

Can the "Privileged" Or: How to overcome the feeling of paralysation speak?

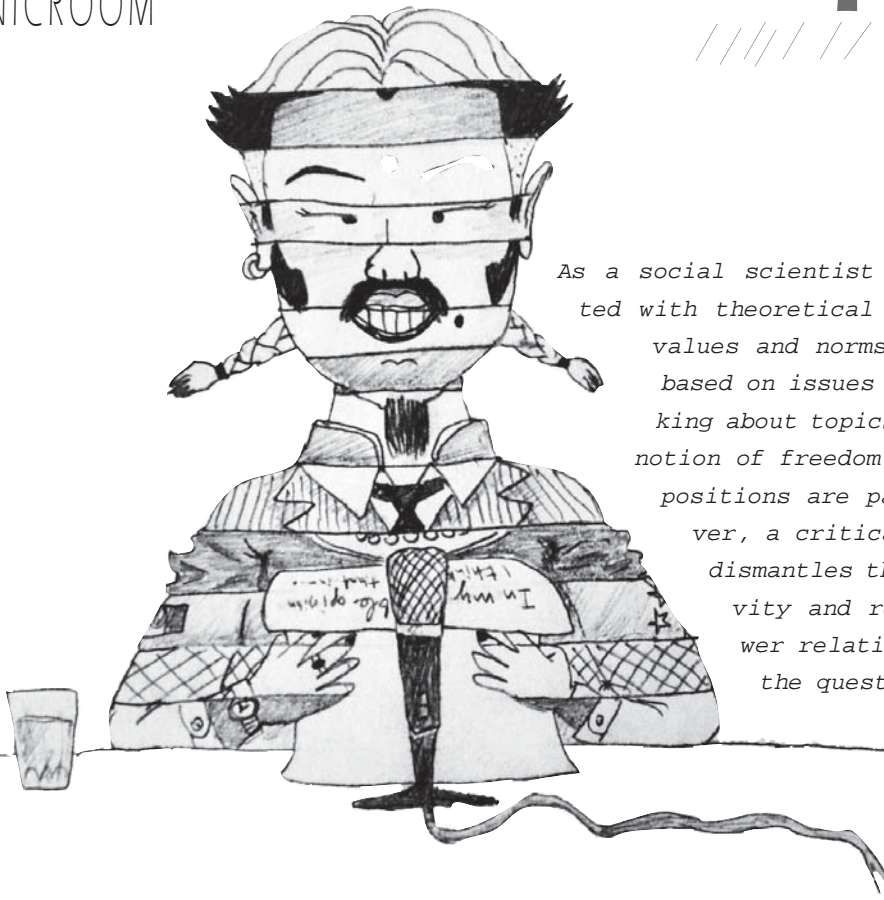
von
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As a social scientist I have often been confronted with theoretical stances proposing universal values and norms, as well as views that are based on issues of cultural relativism. Talking about topics such as human rights or the notion of freedom and emancipation, these two positions are particularly prominent. However, a critical engagement with the topic dismantles the myth of truth and objectivity and reveals a complex net of power relations. This awareness triggers the question whose voice is heard and

can claim to have the best perspective and speak „the truth“. Going a step further and thinking of a specific topic, one can

ask who has the right to „have an opinion“ and who can speak for whom on this topic. These are questions of great importance in postcolonial and feminist theory, where I also tried to find an answer to the dilemma of wanting, but not daring to speak due to one's privileged location¹. But the further I went with reading and discussing, the more paralysed I felt.

Postcolonial theorist Sara Suleri warned in 1992 that "academic self-censorship" and fear of political incorrectness were taking over the academic discourse. Observing the academic landscape (nowadays) this only seems to apply to a minor group of cri-

¹ I use the term location for the social, economic, national etc. background one comes from, as opposed to position, which is flexible and describes the social, political etc. stance one choses to speaks from.

tical academics. However, she does mention an important point when she sees a danger in this tendency in academy of losing connection to actual events taking place in the world and being perceived as „subculturing itself out of viable existence“ (Suleri 1992:336). ▭

IS EPISTEMOLOGY "SKIN DEEP"?

