Notes on the 5 December 2011 meeting on Spivak
“Can the Subaltern Speak?”

Questions:

1st section: What are the epistemological features and the political consequences of the “representational realism” Spivak criticises Foucault and Deleuze for?

2nd section: In how far does the epistemic violence Spivak attributes to Foucault’s “realist representationalism” become apparent in the project of the subaltern studies group to re-write the history of India from the perspective of the subaltern? Why does she discard Foucault’s project of a micro-physics of power as an analysis, which remains confined to a “self-contained version of the West” (p. 86)?

3rd section: Why does Spivak attribute a “long term usefulness for people outside the first world” to Derrida’s method of deconstruction?

4th section: Why does Spivak’s reading of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri’s suicide as a “subaltern rewriting of the social text of sati-suicide” finally lead her to the conclusion that “the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read” (p. 104)?

General questions:

a) In her critique of Deleuze and Foucault Spivak mobilises the Marxist concept of ideology, a certain strand of feminism as well as Derrida’s method of deconstruction. Do you think this eclecticism is valid in epistemological, methodological and political terms?

b) In sum, Spivak seems to criticise the idea, whereupon the subaltern can speak for themselves and, thus, need no intellectual or any other interlocutor (i.e. “the party”) to represent themselves and their interests. Yet, she also warns of the epistemic violence implicated in a naive representationalism “appropriating the other by assimilation” (p. 104). How do you intend to deal with this tension in your project? How do you perceive your role in relation to the “other”? What kind of methodology do you draw on in order to “make” the subaltern speak and render them audible?
Some key ideas:

1) The role of conscience – being part of an objective economic class as one that excludes other classes X feeling part of a class, being conscious of a collective.

2) The role of economic – She uses the idea of putting “under erasure” (Heidegger) – the economic is always important and must be considered, but is not the whole picture.

3) Representational realism – we cannot grasp “subalterns` reality”, but we cannot grasp their conscience either. She criticizes the assumption that scholar have access to “subalterns` conscience”, in their alleged transparency.

4) Self as hero – the role of intellectuals. There would be a sort of division of labour, by which the subalterns provide living experience while scholars make theories of them.

5) Two forms of representation – as tropo and as rhetoric. The group was not sure how she moves from this idea of two types of representation to an understanding of how conscience is crucial for a theory of ideology, what she believes is lacking in Foucault` and Deleuze`s work.

How she collectivizes the subject position – compared to Foucault`s “personal subject”?

There was a discussion on Spivak`s contradictory approach as she simultaneously criticizes the essentialized understanding of “Others”, but also seems to collectivize them as “subalterns”. We argued, however, that does not seem to be a simple contradiction, once she advocates a form of strategic essentialization, in what seems a political move, linked to her context in academia by then.

Spivak` critique to Foucault – the role of ideology (Marxist critique). She criticizes the attempt to grasp this “reality” of how subalterns experience themselves.

Ideology is the key to add “interests” to what she sees as Foucault` and Deleuze`s approaches focused on desire and power.

People might have desires (buy a car), but they have interests as a class to do the revolution against consumerism. They need to be educated for the real interest.

Against Foucault – the subject is not transparent

Archives – epistemic violence – as limits to our frames of thinking (Foucault)

She argues for scholars to “unlearn their privileges” – a Western feminist, for example, is not in the same position as a “brown woman”.