



POSITION PAPERS

***Subaltern Studies* and Postcolonial Historiography**

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Subaltern Studies: Writings on Indian History and Society began in 1982 as a series of interventions in some debates specific to the writing of modern Indian history.¹ Ranajit Guha (b. 1923), a historian of India then teaching at the University of Sussex, was the inspiration behind it. Guha and eight younger scholars based in India, the United Kingdom, and Australia constituted the editorial collective of *Subaltern Studies* until 1988, when Guha retired from the team.² The series now has a global presence that goes well beyond India or South Asia as an area of academic specialization. The intellectual reach of *Subaltern Studies* now also exceeds that of the discipline of history. Postcolonial theorists of diverse disciplinary backgrounds have taken interest in the series. Much discussed, for instance, are the ways in which contributors to *Subaltern Studies* have participated in contemporary critiques of history and nationalism, and of orientalism and Eurocentrism in the construction of social science knowledge. At the same time, there have also been discussions of *Subaltern Studies* in many history and social science journals.³ Selections from the series have been published in English, Spanish, Bengali, and Hindi and are in the process of being brought out in Tamil and Japanese.⁴ A Latin American Subaltern Studies Association was established in North America in 1992.⁵ It would not be unfair to say that the expression “subaltern studies,” once the name of a series of publications in Indian history, now stands as a general designation for a field of studies often seen as a close relative of postcolonialism.

How did a project which began as a specific and focused intervention in the academic discipline of (Indian) history come to be associated with postcolonialism, an area of studies whose principal home has been in literature departments? I attempt to answer this question by discussing how, and in what sense, *Subaltern Studies* could be seen as a postcolonial project of writing history. It should be clarified, however, that my concentration here on the relationship between postcolonialism and historiography overlooks the contributions that other disciplines—political science, legal studies, anthropology, literature, cultural studies, and economics—have made to the field of subaltern studies. This essay is motivated by a question that has the discipline of history in focus: In what ways can one read the original historiographic agenda of *Subaltern Studies* as not simply yet another version of Marxist/radical history but as possessing a *necessarily* postcolonial outlook? I concentrate on the discipline of history for two reasons: (a) the relationship between the new field of postcolonial writing and historiography has not yet received the attention it deserves, and (b) to answer critics who say that *Subaltern Studies* was once “good” Marxist history in the same way that the English tradition of “history from below” was, but that it lost its way when it came into contact with Said’s orientalism, Spivak’s deconstructionism, or Bhabha’s analysis of colonial discourse.⁶ In a wide-ranging critique of postcolonial thinkers, Arif Dirlik (1996, 302) once suggested that the historiographic innovations of *Subaltern Studies*, while welcome, were mere applications of methods pioneered by British Marxist historians, albeit modified by “Third World sensibilities.” He wrote:

Most of the generalizations that appear in the discourse of postcolonial intellectuals from India may appear novel in the historiography of India but are not discoveries from broader perspectives. . . . the historical writing[s] of *Subaltern Studies* historians . . . represent the application in Indian historiography of trends in historical writings that were quite widespread by the 1970s under the impact of social historians such as E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and a host of others.

Without wishing either to inflate the claims of *Subaltern Studies* scholars or to deny what they may have indeed learned from the British Marxist historians, I seek to show that this reading of *Subaltern Studies*—as an instance of Indian or Third World historians merely catching up with or simply applying the methodological insights of Anglo social history—seriously

misjudges what the series has been all about. From its very inception, I argue, *Subaltern Studies* raised questions about history writing that made a radical departure from English Marxist historiographical traditions inescapable. I shall develop my argument by concentrating mainly on the work of the historian Ranajit Guha in the period when he acted as the founding editor of *Subaltern Studies*. The particular writings of Guha I discuss are those which could be considered the founding texts of the project.

