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## 4

# General predicament, specific negotiations: Spivak's persistent critique

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From the standpoint of epistemic decolonization, there is a catchphrase that aptly distils the intellectual strategy of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. I am not – at least not in the first instance – thinking of ‘can the subaltern speak?’ The phrase I have in mind is one which, with minor variations, is scattered throughout interviews and essays. It marks the intimacy of deconstruction with its objects: ‘persistent critique’. ‘Persistent critique of what one cannot not want’;<sup>1</sup> or, alternatively, ‘Persistently to critique a structure that one cannot not (wish to) inhabit.’<sup>2</sup> This is a stance that implies a fundamental complicity between the subject and the object of critique and thereby a destabilization of any clear-cut divisions between the two. Far from the idea of a disinterested epistemic stance, it evokes instead the contortions of contradictory desires that cannot be bracketed off but must always be navigated. Not a renunciation of political struggle or collective commitments, to be sure, but a moratorium on appeals to a politics of purity.

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1. Sara Danius, Stefan Jonsson and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’, *Boundary 2*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1993, p. 42.

2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Routledge, London, 2009 (1993), p. 320.

What I would like to do here is to test the parameters and variations of this phrase, in a manner not dissimilar to that which Georges Canguilhem famously described as the philosophical practice of ‘working a concept’; that is, ‘to vary its extension and comprehension, to generalise it through the incorporation of exceptional traits, to export it outside of its region of origin, to take it as a model or conversely to seek a model for it. In short, to progressively confer upon it, through regulated transformations, the function of a form.’<sup>3</sup> If Spivak at a certain point described herself as a ‘practical deconstructivist feminist Marxist’,<sup>4</sup> I propose that we might use the sentence ‘a persistent critique of what one cannot not want’ to give form to this practice. Within the constraints of this essay, I make no claims to the exhaustiveness of the operation. I restrict it, rather, to two terrains or two distinct scenarios, which in their difference also point to a strategically important differentiation within the field of what sometimes seems an overly homogeneous idea of epistemic decolonization.

In the first instance I will look at how Spivak reads what, in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, she calls the ‘source texts of European ethico-political self-representation’.<sup>5</sup> On her account, because these texts, as conceptual constructs, retain effectivity and structuring force within contemporary discourses, to simply turn one’s back on them ‘when so much of one’s critique is clearly if sometimes unwittingly copied from them, is to disavow agency and declare kingdom come by a denial of history’.<sup>6</sup> What is required is a working through of the ways in which histories of

3. Georges Canguilhem, ‘Dialectique et philosophie du non chez Gaston Bachelard’, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, vol. 17, no. 66, 1963, p. 52. See Peter Osborne’s constructive-methodological use of this notion in ‘Working the Contemporary: History as a Project of Crisis, Today’, in Peter Osborne, *Crisis as Form*, Verso, London and New York, 2022, ch. 1, pp. 3–17.

4. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Peter Osborne, ‘An Interview’, *Radical Philosophy* 54, Spring 1994, p. 32.

5. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999. p. 9.

6. *Ibid.*

colonization have left operative traces within such texts; not just in racist tropes or outright instances of colonial ideology, but in the epistemic perspectives they afford, their mode of address and their expected addressees. What I will focus on here is how 'the persistent critique of what one cannot not want' entails what Spivak has called an *ab*-use and affirmative sabotage of these sources.<sup>7</sup>

In the second instance I will turn to a claim made in the conclusion to *Outside in the Teaching Machine*: namely, that the postcolonial situation outside of imperial centres is itself in some sense a deconstructive scenario that calls for a persistent critique: 'Postcoloniality – the heritage of imperialism in the rest of the globe – is a deconstructive case.'<sup>8</sup> In this instance it is to the translatability of European political and judicial forms both within and after formal colonization that is at stake: a navigation of the declensions of nationalism and free-market capitalism.

These two terrains are of course related, but holding them apart for a moment allows us to see, within Spivak's intellectual strategy, an attention to the difference emphasized by Kuan-Hsing Chen in *Asia as Method*, between what he calls decolonization and deimperialization: the differential between the work of decolonization on the terrain of the formerly colonized and the work of deimperialization on the terrain of former colonizing and imperializing states. What is at stake here is not only a territorial demarcation; it is just as much a question of subjectivity and the construction of identities in the post-Cold War era, in which a political commitment to countering expressions of neo-racism and neo-imperialism are integral to

7. An intimation of how Spivak's situated strategy of reading is a negotiation of the infrastructures of authority in the European canon can be seen in Lucie Mercier, 'Exemplarity, Authority, Universalizability', paper given at the conference 'Exemplarity, Authority, Universalizability: How is a Geopolitics of Philosophy to be Conceptualised?', Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Kingston University London, 4 May 2018, <https://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2018/05/exemplarity-authority-universalizability-how-is-a-geopolitics-of-philosophy-to-be-conceptualised>.

8. Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 316.

emancipatory projects. These two trajectories – decolonization and deimperialization – interact and intersect but they do so unevenly and not in any straightforward manner. They are still being worked out and may even, as Chen writes, be at an initial and critical stage.<sup>9</sup>

‘Persistent critique’ is not only or not simply a testament to Spivak’s decades-long engagement with the writings of Jacques Derrida. To grasp the full and multilayered significance of it as an intervention into discussions of the geopolitics of knowledge production we also need to read it within the framework of Spivak’s particular understanding of the contemporaneity of the history of capitalism. For this reason I start with an account of her engagements with Marx, in order to elucidate the stakes of what might be called ‘a critical art of failure’, the Beckettian end of which is always to ‘fail better’ than before in an ‘immanent critique of theory’s material embeddedness in global capitalism’.<sup>10</sup>

### **Marxism in the expanded field**

Marx keeps moving for a Marxist as the world moves.<sup>11</sup>

Spivak’s Marxism has always been something of an irritant: either too ‘Derridean’ or too ‘orthodox’, depending on the affiliation of her critics. Where Timothy Brennan characterized her work in the 1980s as ‘a mixture of Derrida and a textualized Marx – although this may only be a way of saying a Derridean

9. Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2010, p. 14. Chen’s project to develop a ‘Geocolonial Historical Materialism’ properly speaking involves a strategy not discussed here, the decentring of Eurocentrism and a transformation of existing structures of knowledge and subjectivity by ‘using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point’ such that ‘societies in Asia can become each other’s points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt’ (p. 212).

10. Pheng Chea, ‘Biopower and the International Division of Reproductive Labour’, in Rosalind C. Morris, ed., *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010, p. 179.

11. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p. 67.

Marx',<sup>12</sup> Robert Young instead decried its 'residual classical Marxism ... invoked for the force of its political effect from an outside that disavows and apparently escapes the strictures that the rest of her work establishes'.<sup>13</sup> It is true that several of the earlier texts on Marx and Derrida took the form of a staged and performed encounter between the critique of political economy and the critique of humanism associated with, among others, deconstruction.<sup>14</sup> As is noted in one of these earlier texts,

In the current situation of the financialization of the globe all critiques of hegemonic humanism must digest the rational kernel of Marx's writings in its own style of work, rather than attempt to settle scores with Marxism.<sup>15</sup>

To 'swallow and digest' the rational kernel of Marx's writings rather than seek to correctly fit 'the authoritative label "Marxist"'<sup>16</sup> was also a direct appeal to feminists and anti-imperialists, as this frame highlights global asymmetries within the international division of labour, such that super-exploitation in the so-called margins might be recognized. To understand capitalism it helps to read Marx and to let that reading metabolize. But, as her review of Derrida's first extended engagement with (some of) the Marxian corpus in *Specters of Marx* made clear, whatever critical strategy she had sought to articulate with the idea of 'Marx after Derrida', it was not to be found in

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12. Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2006, p. 103.

13. Robert C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, 2nd edn, Routledge, London, 2004, p. 216.

14. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Limits and Openings of Marx in Derrida', in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, pp. 107–33; 'Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value', *Diacritics*, vol. 15, no. 4, Winter 1985, pp. 73–95; 'Speculations on Reading Marx: After Reading Derrida', in D. Attridge, G. Bennington and R. Young, eds, *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 30–62.

15. Spivak, 'Limits and Openings of Marx in Derrida', p. 108.

16. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Supplementing Marxism', in Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg, eds, *Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective*, Routledge, New York, 1994, p. 113.

