been for the solidarity extended by people in

Palestine. It should also be the case that Palestine solidarity is recognised as central to all social justice struggles during this period just as in a previous period, whatever involvements we had, we all took a stand against apartheid in South Africa. South African solidarity was indeed a measure of the importance of the work we were doing, whether it was around women's issues, education activism, anti-repression, etc. Palestine is the South Africa of our contemporary period.

Gayatri Spivak: Today, also think of the Rohingyas in this way. Please think of the Rohingyas in this way. They cannot show any solidarity because they are now so massively uneducated. They don't know the world exists, cannot think about South Africa or Palestine. I am of course a member of the BDS, but think of the Rohingyas. Nobody really thinks of them. Do something. Maria do Mar Castro Varela organised a wonderful conference on 26th of February in Berlin, so we add their name – Rohingyas – to the list. Today, with self-promoting promises of repatriation, what we have to keep in mind is that Myanmar will not give them citizenship. In India, citizenship is being withdrawn from Bengali Muslims, even, in one case, from a veteran of the Indian army.



Angela Davis: You are absolutely right and thank you so much, Gayatri, for constantly insisting on rendering visible the predicament of the Rohingyas. What people often don't realise also is Palestinian Americans were protesting in Ferguson. The Black Lives Matter movement is often perceived as an all-black movement. They assume that only black people were protesting the killing of Mike Brown in 2014. But there were Palestinians, there were Latinx people, there were Asian-Americans, it was multi-racial. But I want to use this opportunity to say something about the way in which the notion of 'anti-blackness' has travelled. I know this concept does do important work, but I'm very careful about the implications of this category that black people constitute the most important group that is subject to racism. Sometimes 'anti-blackness' is used as an implicit criticism of the category 'people of colour' and to point to 'anti-blackness' in communities of people of colour. Of course there is racism everywhere. And black people are not immune to either anti-black racism or racist-inspired ideological assaults against other people of colour. So it is important to be careful regarding assumptions that black people are always the primary targets of racism. Discussions of anti-blackness often centre on pain and injury, which although not unimportant, can create barriers to developing solidarity, to developing the kind of empathy we were talking about. And if, from where I stand, the importance of black people's

histories in the Americas resides precisely in the fact that there has been an ongoing freedom struggle for many centuries, the centrality of black struggles is much more about freedom than it is about blackness.

Gayatri Spivak: I just have a question: what do you think about Afro-pessimism? I really want you to say something about that.

Angela Davis: Well, this was my way of speaking about Afro-pessimism.

Gayatri Spivak: Well, ok, I get a good mark. Good, good, I am with you 100 percent.

Angela Davis: You know, in many places in Europe I have noticed that these ideas are travelling so rapidly.

Gayatri Spivak: It started in France.

Angela Davis: Yes, in France, in the Netherlands. And I think it is linked to a kind of black nationalism that always appears to be the stance to which black movements defer. No matter how much we contest it, there seems to be a regular capitulation to nationalism – it keeps coming back. W.E.B. DuBois suggested that anti-imperialism was more effective than nationalism. One of the dangers of black nationalism is the way it does its ideological work of reinforcing the nation-state paradigm through many of us who nevertheless believe that we are contesting the state.

Gayatri Spivak: Yes, it is an object of resistance, Angela, that's why I said medicine and *poison*. You constantly train, you constantly have to be a Gramscian permanent persuader, in order to use that bloody structure, but no, it is capable of great harm. But I just don't think that the state has to be like that, for those of us who are working on the subaltern sections of the electorate ...

Nikita Dhawan: Angela, you stood as a Vice Presidential candidate, so somehow there must have been a plan...

Angela Davis: But I didn't think I was going to win. I had no intentions of winning. It was about disrupting the electoral process. It was about also demonstrating that electoral politics can't claim all of the terrain of politics. And it was about bringing issues into the electoral arena that otherwise would not have been addressed.

Nikita Dhawan: And what would you have done if you had won?

Angela Davis: That's not even a fair question though. I remember the years before I was acquitted – you know I was charged with three capital crimes and faced the death penalty three times – I remember saying during that period if I am ever acquitted I am going to run for Sheriff, the Sheriff of Marin County, which is the place where I was being held as a prisoner, but of course that was in jest. But I do think it is important to address electoral politics, although in a nuanced way. For some reason people assume that whenever you venture in that direction you have somehow betrayed your radical roots. I was arguing before the Trump election that people needed to vote, they needed to go to the polls and they needed to vote against Trump. And I made a statement at one point to the effect, I think, I said I am not so narcissistic as to say that I cannot bring myself to vote for Hillary Clinton. And then that travelled all over social media that I was, you know, betraying my radical roots just because I was going to vote for Hillary Clinton. And I spent the

rest of the talk that I was doing explaining why Hillary Clinton would not be a good president. I think the point that I was making is that we need in the US, within the context of the state and electoral politics, to imagine, to build toward a very different kind of radical political party. We need a political party that represents the interests of the working class, that is feminist, that is anti-racist, that challenges heteropatriarchy, that does all of those things.

Gayatri Spivak: And here I am not with you.

Angela Davis: Okay. This is good, we disagree here.

Gayatri Spivak: I don't think a party is a good thing.

Angela Davis: I mean I think you are right. I think you are right. But I am talking about a party with a different kind of leadership, a different kind of structure, the discussions we were having before about feminist leadership can help us to imagine a formation that we are compelled to call a party formation, but that does not correspond to what we know as political parties.

Gayatri Spivak: Yes and you know I am making the same kind of arguments about the state, about what we know as the state. So, it's okay, I mean again...

Angela Davis: So, would you be with us?