***Subaltern Studies* and Debates in Modern Indian History**

I begin by sketching out some of the principal debates in modern Indian history in which early *Subaltern Studies* intervened. The academic subject called “modern Indian history” is a relatively recent development, a result of research and discussion in various universities in India, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and elsewhere after the end of British imperial rule in August 1947. In its early phase, this area of scholarship bore all the signs of an ongoing struggle between tendencies affiliated with imperialist biases in Indian history and a nationalist desire on the part of historians in India to decolonize the past. Marxism was understandably mobilized in aid of the nationalist project of intellectual decolonization.⁷ Bipan Chandra’s book *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* (1969), Anil Seal’s *Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (1968), A. R. Desai’s *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (1966), D. A. Low’s edited volume *Soundings in Modern South Asian History* (1968), the many seminal articles published by Bernard Cohn (now collected in his *An Anthropologist among the Historians* [1988]), debates around Morris David Morris’s assessment of the results of British rule in India, and the work of other scholars in the 1960s raised new and controversial questions regarding the nature and results of colonial rule in India. Did the imperialist British deserve credit after all for making India a developing, modern, and united country? Were the Hindu-Muslim conflicts that resulted in the formation of the two states of Pakistan and India consequences of the divide-and-rule policies of the British or were they reflections of divisions internal to South Asian society? Official documents of the British government of India—and traditions of imperial history writing—always portrayed colonial rule as being beneficial to India and her people. They applauded the British for bringing to the subcontinent political unity, modern educational institutions, modern industries, modern nationalism, a rule of law, and so forth. Indian historians in the 1960s—many of whom had English degrees and most of whom belonged to a generation that grew up in the final years of British rule—challenged

that view. They argued instead that colonialism had had deleterious effects on economic and cultural developments. Modernity and the nationalist desire for political unity, they claimed, were not so much British gifts to India as fruits of struggles undertaken by the Indians themselves.

Nationalism and colonialism thus emerged, unsurprisingly, as the two major areas of research and debate defining the field of modern Indian history in the 1960s and 1970s. At one extreme of this debate was the Cambridge historian Anil Seal, whose 1968 book *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism* pictured “nationalism” as the work of a tiny elite reared in the educational institutions the British set up in India. This elite, as Seal put it, both “competed and collaborated” with the British in their search for power and privilege. A few years later, this idea was pushed to an extreme in a book entitled *Locality, Province, and Nation* (1973) to which Seal, his colleague John Gallagher, and a posse of their doctoral students contributed. Their writings discounted the role of ideas and idealism in history and foregrounded an extremely narrow view of what constituted political and economic “interest” for historical actors. They argued that it was the penetration of the colonial state into the local structures of power in India—a move prompted by the financial self-interest of the raj rather than by any altruistic motives—that eventually, and by degrees, drew Indian elites into the colonial governmental process. According to this argument, the involvement of Indians in colonial institutions set off a scramble among the indigenous elites who combined—opportunistically and around factions formed along “vertical” lines of patronage (in contradistinction to the so-called horizontal affiliations of class, that is)—to jockey for power and privilege within the limited opportunities for self-rule provided by the British. Such, the Cambridge historians claimed, was the real dynamic of that which outside observers or naive historians may have mistaken for an idealistic struggle for freedom. Nationalism and colonialism both came out in this history as straw and foil characters. The history of Indian nationalism, said Seal (1973, 2), “was the rivalry between Indian and Indian, its relationship with imperialism that of the mutual clinging of two unsteady men of straw.”

