On April 20, 2002, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) assailed the feminist majority of The United States—represented as it was by an article in Ms. Magazine called “A Coalition of Hopes”—for ignoring the horrible atrocities committed by the Northern Alliance and for erasing RAWA’s historical role—twenty five years of relentless struggle against the Taliban’s inhumanity toward women. Most of the members of RAWA—at least those who have not been executed or forcibly exiled—remain in Afghanistan, seeking support for their own program of secular democracy, women’s rights, and the re-establishment of a working infrastructure, which is utterly necessary for anything resembling a democratic society to thrive. In its response to the Ms. Magazine article, RAWA posed a set of penetrating questions to US feminists:

Are they merely smearing the US government and Western press who find it easier to present the Taliban as evil and the forces that the US supported against them as good? Or have they joined with our government in a concerted effort to ignore these crimes and once again forfeit the lives and rights of women for our current national self-interest?
Perhaps the feminist majority, in their push for US economic and political power, are being careful not to anger the political powers in the US who still deny and make apologies for the human rights abuses done by the likes of Massoud, Rabinni, Dostum, Hekmatyar, and others who were trained, armed, and supported by the US during the Cold War years in Afghanistan, and then left in a power vacuum to destroy their people and their country.²

RAWA does not here cite the innovative philosophical work of Giorgio Agamben, someone who has tried to show the contemporary political relevance of the ancient Roman category of *homo sacer* by claiming that “[w]hen their rights are no longer the rights of the citizen, that is when human beings are truly *sacred*, in the sense that this term used to have in Roman law of the archaic period: doomed to death.”³ But for the members of RAWA, their erasure is inseparable from our so-called “war which was not a war” against the Afghan people, in which the innumerable deaths of Afghan citizens did not count, could not be counted, either in a moral or a mathematical sense. For we still do not know how many people have died as a result of our militaristic effrontery, people who were killed with impunity as *homines sacri*, people who looked up at our planes not knowing whether packages of aid or bombs were about to fall on their heads.

As I deliver these words to you today, it appears that Iraqis will be the next ones doomed to death in Agamben’s sense as we move headlong into a war against Iraq, in an effort

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² Drucilla Cornell

³ The Sacrilege of Feminism
дvigime kon vojna so Irak, so cel da gosoborime neizniniot vodaç Saddam Hussein. Se razbira, toa ke bide vojna bez presedan vo amerikanskata ustavna historija, zahto planirome da se vovelqem e edna ekstremno militaristicka agresija protiv vlada za koja Skot Riter, inspektor za oružje pri Obединетите нации vo Irak, povëke od sedum godini veli deka ne pretravajuva nikakva seriозna zakana za nacionalnata bezbednost na Соединетите Држави. Sepak, pretstojнata vojna protiv Irak nemа da bide iskluchok od praviloto deka politichkiot diskurse za podrшка na flagrantno nelenitetnite voeni operacii, tipichno ukažujà na faktor deka нашата акциja e neophodna za da se ispravat nеправдите. Naјпосле, во случајot na Avganistan, opravduvavato na bombardirawata i na urivaweto na talibanskiot re'im, znači ispravawe na nеправдите protiv 'enite.

Wo голем дел од своjата долгогодишна марксистичко-феминистичка работа, Гајатри Спивак покажa дека долгата и бруtalна исторija на западниот империјализам можела да опстане - идеолошки, и понаку - затоа што oслободувањето на најсиромашните од сиромашните жени, исто така потпомогнало да се промовира програма за систематска економска доминација. Но, неодамна во eden svoj esej nasloven „Исправање на неправдите“ тaa go promeni svojot teoretski фокус, тврдеjки дека повторно morame da se nавратиме на класичнотo либерално разликувањe meðu природните и граànskite права, ako sakame da sfatime kako se koristat neopravdanite koncepcii za природните права za zagrozuvanje na gраànskite права, признахи od drжавите на глобалниот југ i od делегитимираниte opšteteveni институции и структури, kojto mesnite aktivisti se obiduvat povторno da gi legitimiраat. Nejzina идеja e дека само откако oвие институции i структури ke se zdobijat so to ousht its leader, Saddam Hussein. To be sure, this will be an unprecedented war in American constitutional history since we plan to engage in extreme military aggression against a government that has been shown by Scott Ritter, UN weapon’s inspector in Iraq for over seven years now, not to pose any serious threat to US national security. Yet the imminent war against Iraq will not be an exception to the rule that political discourse created to shore up flagrantly illegitimate military campaigns typically points to the fact that our action is necessary in order to right wrongs. After all, in the case of Afghanistan, the justification for the bombing and for the overthrow of the Taliban regime was that we were righting wrongs against women.