Derrida's Marx: a straw man too 'silly' to measure up.<sup>17</sup> Marx's use of the concept of value as a social and socially efficacious abstraction, so Spivak contended, showed a much keener awareness of the 'spectrality' of capital than Derrida would allow.<sup>18</sup> Short of setting deconstruction to work within the critique of political economy, *Specters of Marx* instead came dangerously close to a 'deployment of Marxian metaphors without any notice of industrial capitalism'.<sup>19</sup> How else, then, might one go about the task? In line with the critique of humanist Marxism and its projection of a substantive, transhistorical conception of labour onto the distinction between the exchange-value and the use-value of labour-power, Spivak's reading was instead, as Beverly Best has shown well, profoundly negative.<sup>20</sup> Emphasizing the *openness* of Marx writings, her repeated returns to the letter of the text sought to tease out which assumptions and presuppositions within *Capital* either facilitated or blocked a persistent critique of political economy on a *global* scale and therefore how it might be used to situate the work of theory within the systemic connections 'between industrial capitalism, colonialism, so-called post-industrial capitalism, neocolonialism, electrified capitalism, and the current financialization of the globe, with the attendant phenomena of migrancy and ecological disaster'.<sup>21</sup> In this framework – an often under-appreciated systemic moment within her writings – the ever increased generalization of the capital relation means that 'inside' and 'outside', 'centre' and 'periphery', 'local' and 'global' become inextricably bound up with one another.

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17. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Ghostwriting', *Diacritics*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1995, p. 79.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Beverly Best, 'Postcolonialism and the Deconstructive Scenario: Representing Gayatri Spivak', in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1999, pp. 489–90.

21. Spivak, 'Ghostwriting', p. 68.

[I]f we dismiss general systemic critical perception as necessarily totalizing or centralizing, we merely prove once again that the subject of Capital can inhabit its ostensible critique as well.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the manner in which the local is implicated in global economic and political processes is grasped from the standpoint of a Marxist theory of exploitation. The central problem here, in the sense of a task to be undertaken, is how to account for the 'historical differential in the geopolitical situation of Marxism'.<sup>23</sup> It is in a constant dialogue with this project that Spivak placed the history of formal decolonization and the movements for national independence within the general frame of the economic restructuring of the globe in the latter half of the twentieth century. This matters to the strategy for reading the European canon because it is precisely this process that subtends the globalization of one particular local tradition and generalizes its claim to universality. It is part of the narrative of what lends authority to this tradition and it reveals the shadows of imposition in the phrase 'what you cannot not want'.

### The art of failure

To address the precise modality of 'persistent critique' as it relates to the philosophical canon, I will focus on Spivak's reading of Immanuel Kant in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. There is of course an undeniable echo of the Kantian project in Spivak's title: if *Critique of Pure Reason* set out to delineate the parameters by which we might identify moments of speculative transgression of the limits of knowledge, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* occupies an altogether more oblique position when it comes to the meanings of critique and of reason. In what sense

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22. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Scattered Speculations on the Question of Cultural Studies', in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 289.

23. Spivak, 'Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value', p. 76.



can we say that there is a cohesive reason or perhaps mode of reasoning to the postcolonial? In some ways it is a work that is closer to Marx's critique of political economy, since it moves both at the level of (economic) discourse and at the level of historical analysis. As Spivak's subtitle, *Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, indicates, if theoretical practice is to be justified as an attempt to grasp our historical present, this demands first that we come to terms with the disciplinary tools we employ to do so, and with how they are themselves enveloped in that history. It is a search for the conditions of transnational and transdisciplinary cultural studies in a global present that remains marked by colonial projects. Persistent critique is one answer to the question of how to deal with the authority of what appears as the uncircumventable Europeanness of the canon.

What compels me to characterize Spivak's strategy in this regard as something akin to an 'art of failure' is her emphasis on what she calls 'mistaken' readings.<sup>24</sup> To fail should in this respect be taken in a quite specific sense, as a highly skilful practice of recognizing what rules a discipline imposes, or what systematic limits a text seeks to establish in its mode of reasoning, only to breach them deliberately. This strategy is played out within a general theory of interpretation, in which each interpretation is understood as a necessary displacement of the intended meaning by a new context of reception (however minimal a difference this may entail). It is the acknowledgement that such displacements happen and the realization that they can be instrumentalized within a critical operation which turn a text against itself, seeking to establish, from the inside, a rigorous displacement.

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24. This strategy is operationalized in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* and is later developed explicitly in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2013.