At the other extreme of this debate was the Indian historian Bipan Chandra, a professor in the 1970s at the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi. Chandra and his colleagues saw Indian history of the colonial period as an epic battle between the forces of nationalism and colonialism. Drawing on both Marx’s writings and Latin American theories of dependency and underdevelopment, Chandra (1979) argued that

colonialism was a regressive force that distorted all developments in India's society and polity. Social, political, and economic ills of postindependence India—including those of mass poverty and religious and caste conflict—could be blamed on the political economy of colonialism. However, Chandra saw nationalism in a different, contrasting light. He saw it as a regenerative force, as the antithesis of colonialism, something that united and produced an “Indian people” by mobilizing them for struggle against the British. Nationalist leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru were the authors of such an anti-imperial movement for unity of the nation. Chandra claimed that the conflict of interest and ideology between the colonizers and the “Indian people” was the most important conflict of British India. All other conflicts of class or caste were secondary to this principal contradiction and were to be treated as such in histories of nationalism.

Yet as research progressed in the seventies, there emerged an increasing series of difficulties with both of these narratives. It was clear that the Cambridge version of “nationalist politics without ideas or idealism” would never ring true to scholars in the subcontinent who had themselves experienced the desire for freedom from colonial rule.⁸ On the other hand, the nationalist historian's story of there having been a “moral war” between colonialism and nationalism wore increasingly thin as research by younger scholars in India and elsewhere brought new material to light. New information on the mobilization of the poor (peasants, tribals, and workers) by elite nationalist leaders in the course of the Gandhian mass movements in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, suggested a strongly reactionary side to the principal nationalist party, the Indian National Congress. Gyanendra Pandey at Oxford, David Hardiman and David Arnold at Sussex (all of them later to become members of the *Subaltern Studies* collective), Majid Siddiqi and Kapil Kumar in Delhi, Histesranjan Sanyal in Calcutta, Brian Stoddart, Stephen Henningham, and Max Harcourt in Australia, and others elsewhere documented the way nationalist leaders would suppress with a heavy hand peasants' or workers' tendency to exceed the self-imposed limits of the nationalist political agenda by protesting the oppression meted out to them not only by the British but by the indigenous ruling groups as well.⁹ From the point of view of a younger generation of historians whom Guha, following Salman Rushdie, has called the “midnight's children,” neither the Cambridge thesis propounding a skeptical view of Indian nationalism nor the nationalist-Marxist thesis glossing over real conflicts of ideas and interests between the elite nationalists and their socially subordinate followers—or assimilating to a nationalist historiographical agenda—was

an adequate response to the problems of postcolonial history writing in India.¹⁰ The persistence of religious and caste conflict in postindependence India, the war between India and China in 1962 which made official nationalism sound hollow and eventually gave rise to a fascination with Maoism among the urban educated youth in India, the outbreak of a violent Maoist political movement in India (known as the Naxalite movement) which drew many members of the urban youth into the countryside in the late 1960s and early 1970s—all these and many other factors combined to alienate younger historians from the shibboleths of nationalist historiography. All this historiographical discontent, however, was still floundering in the old liberal and positivist paradigms inherited from English traditions of history writing even as it was searching for a path toward decolonizing the field of Indian history.

Subaltern Studies as Paradigm Shift, 1982–1987

Subaltern Studies intervened in this situation. Intellectually, it began on the very terrain it was to contest: historiography that had its roots in the colonial education system. It started as a critique of two contending schools of history: the Cambridge school and that of the nationalist historians. Both of these approaches, declared Guha in a statement that inaugurated the series *Subaltern Studies*, were elitist. They wrote up the history of nationalism as the story of an achievement by the elite classes, whether Indian or British. For all their merits, they could not explain “the contributions made by people *on their own*, that is, *independent of the elite* to the making and development of this nationalism” (Guha 1982, 3; Guha’s emphasis). It will be clear from this statement of Guha’s that *Subaltern Studies* was part of an attempt to align historical reasoning with larger movements for democracy in India. It looked for an anti-elitist approach to history writing, and in this it had much in common with the “history from below” approaches pioneered in English historiography by Christopher Hill, E. P. Thompson, E. J. Hobsbawm, and others. Both *Subaltern Studies* and the “history from below” school were Marxist in inspiration; both owed a certain intellectual debt to the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci in trying to move away from deterministic, Stalinist readings of Marx. The word “subaltern” itself—and, of course, the well-known concept of “hegemony” so critical to the theoretical project of subaltern studies—go back to the writings of Gramsci.¹¹ As in the histories written by Thompson, Hobsbawm, Hill, and others, *Subaltern Studies* was also concerned about “rescuing from the condescension of posterity” the pasts of the socially subordinate groups in India.

