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Postmodern Market Feminism:
Half of a Conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

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I've been most things in my life: a positivist social engineer, a Joan Baez socialist, and a man. Now I'm a free market feminist, a quantitative postmodernist, and a woman. I'm not ashamed of these changes of mind. Keynes replied to the complaint that he changed his mind on free trade, "When I get new information I change my mind. What do you do?"

My main point this morning is that it's possible to be postmodernist and pro-capitalist and feminist all at once. It's not only possible, it's desirable and natural. The three hang together. Together they do good work in the world. Gayatri and I agree largely on the postmodernist and feminist ends. It's on the middle bit, the economics and the economic history, that we disagree. I say that market capitalism fits postmodernism and feminism better than does Marxism.

My postmodernism is that of a former modernist. It comes out of a unease I began to feel around 1975 with modern economic method, modern architecture, modern painting, modern academic music, modern social engineering. Postmodernism is about how we know. It says that we do not know in modernist ways, a simpleton's version of Science applied to a dogmatist's version of Reality, the method my former colleagues in Economics at the University of Chicago 1968-1980 used to

believe. George Stigler was an especially simple and dogmatic exemplar. My particular form of post-modernism is the oldest, as all humanists know, the “rhetorical.” It dates from 467 BC, when the new (free guys’) democracy of Syracuse needed a disciplined theory of how we persuade. It is very similar to deconstruction: in fact the masters of deconstruction such as Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida were rhetoricians first, if only from their *lycee* Greek. I combine rhetoric with the American pragmatism of James, Dewey, and latterly Rorty, which gives me a philosophical grounding to do rhetoric in somewhat the same way that Hegel gives Gayatri a grounding to do deconstruction. I don’t think these merely philosophical groundings matter very much for what we do: Gayatri and I agree that texts, like allegedly positivist facts, are made not born; we agree that you need to pay close attention to the work that words do.

Yet most postmodernists are socialists, or at any rate vigilant about the failures of markets and not so vigilant about the failures of governments messing about in markets. That’s a fact.

My point is that this sad political fact is an accident of history, not inevitable. There’s nothing in postmodernism entailing socialism. Rather the contrary. Classical Marxism is a notably positivist project, and recent versions of socialism from Sweden in the 1950s to environmentalism in the 1990s still believe old Comte, “savoir pour pouvoir,” know in order to control. Marx and Engels called their project *scientific* socialism (though “scientific” not quite in the modern English sense). I’m not saying that only the left participates in an antique positivism. Our middle-of-the-road economic friend Max U, the Samuelsonian seeking man (*homo petens*), marches in that old parade, too. It’s all of a piece, this scientism, and it is precisely not the project of postmodernism.

What I mean also by “rather the contrary” is that a market society is alert, flexible, innovative, bubbling up, democratic, unintended,

creative. It is the opposite of centrally planned, or planned at all. The attempts of experts to lay down the future notwithstanding, in a free society you can't tell what's next (have a look at *If You're So Smart* [1990]). (I am aware that you will object to my cheerful description of late capitalism. Marxists believe that the last stage of capitalism is a socialism without the Revolution, and every reader of the *New York Times* believes that giant multinationals run the world. I think both views are mistaken.) As Virginia Postrel writes in her important book, *The Future and Its Enemies* (Free Press, 1998), the modernist project of prediction and control is "stasist." ("Stasist" from "stasis," equilibrium, not "stastist," though it is that, too.) Free and enriching societies are on the contrary "dynamist." A 1960s glass box building goes with stasis, cyberspace art with dynamism, not the other way around. Most academic Marxism is a glass box: Jack Amariglio and the *Rethinking Marxism* crowd have been trying to find the exit. To pair postmodernism with Marxism has always seemed to me odd.