I would rather suggest that we must know what mistake to make with a specific text and must also know how to defend our mistake as the one that will allow us to live. I assume that the passing of a text into my grasp is a mistake, of course. As we move toward the subaltern, we can only learn through mistakes, if that remote contingency arrives.<sup>25</sup>

Where does the difference lie between a general ‘mistaken’ reception and one that can become an epistemic strategy for decolonization? And for whom is it available? When the texts in question are those of the European philosophical Enlightenment, there is from the standpoint of ‘the postcolonial and the metropolitan migrant’, which Spivak repeatedly emphasizes as her own, something akin to a redoubling of the general scenario of unintended reception: how to give a reading of reasoned texts that ostensibly cast one as the ‘other’ of reason? The practice of reading that must carve out the epistemic perspective of the unintended reader is designated by Spivak in turn as an ‘ab-use’ – a use from below that seeks to find another use<sup>26</sup> – and ‘affirmative sabotage’, the deliberate destruction of the conceptual machinery of the master from within.<sup>27</sup> It is the strategic wager that tools of colonization can be put to use in the work of decolonization. There is something of a kinship here with Fred Moten’s reading of the phenomenological tradition against the grain, in a modality that makes its ‘juridical and philosophical inadmissibility’ the condition for an immanent critique from the standpoint of those whose subject positions have been systematically barred entry:

What if phenomenology were improperly, generatively (mis) understood as a set of protocols for the immanent critique (degeneration, corrosion, corruption) of its object, namely the transcendental subject of phenomenology? Let’s say that

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25. Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, p. 29.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Nazish Brohi and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘In Conversation with Gayatri Spivak’, 2014, [www.dawn.com/news/1152482](http://www.dawn.com/news/1152482).

deconstruction is the ongoing history of this misunderstanding, this refusal to understand.<sup>28</sup>

In Spivak's reading of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* the wilful mistake and the failure to comply take the form of a short-circuiting of the empirical and the transcendental: an attempt to locate the 'anthropomorphic' moments where the transcendental subject slips towards the empirical. As Étienne Balibar has noted, Spivak tracks the process whereby 'empirical differences are converted into unequal capacities to realize the proper human, and even leaves the possibility that some racially inferior humans will never be educated, i.e. will never prove able to recognise the idea of the community [of human beings] to which they should belong'.<sup>29</sup> This reading is performed through the lens of terms lifted from two other disciplines: the ethnographic 'native informant', who informs but does not itself present the narrative, and the psychoanalytic notion of 'foreclosure',<sup>30</sup> used here to describe the structural relation between a racialized subject and the transcendental subject. This is a relation which 'differs from exclusion in that it does not keep an already constituted subject at bay. Rather, it constitutes the subject, upon which the system depends, but simultaneously expels or disavows it'.<sup>31</sup> On this reading, there is a primal lack, a gap between natural disposition and transcendental structure (as there is between theoretical and practical reason), which is covered over by foreclosure of the 'native informant'. 'Man' is an area cordoned off for the 'native informant' in what is a structural and *textual* foreclosure and not an attempt to 'diagnose

28. Fred Moten, *The Universalising Machine*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2018, p. 2.

29. Étienne Balibar, 'Human Species as Biopolitical Concept', *Radical Philosophy* 2.11, 2021, p. 10.

30. Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, ed. Daniel Lagache, PUF, Paris, 1973, *Forclusion – Verwerfung*, pp. 163–7.

31. Kanchana Mahadevan, 'K.C. Battacharyya and Spivak on Kant: Colonial and Post-colonial Perspectives, Lessons and Prospects' in Sharad Deshpande, ed., *Philosophy in Colonial India*, Springer, Delhi, 2015, p. 148.

Kant's hidden beliefs'.<sup>32</sup> The form of repression and rejection inscribed within the text is a philosophical problem that is not just Kant's. By situating her reading within one of the canonical texts, Spivak effectively bypasses the move to brush off Kant's racism, which could be (and has been) performed in relation to what are treated as marginal texts like the anthropology and the writings on race. The latter is the strategy of certain analytic readings which abstract from the historical and textual context in order to reconstruct the most *plausible* argument to be drawn from a given thinker. This means that for an analytic Kantian, Kant's racist bias in his conception of cosmopolitanism does not in itself constitute a problem, as long as an argument for cosmopolitanism which does not include this bias can be constructed on the basis of the Kantian assumptions. This is what Robert Bernasconi has called the 'streamlined version of the history of philosophy':<sup>33</sup> optimized for rational application and free of embarrassing historical detail. The manner in which Spivak approaches the text instead looks to the historical conditions of possibility of the philosophical narrative of universality, and the Kantian narrative in particular. With this question comes also 'a commitment, not only to narrative and counter-narrative, but also to the rendering (im)possible of (another) narrative'.<sup>34</sup>

### **Decolonization as aporetic passage**

'What we cannot not want' spells out a double bind. Spivak has generalized the term 'double bind' – a phrase originally developed to theorize schizophrenia from an experience of mutually contradicting messages received from figures of intimate

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32. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, pp. 33, 37.