The declared aim of *Subaltern Studies* was to produce historical analyses in which the subaltern groups were viewed as the subjects of history. As Guha (1984, vii) put it once in the course of introducing a volume of *Subaltern Studies*: “We are indeed opposed to much of the prevailing academic practice in historiography . . . for its failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny. This critique lies at the very heart of our project.”

But at the same time Guha’s theorization of the project signaled certain key differences that would increasingly distinguish the project of *Subaltern Studies* from that of English Marxist historiography. With hindsight, it could be said that there were broadly three areas in which *Subaltern Studies* differed from the “history from below” approach of Hobsbawm or Thompson (allowing for differences between these two eminent historians of England and Europe). Subaltern historiography necessarily entailed (a) a relative separation of the history of power from any universalist histories of capital, (b) a critique of the nation-form, and (c) an interrogation of the relationship between power and knowledge (hence of the archive itself and of history as a form of knowledge). In these differences, I would argue, lay the beginnings of a new way of theorizing the intellectual agenda for postcolonial histories.

The critical theoretical break came with the way Guha sought to redefine the category of “the political” with reference to colonial India. He argued that both the Cambridge and the nationalist historians conflated the political domain with the formal side of governmental and institutional processes. As he put it:

In all writings of this kind [i.e., elitist historiography] the parameters of Indian politics are assumed to be or enunciated as those of the institutions introduced by the British for the government of the country. . . . [Elitist historians] can do no more than equate politics with the aggregation of activities and ideas of those who were directly involved in operating these institutions, that is, the colonial rulers and their élèves—the dominant groups in native society. (Guha 1984, 3–4)

Using “people” and “subaltern classes” synonymously and defining them as the “demographic difference between the total Indian population” and the dominant indigenous and foreign elite, Guha (1984, 4–5) claimed that there was, in colonial India, an “autonomous” domain of the “politics of the people” that was organized differently than the domain of the politics of the

elite. Elite politics involved “vertical mobilization,” “a greater reliance on Indian adaptations of British parliamentary institutions,” and “tended to be relatively more legalistic and constitutional in orientation.” In the domain of subaltern politics, on the other hand, mobilization for political intervention depended on horizontal affiliations such as “the traditional organization of kinship and territoriality or on class consciousness depending on the level of the consciousness of the people involved.” They tended to be more violent than elite politics. Central to subaltern mobilizations was “a notion of resistance to elite domination.” “The experience of exploitation and labour endowed this politics with many idioms, norms and values which put it in a category apart from elite politics,” wrote Guha. Peasant uprisings in colonial India, he argued, reflected this separate and autonomous grammar of mobilization “in its most comprehensive form.” Even in the case of resistance and protest by urban workers, the “figure of mobilization” was one that was “derived directly from peasant insurgency.”

Guha’s separation of elite and subaltern domains of the political had some radical implications for social theory and historiography. The standard tendency in global Marxist historiography until the seventies was to look on peasant revolts organized along the axes of kinship, religion, caste, etc., as movements exhibiting a “backward” consciousness, the kind that Hobsbawm (1978, 2) in his work on social banditry and “primitive rebellion” had called “pre-political” (cited in Guha 1983, 5–6). This was seen as a consciousness that had not quite come to terms with the institutional logic of modernity or capitalism. As Hobsbawm (1978, 2) put it with reference to his own material: “They are pre-political people who have not yet found, or only begun to find, specific language in which to express their aspirations about the world.” By explicitly rejecting the characterization of peasant consciousness as “pre-political” and by avoiding evolutionary models of “consciousness,” Guha was prepared to suggest that the nature of collective action against exploitation in colonial India was such that it effectively stretched the imaginary boundaries of the category “political” far beyond the territories assigned to it in European political thought. To ignore the problems that peasants’ participation in the modern political sphere could cause for a Eurocentric Marxism would lead, according to Guha, only to elitist histories. For one would then not know how to analyze the consciousness of the peasant—the discourses of kinship, caste, religion, and ethnicity through which they expressed themselves in protest—except as a “backward” consciousness trying to grapple with a changing world whose logic it could never fully comprehend.