I'm suggesting that the market, not socialism in any of its forms (all involve Society taking charge, that being the point of the word), is the most natural pairing with postmodernism. Understand, I speak here of tone and spirit. We are agreeing that *entailment*, logical connection, is not at stake. I am not claiming that bourgeois market capitalism is logically either necessary or sufficient for postmodernism. I *am* ready to claim, with Tyler Cowen's *In Praise of Commercial Culture* [Harvard 1998], that bourgeois market capitalism has in fact been a good forum for developments in art and thought, such as postmodernism. "Forum," you know, means in Latin "market place."

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And I want to suggest, further, that feminism is a natural third term: postmodern market feminism.

I know. Many of you believe that the market has been a great enslaver of women. Understand: I am disagreeing with you, on economic and historical grounds, and suggesting that we sit together quietly and discuss the evidence. The market I claim has been the great liberator of women (and of slaves and of poor people and of religious minorities and of sexual minorities).

The economic logic is that markets provide women with an option of exit otherwise denied to a daughter or wife or widowed mother. We agree that power in the household is the heart of the matter (and I very much agree with Gayatri's point [as in *The Post-Colonial Critic*, Sarah Harasym, ed., pp. 118-119] that gender power interacts with class power and economic power and racial power [and religious power and ideological power and intellectual power and so forth], making it wrong to take them one-by-one: that is my point, too). In societies in which women are forbidden by law (as in Afghanistan) or compelling custom (as in India in some castes) to work outside the home a woman has less choice. Less than what? Here the critics of capitalism sneer indignantly at the jobs available, joining in their sneering the aggrieved husbands. Free to sleep under the bridges. Free to take jobs with Nike. After all, a wretchedly-paying job making athletic shoes for the American market is hardly unalienated work.

But ask the woman, the economist suggests, if she would rather that the shoe company not make her the offer. Ask her if Nike doesn't pay more than taking in washing. Look at the length of queue that forms when Nike opens a new plant in Indonesia. And ask her if she'd rather not have any market opportunities at all, and be left at home instead entirely to her father or husband (or mother in law).

That other Marx, Groucho, put it well. A Communist friend of his came around during the Depression and asked Groucho for a job. Groucho laughed and turned him down: "Harry, no, I can't do that. I wouldn't want to make you a wage slave."

I'm not very impressed by such logical arguments by themselves. It's part of the modernist project of economics to claim that great social truths can be proven standing at a blackboard. I don't think so. I'm an economic historian, which is a very vulgar, low-caste occupation in economics. I think you have to see how markets and capitalism and bourgeois values have in practice interacted with other systems (such as politics or popular culture) to see if they have on the whole been emancipatory for women.

It could have been bad, and in some parts is. You could argue (as I would not) that on the whole market valuation of human beings has commercialized female sexuality, with disastrous effects in self-esteem among women in rich countries, showing itself for example in voluntary starvation. You could argue (as I would), to speak of literal slaves, that the expansion of European cultivation of sugar hardened the enslaving tendencies of already slave-owning societies, such as West African kingdoms. Capitalism could have been bad news. In 1848 it looked like a good bet to a lot of people that it was going to be.

Ironically the half-century after 1848 proved every one of the expectations of 1848 to be mistaken. Real wages in Britain from 1855 to 1913 doubled (C. H. Feinstein, *National Income* [1972], series 21.1 and 21.2 divided by 25.3). Women are doubly subaltern, but women's wages kept pace. And the 20th century, despite a wretched forty years 1914-1945, has dramatically improved on that--this against the expectations of John Stuart Mill and other orthodox economists much influenced by Malthus, such as Marx. It will surprise no one that in the 16 OECD (i.e. presently rich) countries for which Angus Maddison was able to assemble data unweighted averages (i.e. one country = one observation) per capital real GDP per capita expressed in 1980 dollars rose from \$1800 in 1900 (about the present-day income per head in China, to give you an idea; Maddison, *World Economy*, p. 19; population weighted figures give about the same result) to \$10,000.

