The Transcendental Subaltern

Private Enlightenment in Occupied Königsberg

Byron Taylor

University College London, London, UK

byron.taylor.18@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

Was Immanuel Kant Russian? More striking than the fact itself is the length of time it was overlooked: following historian Alexander Etkind's research on the topic, this paper details Königsberg's occupation by the Russian Empire, considering the possibilities of reinstating Kant's thought in the postcolonial tradition, more specifically that of the subaltern (as framed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak). Taking this colonial context into account via a range of historical records and correspondences, I argue for a postcolonial reinterpretation and re-evaluation of the philosopher's work, beginning with his famous essay on the topic of enlightenment. In what ways does this pertain to the enlightenment, as Kant sees it, and the way he distinguishes between the public and private spheres? Furthermore, how does Spivak's reading of Kant overlook the subaltern status that she herself defines?

Keywords

Kant – Spivak – Russia – empire – postcolonialism – enlightenment

1 Introduction

In 1757, Immanuel Kant sent the following letter to the Russian Empress Elizabeth II, where he promised that

I will be loyal and true to the Illustrious and All-powerful Empress of all the Russians ... in the case of treachery, [I will] inform the authorities forthwith, but also try to thwart the deed ... most enlightened, the most autocratic Empress.

GULYGA, 31

This may come as a surprise: firstly, we are invariably unfamiliar with any connection between Immanuel Kant and the Russian Empire (that he was, in fact, its subject); but also, do the words “enlightened” and “autocratic” not explicitly contradict each other, and our understanding of the enlightenment more broadly?

Answering such questions requires a greater definition of terms. The enlightenment was, after all, a historian’s invention. While the projects of *Aufklärung* and *les lumieres* did share common concerns and aspirations, Kant’s definition was not that of D’Alembert or Diderot. As Neil Lazarus remarks, just as our notion of the West has become “oddly detachable from any specific territories or terrains, so too has enlightenment become abstracted from its textual and historical origins” (10). In a 1786 essay, Kant provided a much briefer iteration: “To think for oneself means to look within oneself (i.e. in one’s own reason) for the touchstone of truth; and the maxim of thinking for oneself at all times is *enlightenment*” (*Religion And Rational Theology* 10). Which tells us Kant’s *Aufklärung* was a question of authenticity as much as individuality, and it is along these lines that we will investigate his essay later. Much recent scholarship has paved the way towards globalising the enlightenment. This is not my aim here. Rather, this paper will attempt to magnify the local sources of Kant’s enlightenment – namely, within a small town with a tumultuous identity (then Königsberg, now Kaliningrad).

As to why Kant’s time as a Russian subject has gone overlooked for so long, my suggestions are twofold: firstly, in much of the Anglo-American Academy and beyond, philosophy is no longer a subject in which dates are worth remembering. Analytic philosophy treats ideas as *a priori*, and thus ahistorical. Secondly, I would blame Heinrich Heine’s famous anecdote. The poet once claimed the “history of Immanuel Kant’s life is difficult to portray, for he had neither life nor history” (Kuehn 13). As he passed them, at the same time each day, Heine went on, the citizens of Königsberg “greeted him in a friendly manner and set their watches by him” (13).

Rarely has a single anecdote shaped our understanding of a thinker so thoroughly. While he was a notably untraveled man, this suggests a life-story not particularly worth our attention. Though as some biographies imply, this is not the full story: Zammito follows his strange romance with the thirteen-year-old Maria Charlotte Schwink (123), while another biographer recalls how “he made his way home after midnight, once – on his own admission – so drunk that he could not find his way back to the street where he lived” (Gulyga, 51–52).

As Russian historian Alexander Etkind has discovered, the world beyond Prussia came to Kant, in the shape of a Russian invasion and occupation, through which he was forcibly made (for half a decade) a subject of the Russian

empire – and, by extension, a colonised inhabitant. Using Etkind's recent work as my point of departure, this paper seeks to reframe Kant within the postcolonial tradition by following two lines of argument:

- 1) That the interjection of Etkind's historical research on Königsberg demands the re-evaluation of the philosopher's work.
- 2) Consequently, that the occupation of Königsberg bears impact on Kant's 1784 work "What is Enlightenment?"

2 Königsberg

Etkind's "Internal Colonisation" centres on Russia's historical habit of colonising its *own* geographical space, its populations and its natural resources, just as the European powers did with their distant, external colonies. This, already, provides us with an interesting subversion (or rather, inversion) as to how we commonly understand the colonial dynamic. Impressively, Etkind scales the expansion of the Russian landmass and fur trade until, in 1757, he describes how, towards the end of the Seven Years War, Russian soldiers silently reached the edges of Königsberg, "but retreated for no apparent reason" (174).