Guha insisted that instead of being an anachronism in a modernizing colonial world, the peasant was a real contemporary of colonialism and a fundamental part of the modernity that colonial rule gave rise to in India. The peasant's was not a "backward" consciousness, a mentality left over from the past, baffled by modern political and economic institutions and yet resistant to them. Guha suggested that the (insurgent) peasant in colonial India did in fact read his contemporary world correctly. Examining, for instance, over a hundred known cases of peasant rebellions in British India between 1783 and 1900, Guha (1983, chaps. 1 and 2) showed that these revolts always involved the deployment by the peasants of codes of dress, speech, and behavior which tended to invert the codes through which their social superiors dominated them in everyday life. Inversion of the symbols of authority was almost inevitably the first act of rebellion by insurgent peasants. Elitist histories of peasant uprisings missed the signification of this gesture by seeing it as "pre-political." Anil Seal (1968, 1), for example, dismissed all nineteenth-century peasant revolts in colonial India as having no "specific political content," being "uprisings of the traditional kind, the reaching for sticks and stones as the only way of protesting against distress." Marxists, on the other hand, explained these gestures as expressing a false consciousness and/or performing a "safety valve" function in the overall social system.¹² What both of these explanatory strategies missed, Guha contended, was the fact that at the beginning of every peasant uprising there was inevitably a struggle on the part of rebels to destroy all symbols of the social prestige and power of the ruling classes. He wrote: "It was this fight for prestige which was at the heart of insurgency. Inversion was its principal modality. It was a *political* struggle in which the rebel appropriated and/or destroyed the insignia of his enemy's power and hoped thus to abolish the marks of his own subalternity" (1983, 75; emphasis mine).

I have emphasized the word "political" in this quote from Guha to underline a creative tension between the Marxist lineage of *Subaltern Studies* and the more challenging questions it raised from the very beginning about the nature of power in non-Western colonial modernities. Guha's point was that the arrangements of power in which the peasant and other subaltern classes found themselves in colonial India contained two very different logics of hierarchy and oppression. One was the logic of the quasi-liberal legal and institutional framework that the British introduced into the country. Imbricated with this was another set of relationships in which hierarchy was based on direct and explicit domination and subordination of the less powerful through both ideological-symbolic means and physical force. The

semiotics of domination and subordination were what the subaltern classes sought to destroy every time they rose up in rebellion. This semiotics could not be separated in the Indian case from what in English we inaccurately refer to either as “the religious” or “the supernatural.”

The tension between a familiar narrative of capital and a more radical understanding of it can be seen in *Elementary Aspects* itself. There are times when Guha tends to read “domination and subordination” in terms of an opposition between feudal and capitalist modes of production. There is a respectable tendency in Marxist or liberal scholarship to read undemocratic relationships—or personalized systems of authority and practices of deification—as survivals of a precapitalist era, as not quite modern. They are seen as indicative of the problems of transition to capitalism, the assumption being that a full-blown capitalism would or should be logically incompatible with “feudal-type” relationships. *Elementary Aspects* sometimes does speak within this tradition of analysis. Direct domination, Guha (1983, 6) tells us, in some places is a feature of lingering feudalism:

Taking the subcontinent as a whole capitalist development in agriculture remained merely incipient . . . until 1900. Rents constituted the most substantial part of income yielded by property in land. . . . The element that was constant in this [landlord-peasant] relationship in all its variety was the extraction of the peasant’s surplus by means determined rather less by the free play of the forces of a market economy than by the extra-economic force of the landlord’s standing in local society and in the colonial polity. In other words, it was a relationship of domination and subordination—a political relationship of the feudal type, or as it has been appropriately described, a semi-feudal relationship which derived its material sustenance from pre-capitalist conditions of production and its legitimacy from a traditional culture still paramount in the superstructure.

