Enlightenment Modernity and the Subaltern: Dalit Women and Activism in South India

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Working at the intersection of postcolonial theory and ethnography throws up – as with any intersection between theory and ethnographic investigation – a series of mutual interrogations as well as forms of mutual illumination. Yet most of the questioning has flowed in a uni-directional form, from postcolonial critique towards ethnography taken as its critical object. The charges have been stark - ethnography has been criticized as a form of essentialising the Other, a colonial categorisation and fixing of the "native", as a style of writing that forgets its own provisional and constructed character, and in doing so, attributes closed and reified qualities to other cultures. Against this backdrop, I wish to reverse the flow a little, using my own ethnographic work among poor Dalit women in south Indian fishing and agricultural villages, in order to highlight some of the lacunae in postcolonial theory. My comments extend in their scope also to the style of aligned theoretical projects that feed into postcolonial theory, such as post-structuralist and post-modern appraisals of modernity itself. When I speak of working at an intersection between postcolonial theory and ethnography of India, I am sure it will be understood that I am not speaking simply of western theory and its relation to an ethnography of India. In the case of Indian intellectual life, a fertile brew has evolved through the late seventies, eighties and nineties of post-Marxist subaltern studies which has taken on some of the themes of post-structuralist and postmodern critique, mediated by Said's critique of Orientalism and colonialism. The brew has been enormously productive – it has generated an extensive literature which is particularly critical in its appraisal of Indian modernity, taking into its critical purview the history of social reform movements, the state's constructions of the Indian social polity in terms of caste and religion.
But the intellectual milieu has virtually ceased to investigate subaltern realities, (much to the dismay of some former members of the subaltern school of historiography, such as Sumit Sarkar). This closing down of the subaltern in subaltern studies has been encouraged by the severity of the critique. The charge is that modernity's universalisms

are in reality exclusionary, representing particular interests while parading as universal. The flavour of the Indian critique is conveyed by Partha Chatterjee's formulation. Chatterjee closes his chapter in the influential collection *Recasting Women* which came out in the late 1980s with the sweeping conclusion that the Indian middle class effected a *social closure* through the use of emancipatory ideals:

> Ideas of freedom, equality and cultural refinement went hand in hand with a set of dichotomies which systematically excluded from the new life of the nation the vast masses of people whom the dominant elite would represent and lead, but who could never be culturally integrated with their leaders. (1989:251)

The critique of the Indian middle classes and their leadership of the nationalist movement echoes the wider postcolonial critique of modernity as masking the interests of European hegemony, a Europe whose provinciality needs to be unmasked. The resonance with the debates on cosmpolitanism will be readily apparent – is cosmopolitanism really a mask for the privileged existence of a white European minority of 'high flying cosmocrats'? But there is a much older genealogy to such forms of critique, such as Marxist critiques of liberalism (liberal ideals of freedom mask the particular interests of the bourgeois classes and indeed, render invisible the various forms of un-freedom these ideals rest on); as well as feminist critique (various branches of apparently neutral and universal knowledge are in fact *particular* to male experience, interests, and elide their reliance on a world of female labour). The honourable resonance of such traditions of critique has served to sustain the political credentials of postcolonial forms of critique, even though the effect has been to encourage a complete lack of intellectual curiosity about the effects on 'the vast masses of people', of nearly a century of interventions by colonialists, missionaries, and middle class organisations. The majority of 'postcolonial' historical studies in the last decade have been devoted to middle class intellectuals and experiences (cf. Partha Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj, Dipesh Chakrabarty), ostensibly in a spirit critical of their exclusionary power, but in fact based on little exploration of the world outside this privileged milieux.

In what follows I will argue that this omission has affected the appraisal of modernity itself, assigning it a fixed set of (largely negative) meanings. Such an appraisal is belied