China in 1987 to Sweden in 1987. That's a factor of 5.6 more shoes, education, bread, books (and, yes, landmines and jet fighters, though the Bads among the goods are a tiny portion of the whole). \$1800 against \$10,000 is the difference between getting along and doing very well. It has freed women from an enslavement to kitchen and yard. A majority of college students in the OECD nowadays are women. As I say, no surprise: the rich have gotten richer (though Japan in 1900, with an income in the range of Thailand's or Peru's at the time, and of India now, could hardly be called rich).

But contrary to the expectations of Malthusianism, and despite a rise in world population by a factor of five, from 1900 to 1987 the population-weighted average of *world* income per head rose from \$840 (the level of 1987 Pakistan; Maddison, pp. 14, 19) to \$3,700 (the level of Brazil in 1998), more than a factor of four. If the fixed-pie assumptions of Malthusianism (and a version of Marxism that does not listen to Marx and Engels in 1848) were correct, income per head should have sharply *fallen* 1900-1987. Instead it sharply rose. Pakistan to Brazil is not a move from hell to heaven, but it is a move that the average Pakistani would like to take. Supposing an unweighted average of the 16 non-OECD countries for which Maddison found data (such as India, Mexico, the USSR: no African country; p. 19) to be representative of the poor, the income per head *of the poor* increased by a factor of 4.1 in the era of high colonialism and decolonization. It has grown somewhat slower than the (now) rich countries, but has been revolutionized by the extension of international capitalism. The poor have *not* gotten poorer.

I do not want to muddle you with statistical detail. The longer story is this. In 1800, according to new and exciting scholarship on India and China, European per capita income did not stand out. The richer parts of China and India were comparable to the richer parts of Europe. Since 1800 world population has increased by a factor of six. Yet world income per head has risen by historically unprecedented amounts. The non-European parts at first did not share much in this.

Increasingly in the 20th century they did. The most important source of liberation for women and other submerged peoples has been modern economic growth. To paraphrase Marx and Engels, the bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce two-hundred-and-fifty years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Quite. The most important event in *women's* history is the rise of capitalist prosperity.

I do not like to rest the case on such aggregate findings, but for the moment will. I think the detailed stories of women's lives show the same liberation. The young women of Massachusetts who staffed the early American cotton industry in competition with the British metropolis did not regard themselves as disadvantaged by the offer.

The revolution since 1800 and especially since 1900 took place mainly in the production of goods. Professors teach pretty much as they did in Plato's Academy, but cups and shoes and rice and building materials cost a tiny fraction in labor power what they cost in 1848. Homework, one part of national income not in the figures above, has been less transformed, although the movement of food preparation into the market has liberated many hours of female labor. In 1900 a typical American household of the middle class would spend 44 hours in food preparation (Lebergott 1993, p. 51, from a small survey by Charlotte Perkins Gilman). Forty-four: bread, canning, making pies from scratch (my mother has told me that this spring when I visit her she will show me how to make pie crust: mother to new daughter). Childcare is now moving further into the market, but unlike factory-made food has not been transformed in technique. It still takes a pair of adult eyes and hands to watch a child or two or three, which is Elizabeth Wayland Barber's explanation for why women invented cloth, a business that could be combined easily with childminding (*Women's Work* [1994], p. 29, quoting the anthropologist Judith Brown).

And to mention the other component of national income not measured in the market, environmental degradation has not offset the gain. The unaccounted cost of fresh air and mountains and lakes and sunsets has been brought closer by modern transportation. We live in a cleaner environment, we rich people, than our great grandparents did in 1900. A horse-drawn city heated by soft coal is lethally dirtier than one with cars and natural gas.

Whether or not a woman chooses to work outside the home (in a terrible job, and then starting the Second Shift when she gets home to her shack; or the way Gayatri and I “work”), that her sisters do so has radically changed the balance of power within the family, or, not to be heterosexist, the wider society. This is why Barbara Bergmann’s policy is--become imitation men as fast as you can, my dears; get out there in the market and sell. She sees it, as it has been historically, as the road to women’s liberation.