It was owing to Empress Elizabeth II's illness that the instructions to the Russian military were so haphazard, but this was only the first of many bewildering moments for the people of Königsberg. Preoccupied with defending Berlin, Frederick II refused to surrender. This did not prevent the capital from being massacred and seized by Russian and Austrian troops in 1760: "With the fall of Berlin, the Königsbergians lost any hope of their emancipation" (Gusejnova 64). As Riga had in 1710, the leaders of Königsberg bowed to their new rulers on January 24th, 1758, taking an official oath to Empress Elizabeth II (privately aware, no doubt, that the alternative was death).

Once occupied, the empire set to work. Nikolai von Korf (who spoke Russian but could not write it) was established as General Governor for the town, confiscating guns from across Eastern Prussia, "prohibiting portraits of Frederick II and personally censoring newspapers, printers and booksellers" (67). Kant's letter to Empress Elizabeth II was motivated by his attempt to acquire a chair at the University – but the Empress never responded. None of the inhabitants, Kant included, could have known that the occupation would end in less than five years (Etkind 177). "On Optimism," written in 1759, may offer us the most intimate textual insight into Kant's reaction to the invasion. "Why, I ask in all humility," he wrote, "did it please Thee, Eternal Being, to prefer the inferior to the superior?" (*Theoretical Philosophy* 71) Addressing the bleak and seemingly unshakable inequality of his situation, Etkind marks this as the philosopher

“formulating the ultimate question of the subaltern” (Gusejnova 70). Soon after, Kant would shock his secretary and biographer with his request for the essay to be suppressed (Borowski 29) – perhaps fearing its contents betrayed his attitude too openly.

During this period, he had no choice but to tutor Russian soldiers, from which he earned a modest income. It was not until July 1762 that a Prussian governor was reintroduced, after Tsar Peter II and Frederick II came to an agreement. The town rejoiced in the streets. Soon after, though, Peter II was dethroned and murdered by his wife, who would come to be known as Catherine the Great.

The special courier brought the news to Königsberg on 18 July. [The Governor] immediately issued a new declamation in which he annulled his previous order, announced his return to power, and stopped festivities under the threat of “the cruellest punishments.” Ready to start new hostilities, he returned the guards to the castle, distributed ammunition to troops and summoned them to gates of the city ... But [Catherine the Great’s] grasp on power was still unstable, and she decided against a new war with Prussia ... On 16 July 1762, the bewildered Königsbergians read the latest declamation signed by their Russian governor. Again, he annulled his previous order, this time to give Eastern Prussia to Frederick.

GUSEJNOVA 64–65

Farcical as it may read in retrospect, the impact of these calamities on the inhabitants themselves is where our focus should turn. “It was as if,” claims Etkind, “in five fateful years, Kant’s Königsberg had experienced the whole cycle of imperial invasion, colonial regime, emancipation and postcolonial nationalism” (68). The historian is at pains to show how these events are confusing enough from our *own* perspective, let alone for the colonised town at the time. For them, it was an event “stripped of any understandable meaning” (Etkind 177):

The colonisation of Königsberg encountered silent resistance on the part of the natives, who ... complied with Russian rule and rulers, [but] detested them in their quiet way ... This situation invited deep questions about power, reason, and humanity, some of them for the first time ever. The Russian attempt at colonising Königsberg became an entry point into modernity.

178

Etkind thus argues that it was this sudden, bewildering event that stimulated the ideas that would characterise Kant's thinking, as summarised in argument (1). However, to address argument (2), and justify its impact on Kant's essay, we must investigate his personal relationship to the event more closely. To do so is to encounter a muted response. This "silent resistance on the part of the natives" is mirrored in Kant's published output, which was sparse. For the entire half-decade of the occupation, Kant's only essays centre on one theme: earthquakes. While they may have been distant geographically, "metaphorically, these inexplicable, senseless disasters were close to Kant's world" (181). The fact that Kant's publications burst forth after the empire's departure further confirms Etkind's premise that "under Russian rule, Kant was a subaltern and he did not speak" (181).

While Kant's experience may be new to us, given the postcolonial theme of this issue, the term Etkind employs here is likely not. We cannot subscribe to Etkind's conclusion here without reference to the piece in question. It will mean leaving Kant's predicament, and travelling to South East Asia, to a figure and text of comparable import.