by ethnographic engagement with *cross-class* relations and a perspective that takes the subaltern, in my case poor Dalit women, as the location from which to re-consider modernity. I am not so much denying the importance of critiques of universalism in the name of the located quality of experience, understanding and therefore, of knowledge. Rather, I am arguing that there has been a mis-characterisation of what is meant by 'location' in "located knowledge". Location often seems to be represented as if it were a point in a map, fixed by the intersection of two lines. (Popular postmodern imagery, often invoking the practices of cartography has not been helpful in this regard). The cost of such misrepresentations is to not only to academic scholarship, but to oppositional movements themselves – there is a mutual interconnection between mis-characterizing universalism and mis-characterizing identity and location. One of the great concerns of the eighties and nineties in the women's movement in the west was the sense of having criticized universalisms only to trigger an ever-decreasing circle of those who are allowed to speak and represent: ('only women can speak of women's experiences', but within that 'only black women can speak for black women', only 'black lesbian women can speak for black lesbian women' etc.) Similar dilemmas emerged in the Indian women's movement where the conjunction of postmodern feminism with events such as the victimization of Muslims and the backlash against affirmative action by upper castes led to a an internal critique within the movement of the caste, class and religious composition of metropolitan feminists. Far from enabling voice, too closed a definition of identity and location ends up suffocating all speech. The repercussions of this logic on anthropologists speaking about other cultures or minorities will be only too well known to this audience.

To this static and fixed understanding that keeps flowing into oppositional politics on the part of minorities and subaltern groups, I am counter-posing the centrality of *movement*. Sociologically, my consideration of movement is located in social movements in the sub-continent – the women's movement, the socialist movements of an extra-parliamentary nature, but also, important in the context of rural south India, the earlier projects of reform, intervention and organization represented by Christian missionaries. The dimension of movement I wish to highlight requires many different overlapping forms of investigation – as the circulation of discourses, as the social connections, networks and

relations forged by earlier histories. Given the paucity of time, I will concentrate on highlighting a dimension that is often signally absent in debates on movement, universalisms etc. – and that is the dimension of *affect* and the *existential* movement that is implicit in affect. This should be an insight familiar to anthropology – it is central to Durkheim's discussion of the capacity of affective intensities to contagiously leap outside any boundary one might wish to place around an object that is considered either sacred or polluting, and to charge surrounding objects and beings with its affective qualities. The qualities of affect are central in the almost ontological transformation of a group of individuals into a collectivity. Considering modernity from the context of subaltern Dalit women in fishing and agricultural villages of Tamil Nadu, I find that present certain aspects of modernity I will characterize as part of 'emancipatory projects'. Propelled by the affect that contagiously charges the subjectivity of young Dalit women, these projects have leapt outside the location specified for them in advance by critics, namely the allegedly exclusively middle class location. Such contagiousness, as Durkheim pointed out, depends on collective engagement in embodied practices and the focus provided by representations. The leap out of middle class environments is mediated in an embodied sense by social networks of NGOs, activists who move between 'social movements' and involvement in health/literacy/employment generation. These programs have their own practices, practices which, when they develop a certain temporal thickness, "animate" the embodied subjectivity of the young Dalit women designated in their turn as 'animators' of other women. These Dalit women had been trained in this role by various NGOs, many of them Christian, in the villages of south India. Several had received prolonged training in order to act as health guides back in the villages. One of them explained the program based in Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu to me thus:

> Every year we train sixteen to twenty girls. If they are to be health workers, they are given six months training, with some refresher training offered in subsequent years. If they are to be health guides, we offer them a basic training in minor ailments. Girls who are chosen for this training are chosen from those who have already been working in villages as volunteers for us for between one to four years. We began in 1971 and at its peak, we had health centres in one hundred and twenty seven villages in the district, with Colachel as the main centre. Each centre has one health guide and two health workers. In addition we run the Matar Sankam [mothers' groups].

Again, the training in itself would have been insufficient to secure the transformations these women relate. However, after their training, health guides were expected to move around between different villages, running the mother's groups, conducting health talks, and occasionally organising village women into acting as pressure groups. In addition, for many women working with NGOs, their current training and employment was only the culmination of many earlier forms of training and education which had already prepared them in advance. Many of these early forms of training were offered by Christian convent sisters and social service organisations.