This particular Marxist narrative, however, underrepresents the force and larger significance of Guha’s critique of the category “pre-political.” For if one were to accept the Marxism of this quotation, one could indeed come back at Guha and argue that the sphere of the political hardly ever abstracted itself out from other spheres (of religion, kinship, culture) in feudal relations of domination and subordination, and that in that sense feudal relations of power could not properly be called political. The

lingering existence of “feudal-type” relationships in the Indian scene could then be read—as indeed does Guha at the beginning of this quote—as a mark of the incompleteness of the transition to capitalism. By this logic, the so-called semifeudal relations and the peasant’s mentality could indeed be seen as leftovers from an earlier period, still active, no doubt, but under world-historical notice of extinction. All India needed was to create more capitalist institutions, and the process of the conversion of the peasant into the citizen—the properly political figure of personhood—would begin. This indeed was Hobsbawm’s logic. That is why his “pre-political” characters—even when they are “broken into” capitalism and even when Hobsbawm (1978, 3) acknowledges that the “acquisition of political consciousness” by these “primitive rebels” is what makes “our century the most revolutionary in history”—always remain in the position of being classic “outsiders” to the logic of capitalism: “It comes to them from outside, insidiously by the operation of economic forces which they do not understand and over which they have no control.”

In rejecting the category “pre-political,” however, Guha insists on the specific differences in the histories of power in colonial India and in Europe. This gesture is radical in that it fundamentally pluralizes the history of power in global modernity and separates it from any universal history of capital. “Hobsbawm’s material,” Guha (1983, 6) writes, “is of course derived almost entirely from the European experience and his generalizations are perhaps in accord with it. . . . Whatever its validity for other countries the notion of pre-political peasant insurgency helps little in understanding the experience of colonial India.” If we see the colonial formation in India as a case of modernity in which, as Guha argues in introducing *Subaltern Studies*, the domain of the political is irreducibly split into two distinct logics which get braided together all the time—the logic of formal-legal and secular frameworks of governance and that of relationships of direct domination and subordination that derive their legitimation from a different set of institutions and practices including those of *dharma* (often translated as “religion”)—then Guha’s writings help to open up a very interesting problem in the global history of modernity.

Ultimately, this is the problem of how to think about the history of power in an age when capital and the governing institutions of modernity increasingly develop a global reach. Marx’s discussion of capitalist discipline assumed that the rule of capital entailed the transition to capitalist relations of power. Michel Foucault’s work shows that if we want to understand the key institutions of modernity that originated in the West, the juridical model

of sovereignty celebrated in modern European political thought has to be supplemented by the notions of discipline, bio-power and governmentality. Guha claims that in the colonial modernity of India, this supplementation has to include an extra pair of terms: domination and subordination. And this is not because India is anything like a semimodern or semicapitalist or semifeudal country or that capital in India rules merely by “formal subsumption.” Guha goes beyond the argument that reduces questions of democracy and power in the subcontinent to propositions about incomplete transition to capitalism. Guha does not deny the connections of colonial India to the global forces of capitalism. His point is that the global history of capitalism does not have to reproduce everywhere the same history of power. In the calculus of modernity, power is not a dependent variable, with capital playing the role of an independent one. Capital and power could be treated as analytically separable categories. Traditional European-Marxist political thought, which fused the two, would therefore always be relevant but inadequate for theorizing power in colonial-modern histories. The history of colonial modernity in India created a domain of the political that was heteroglossic in its idioms, irreducibly plural in its structure, interlocking within itself strands of different types of relations that did not make up a logical whole. One such strand critical to the functioning of authority in Indian institutions was that of direct domination and subordination of the subaltern by the elite. As Guha (1982, 4) said in his first contribution to *Subaltern Studies*, this strand of domination and subordination ubiquitous in relationships of power in India “was traditional only in so far as its roots could be traced back to pre-colonial times, but it was by no means archaic in the sense of being outmoded.”