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Gayatri and I emphatically agree that history is a tale we tell. This does not mean we do not believe in examining archives or getting relevant dates right. I am not sure that this position is postmodern as much as merely sensible. Any thoughtful historian knows she is *telling* a story, *selecting*, studying as Collingwood put it “problems, not periods.” She understand she is not just copying down What Happened from the archive. What Happened isn’t in the archive. A bunch of paper with marks is. Stories do not lie about on the sidewalk waiting to be told. Stories are not out in the world like pebbles; they are manufactured in people’s heads and told on their lips.

But Gayatri and I disagree on the story that should be told about the three centuries past and the century to come. I think she merely overlooks the gigantic enrichment that has come from allowing market

capitalism to operate. Because she overlooks it she can tell a story of immiserization, contrary to fact. We quantitative postmodernists, though, are very patient with mistakes that come from not being quantitative. I think the numbers justify a narrative of Progress. I believe that the whole world in the next century will get as rich as present-day suburban America if we let markets operate (this does *not* mean “let the Country Club Republicans have everything they want”: it means enforcing human rights, in particular the human right to dispose of one's labor, even if female). I therefore do not believe in the Malthusian emplotment of the environmentalists. Malthusianism, as I have suggested, has been a poor guide to modern economic history (it is an excellent guide to ancient and medieval economic history: the point is that the character of the history changed sharply c. 1800, just about the time that Malthus formulated his theory).

My vision is simpleminded capitalism. I see no reason why Bengalis or Ecuadorians should have any fundamental problem doing things well. In the long run there can be no racial or cultural reason why the average woman in a country now very poor should not be able to participate in, say, an optics industry up to German standards or a computer programming industry up to Indian standards or a retail trade industry up to U.S. standards. A country that does all things well (for example, coming up to Bengali standards in poetry) achieves the well-doing standard of living. How does it happen? Profit. If there is a better, American way of organizing retail trade, retailers in Britain and Denmark will be tempted to adopt it--as they have, profitably until entry drives down the supernormal return. Growth is not mysterious--here I sharply disagree with my economist colleagues of the New Growth Theory or of Path Dependence. Growth is simple: do things the way the best doers are doing them presently. The more things you do well the richer you will be.

There is nothing except war and “protection” and organized theft (all of which are specialties of overweening governments, the libertarian

notes) that can stop this from happening. Japan protects its agriculture and its retail trade, and so has not quite reached an American standard of riches. But Japanese consumers are not going to put up with such selfish nonsense forever. And growth will resume. My unconditional prediction is that it is in fact going to happen to the entire world. Democracy is making it essential. The "long run" I have in mind is 50 years or so, the time it has taken South Korea to develop from a country poorer than present-day India to one richer than present-day Argentina. The next fifty years are going to be the great age of the woman liberated by market income.

But I am less patient with the other part of Gayatri's story, the colonial part. I think she has been misled by Samir Amin. There are two points here.

I feel less confident of the first, that contrary to Amin and Gayatri and many others the problems of poor countries have little to do with the experience of imperialism. I have no standing to speak about what it is like to be Indian or Nigerian. But let me make a few postmodern market feminist points, for the little they are worth. It seems strange to go on blaming imperialism for the woes of a Third World whose growth rate has *accelerated* steadily in the past fifty years. India, the most confidently anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist former colony, has had the lowest growth rate in Asia, mainly, I would say, not because it was once Victoria's jewel but because it has followed Harold Laski's policies of keeping the market out. Come to think of it that *is* a result of a kind of imperialism: intellectual. You could only recently buy American breakfast cereal in India. The former colonies that have embraced capitalism--Hong Kong is of course the leading if admittedly weird example--have done well. You can buy anything in Hong King. Even parts of Africa seem to be emerging from their self-inflicted wounds since independence. In parallel with all this, the phrase "the international division of labor" plays in Gayatri's writing a spooky role. She thinks that poor countries are permanently indentured to the rich. I