3 Retrieving the Subaltern

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous essay begins by unpacking how a conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze reveals how epistemically-blinded both thinkers were, when articulating the plight of those beyond the Western context. Her second section refutes the commonly-held assumption that Foucault dealt with society while Jacques Derrida dealt with words, arguing that the latter was more attentive to the ethnocentric nature of writing than he is usually credited for. In elaborating the political stakes of writing, Spivak moves from these assessments to a case of more extensive colonial impact – that of the role of the Brahman elite during the British occupation of India.

The British Empire, Spivak explains, created a hierarchy of the written word in the country, whereby a select few Brahmans were commissioned with the responsibility of writing for, and on behalf of, the wider population: in the process, a version "of history was gradually established in which the Brahmans were shown to have the same intentions as (thus providing legitimacy for) the codifying British" (Williams and Chrisman 77). The absurdity of this arrangement is even more pronounced when one is reminded of the sheer number of the population this system prevented from expression.¹

1 238 million at the start of the twentieth century, to around a billion by its end.

"Certain varieties of the Indian elite" became, at best, Spivak continues, "native informants for the first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other" (79). While this enabled information about Indian and Hindu culture to be transmitted from the colonised population to their rulers back in London, "one must nevertheless insist that the colonised subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogenous" (79) in this process, a nation of individuals lost in a vacuum of generalities:

For the "true" subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no un-representable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation. The problem is that the subject's itinerary has not been traced so as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual ... With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?

SPIVAK 80

In other words, the subaltern occupies an impossible space between parties ranked above them, leaving the subaltern unable or forbidden to express (and, therefore, articulate) their sovereign subjectivity to either side. Spivak reminds us that, in all the written works such colonial dynamics produce, it is, in fact, precisely "what the work cannot say that becomes important" (82):

The sender – "the peasant" – is marked only as a pointer to an irretrievable consciousness. As for the receiver, we must ask who is "the real receiver" of an "insurgency"? The historian, transforming "insurgency" into "text for knowledge," is only one receiver of any collectively intended social act ... "The subject" implied by the texts of insurgency can only serve as a counter-possibility for the narrative sanctions granted to the colonial subject in the dominant groups.

82

More simply, all and any form of insurgency, revolt, revolution or transgression by the colonised is coolly archived away in the annals of a discourse constrained from any form of similar deviation in what it reports. This insidious process meant that the Brahmans were forbidden from accurately articulating the colonial experience – for fear of themselves losing the means to partake in this discourse with their rulers, and being relegated to the role of the subaltern themselves.

Much has been written on how colonial subjects struggle to rationalise their predicament, to make imperialism cohere with previous assumptions of iden-

tity. Similarly, Antony La Vopa argues there is “an element of self-caricature, and indeed of self-hatred” in Kant’s writings during the time of Russian occupation:

Among the explanations for this important though temporary crisis, one comes from the postcolonial tradition. Under a colonial regime, the local intellectuals often registered similar feelings of internal splitting, doubling and self-hatred. Much of 20th century existential thought came out of these situations, in Algeria and elsewhere. Reinstating Kant in occupied Königsberg helps us to understand his relation to this tradition.

181

Doing so, of course, requires overturning and undoing many preconceptions, not least those of Spivak herself, though this is an issue we must address later. Before that, to make some modest contribution to such a vast task as La Vopa and Etkind suggest, as articulated in argument (1), will mean turning to the more specific aim of argument (2), namely, the ways in which Kant’s postcolonial experience bears resonance in his famous answer to the question “What is Enlightenment?” Following its analysis, I wish to concentrate on what La Vopa refers to as “the internal splitting” and “doubling” of the subaltern, as characterised by what Kant deems the public and private spheres of enlightenment.

4 What Is Enlightenment?

Written as a response to the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* journal in 1784, Kant’s answer evokes many questions. “Enlightenment,” Kant begins, “is man’s emergence from self-incurred immaturity” (*Political Writings* 54). By “emergence,” he tells us that it is a slow, continual and potentially unending process, and by “self-incurred,” he puts the responsibility to partake in this process on the individual. That is not to say that enlightenment can be done by oneself. It “cannot be just a personal project,” Katerina Deligiorgi’s extensive analysis observes, but one that “amounts to a test of one’s capacity to acknowledge others” and “think with others” (58). To challenge, question and interrogate everything, ourselves and each other included.