Following some discussions in postcolonial theory, there seems to be a certain hierarchy of oppression concerning the right to have a voice; Suleri, as well as Spivak and other authors, observe the iconic status ascribed to postcolonial feminists. „The coupling of postcolonial with woman, however, almost inevitably leads to the simplicities that underlie unthinking celebrations of oppression, elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor for 'the good'“ (Suleri 1992:337).

Also Donna Haraway (1988) discusses the tendency of romanticisation of postcolonial voices as problematic and calls attention to the fact that "subjugated" standpoints per se do neither promise more authentic or more objective accounts of reality, nor are they necessarily free from dominant ideology. This point is further stressed by Margary Fee (1995:244) and Spivak (1988), the latter criticising the "(post)colonial subaltern as a seemingly 'freely speaking' subject/ agent in the discourses of the dominant order" (Spivak 1988, in Bart Moore-Gilbert 2005:452f).

In this context Suleri criticises postcolonial feminism as being inherently "skin deep" (Suleri 1992:337), in the sense that the location you write from seems to be derived from your bodily appearance, from the visible - hence re-producing biological readings of ‚race‘. This strict reading is also observed by Hinterberger, who states that „[...] feminist critiques of representation tend to fall suspiciously along divisions of 'western-white' and 'non-western-non-white'“ (Hinterberger 2007:77). ▭

On the one hand it makes perfect sense that lived experience offers a greater insight into a topic; especially a topic closely linked to notions of wishes and desires. But on the other hand one runs the risk of reproducing biological concepts of ‚race‘ and objective authenticity, as well as universal notions of desires and needs instead of deconstructing them.

But then, how can this dilemma be solved? Are we condemned to radical subjectivity?

DEVELOP RAGE

Concerning the dilemma of representation I found some insight in a discussion about multi-culturalism between Sneja Gunew and Gayatri C. Spivak (1990). The latter describes a situation at university where a student says he couldn't speak, as he was only "a bourgeois white male". Spivak suggests that instead of simply seeing things in a chromatic (basing everything on one's skin colour) or genitalistic (basing everything on one's ‚biological sex‘) way, one should investigate what exactly it is that silences oneself and possibly "develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced".

"From this position, then, I say you will of course not speak in the same way about the Third World material, but if you make it your task not only to learn what is going on there through language, through specific programmes of study, but also at the same time through a historical critique of your position as the investigating ▽

person, then you will see that you have earned the right to criticize, and you [sic] be heard" (Spivak 1990:62). ☐

Spivak does not only address the right to speak, but in a way also the duty to speak when she claims that "[...] you have to take a certain risk: to say 'I won't criticize' is salving your conscience" (Spivak 1990:62f). But to do so in an ethical way, avoiding ascribing attributes and fixed identities to other people, it is necessary to keep in place the "(im)possible perspective of the native informant" (Spivak 1999:352, in Hinterberger 2007). The contrast of possibility and impossibility tells that one should strive towards an understanding of specific perspectives, but always bear in mind that there is no full or complete representation of "others" (Spivak 1992:283, in Hinterberger 2007:77). ☐

Of course this is only a short elaboration on the topic and I only touched upon a few issues here - as always, the reality is much more complex... However, this essay shall demonstrate how necessary it is to move away from essential categories of belonging² and to speak, to have an opinion, to make a statement, to discuss and to oppose if necessary! It is too easy to wash your hands off thinking that some issues have nothing to do with one's own life. But it is just as important to be critical and reflect upon one's historical and social location. I wouldn't fully agree with Spivak (2007:136) that history is bigger than personal good intentions, but no matter what position we chose to write or speak from, our history - our location - will always be part of who we are and how we think. ☐

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² I found Sandoval's concept of differential consciousness (2002) and Anzaldúa's concept of the borderlands (1987) particularly useful for rethinking questions of identity and belonging, and hence also of authenticity, essentialism and representation. These areas of consciousness deny the necessity and possibility of fitting into one category and instead create an alternative transcultural, transnational and transgendered space. Sandoval proposes employing 'tactical essentialism' - similar to Spivak's suggestion of strategic essentialism - where necessary, but avoiding clear-cut definitions and group boundaries. In this respect, essentialism can be used to obtain visibility and act as a body of people, but should remain highly contested and always be connected to mechanisms of power.