think on the contrary that her worry shows a lack of historical perspective. The American South was once a primary producer for the mills of Lancashire. For that matter Lancashire was once a primary producer for the cheese markets of medieval London. The notion that these relations are “structural” (a magical word that allows one to bypass history) is false. One indicator: the all-Asia average of manufactured exports (as again primary commodities) as a share of total exports changed from a mere 8 percent in 1953 to 64 percent in 1986 (Maddison, p. 96). The same statistic for Latin America went from 4 percent to 24 percent. This isn’t “structure.” It’s growth.

I feel more confident about my other point, that contrary to Amin and Gayatri and some others, the impact of imperialism *on the imperial powers* was trivial. I admit I am mystified by the contrary claim of post-imperialist critics. Gayatri and other post-colonialist critics seem to take the very sensible point of the subaltern school of historians that the colonial experience was identity-making for the colonized and turn it into an all-purpose influence *on the colonizers*. I know, I know: the other, the Orient, and so forth. But aren’t most of the Others in the imaginations of Germans and Americans *inside* Germany and America? Don’t women and Jews and immigrants and African Americans provide a sufficiently rich palette of Not Us that most identities could be colored with it alone? Isn’t it possible that even when a quarter of the globe was painted red most British people got their identities from their British life, not from their tangential participation in the Empire? The opposite case, that colonization was a central experience for Europeans, results I think in a lot of implausible history.

I think it is implausible, to torture Gayatri with a small and not very important example, that “the constitution of the sexed object in terms of the discourse of castration was, in fact, something that came into being through the imposition of imperialism” (Harasym, ed., p. 9). After all, it is Vienna c. 1900 we are talking about here, the capital (and dubiously even that) of the one European power that did *not* have

expansive imperial ambitions. The sort of imperialism that the Austro-Hungarian empire exercised looks good from the point of view of the Balkan Problem 1914-1999. That peculiar “empire” was a clumsy common market, and kept some people very eager to slit the throats of their non-Christian or non-Serbian neighbors from carrying out their desires. It is very strange to cast Freud as a part of the Raj.

The more important example is what I as an economist and economic historian think is the bizarre overemphasis on the experience of imperialism in the 17th and 18th centuries. I think the cultural importance of imperialism per se, as against exploration per se, is easy to exaggerate, but I am no critic of such matters and will fall silent, noting merely that *The Tempest* is not the only play Shakespeare wrote. About the economics and economic history I can testify. One can plausibly claim that some small part of the wealth of Holland (*sensu stricto*) resulted from stealing from Javans; but mostly it came from internal sources: good education, well-enforced laws, a calling to labor. The point is that countries are rich mainly because of internal matters, not stealing from their colonies. That Spain and Portugal are exceptions rather proves the rule: they were poor once the mines of the New World ran out.

There's a reason that the periphery is called that: it's peripheral to the economies of the core. The idea that Poland was crucial to the prosperity of Holland c. 1650, or the United States and Ireland to the prosperity of Britain c. 1800, or South Asia and Latin America crucial to the prosperity of Europe c. 1999 is mistaken. Nor does the reasoning play well in the present. It is a cliché of economic history that the rich countries mainly trade with and invest in each other. However intrusive European economic activity was from the point of view of the periphery, from the point of view of the Europeans the periphery was economic trivia. I revert to my quantities. Again using Maddison as a guide, external financing as a share of GDP in 15 developing countries 1950-1986 was about 2 percent. How much was the total investment effort of

these countries? About 16 percent (Maddison, pp. 75-76). Seven eighths of real investment in poor countries was undertaken by the countries themselves. The same is even more true of the rich countries. Investment in human and physical capital is mainly something that is financed at home. Funds borrowed or stolen from abroad are trivial. It is *not* the case that the original accumulation of capital (that silly idea) came from the slave trade or the other spoils of empire. It came from domestic saving. The same is true of commodity trade. The underlying point is that foreign trade is a small part of the economic activity of any large geographical area--India, say, or the United States, or China, or Europe. Most trade is local and national, nothing like Imperial.