Social domination and subordination of the subaltern by the elite was thus an everyday feature of Indian capitalism itself. This was a capitalism of the colonial type. Reading critically some key texts of Marx, Guha argued that modern colonialism was quintessentially the historical condition in which an expansive and increasingly global capital came to dominate non-Western societies without effecting or requiring any thoroughgoing democratic transformation in social relationships of power and authority. The colonial state—the ultimate expression of the domain of the political in colonial India—was both a result and a condition of possibility of such domination. As Guha (1982, 5–6) put it, “Colonialism could continue as a relation of power in the subcontinent only on the condition that the colonizing bourgeoisie should fail to live up to its own universalizing project. The nature of the state it had created by the sword made this historically

necessary.” The result was a society that no doubt changed under the impact of colonial capitalism but in which “vast areas in the life and consciousness of the people” escaped any kind of “[bourgeois] hegemony.”

The cultural history of power in Indian modernity could not, therefore, be produced by a simple application of the analytics of nationalism available to Western Marxism. Contrary to the intellectual tradition that bound the nationalist-Marxist historian Bipan Chandra to the views of left-nationalists such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Guha’s argument implied that one could not pit against the story of a regressive colonialism an account of a robust nationalist movement seeking to establish a bourgeois outlook throughout society.¹³ For there was no class here comparable to the European bourgeoisie of the Marxist narrative, a class able to fabricate a hegemonic ideology that made its own interests look and feel like the interests of all. The history of the way the elite nationalists in India sought to mobilize the subaltern classes shows a political domain in which the secular languages of law and constitutional frameworks coexisted and interacted with noncommensurable strategies of domination and subordination. The “Indian culture of the colonial era,” Guha argued in “Colonialism in South Asia: Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography” (Guha 1997, 97–98), defied understanding “either as a replication of the liberal-bourgeois culture of nineteenth-century Britain or as the mere survival of an antecedent pre-capitalist culture.” This was capitalism but without capitalist hierarchies, a capitalist dominance without a hegemonic capitalist culture—or, in Guha’s famous term, “dominance without hegemony.”

***Subaltern Studies* and Reorientation of History**

Guha’s two formulations—that both nationalism and colonialism were involved in instituting in India a rule of capital in which bourgeois ideologies exercised “dominance without hegemony,” and that the resulting forms of power in India could not be termed “pre-political”—had several implications for historiography. Some of these were worked out in Guha’s own writings and some in what his colleagues wrote. It is important, however, that we clarify these implications, for they are what made *Subaltern Studies* an experiment in postcolonial historiography.

First of all, Guha’s critique of the category “pre-political” challenged historicism by rejecting all stagist theories of history. If the term “pre-political,” as I have discussed, took its validity from categorizing certain kinds of power relationships as “pre-modern,” “feudal,” and so on, Guha’s discussion of power in colonial India resists such a clear distinction

between the modern and the premodern. Relations in India that looked “feudal” when seen through a stagist view of history were contemporaneous with all that looked “modern” to the same point of view. From Guha’s point of view, the former could not be looked on through geological or evolutionist metaphors of “survival” or “remnant” without such historicism becoming elitist in its interpretation of the past.