Consider the effects of this engagement in subjectivity that comes through in the interviews I conducted:

> (1) "I am the daughter of a fisherman, and I am married to a rice trader who is now in Saudi Arabia, working on an oil rig in the ocean. We were a poor family. I have studied up to the SSLC, but more important, I now have *arivu* [consciousness, awareness, knowledge in the widest sense] which dispels fears. I talk freely about periods and menopause since my training and I am now asked to attend births. The girls I teach are initially embarrassed but there is great curiosity afterwards. You should see the difference between me and my *akka* [elder sister]. When I began to have overbleeding in my periods, I went to the doctor, and looked at the scan with her." [Interview with health guide Jansi in fishing village, Kanyakumari 1991]

> (2) "There are many differences between what we say and the beliefs of village women. Many believe that doing hard work during pregnancy makes delivery easier. Others believe that sex during pregnancy is good for making birth easier – they think it opens the mouth of the vagina. They get rid of the coating over the baby when it is born, thinking that this is the rice flour ingested by the mother that has stuck on to the child. They avoid eggs and milk in case it makes the baby too fat or give the baby too much heat and therefore give it a rash or boils. They think if they eat water retentive gourd vegetables, it increases the water in the legs. If young women die unmarried, her spirit is appeased yearly with new clothes, powder and perfume. If she dies in childbirth, a living child must wear new clothes the next year. [*I ask what she does if she encounters possession, a possibility which arises in such situations. She responds:* I would take her for counselling.]

> But we have brought about changes – an increase in hospitalisation and check ups, seventy five percent have taken to family planning of the rhythm method once they have had two children. Many of the women who desire it have a husband who refuse, who come home drunk and insist on sex. [Interview with

Amala, health guide in another coastal village, Kanyakumari 1991]

(3) "Those exposed to our [health] talks stand out in any crowd. They talk differently to the others. There is great progress [*munnetram*]." (Interview with Amber, a trained midwife employed by a leading non-government organisation in Kanyakumari, 1992)

(4) Amma [mother] would keep a *katti* [iron knife] in the ashes of the stove to keep the spirits from hearing the cry of the baby. When my baby was small, I was told not to go in front of women who had lost babies before birth – if I did chance on one, I was told I should give them my baby to hold for a little while. There are many *muta nambikkai* [backward, foolish, irrational beliefs] around. They bathe fully in the water – only then do they feel that the heat of the body is reduced. We advise them not to do that. They do not eat eggs and milk in case the baby gets too big and they have a difficult birth. But 75% change their minds after we answer their questions. There is great awareness about immunisation and hygiene, and treatment for diarrhoea. Where before no liquid was given, now they give the sugar and salt solution. For *vysoori* [small pox], they seek hospital treatment. At the last mother's meetings the women suggested writing to the Block Development Officer over the lack of electricity and water pumps in the village; finally they went there themselves and broke their water pots outside the office.'

(3) 'I have changed since my mother's ideas and ways. She brought me up not to be able to speak in front of four people [*nallu peru*, a conventional idiom in Tamil for a small gathering], not to be able to move around. I plan to give my daughter confidence and will tell her everything she needs to know about her body and how to live her life.'

The voices of these women have a distinct ring about them. Quite unlike the view that they are marginalized by the very operation of modernity, they take up a stance as active claimants of an emancipatory modernity. Evidently Chatterjee is wrong on at least one score – if such understandings were originally meant to exclude the poor, they have certainly not been successful in doing so. But ought we still to understand the very pervasiveness of these projects as an even more efficient means of inculcating the same exclusionary binary oppositions that characterize elite discourse? Certainly, many of the blindnesses of Enlightenment modernity accompany the movement of this discourse beyond its original locations, separating the enlightened from the un-enlightened, the modern from the traditional. But this dynamic needs to be assessed as one that is integral

to the very power of its address. 'Modernity' is not simply a matter of individual and isolated *propositions*. To remain, for the moment at the level favoured by the linguistic orientation of post-structuralism – the level of 'discourse' – binary oppositions constitutive of modernity do not operate in isolation. As field work in anthropology makes us very aware, the mode of operation of binary oppositions can be quite radically transformed by context. Part of the context is provided by the *constellation* and *clustering* of discursive elements. The meaning-conferring power of constellations ought to prevent political characterizations from picking out particular oppositions and assigning the same meaning to them regardless of where they occur. Thus on those occasions where NGOs operate with a discursive constellation that includes elements such as 'autonomy', 'women's rights', and 'bodily autonomy', they radically narrow the distance created by distinctions between those who are enlightened and those who are not. The distance is narrowed, not in a sociological sense, but in an existential sense – the address of the animator is designed not simply to reinforce her own superiority as a representative of a modern way of life, but is accompanied by the attempt to *mobilize* the addressee. This is an excerpt I noted down from what one of the health educators was saying to the village women:

Health educator: have you and your husband ever spoken about the fact that you have babies, and half of them die, have you spoken of whether to go on having babies.