33. Robert Bernasconi, 'Introduction', in Robert Bernasconi and Sybil Cook, eds, *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN, 2003, p. 2.

34. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p. 6.

authority – and used it to situate and anchor the idea of constitutive aporias at several levels: in language and representation as well as in politics.<sup>35</sup> Part of what makes this such a difficult idea to grasp is that it is at once constitutive (a general enabling impossibility from out of which *all* ‘experience, thought, knowledge’, indeed ‘all humanistic disciplinary production’, springs)<sup>36</sup> and specific, referring to particular instances of this enabling impossibility. These relate to the linguistic, philosophical and practical ‘translation’ of the political and juridical master signifiers of the European Enlightenment into different geohistorical contexts in and after colonization:

the political claims that are most urgent in decolonized space are tacitly recognized as coded within the legacy of imperialism: nationhood, constitutionality, citizenship, democracy, socialism, even culturalism. Within the historical frame of exploration, colonization, and decolonization, what is being effectively reclaimed is a series of regulative political concepts, the supposedly authoritative narrative of whose production was written elsewhere, in the social formations of Western Europe. They are thus being reclaimed, indeed claimed, as concept metaphors for which no historically adequate referent may be advanced from postcolonial space. That does not make the claims less urgent. A concept metaphor without an adequate referent may be called a catachresis by the definitions of classical rhetoric. These claims to catachreses as foundations also make postcoloniality a deconstructive case.<sup>37</sup>

The question of how to conceive this partial inhabitation of what is fought against shifts the focus from persistent critique as a strategy for reading authoritative philosophical texts to persistent critique on the terrain of social and political struggle.

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35. Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, p. 4 and *passim*.

36. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, 2nd edn, Routledge, London, 2006 (1998), p. 364.

37. Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 316. With this description Spivak is navigating a similar problem to that which would launch Dipesh Chakrabarty's rethinking of the geohistoricity of the concepts of political modernity in *Provincializing Europe*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2009.

Here Spivak's work partakes in that 'double movement' which Mathieu Renault has proposed as a minimal definition for the central operation of 'postcolonial critique', a movement that is at once a

decentering (provincialization) and translation, of wrenching and appropriation of the 'gifts' of the West, as a severing and a renewal; a movement founded on a series of epistemological displacements and an interrogation of the politics and perspectives (places) of knowledge.<sup>38</sup>

What I want to emphasize here is that, from this perspective, a 'persistent critique of what you cannot not want' also implies an imperative not to regard the constitutive aporia *at the general level* as an alibi for remaining passive in the face of its specific instances. This is a point which has sometimes been overlooked by Spivak's critics, in particular those who express the sentiment that if a term like 'postcoloniality' is used to denote a contemporary state, condition or epoch it will inevitably blur geographical and geopolitical specificities, and different histories of colonization and liberation. With the effacement of these differences, the political thrust of the postcolonial as a concept that is meant to denote a displaced repetition of colonial hierarchies largely recedes.<sup>39</sup> But the persistence of critique – while always self-questioning after the fact – also entails a *passing through* of each specific aporetic scenario: '[t]he aporetic is a situation where we cannot cross over fully to the other side, yet must continue to perform carefully mustered imperfect crossings, manoeuvring wars entailing impermanent wars of position.<sup>40</sup> To strategically

38. Mathieu Renault, 'Rupture and New Beginning in Fanon: Elements for a Genealogy of Postcolonial Critique', in *Living Fanon*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011, p. 105.

39. This general critique of the term 'postcolonial' was formulated at the height of the early 1990s' debates on postcolonialism by, among others, Ella Shohat, 'Notes on the 'Post-Colonial'', *Social Text*, vol. 31, no. 32, 1992, pp. 99–113; and Anne McClintock, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-Colonialism"', *Social Text*, vol. 31, no. 32, 1992, pp. 84–98.

40. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'They the People', *Radical Philosophy* 157, September/October 2009, p. 34.

'cross over' in the service of generalized social emancipation requires a careful consciousness of context. From this perspective, to think of persistent critique as an art of failure is far from the anticipation of defeat. Rather, we might see it as a comment on the temporality of change, a picking away at what one 'cannot not want'.