

BOOK REVIEW

Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging
Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak
London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull, 2007, 121 pp, Rs 395

Anirban Das

The short and stout volume of conversations between Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak deals with a very old object of inquiry in the social sciences – the nation-state. Coming from two of the leading radical thinkers of our time, it is not surprising to find in the book a call for a disjuncture of the hyphen to think the nation and the state separately. What might be little unsettling for the reader with a somewhat Marxist progressivist background is the clear preference of both the authors for the latter, that is, state. For Butler, the need is to think of an access to the state without the call for an access to homogeneous nationhood. For Spivak, a possible search would be for a reinvention of the state as an abstract structure of redistribution, welfare and constitutionality with a persistent effort to keep away nationalisms and fascisms. I will try to make a sense of these counter-intuitive moves with reference to certain other coordinates of theorizing on the matter.

Judith Butler begins the discussion with a focus on the forms of exclusion perpetrated by the nation-state. In this context, she refers to Hannah Arendt's essay "The Decline of the Nation-state and the End of the Rights of Man" in the volume on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1958) and launches a sustained critique of Giorgio Agamben's notion of 'bare life'. Statelessness is at the heart of her argument. The stateless, the one excluded from the state, is thereby not outside the grids of power that constitute the state, Butler asserts. S/he is also excluded by the processes that found the specific form of state, one should not forget. These processes, in the prevailing context of the political, has the specific articulation of the nation and the state at its core –

"As such, they are *produced* as the stateless at the same time that they are jettisoned from juridical modes of belonging" (16)

This, for Butler, is unlike Agamben's notion of 'bare life' which sets up a "simple exclusionary logic" between life and politics. Such a move evidently ignores the implication of power processes in the making up of

the category 'life'. It reduces the connection between life and politics to the domain of citizenship alone and disregards the processes of biopower active in the modern nation-state. What is regarded as simple, 'bare' life is also defined and produced through the procedures of classification, enumeration and normalization even when that life remains excluded from the observable structures of power. This exclusion can occur through complex forms of governmentality and not, pace Agamben, reducible to acts of sovereignty, Butler instructs. Containment and expulsion occur simultaneously and through the same grid of mechanisms of power. Operative here is power without entitlement or obligation, power that renounces its hold, yet power nonetheless. For Butler, destitution of the stateless is not explained by sovereignty or bare life as key terms. Statelessness is saturated with power. To bring in the act of sovereignty as the causative element in this predicament is to simplify the complexity of the multivalent tactics of power. This act of simplification would make one reiterate the only available heuristic (of sovereignty) endlessly to explain highly differentiated states of dispossession and will keep her/him blind to the possibility of multiple forms of resistance, agency and counter-mobilization.

One could very well question Butler's reading of Agamben (a reading to which Spivak has also shown her sympathy). It can be argued that, what is important in Agamben's intervention is his focus on the moment of sovereignty *in* modern forms of power and not his efforts to mark empirical instances of such moments. The empiric instances (of sovereignty) are important not since they elude governmental techniques but because they bring out the sovereign acts that inhere *in* the governmental. Agamben (*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, 1998) defines his figure of the political, which he calls *homo sacer* (the sacred man), as someone who can be killed but not sacrificed. *Homo sacer* can be killed by anyone without incurring the punishment, even the judgment, for homicide. His killing is not a homicide. *He is beyond the law of the human*. He cannot be sacrificed in the name of god. *He is beyond the law of the divine*. Beyond both human and divine laws, *homo sacer* is always and already vulnerable to death. This vulnerability to death is the Power that is the subject matter of politics. This is 'bare life', the ultimate subject *and* object of the political. The inverse of this logic, the reverse of the same coin, is the 'man' in the modern democratic society, whose life is invulnerable on principle. The invulnerability of life in modern society is the exact opposite, hence guided by the same economy of death, only in the reverse, of the absolute vulnerability of the *homo sacer*. It is possible to continue with the concerns of Butler and Spivak without denouncing the notion of bare life in this sense. But their concerns here

do not directly engage with this moment of sovereign power. For the moment, they are more interested in the dynamics of the governmental nation state -

... trying to open up an analytics of power that would include sovereignty as *one of its* features but would also be able to talk about the kinds of mobilizations and containments of populations that are not conceptualizable as the acts of a sovereign, and which proceed through different operations of state power. (emphasis added, 102).

Butler points to the fact that Hannah Arendt had been acutely aware of the force of the performative speech - "speech that founds or "enstates" a new possibility for social and political life" (27). The act of declaration, the performative exercise of the announcement, is seen here as a founding gesture of articulating the nation-state. She speaks of the call to freedom that founds freedom, of the right to rights that can only be exercised beyond and before the domain of rights. This originary freedom, as also this originary right, "can only exist in its exercise" (48). And as with all performatives, with all repetitious moves, the act of repetition bears within it the chances of displacement. Or rather, displacement inheres in repetition. A statement of belonging always moves within a possibility of loss. Butler, and later on Spivak, refers to the incident that gives this book its name - in spring, 2006, street demonstrations were being organized for illegal residents in the United States of America. In these demonstrations in the Los Angeles area, the US national anthem was sung in Spanish (along with the Mexican anthem). How to mark this phenomenon? Was this a simple call for inverting the prevailing laws that prevented the national anthem being sung by the 'foreign' tongue? For Butler, this signaled a different act. When the stateless (the 'illegal' immigrant) sings the national anthem, tries to move into the (nation-)state, the sheer act of the one marked as stateless owning up to the state is not a simple reversal but a displacement of the very logic of the (nation-)state. The logical structure of the nation-state being grounded on a 'lack' (of those who are thereby rendered stateless), the entry of that constitutive outside displaces the very structure which was built upon this definitional lack. The performance (declaration or the call) enacts the action, stages the state they do not possess, and in the process, displaces the hyphen between the state and the nation. To think of the incident in this light, one has to be able to think the state and the nation separately. Disjointing the state from the nation is the prerequisite to think access to the state without access to homogeneous nationhood. Butler is perfectly aware (and says that in so many words) that this displacement is not necessary to the act. It may well be an act of "resurgent nationalism". But there is a contingency, a

potentiality to move in multiple directions, in the situation. For her, this might signal a different notion of multiculturalism rather than a singular notion of the nation (112).