By using the adjective *Unmündigkeit* for immaturity, Kant is not only emphasising the distance between our innate state and the one we should aim for, or collectively evolve towards, but also uses a term that is alliterative with *der Mund* (mouth), implying that the (in)ability to speak is a decisive criteria for the enlightenment he describes: how can we question the world around us without articulation? How can we learn to “think with others” without com-

municating? Bonfiglioli points out that, after providing his brief definition of enlightenment, Kant's essay "immediately becomes preoccupied with a prolonged and vigorous critique of unenlightenment ... a state of punitive internment, a sort of debtor's prison for those who lack intellectually independent means" (172):

The enlightenment essay directly represents the state of unenlightenment nineteen times by lexical choices that play negatively on the term *Mund*. The oral thus stands in opposition to the enlightened subject, not only in the terms *unmündig/Unmündigkeit*, but also in the term *Vormünder* [guardians], those who speak for and before the unenlightened, and upon whom one is (orally) dependent for the articulation of thought ... unenlightenment is a state of inarticulateness, insufficiency, and dependency upon authority.

178

As it goes on, Kant's answer gradually expands itself into a socio-political critique: "only a few," he claims, "have succeeded in freeing themselves from immaturity," though he does not elaborate on who these lucky few are. In any case, there "is more chance of an entire public" achieving this state simultaneously – if they are granted the freedom to do so, Kant believes, it is "almost inevitable" (*Political Writings* 55). The dialectic, as far as his essay goes, lies between the Guardians (*Vormünder*) and the immature (*der Unmündigkeit*). The "obstacles" to this process, he states encouragingly, "are gradually becoming fewer." (55) Yet this does not mean that we should rush headlong in our search for its obtainment. Rather,

a public can only achieve enlightenment slowly. A revolution may well put an end to autocratic despotism and to rapacious or power-seeking oppression, but it will never lead to a reform in ways of thinking. Instead, new prejudices, like the ones they replaced, will serve as a leash to control the great unthinking masses.

55

By Kant's verdict, patience is a virtue if social progress is the conscious goal. To rush towards enlightenment would only produce the reappearance of the "prejudices" that motivated it to begin with (revolutions past and recent have not entirely contradicted Kant's assessment here). Kant's answer becomes a contract. He claims a revolution will only occur when enlightenment is forbidden. Consequently, the guardians and rulers of society have no choice: they must

necessarily allow enlightenment to circulate within their domain to ensure their survival. “If it is now asked whether we at present live in an enlightened age,” Kant argues, then the answer is no: “but we do live in an age of enlightenment.” (58) In the next section, I will demonstrate that the aspect of his essay that has earned the most confusion from his critics – his distinction between “public” and “private” life – is precisely where his views of enlightenment deserve further reflection. It is Kant’s notion of the public and private realm which we should now look to more closely.

5 The Public and the Private

However influential his overall argument, Kant’s distinction there between “public” and “private” life has puzzled many scholars. The two appear to be, if anything, reversed. As counter-intuitive as it may sound, Kant tries to define his distinction most simply in the following passage:

By “public use of one’s reason” I mean that use which a man, as scholar, makes of it before the reading public. I call “private use” that use which a man makes of his reason in a civic post that has been entrusted to him.

Political Writings 54

This suggests that Kant’s distinction hinges on the inauthenticity of human office. Notice how far the public and private extends: the public reception of a scholar among “the reading world” is a wider, freer, and more autonomous space than the private office to which a subject is, in Kant’s words, “entrusted” (“*anvertraut*”). What makes this so peculiar is that this latter term contains neither the freedom and intimacy we ascribe our private lives, nor the voluntary nature of our private time.

The strangeness of Kant’s distinction was not lost on his contemporaries. In a letter from 1784, Johann Georg Hamann complained that the distinction “means that one really has freedom when writing an article for the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, while in one’s vocation and daily life one remains a hypocrite and a slave.” (Mali and Wokler 111) That Hamann was also a victim of the Königsberg occupation should not escape us, and may, to some extent, explain his harsh tone. Kant’s private sphere is also treated unsympathetically by Bonfiglioli, who claims its purpose is to show that “not everyone should call established practices into question,” and that for the sake of order there must be a distinction between “those who question and those who obey” (185). Foucault observed that this distinction is, “term for term, the opposite of what is usu-

ally called freedom of conscience" (Foucault and Rabinow 36). My argument will not take issue with these opinions but clarify their origin, by appealing to the Russian occupation as their source. Interestingly, Bonfiglioli insists that a closer reading reveals that "the public sphere is actually a condensation of many undesirable elements from which the philosopher unbound seeks to distance himself" (185).