P: yes, we have spoken of it, but we do not favour family planning [*kattupadukku virupam illai*]

Educator: Each pregnancy you lose strength, and before replenishing your body, you begin the next one.

P: It is as the Lord wishes [*Antavar taradu tane*]. My husband is not of that mind, he does not agree [*Veetu karar ku manasu illiye; sammadikka illiye*]. What is to be done .. [*Atukku ena shaiyya*]

[The educator explains alternatives to sterilisation.]

Educator: He seems a good man, and we must listen to our men, but at the same time, *these are our bodies, you must say this is my body. [Ennodu utampu]. The day must come when we can say: this is my blood that goes*

waste every year, my pain. I cannot work because of it , I am the one who gives milk, who raises the child while I carry the next child in my womb. A new consciousness must come [oru unarvu varanam]. You must be able to say: this is my issue [prachinai], the one whose body labours and suffers is mine [utal ritiya patu pataratu nan]; from now on, no more babies [inime kuzantaikal ventam]. This kind of awareness must come to girls [tunavum penkallukku varanam]. Emphasis added.

Such a form of address, powerful as it is, would not of itself alter Paniamma's subjectivity. Such change requires the presence of a broad range of activities in which women can involve themselves over a period of time. But such change is precisely what Dalit women activists describe. I give below a more detailed account by a young woman working in the agricultural Dalit communities of Chengalpattu District, Tamil Nadu, an excerpt from a much longer conversation.

THE NARRATIVE OF SELF-TRANSFORMATION: VICTORIA, A DALIT NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATION WORKER

My family are Roman Catholic, and we owned a little land. In my village the dominant caste is Reddiar. Before I was born, my family must have worked on their land. We must have had to have given way to them, not worn slippers in front of them, not walked on the same path as them. For the last thirty years or so, all that has now changed. Maybe five out of every hundred still keep to the same habits and practices [pazakkam]. In Porur, we have our own water supplies, pumpsets, handpump and new well. So we don't have to rely on the upper castes any more. We also know now that we are numerically dominant, and that frightens them a little.

I have studied upto 10th class, done a typewriting course in English and Tamil, and seven years of social work with the Madras Social Service. We would get food supplies from the U.S of soy bean oil, wheat, and fish powder, which we distributed among villages, we weighed infants monthly. I did house visits and ran a twenty day class for mothers, one hour daily. I taught them about hygiene, about infectious diseases, about the importance of weighing children, about eye infections, and about how to manage pregnancy.

In the Mathar Sanghams [Mothers' Associations], which were held at night, we spoke about *penkal's nilamai* [the situation and dilemmas of girls and women], we read literature, made charts. We would get them to make small savings with their own credit society, get them a bank book. We held a

Mother's Day one year after opening, showed a film on women's situation, organised the women into performing a play, a kummi [rural women's dance in Tamil Nadu].

But my upbringing was actually quite sheltered. When I was first sent to Bosco School in Madras for a better education, I was very afraid. I had to stay in a school hostel, and thought that I was to be locked up somewhere. I stuck it out for one year, very afraid of all the people. I even ran away.I was no sooner back from school to my village of Porur, than a sister in the convent called me to do social work. My parents worked for the convent. So the sister from the convent called me and gave me training in how to speak and dress, simply, so you can communicate with the poor. They gave me a cycle to move around in. I was only fifteen, so the sisters had to convince the village women that I could take responsibility, despite my youth. I was afraid of the big kutams [crowds] and refused to go a couple of times. The sisters told me about their own dedication, the efforts they had to make. They taught us morality – not to laugh and mix too freely with men, they said that when we go to work we must be ozunga [decent] so we could be good for marriage. They would read out from newspapers and stories for us. I saw others attending meetings, and thought, I should like to be like them. So I began to go around on my bike, taking doubles sometimes. I got insults from others. If I carried an umbrella, the villagers would say: 'Oh, look at her go with a kodai [umbrella], just like some big teacher.' I would ignore them, or retort: 'So what, have *you* paid for my umbrella?!'

I have changed since my mother's ideas. She brought me up not to be able to speak in front of four people, not to be able to move around. I plan to give my daughter confidence and will tell her everything she needs to know about her body and how to live her life.