In much of her Marxist feminist work over the years, Gayatri Spivak has shown that the long and brutal history of Western imperialism was able to survive, ideologically and otherwise, because the liberation of the poorest of the poor among women also helped promote a program of systematic economic domination. But recently, in an essay called “Righting Wrongs,” she has shifted her theoretical focus, arguing that we must revisit the classical liberal distinction between natural and civil rights if we are understand how it is that unjustified conceptions of natural right are used to encroach upon the civil rights recognized by nation-states in the global south and by de-legitimated social institutions and structures that grassroots activists are trying to re-legitimate. Her point is that only once these institutions and structures receive new legitimacy can the nation-states in which they function overcome the human rights dependency that endlessly reproduces the figure of ‘wronged victim’—a dependency that, according to Spivak, “can be particularly vicious in
its neo-colonial consequences, if it is the state that is the agency of terror and... [Europe and the United States] that is the savior." Although this self-permission for continuing to right wrongs is, for Spivak, premised on the idea that “wronged victims” will never be able to help themselves, and indeed will always need to be politically buttressed from the outside, due to their necessarily inferior political status, which renders them at once unwilling and unable to participate in what the likes of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington would call the modern civilized culture of democracy. Spivak goes on to suggest that the notoriously shaky philosophical foundation of natural rights—the idea that our rights as “men” are, ipso facto, anterior to our civil rights as citizens—often goes unnoticed in human rights discourse. The reason for this, she claims, is that a decidedly Darwinian assumption underwrites much of that discourse, namely that those who are naturally the most human must shoulder the burden of righting the wrongs of those less-than-human peoples who do not fit into our modern as well as classical liberal conception of the rights bearing individual protected under the law. Interestingly enough, she nevertheless fully endorses what I would like to call, following Immanuel Kant, the ideal of humanity. But she does so by admonishing those of us who are citizens of the US and of Europe to unlearn our cultural absolutism which is in fact our own cultural relativism, and which includes our hegemonic conception of modernity, our conception of ourselves as the natural saviors of the world, as the ones who are the most truly human and who are thus in a position to name what counts, and especially what does not count, as human.
It is important to note that Spivak is not against human rights, that, believe it or not, she thinks such rights are necessary and sufficient, in particular historical contexts, for achieving the ethical goal of righting wrongs. But it is perhaps more important to note that central to her recent thinking no less than to her political activism in India and elsewhere is the idea that human rights activists must be constantly cognizant of the fundamental inequality that allows them to right the wrongs perpetrated against so many others in this world, particularly women. With her conception of worlding, she forces those of us residing in “the first world” to accept that we inhabit an imaginary world that is only too real, a world in which doing the right thing is horribly bound up with Social Darwinist assumptions about the natural power to name the human, the inhuman, what may even be otherwise than human or inhuman. Spivak’s sincerest hope is that we can salvage human rights discourse by suturing it to “an epic as openness toward the imagined agency of the other for and to... even compromised and de-legitimated cultures and societies and, most specifically, the almost buried social institutions and rituals of the subaltern.”5 Anything less than this suturing would merely return us time and again to justifications of natural rights founded upon some avatar or another of Social Darwinism.
In view of Spivak’s critique of Darwinian liberalism, consider Martha Nussbaum’s attempt to name basic human capabilities—a forthright attempt to solve the dilemma of how natural rights conceived precisely as human rights could manage to trump civil rights and indeed justify overriding the sovereignty of nation-states. Although Nussbaum wishes to leave space for cultural interpretation of the basic capabilities, she believes it is possible to describe in normative terms the proper contents and functions of these capabilities, and therefore how exactly one who is not yet human ought to become human. Amartya Sen, in both implicit and explicit critiques of Nussbaum, expresses his disagreement with this kind of hierarchical value system of natural human rights over and against civil rights by insisting that the goal of development (a teleological project that, with Spivak, I do not think can be extricated from its indisputably imperialist origins) is freedom—freedom to protect not only civil rights, but what the Marxist Spivak would call the social production and circulation of capital and value. At his most radical, Sen contemplates articulating Marxist economic claims from a politically liberal standpoint. But that is as far as he goes: he backs down from Spivak’s far more daring project of raising questions about how we might suture a new ethics of responsibility to the figure of the other, to its imagined agency in a world that cannot count the other—in all its sacred forms and incarnations—among its sovereign agents.

I have left in abeyance a question that only now, at this very moment, is it possible for me to address directly—the question concerning the future of feminist theory.
answering, I would like to adopt Spivak’s own endorsement of humanist education, and assert that feminism must be thought inextricably linked to an uncoercive political process of suturing the habits and values of radical democracy onto cultural and ritual formations of the subaltern. Such is the theory-driven feminist practice that Spivak herself has undertaken so painstakingly by helping to establish schools for aboriginal children in rural India, and by working with grass root’s women’s and anti-development groups who seek to weave together gender politics, the struggle to survive, and the actual formation of democratic organizations. But we cannot undertake this kind of work in our own countries and throughout the world without creating feminist ethics anew, without refashioning human rights discourse so that it can retain at its core an ethical moment of reflexivity—our own vigilant self-reflection on the dangers of any individual, nation-state, transnational institution, or even NGO claiming that it is in a position to turn the ideal of humanity into something that can be given hierarchical and hence non-ideal shape, something that those who usurp the power and sovereignty of others, subsuming it into their own, will use to render some homines sacri, others people whose lives will always count among those who are living as politically legitimate human beings.

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Notes

1 Presented at The American Political Science Association conference in Boston, September 1, 2002.


5 Spivak, “Righting Wrongs“.


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Белешки

1 Презентирано на The American Political Science Association conference in Boston, September 1, 2002.