If this is true, and civil occupation is (at best) a compromising limitation on, or (at worst) an irremovable obstacle to, enlightenment, then the obligatory nature of colonisation and its "silent resistance" (Etkind 178) must be taken, for the first time, into account. In the colonial context, civil office, at such times, becomes not only a duty but a means by which the locals are forced to extend the authority of their foreign oppressors over themselves and each other, by mediating between the two. This, clearly, is how Spivak views the role of the Brahmans, and it appears to colour Kant's view of civic office too. Meanwhile, it is "within the public sphere, this immune centre, that the Kantian subject is located":

This refined public sphere occupied the centre. That is to say, it carved out a domain between the realm of kings and the world of the alleyways and taverns and it did so by forcing together the high and the low as contaminated equivalents.

BONFIGLIOLI 186–87

I would suggest that replacing "contaminated" with "colonised" may take us closer to what this distinction illuminates. Kant's enlightenment, Bonfiglioli continues, "involves a simultaneous disambiguation and decontamination" (187). The public sphere has greater scope. To reach beyond one's immediate environment through writing is a mode of freedom, a form of (eventual) enlightenment. The private sphere, that of the civic office, meanwhile, is "constituted out of the debris rejected in the process of self-cleansing," ridding the self of the "persistent irritants" and "unintended stowaways on the project of enlightenment" (187).

Bonfiglioli not only elaborates Kant's distinction, but, crucially I believe, identifies what could be read as a causal and temporal rupture between the two spheres. I would suggest that we depart from seeing them as a bifurcation of the everyday, as many scholars have previously; but see them instead as two stages of individual and collective enlightenment separated by time and causality. If enlightenment is a process then these are its stages. Only by the "decontamination" of the private sphere in which we could not speak, do we eventually reach the wider public in which we can. The private sphere of the constrained office

is cast to the past tense, characterised by a life “contaminated” (or “colonised”) by external factors, while the range of the written word and the circumference of its multiple destinations lies ahead, in an enlightened futurity.

We should approach these conclusions cautiously, lest we fall into the trap of relativizing between the public sphere of World Literature’s goals and the public sphere as Kant and his contemporaries saw it. The obsession with steering, shaping and directing public opinion was, in fact, a hallmark of the European enlightenment – but “exactly what ‘public opinion’ was may not have been clear at the time, and has been disputed by historians since. In some contexts it was perhaps little more than the writer’s imagination” (Mali and Wokler 81).

One of Kant’s oppressors is of interest to us here, because they proactively transcend his distinction between “public” and “private” while characterising World Literature more directly. In his chapter on the occupation of Königsberg, Etkind follows the curious side-narrative of a Russian translator, Andrei Bolotov. Keen to ingratiate himself with the Prussian town his empire was oppressing, Bolotov initially found the locals cold, taciturn, and distrusting. He would sit for hours in Prussian beer gardens, trying to befriend the locals, with little success. Eventually, Bolotov found it was in the German literature he began to rapidly consume, that a cultural enlightenment, of sorts, could be found:

By reading novels, I formed an idea about the customs and mores of various peoples and about everything that they have there, good and bad ... I developed an understanding of the life of different classes ... I started to look at all events in the world through different, nobler eyes.

462

We need not justify Bolotov’s naivete towards his colonised subjects to share his idealism. What Bolotov describes is the bedrock that informs World Literature at its core: *language simultaneously creates and transcends difference*. Though it is part of his private occupation, Bolotov appears to frame the scene of reading another culture as an example of the public sphere that Kant gestures to – in the process, transcending both. However, so far, this reading has not graduated beyond the interpretative, and historical reference is necessary to confirm argument (2), that the occupation bore impact on Kant’s essay directly, despite being written much later.

6 The Spectre of Invasion

Caroline von Keyserlingk recalls a Königsberg dinner-party: "Kant, as did I, declared that the Russians were still our main enemies," thirty years after the invasion (Keuhn 337–38). Yet while enduring occupation, he made no comment when another scholar (more approved of by the occupying forces) received the University promotion he had looked forward to for so many years (Etkind 178–80). In this biographical contrast the distinction becomes comprehensible: in the "public" space of an evening dinner, the philosopher spoke his mind; in the "private" space of his profession, he was as silent among his colleagues as he was scarce in publications. In the essay itself, those "not restricted by the duties of office are even freer," Kant writes. "This spirit of freedom spreads further, even where it must struggle with the external hindrances of a government which misunderstands itself" (*Political Writings* 54). Given Kant's lack of travel, the administrative chaos relayed above (including a Governor who censored what he could not himself read), and the comparable calm of Frederick II's Prussia, it is difficult not to associate such a government with the one Kant witnessed during occupation.