THE AFFECTIVE POWER OF ACTIVISM

Formulations that rely too heavily on the linguistic preoccupations of structuralism and post-structualist discourse theory seem too dry to give the drama of Victoria's narrative its proper significance. My previous formulation of the power of 'discursive constellations', relying as it does on the insights of Saussurian structuralist theories of language, lacks the emotional world that gives *life* to such a constellation. If left at this, we could not understand why philosophies such as gender and class equality, and bodily autonomy, are able to find a purchase among groups of people so far removed from the original European or middle class citadels of power that anti-universalist critiques

determinedly trace them back to and, in a sense, attempt to place them back within. To bring this emotional world into our account, we need to explore something of the existential structure of activism, which is shared among a number of modern emancipatory projects such as feminism and socialism, both of which continue to inspire activists and intellectuals in India. I deliberately join together an examination of non-government organisations with wider political projects and older genealogies. The homogenizing nomenclature of 'non-government organisations' gives little indication of the various phases of NGOs in India. In particular, I wish to distinguish the corporatist globalised NGOs of the post-liberalisation India from what used to be described as the 'voluntary sector' or voluntary organizations of the 60s, 70s, and '80s which were integrally related to social movements such as the extra-parliamentary left movements, the students, the peasant/tribal movements, the urban unions, the rise of neo-Gandhian movements such as JP. Today, the women's movements and the anti-dam movements continue to provide some continuity with this past. Studies such as Smith-Sreen's study of women's organisations in India (1995), which frames their investigation in terms of the efficiency and profitability - on the grounds that poor women themselves prioritise income generation above all else - effectively take the 'movement' out of 'organisations'.

This 'movement' has its own characteristic existential structure which gives emotional life to activism and which distinguishes it from characterizations that regard modernity exclusively as a dynamic of exclusion and distinctions. In the case of activism, distinctions between those who enlightened in their beliefs and practices, and those who are not, drive quite the opposite response. As an initial formulation, let us say that they provide the impetus, instead, to immediately mobilise oneself into interventions among those around. More significantly, the force of these interventions is not to encourage passive reception, but to make subjects of the objects of their interventions, to turn them into self-motivated subjects.

The closest that post-structuralist adjudications of modernity come to describing the dynamic I am seeking to hit off, is in the 'technologies of the self' described by Foucault. In coining this term, Foucault is concerned with the contrast between forms of power 'which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or

domination' as against those kinds of practices 'which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.' (1988:18). Like his predecessor Mauss, Foucault's genealogy of modern practices of 'subjectification' goes back to the Stoics and to Christian notion of the person, described by Mauss as the agent of morality, as a unity of 'body and soul, consciousness and act' (Mauss [1938]). Foucault similarly describes the practices of the Stoics, as they disclose the self in writing letters to friends, examine and review the self, and practice 'askesis', a remembering of the self's activities. The element of Christianity which Foucault singles out for particular attention – concerning the confessional practices that merge knowledge of the truth of the self with disclosure and penance.- is one which has been vastly influential in contemporary cultural studies and investigations of the modern self.

There seems to be a certain resonance here with the voices of the women in this chapter, as when Foucault describes 'the affect of change, of rupture with self, past and world' (1988:43). Yet it is characteristic of a certain inability on the part of Foucault to adequately represent the emotional structure of emancipatory projects, that his description of 'subjectification' threatens to collapse into the same language with which he describes 'technologies of domination'. Foucault's technologies of the self describe a series of practices in which one part of the self comes to exercise surveillance, monitoring and description of the rest of the self, excavating and describing an inner truth that must be known in order to be re-shaped. This self, which sits in surveillance over itself, either to confess or to review its past in letters to friends or through the cultivation of memory, seems extraordinarily distant from the world of a Dalit activist woman such as Victoria. Where would a Foucauldian self such as this locate the emotional reserves that Victoria draws on to resist the abuse and taunts of society for moving out of the more circumscribed world allotted to a Dalit woman? Foucault's self-fashioning subjects sound oddly solipsistic in this context, their practices scarcely involved, unlike the rural women activists, in a direct engagement with the social world. In the voices of the women I have

highlighted, the movement towards a more agential mode of becoming a modern self is based, not on self-fashioning but on engagement in social transformations.

