



PEOPLE ST

OUR VOICE ON

Learning to
Learn:
Going
Deeper on
the
Subaltern

August 2026

A companion piece to Our Voice on "Can the Subaltern Speak?". This short-form blog was written after listening to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in conversation, Holberg Prize, Oslo, June 2025.

In January 2026, we wrote a blog about Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' It asked us hard questions about who gets heard, and what we are really doing when we say we are "listening."

We've been listening to something new. In June 2025, Spivak sat down in Oslo for a conversation called "Learning From Below," as part of the Holberg Prize. In it, she goes further into one word: subaltern. What it means. Who it applies to. And what it asks of people like us, who do research and outreach for a living.

This blog doesn't repeat what we said last time. It goes deeper into two ideas, so we can be clearer and more careful in how we frame our approach and positionality.

A position, not a person

Spivak agitates and disrupts our understanding of subaltern from the start. She urges us to reconsider Gramsci's position, to re-examine how we frame subaltern. She presses upon us that it doesn't mean "marginalised group." It means something more precise: a position, with no real access to citizenship rights. She says "Subaltern is a position without identity. It's not really people."

This matters for us. At People Street, we often talk about communities who are excluded, under-served, or seldom heard. Spivak's point sharpens that language.

Not every group that suffers, or is left out, is subaltern in this strict sense.

Subalternity is about being cut off from the systems, the vote, the public voice, the recognition, that let a claim even get heard in the first place.

Some of the communities we work with are closer to that position than others. Naming that difference honestly matters more than we'd realised.

You can't copy and paste a method

Spivak tells a story about a group of students who went to work with a rural community in Brazil. A natural disaster meant they ended up working with a very different, urban community instead. They used exactly the same approach anyway. It didn't work.

It doesn't transfer neatly from one place to the next. She argues that these positions are not generalisable. This confirms something we already believed, but it pushes it further.

We say we "start with relationships, not methods." Spivak's warning is that even our relationships and methods from one project, one community, one estate, can't simply be carried over to the next and expected to work. Every community must be met again, fresh, on its own terms.

Learning to learn, not just learning

There's a small but important difference in Spivak's title. Not "learning from below," but "learning to learn from below."

She warns against a comfortable, well-meaning idea: that marginalised people already know exactly what they want, and all we have to do is listen and pass it on. She calls this a "nice Christian point of view," and says, plainly, that it isn't true.

"If they really know what they want, then the centuries of historical crimes that we have committed against them... that didn't have any effect. That isn't true" she argues. This point is made by many including Afua Hirsh in Bri(itsh) "It's about the fact that the past is linked to the present in a smooth continuity, from slavery to colonialism..."

In other words, generations of exclusion don't just disappear because we finally decide to ask a question. They shape what feels possible to say, and to whom. So listening isn't a simple, one-step act. It has to be learned, slowly, and we should expect to get it wrong sometimes along the way. "I still haven't learned. I still make mistakes" she declares at 83 years of age.

We found this oddly reassuring. If someone with Spivak's experience still describes herself this way, then our own uncertainty, our own mistakes, aren't a sign we're doing something wrong. They're part of doing it honestly.

Structure builds the system. Texture holds it together.

Spivak introduces the distinction between structures such as policy changes, funding and law making and what she calls textural involvement. She argues that structures can't hold unless there are texturally attached, patiently, slowly, over years, to the everyday desires and struggles of the community a policy is meant to serve.

Using the imagery of darning to make her point, Spivak suggests that when you repair a tear in fabric, you don't start at the hole. You start a little above it, where the cloth is still whole, and you slowly weave your way in, thread by thread, until the tear is mended. "Textural involvement is like that. You have to have an infinite amount of patience" she declares.

This is close to how our community researchers work. They are not neutral go-betweens, translating one world into another. They are woven into the fabric, thread by thread, over time.

Spivak's image gives us a clearer way to explain to ourselves and to funders, why this kind of slow, relational work isn't a nice extra. It's the mending itself.

Not a solution, a direction

Spivak is clear that the goal isn't to fully "understand" a subaltern community once and for all, or to become the expert who finally cracks it. The goal is to work towards dismantling subalternity itself, bringing people into the full rights of citizenship, while still questioning what citizenship gets people, and who it still leaves out.

She also reminds us of that subalternity isn't a fixed label stuck on a person forever. It's about structural access, which can shift. Someone can be closer to, or further from, that position depending on where they stand, and when.

Where this leaves us

Spivak's talk didn't give us a formula. It gave us sharper questions to sit with:

Are we generalising when we shouldn't?
Are we building structures without doing the texture?
Have we mistaken listening once for the ongoing work of learning how to listen?

We don't have neat answers to any of this. But we're glad to keep sitting with the questions, at People Street, quietly, collectively, and with care.

As we approach the Our Health, Our Data community roundtable in September, we will not just sit with these questions, we will review our practice.

Glossary: Some of the words are academic ones. Here's what we mean by them, in plain terms.

Subaltern: A word from the thinker Antonio Gramsci. It doesn't mean "poor" or "marginalised." It means a position with no real access to citizenship rights, the vote, or a public voice that gets heard.

Gramsci (Antonio Gramsci): An Italian thinker and politician who first used the word "subaltern" in this way. He wrote much of his work in notebooks while in prison.

Generalisable: Able to be applied the same way in lots of different places. Spivak's point is that subalternity, and the methods used to work with subaltern communities, are not generalisable, they don't transfer neatly from one place to another.

Citizenship rights: The rights and protections a person gets from being recognised as a full member of a country or society, such as the right to vote.

Structural work: changes systems, laws, and policies.

Textural work is the slow, patient, relationship-based work of staying closely connected to a community's everyday life.

Public sphere: The shared space in society where people can speak, be heard, and take part in public life and decisions.

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Reference

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