Despite his lack of travel, Kant did not consider himself unqualified to teach and write on anthropology or geography. Among such works is "On the Different Races of Human Beings." Written in 1775, the text includes Kalmuchians as a separate race (along with "Negroes" and "Native Americans"), making a "highly unusual racial classification based on his personal experience," argues Etkind (174). The Russian forces had been predominantly of Slavic, Tartar and Kalmyk extraction. Even in 1775, the trauma of the occupation still informed Kant's outlook, in papers that purported to objectivity. While it demonstrates its shadow over his thinking, of course, this does not directly pertain to the essay under discussion (nor is it inconsistent with the attitude of many of his contemporaries). This still does not address the most obvious question: how do we know that the occupation still mattered to Kant at the time of writing his essay on enlightenment?

What may answer that question, I believe, is a letter Kant received from a former student, F.V.L. Lessing. He received this letter only a few months before his essay on enlightenment was published, which means it may have arrived at the same time as its composition. Discussing the fear of their leader Frederick II being superseded by a less "enlightened" ruler, Lessing wrote a letter to Kant filled with a mixture of admiration and anxiety:

How great [Friedrich II] seems to me! And how grateful to him must human reason be! If only he could live another 20 years. Fanaticism and

superstition are now again threatening us with great restriction on freedom of thought ... It seems that despotism, fanaticism, and superstition are trying to conquer all of Europe.

Philosophical Correspondences 114

There is a palpable sense of panic in these lines. There is also, clearly, in Lessing's letter the expectation that Kant will share this sentiment. One can read this with attention to the colonising or "conquering" capacity of the threat described, and the "despotism" that Lessing and Kant face with distrust and a sense of foreboding. The fact the student claims that this could all happen "again", firmly suggests, I believe, the occupation of Königsberg as its point of reference – implying its impact extended long beyond its direct experience in the town (despite happening some twenty years before).

Acknowledging this context helps us find the source of this sense of crisis in Lessing's letter. Given the urgency of its tone, and its arrival at the time Kant was writing his answer to the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, I will risk speculating that receiving and reading this letter may well have considerably shaped the essay Kant would publish very shortly thereafter. It may well have made vivid to him the experience he had undergone between 1757–1762. Which suggests the spectre of occupation still hung over the philosopher who searched for enlightenment's definition.

Both the interpretative analysis of the essay itself, and these historical sources support argument (2), but there remains work to be done in taking Spivak's project into account. As I warned earlier, this paper's task cannot be completed without overturning Spivak's own views, most extensively those in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.

7 Kant and Spivak: Transcending Differences

In the opening chapter, Spivak tells us the "subject as such in Kant is geopolitically differentiated" (26). The North-Western European subject is the norm by which all others are measured. "By contrast, *der rohe Mensch*, man in the raw, can, in its signifying reach, accommodate the savage and the primitive" (13). The "raw man" Kant refers to, "is not yet the subject divided between the three critiques" (13–14). In her attempt to destabilise and invert the certainties of Kant's system, Spivak claims his text is occasionally "signalling to us its own vulnerability to the system it describes" (21). In her conclusion, she claims that reading such canonical texts with "the native informant's impossible eye" brings "shadowy counter-scenes" into play (37).

Yet Etkind's historical research renders her vantage on Kant incomplete. She makes the following admission: "I will call my reading of Kant 'mistaken,'" written "in the interest of producing a counternarrative that will make visible" the "subject" not granted "access to the position of narrator" (9). My argument here has attempted to make a similar move. As the occupation of Königsberg shows, Spivak's reading is, indeed, mistaken: because that subject is also Kant himself.

Granted, Spivak's attitude towards Kant is not without foundation. Several passages of his work make for disturbing reading and are unambiguously xenophobic.² Considering "The Critique of Judgement," Spivak overlooks the section in which a hierarchy of nations are graded according to their accessibility to aesthetic experience. Kant begins with the Germans, followed by the French, and then the English. His tone changes dramatically as he reaches the bottom of the list: "What trifling grotesqueries do the verbose and studied compliments of the Chinese contain!" (Eze 58). The greatest vitriol, however, is reserved for "the Negroes of Africa" who, Kant asserts, "have by nature no feelings that rise above the trifling" (61).

Lucy Allais reminds us that "the very idea of 'race' is, arguably, new at this time, with Kant being one of the first people to theorize it" (10). Referring to an argument between a European missionary and an African carpenter, Kant concedes "in short, this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid" (Eze 57). In such moments, it becomes obvious that if Kant's "public" sphere can maintain a contemporary legitimacy, it must be extended and enlarged to accommodate those beyond his original inscription: on this, myself and Spivak agree.