Spivak's take on the incident is a little different. For her, the most important connotation of the event is in the unhinging of the US state and the putative American nation. She analyzes the process of separation minutely. The 'national' anthem is untranslatable: Spivak cites the instance of the Indian national anthem which was written in Bangla but is sung nationally in Hindi. To translate that anthem is to attempt accessing the state that marks it thus, without laying claims to nationhood. This attempt brings forward the needs to theorize the desire for citizenship. Arendt's theorization of statelessness could not reach this desire, Spivak asserts. For Spivak, the separation between the state and the nation does not indicate, for the given event, a new thinking of a "rights to come". The notion of the "rights to come", though not spelt out in detail in the book, is of crucial importance in this regard. Jacques Derrida has often used the French word for 'future', *avenir*, as "l'à-venir": spaced out to ring the sense of the infinitive 'to come'. This sense of 'to come' has the open-endedness of a future as always anterior and not a future as future-present. Spivak, when she refers to the rights to come, brings in this sense of a radical futurity that will never be attained as future present and yet need be pursued relentlessly as something which one "cannot not want". Thus when she will be speaking a little later on the notion of "critical regionalism" working "under and over nationalisms", the call for that regionalism should also be understood not as a call for a future structure with a full presence but imagined in the spirit of this 'to come'-ness.

The sense of "l'à-venir" permeates the notion of the state when Spivak surmises that global feminism might seek to reinvent the state as an abstract structure with a persistent effort to keep it clean of nationalisms and fascisms. The important point is to remember that this notion of absolute futurity does not presume the future to be imaginable from naught. That which will never be fully present will not appear *sui generis*. What is to come is firmly rooted in the present, is derivable as logical extensions of the present, and is underivable if not through such extensions. Yet it is not *wholly* derivable from the present, it extends the logic of the present in such a manner that the logic becomes inoperative and reaches an aporetic moment. So the future will never be *fully* present. Spivak thus speaks of the state which she wants to protect as a "minimal abstract structure" and characterizes the modes of laying claim to this abstract structure as performative and utopian. Again, one has to remember that the definitions of this abstract structure are derived from the messy rudiments of the very

present predicaments. Spivak reminds the reader of the determining role of capital as “something which is neither national nor determined by state” (78). Against the tendencies of reduction in the state-specific public sphere with references to the global economic sphere, and the erosion of the “structure of redistribution, welfare and constitutionality from within the state” (90), she calls for a decline of the national state

as a displacement into the abstract structures of welfare moving toward critical regionalism combating global capitalism (78).

She pits the abstract structures of welfare against the managerial state on the free market model. The forms of state and the critical regionalism she speaks of are to be thought of thus in the mode of ‘to come’ yet emerging from the very complexities of the present networks of capital, nation-state and different discursive modalities.

In response to questions, Spivak clarifies the notion of ‘critical regionalism’ against Jurgen Habermas’s attempts to articulate a democracy beyond the nation-state in Europe and against Paul Gilroy’s cosmopolitan multicultural idea. Critical regionalism works in the atmosphere of erosion of nationalisms. Elements of this regionalism may be discernible in shared sensibilities among today’s nations: Spivak talks about old links “pre-dating Bandung” between pan-Africanism and anti-colonialism, about the newly emergent (post-Soviet) Caucasus and the trans-Caucasus, about the New Latin America, and about certain links in South Asia operative below and beyond the hostilities between the nation-states. Arising – Butler acutely points out – as a critique of the “area studies map” (118), critical regionalism tries to retain “abstract structures of something like a state” and “allows for constitutional redress against the mere vigilance and data-basing of human rights, or public interest litigation in the interest of a public that cannot act for itself” (94). For Spivak, Habermas occupies a different variety of performative contradiction. His notion of a European democracy is based on the supposedly special capacity of Europe to articulate democratic principles and presupposes a notion of cosmopolitheia continuous with the Kantian architectonics of reason. Again, the stated reference here is to Derrida’s critique of Kant in *Rogues* (Stanford University Press, 2005) in terms of a ‘democracy to come’ (as opposed to a future *presence* of universal Europeanism). What Spivak speaks of here is also different from a cosmopolitan multiculturalism in that it deals with the notion of a practical access to the abstract structures of the state and not with the question of coexistence of cultures.

To speak of the state thus is not to speak of ethical universalism, not to speak of the state to represent an ethical universal. Instead, as Spivak

points out near the end of the discussion, what remains important is that ...you cannot adjudicate an ethical state. Ethics interrupts the abstractions of the state structure. Those structures are legal. They cannot adjudicate justice but they serve justice and we must protect them. (100-101).

The practical act of accessing the abstractions of the state is also, at the same instant, a philosophical act. Philosophical speculation and practical politics is a very dangerous binary, the authors seem to agree. This enables one to think of ethics and politics in their separate specificities, not as opposed terms, and to access both in their intimate embrace of the ethico-political. The book ends, in the words of Judith Butler "on the promise of the unrealizable" (120).

It would be good to have some editorial comments regarding the context of this exchange and about the identities of the unnamed interlocutors who pose important questions. Apart from this major editorial inadequacy, I end with an allusion to the fact that this review has focused on a single trajectory of argument and has not touched upon a number of related issues in this immensely readable and significant intervention.