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To speak positively, to put forward propositions as bravely as Gayatri has from her side, let me end with a postmodern market feminist view of the economy.

How can one be a feminist and a free-marketeer? Aren't all those guys hostile to women's liberation?

Yes, but. An Adam-Smith-tie economics, admittedly, is not hospitable to women. This is because Adam-Smith-tie economics misunderstands, in a man's way, how economies operate. Adam Smith himself, by contrast, understood how they do in fact operate: courage, temperance, prudence, justice, and love (so in his greatest work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which few read, and no Adam-Smith-tie men). Since Jeremy Bentham the feminist views of Adam Smith (for which see Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries* [1993], esp. Chp. 2) have been eclipsed by a Prudence-Only view of the economy. I regard this theory as inaccurate and dangerous. It just won't do to sneer from the boardroom (or more exactly the clubroom) that Prudence rules (see "Bourgeois Virtue and the History of P and S" [*Journal of Economic History*, June 1998]). But for this audience I want to stress that the

people on the picket lines sneer the same way. Prudence rules in both Interest Marxism and Interest Capitalism. Again, my colleague Stigler is a good example. The left and right agree: Gabriel Kolko is a Marxist historian who showed brilliantly that the Interstate Commerce Commission was seized by the Prudent interests of the railways; we at Chicago in the 1970s thought his stiff was pretty neat.

But one should not be confused about how the economy operates just because some Republican twits at the *Wall Street Journal* are. That our theories about the economy are mistaken should not make it impossible for us to see the evidence.

Love is missing. It's missing in all social theorizing from Bentham on. This is ridiculous, as many women will readily understand. It's not tough and realistic to exclude considerations of love (and courage and temperance and justice) from our social theorizing in favor of "neat" models from Prudence alone. It's merely to indulge a macho passion, and has a poor record of prediction. In a word, it's stupid. ("Tough and realistic" are often stupid, as in Realpolitik foreign policy, which stupidly won't acknowledge that nations speak to each other in language and in culture and in history; see Robert Harriman, ed.)

A feminist theory of the economy is one that takes account of what motivates people. This means there will be all sorts of different people, from cloistered nun to bond salesman, and variations within these, with all sorts of different reasons for coming to market.

I know this is not excitingly edgy. I am not standing before you in a corset and waving a whip and telling you that markets are sexy. I can offer no immodest insight into capitalism.

But I think that feminism's unique contribution to social thinking is the acknowledgment and celebration of difference. Theories of Man are for men. For motives that I am beginning to

forget, men like their social theories simpleminded. They just *love* saying that Man is such-and-such, and Woman so-and-so. And so they posit a singleminded Agent. A character in *The Waves* declares, "Let a man get up and say, 'Behold, this is the truth,' and instantly I perceive a sandy cat filching a piece of fish in the background. Look, you have forgotten the cat, I say."

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There are many ways of being a woman. In one interview Gayatri said that she dislikes

high feminism where highly privileged women see their face in the mirror and define "Woman"--capital *w*--in terms of the reflection that they see there; sometimes they look at their face, sometimes they look at their genitals, and in terms of that they adjudicate about women as such. I have very little patience with that.

The Postcolonial Critic, p. 119.

At this I stood up and cheered.

A feminist theory of desire and economy is that humans are various, and we must listen to their stories. This is in sharp contrast to the guy toys that pass for social theorizing in these latter days: that humans are *entirely* Prudential; or *all* Love; or *pure* Courage (these would be economistic [whether Marxist or neoclassical], religious, and conservative theories). We can do better, we Marxists and nonmarxists, in being postmodern and feminist and, yes, market-lovers together.

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