The Russian occupation of Königsberg does not justify Kant's statements on race. Nevertheless, Etkind's discoveries demand us to re-evaluate Kant in a new light, by way of Spivak's term. Etkind reveals the hypocrisy at the heart of Spivak's analysis. Her critique of Kant falls prey to the "vulnerability" of "the system" she, herself, "describes" (21) precisely because, while Spivak insists that the Kantian subject is "geographically differentiated" (16), it proves remarkably ironic how – in her reading of the German philosopher – she has *herself* committed the exact same offence in her reading of Kant. By painting Kant as the oppressor, she overlooks his *own* subaltern experience. The occupation of

2 Lucy Allais marks a subtle distinction here, between the racial hierarchies Kant advocated and the slavery that this position usually endorsed: "Whether he in fact endorses slavery may be argued to be less clear; he does not do so in published work and does condemn it in very late works. This possible uncertainty might be taken to be significant for the relation between his racism and his moral theory, since thinking that races are different, and even thinking that some races are inferior, need not amount to thinking that they can be enslaved" (4–5).

Königsberg merits deeper attention, and could well illuminate our understanding of Kant further.

At issue here is “less our ability to unmask philosophy as a species of rhetoric than our willingness to reopen philosophy to the broad daylight of public appearance,” claims McCormick, where questions “of historicity must be restored” (322). Even if I have stopped short of endorsing Spivak’s direct analysis of Kant, I can more easily subscribe to her observation that “philosophy has been and continues to be travestied in the service of the narrativization of history” (9).

8 Conclusion

Kant may be long dead, but the biography of his hometown did not end with him, and nor has its colonial narrative. Invaded once more, in 1914, the town of Königsberg, now named Kaliningrad, is today a Russian exclave between Poland and Lithuania. It was virtually a closed city until 1992. When a poll in December 2018 asked the population to name their new airport, Kant’s popularity in the results provoked rage from the Russian authorities. Vice Admiral Igor Mukhametshin delivered his own blunt critique,³ followed by the vandalising of three landmarks dedicated to Kant, including even the philosopher’s gravestone. Only in such recent circumstances does the segregation of the town reawaken, as Kant’s subaltern status is reconfirmed.

Neither should we believe that the relationship between colonial experience and German Idealism ends there. In “Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History,” Susan Buck-Morss argues that Hegel’s inspiration was not the World Spirit on horseback embodied by Napoleon, but the uprising against the French Empire in the colony of Haiti. The relentless struggle in Saint-Dominique, between 1791 and 1803, was the first (and only) uprising to succeed in overthrowing a colonial slave economy to form a self-governing republic.

Given the gravity of this event and its extensive coverage in German newspapers at the time, extensive archival research shows this event would not have escaped Hegel’s attention. In her brilliant “Freedom is Slavery,” Russian philosopher Oxana Timofeeva locates Hegel’s ideas between the slavery and human-trafficking of contemporary Europe and the contexts of Saint-Dominique: “none of Hegel’s interpreters has previously taken this historical reality into

3 Kant “humiliated himself and on his hands and knees begged to be given a department at the university, so that he could teach, and he wrote some incomprehensible books that none of those present here today have read, and won’t read.” See “No you Kant.”

consideration,” she points out: “Nobody cares about Haiti, while every reader strives to see a high-minded metaphor in the Hegelian dialectic” (441).⁴

Having begun with the occupation of Königsberg, I expanded on the Spivak terminology that Etkind employs, before turning to Kant’s essay in the hope of understanding it better through the context provided. As such, resonances between these two very different texts both address the means to communicate: Etkind shows that the Kantian subject and the subaltern of Spivak’s work are not as dissimilar as prior supposed. Which begs the question: What *is* Kant’s enlightenment? Does the colonial context explored strengthen or dilute its value? If it is one informed by experiences of subjugation and oppressive threat, can we understand it better?

Kant responds that enlightenment is not something identifiable so much as perpetual. We inhabit a *stage*, rather than an age, of enlightenment – and will continue to, for some time to come. We should not dismiss his argument but should take heed of his context: which implies that it is around the *context* of the philosophical statement that its validity can be better understood. If the assertion of argument (2), and the occupation’s bearing on this essay is satisfactory, then the challenge of argument (1) would require far more work than is possible within the boundaries of this paper. As already acknowledged, the re-evaluation of Immanuel Kant would be a substantial project.