Gayatri Spivak: For a party? No, and I will tell you why, because you are talking here in the United States about 'we need "dot dot dot"', speaking about the state. It's different in India with its 17 left parties, in West Bengal with its second international communism, M.N. Roy founding the Communist Party of Mexico, etc., and the way I have been guided by the *Frontier* group, the left of the left party critique of the parliamentary left. It is not the same everywhere, as in a colonial country where the state was not at the centre. The United States is not the model of the world. This is why I say that we have to think state-wise. I mean you just said in the US 'we need a party "dot dot dot"', because the left has been so defunct, whereas in India, I don't think a party is going to do anything. So therefore I think I will not be against you, but I will not put my faith in this. I cannot agree with Gramsci, whom I really like very much, that the party might be the modern prince. That was the anti-state argument – party.

Angela Davis: But if we can perhaps develop a new way of thinking about a formation that can have an impact on the state as you suggest. And of course this is a very practical question about, what do we do now in the US.

Gayatri Spivak: In the case of the Tricontinent, as the Bolsheviks and the Chinese communists used to call what we call the Global South, one is focused on the largest sector of the electorate, with whom the parties are really doing bad things. So, an alternative party for these millions of people, who are being violently pushed into voting, is a bicycle for a fish. In Africa campaigners go to campaign with the unsystematised mother tongues, so that right before elections you have ethnic violence. So one has to see that the party is not in itself an unquestioned good. In the United States, Cornel West pushes for a new party. Good ... I like the United States, I have lived there for 58 years, so I understand where that comes from, but it does seem to me that one of the problems with the US is that sometimes it thinks it's the world, so that even the radicals adjudicate for what *the* party will be.

Angela Davis: You are absolutely right about that. And I think those of us who have spent most of our lives in the States have a responsibility to do the work of what Ngũgĩ called decolonising the mind, because even activists, radical activists, are not immune to US exceptionalism and the tendency to think that the US is the world. So I am thinking narrowly – not universally – about the specific predicament we face in the US, which of course has repercussions all over the world. But what do we do two years from now? Where do we go? We will not have another party by then anyway – and the Democratic Party doesn't seem like it's doing very well.

Gayatri Spivak: I wrote a little thing for Occupy Wall Street, because they asked me to, called 'What is to be done?'. It is very bold and rough, but I was talking about how even the states were trying to make Obama come forward to solve the 2007 crisis, when even the Congressional record commented on the securitisation of the loan syndrome, and Obama couldn't do anything given the exigencies of finance capital. So, those of us who remain Marxists have to see that electoral politics is not going to do anything anywhere *by itself* anymore, although it should still be used.



Angela Davis: I totally agree with you on that, I absolutely agree. I just want to bring the issue of indigenous people into the conversation. When we speak about postcolonialities, certainly we need to in the first place think about those who were subject to the colonisation process from the very beginning. I am listening to Gayatri and I am trying not to think about alternative epistemologies in the way you suggested that people are always looking for alternative epistemologies. But I do think that if we want to generate hope we might learn something from indigenous cosmologies. We might learn something from the ways in which many indigenous people think not in terms of the length of time of one lifetime, but think in terms of generations and hundreds of years and how the work we do today can guarantee the continuation of a movement that moves in the direction of what we have called freedom. And we cannot assume that we will accomplish that in our lifetime.

Gayatri Spivak: But let me also say something else, Angela. Indigenous people – there are three hundred-plus so-called Austro-Asiatic tribes in India – I work with them, but we must not mistake cultural conformity for revolutionary vision.

Angela Davis: Absolutely.

Gayatri Spivak: That's the thing that makes us go wrong. And again that is a legitimation by reversal. Those brothers and sisters of ours are, as we are, not untouched by social exclusion. One of the people I work with in Birbhum, a high school teacher, he has some land, etc. He is doing some collecting for us with our oral traditions. He goes out to collect and he is doing what Gramsci says about the subaltern intellectual. He is himself a songwriter. It is not easy to learn how they do their songs. Very carefully he has learnt so that they take him seriously as a songwriter and thus, through doing this cultural conformity from within, he is introducing new thinking: around gender especially. There is a line that he has: 'We demand a steel Sita.' If there is anybody here who knows anything about the Ramayana, then this line that he has written, which goes with the way their cultural conformity works, makes them think differently. They are not protected from historical change. That's something that we must consider, even as we celebrate them for ecological thinking and a different mindset. But that cultural conformity should not be mistaken for a revolutionary mindset.

Angela Davis: I am not trying to suggest that ... you know, that conversation can go on and on, but I simply want to think about how to be critical of the neoliberal focus on the individual and how we can learn how to imagine the work that we are doing today as having an impact on generations to come.

Gayatri Spivak: And not according to our plan.

Angela Davis: And no, not according to our plan. We thought we were going to make the revolution in the 1970s. And look at where we are now. But we did bring about some change. Something did happen and I think that that kind of posture can help us generate the hope that we need.

Photos credit: Akademie der Künste

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Notes

1. Spivak has been teaching and training local teachers at five primary schools and coaching high schoolers among the landless illiterate Dalits in West Bengal since 1986. This is how she describes it for tax purposes: 'a long-term research enterprise trying to solve an intellectual problem: is it possible to insert, through teaching and training community-based teachers and supervisors, the children of the very poor, the largest sector of the electorate, into the intuitions of democracy?'
2. Karl Marx, 'The Two Departments of Social Production', in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 2, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1992), 471–74.
3. Since this conversation took place, the Bundestag passed a resolution in May 2019 declaring that the 'pattern of argument and methods of the BDS movement are anti-Semitic'. Though non-binding (as yet), the motion, which calls for a halt to the funding of pro-BDS groups (rather than, as the AfD proposed, making them illegal), has already had a significantly caustic effect on critical discourse on Israel within Germany.