We are now in a position to attempt a better formulation of the affective colouring of activism as a project. Unlike the confessional genealogy invoked by Foucault, the tranformation into an activist self rests on *a movement out into the world in order to change it*. The transformation of self necessarily entails a relationship to others., and does not pre-exist the process of representing and occasionally acting on behalf of others. It is the move outward, reaching out to others, which is fundamental to the formation of a specifically political identity which breaks simultaneously with its own past, even if the break is never as complete as it is imagined to be. It is therefore to be found in Indian feminism as much as in "western" feminism. Middle class Indian feminists working in the 1930s Swadeshi movement did not rest content with discursive claims to representation or limit their demand for bodily autonomy to their own class. There was an immediate impulse to generalise the claim, to take it beyond the middle class, to villages and lower-middle class urban neighbourhoods by establishing groups that aimed to 'provide and encourage self-help' as well as providing training programs in 'female literacy, reviving village crafts, teaching needle work, but most importantly, improving traditional midwifery and conditions in the lying-in-room [birthing room].' (Engels 1996:148-9; see also Whitehead 1996:197).

There is a characteristic structure of *absorption outside* of oneself in the construction of the activist. What renders the world so absorbing is not that other identities are different and inferior to one's own (and therefore in need of re-modelling), but rather that they are suffering and in need of assistance. It is this aspect of Christianity, perhaps highlighted by the centrality of missionary projects in the colonies from which many modern social movements in India took their cue, which is central to the emancipatory projects, not the confessional element. The impetus of feminism was such that one found oneself already engrossed in the burning of the witch in medieval Europe, in the persecution of the hysteric by the modern structures of science, with the young girls enduring cliterodectomy and infibulation in the Sudan or in an immigrant population. It is this

absorption in others, and the sense of self-transformation in the course of activism, which is responsible also for the blindness specific to the emancipatory activist. Race and class (or heterosexuality, or any number of constitutive bases of social identity) as ongoing aspects of one's own identity seem existentially distant, left behind, along with the 'pre-feminist', oppressed or narrower self.

I have deliberately chosen examples that have been highlighted by critiques of the colonial in feminism, critiques in which I have myself been a participant. But a richer appreciation of the experiential structure of these emancipatory projects allows a better understanding of their mobilizing capacities. The young Dalit women re-define their selves by increasing their range of movement out into the world – instead of remaining within what seems to them now a very confined world of gender identity proper to young women, they brave the insults of the world to visit and teach others in neighbouring villages. But there is movement already implicit in their affective engagement with others. Appreciating the existential structure of this engagement allows a better appreciation of why it is that emancipatory projects, far from performing a purely exclusionary move, also show a remarkable contagiousness and capacity to slip any sociological mooring that recent critiques have tried to ascribe to them.

The question of the relationship between the universalistic ideals of modernity that form one central feature of modern cosmopolitanism, and the necessarily em-placed aspects of human identity, arises in different forms in the debates around cosmopolitanism. If some, such as Kwame Appiah's father find no contradiction between one's roots and one's belonging as a world citizen (Cheah and Robbins 1998), there are many projects of modernity, such as the emancipatory ones I have concentrated on, (partly directed by their salience in shaping my own life), which actually exacerbate and exaggerate the gulf between the given and the chosen, between one's upbringing and one's new political self. These projects successfully highlight one aspect of human beings – the capacity to re-forge the self not only through practices of self-fashioning as described by Foucault in his later works, but also through engagement with new kinds of affectively charged collectivities, whose futural orientation is characterized by new utopian imaginings that in turn transform social relations to others right now in the present. These projects remind

us of the excitement of discovering that the world is changeable, and not simply a factical 'given'. These insights are won at a cost. They systematically minimize the other pole of human existence, which is equally crucial - the ongoing effects of the one's primary forms of socialization, one's habitus, which is why revolutionary activists can so readily be charged with conveniently 'forgetting' the privileges one operates with. But I will close with one of the further insights that these transformative projects of emancipation also illuminate. They illuminate a central feature of human engagement with the world which, properly understood, makes nonsense of any purely *spatial* understanding of different 'levels' and scales that seem to inhabit debates on cosmopolitanism – the levels of the local, the national, the international. Closeness or distance to others and to things in the world is radically transformed and shaped by the nature and extent of one's attention, absorption and engagement.