Nevertheless, it appears that one issue (at least) is foreseeable: Kant’s moral philosophy is based on the idea that all human acts must stem from free choice – if so, how does the occupation impact on this? Can the subaltern act freely, and did Kant himself in this instance? Some may choose to follow this difficult line of inquiry. Others may take the easier route, which would amount to saying that this episode only strengthened Kant’s resolve, leaving their interpretations of him untouched and without need for revision. Would this not, however, commit the same contemporary error of dissociating ideas from the contexts that shape them?

4 Timofeeva begins with the state of slavery in its current global condition, before approaching Hegel’s dialectic through such context(s), inverting the order of historicity and philosophy as she does so: “The market in slaves was literally black when it was still (figuratively) white: since the period of the great geographical discoveries, when ships sailed the Atlantic with slaves from black Africa to European colonies on the Caribbean and Antillean islands, up until the recent moment when rubber dinghies with Africans, sometimes already dead, began washing ashore on the island of Lampedusa, one of the traditional transfer points for migrants on their way to the European Union, this market has only changed its legal status and thereby finally taken on the nominal colour of its commodity” (427).

Contrarily, for a paper discussing a key text of the enlightenment, we have come face to face with a series of myopias, of blindness and blank spaces, ignorance and oversights. Summarily, several further misunderstandings or contestations should be anticipated in advance. Firstly, some may argue that Kant's role during occupation was closer to the Brahman of India than the subaltern they were commissioned to communicate for. Does his teaching and tutoring truly merit this comparison?

Responding to this would require greater historical access to either context, along with the requisite time and space to answer it. Secondly, it should be made clear that the inquiry of this article has not been guided by a desire to victimise the European subject as the sole (or privileged) recipient of the colonial experience. Neither has it been an attempt to relativize between the experience of Königsberg and that of India: my point, rather, has been to introduce this context to render Kant's work anew, and acknowledge the challenges it entails to previous scholarship on the topic.

Between two radically different essays, between the scribal role of the Brahmins of India and Kant's public sphere of readers, it is clearly on the written word that these very different thinkers converge in their emphases. Enlightenment can only be found in independence, independence is only found in expression, and expression can only be found in language. Given its promiscuous accumulation of concepts, methodologies and fields of inquiry, no discipline seems to me better suited to address and rectify this impasse than World Literature. What better way to begin this conversation, than by re-evaluating two thinkers and texts so cherished in isolation from each other?

Works Cited

- Allais, Lucy. "Kant's Racism." *Philosophical Papers* 45:1–2 (2016), 1–36.
- Bolotov, Andrei Timofeevich. *Zhizn' I Priklucheniia Andreia Bolotova, Opisannye Samim Im Dlia Svoikh Potomkov*. Moskva: Sovremennik, 1986.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. *Hegel, Haiti, And Universal History*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012.
- Bonfiglioli, Thomas Paul. "Private Reason(s) And Public Spheres: Sexuality And Enlightenment In Kant." *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 38:2 (1997), 171–90.
- Borowski, Ludwig Ernst. *Immanuel Kant*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980.
- Deligiorgi, Katerina. *Kant and the Culture of Enlightenment*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2005.
- Etkind, Alexander. *Internal Colonization*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011.

- Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi. *Race and The Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 2008.
- Foucault, Michel, and Paul Rabinow. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.
- Gulyga, Arsenij. *Immanuel Kant*. Boston: Birkhäuser, 1987.
- Gusejnova, Dina. *Cosmopolitanism in Conflict*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Kant, Immanuel, and Arnulf Zweig. *Philosophical Correspondence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970.
- Kant, Immanuel, and David Walford. *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992.
- Kant, Immanuel, Allen W. Wood, and George Di Giovanni. *Religion and Rational Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Kuehn, Manfred. *Kant*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- La Vopa, Anthony J. "Thinking About Marriage: Kant's Liberalism and the Peculiar Morality Of Conjugal Union." *The Journal of Modern History* 77:1 (2005), 1–34.
- Lazarus, Neil. "The Fetish of 'the West' in Postcolonial Theory." In: *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*. Eds. Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2002, 43–64.
- Mali, Joseph, and Robert Wokler. *Isaiah Berlin's Counter-Enlightenment*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2003.
- McCormick, Samuel. "The Artistry of Obedience: From Kant to Kingship." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 38:4 (2005), 302–27.
- "No you Kant: Russians Reject German Thinker's Name for Airport." *BBC News*. 4 Dec. 2018. Web. 14 Jun. 2020.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999.
- Timofeeva, Oxana. "Freedom Is Slavery." *Crisis & Critique* 4:1 (2017), 425–45.
- Williams, Patrick, and Laura Chrisman. *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993.
- Zammito, John H. *Kant, Herder, and the Birth Of Anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.