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IN CONVERSATION WITH

Lata Mani

BY DEVAKA GUNAWARDENA

AFTER HER TALK AT UCLA ON FEBRUARY 10, Professor Lata Mani graciously extended her time and critical thinking to this interview and helped frame it as a conversation, rather than a didactic exposition of her work. I am grateful for both. As a continuation of her talk, this interchange refers to the problems she raised in it, but I hope it will also be accessible to those who were not present. In her talk, she discussed varied topics, from Taylorism as an industrial process to the possibly productive relationship between secular academic discourse and sacred knowledge.

Throughout her discussion, she elaborated on the twinned poles of disaggregation and interdependency. The former covers social malaise and exploitation while the latter involves

a recognition that could enable us to build a positive ethics of interaction and activism. In addition to theoretical and aesthetic work, Professor Mani has done much practical work embedded in this conception of ethics. She co-founded an organization with Indira Chowdhury and Vivek Dhareshwar called “Street Scholars,” and she continues to be active in ecological struggles in Bangalore, India.

You mentioned that we currently naturalize constructions of hierarchy while claiming to be challenging them. Could you elaborate on this paradox and its possible relation to activist practice?

I am trying to bring attention to a curious dynamic in sociopolitical critique. We may claim

that the so-called differences which ground hierarchical systems are mere social constructions. However, our discourse frequently serves to reify those very differences. Part of the challenge stems from the fact that we are required to simultaneously demonstrate the fictive basis on which hierarchy, marginality and exclusion are legitimized and with equal vehemence to highlight their reality as lived experience. The African American lesbian poet Pat Parker put the problem in this way: “Forget I’m Black. Never forget I’m Black.” We are called upon to undertake a careful balancing act and we often lose our footing.

Additionally, we may have internalized some of the very ideas, preferences, or commitments that we claim to oppose. Such enmeshments

are, as we know, quite common. Our politics may also actively involve positively affirming that which has attracted contempt or been rejected, subordinated, or demonized. This stance (even when it is adopted as an ironic strategy) also serves to lend credence to normative notions. Inverting a binary does not by itself challenge the norm. A degree of dispassion towards prevailing norms is crucial if activism or scholarship is to retain its critical edge. However, antithetical critique is often deemed sufficiently radical. Conventionalism is as much a problem on the left as it is on the right.

While contemplating systems of infinity, you added the qualification later in your talk that we do not perceive from an Archimedean point. How then are we to grasp “interdependence” as a felt and/or intellectually comprehended moment in our lives? How can the finitude of our experience enable us to comprehend the whole?

Interdependence, like gravity, is a fact of life and like gravity we may observe its operation if we are open to doing so. We already possess an analytical vocabulary that enables us to understand many dimensions of our mutuality and relatedness whether within or across species. Even so, our human centeredness, the idea of independence as freedom from

constraint and the ideal of the individual as sovereign, autonomous, and self-governing occlude our capacity to fully grasp the a priori of interdependence. We routinely fail to take account of the fact that every aspect of our lives expresses a multiplicity of interdependencies and each is itself the effect (contingent and/or conditioned) of such relationships. I refer here not just to the human subdivision but to the entire phenomenal world. Everything is a dependent effect of a dependent cause and each in turn generates further causes and effects in a near infinite process. Any analytic effort can only trace some aspects of the concatenation of cause-effect interrelations that bear on the specific question that it has set out to examine. These facts extend and deepen the idea of knowledge as situated. We discover mutuality as intrinsic to being and to the very process of knowing not merely something existing out there for us to document. The researcher begins to recognize herself or himself as a subordinate clause among others in the grammar of the universe. We have a greater kinship with poets and philosophers than is generally believed to be the case.

You frequently pointed to temporalities that make manifest spaciousness for action as opposed to the “enervating kinds of repetition” inherent in processes of disaggregation, such as Taylorism. How should we think about “spaciousness”? Is it part of a phenomenology of enchantment as opposed to a phenomenology of boredom?

Spaciousness may be described as a relaxed awareness that can heighten our capacity to notice, sense, feel, intuit, examine, investigate, ponder, cogitate, all of which are crucial to investigative procedures but equally to being fully alive. It is to be distinguished from the kind of concentration that assures its potency by actively “managing” what is in its field of vision. Spaciousness is an attentiveness that is flexible, inclusive and explicitly open to perceptual frames being liquefied or recast by the observational and experiential process. It is integrative in impulse though the purview it affords is understood to be partial and provisional. It has both an interior and exterior dimension: it is as much an introspective practice as it is a research orientation. One may even go far as to say that genuine spaciousness toward that which appears as external to oneself depends on a similar generosity toward all aspects of one’s own self. It is a way of being in the world that makes one conscious of its mystery, richness, unpredictability and

1. Professor Mani’s phrase.

surprises. This is a necessary supplement to our comprehension of the regularities (assuring as well as dispiriting) that characterize the social world we inhabit and which we have set out to examine. In that sense it may be described as an epistemology that re-enchants the world. But this kind of spaciousness is predicated on embracing the temporalities authentic to a given phenomenon or process. When we speed up or short circuit processes (in the way we organize work or life activity, for example) we create conditions that facilitate dissatisfaction and boredom.

Drawing the previous question in another direction you mentioned the rise of technology and speed, and you said that social psychologists have done productive work studying the emotional and cognitive effects of these phenomena. What could be a related program of research for Cultural Studies?

The question of how technology is reshaping our lives is deeply intertwined with other aspects of contemporary culture. As an interdisciplinary field Cultural Studies is thus uniquely positioned to study the conceptual and empirical dimensions of its effects across a range of domains. This is crucial to ensuring that technology alone is not made to bear the burden and responsibility for broader socio-cultural developments. As we know technol-

ogy both reflects such trends and makes its own singular and defining contribution to them. Further, subjectivity has been a core concern of Cultural Studies. Subjectivity is a more supple and multidimensional concept than the mental health categories typically drawn upon by psychologists who have generated most of the research on the impact of technology on users.

Has disaggregation always existed, or is it embodied in a historical moment? If the latter, do you make a weak or strong correlation between disaggregation and industrialism? Or, on a different level, is disaggregation less a part of "history" than the permanent possibility?

Disaggregation names the failure to perceive the integral nature of the phenomenal world: the relationships between humans and the rest of the natural world, mind-body-heart-spirit, self and so-called other etc. Such interrelationships are complex, multiply mediated and often entangled in the normative structures and relations of power that characterize a given historical moment. When we ignore, forget, deny or in other ways fail to see and act on the basis of our foundational mutuality we act on a basis that disaggregates. In this sense disaggregation is as you put it "a permanent possibility." The industrial revolution and the

perceptual shifts that enabled it dramatically intensified disaggregation, deepened its scope and in some domains altered its character. But prior epistemologies were equally vulnerable. The long duree of gender and caste discrimination would be a case in point.

Does reflection on interdependency necessarily precede ethical action?

To the degree that ethical action is implicitly concerned with consequences it cannot evade the issue of interrelatedness. However it is the proposed and implied interrelationships that ground a given conception of ethics that tell us something about its politics.

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