Subaltern Studies, then, was in principle opposed to nationalist histories that portrayed nationalist leaders as ushering India and her people out of some kind of “pre-capitalist” stage into a world-historical phase of “bourgeois modernity,” properly fitted out with the artifacts of democracy, citizenly rights, market economy, and the rule of law. There is no doubt that the Indian political elite internalized and used this language of political modernity, but this democratic tendency existed alongside and interlarded with undemocratic relations of domination and subordination. This coexistence of two domains of politics, said Guha (1982, 5–6), “was the index of an important historical truth, that is, the *failure of the bourgeoisie to speak for the nation*” (Guha’s emphasis). There was, in fact, no unitary “nation” to speak for. Rather the more important question was how and through what practices an official nationalism that claimed to represent such a unitary nation emerged. A critical stance toward official or statist nationalism and its attendant historiography marked *Subaltern Studies* from the beginning. Postcolonial history was thus also a postnationalist form of historiography.¹⁴

Guha’s quest for a history in which the subaltern was “the maker of his own destiny” brought into focus the question of the relationship between texts and power. Historical archives are usually collections of documents, texts of various kinds. Historians of peasants and other subaltern social groups have long emphasized the fact that peasants do not leave their own documents. Historians concerned with recuperating peasant “experience” in history have often turned to the resources of other disciplines for help: anthropology, demography, sociology, archeology, human geography, etc. In his well-known study of nineteenth-century rural France, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976, vxi), Eugen Weber provides a succinct formulation of this approach: “The illiterate are not in fact inarticulate; they can and do express themselves in several ways. Sociologists, ethnologists, geographers, and most recently demographic historians have shown us new and different means of interpreting evidence.” In the sixties and seventies, E. P. Thompson, Keith Thomas, and others turned to anthropology in search of ways of getting at the “experiences” of the subaltern classes.¹⁵ Guha’s (1983) approach is interestingly different from that of these historians. His

Elementary Aspects starts by recognizing the same problem as do Weber, Thomas, Thompson, and others: that peasants do not speak directly in archival documents, which are usually produced by the ruling classes. Like them, Guha also uses a diversity of disciplines in tracking the logic of peasant consciousness at the moment of rebellion. But he thinks of the category “consciousness” differently. In insisting on the autonomy of the consciousness of the insurgent peasant, Guha does not aim to produce generalizations that attempt to sum up what every empirical peasant participating in rebellions in colonial India must have thought, felt, or experienced inside his or her head. For such attempts, however well intentioned, ended up making peasants into relatively exotic objects of anthropology. Guha’s critique of the term “pre-political” legitimately barred this path of thinking. Guha thought of consciousness—and therefore of peasant subjecthood—as something immanent in the very practices of peasant insurgency. *Elementary Aspects* is a study of the *practices* of insurgent peasants in colonial India, and not of a reified category called “consciousness.” The aim of the book was to bring out the collective imagination inherent in the practices of peasant rebellion. Guha makes no claim that the “insurgent consciousness” he discusses is indeed “conscious,” that it existed inside the heads of peasants. He does not equate consciousness with “the subject’s view of himself.” He examines rebel practices to decipher the particular relationships—between elites and subalterns and between subalterns themselves—that are acted out in these practices, and then attempts to derive from these relationships the elementary structure, as it were, of the “consciousness” inherent in those relationships.

In keeping with the structuralist tradition to which he affiliates his book by the very use of the word “elementary” in its title, Guha describes his hermeneutic strategy through the metaphor of reading. The available archives on peasant insurgencies are produced by the counterinsurgency measures of the ruling classes and their armies and police forces. Guha, therefore, emphasizes the need for the historian to develop a conscious strategy for reading the archives, not simply for the biases of the elite but for the textual properties of these documents, in order to get at the various ways in which elite modes of thought represented the refractory figure of the subaltern and their practices. Without such a scanning device, Guha argued, historians tended to reproduce the same logic of representation as that used by the elite classes in dominating the subaltern.¹⁶ The interventionist metaphor of reading resonates as the opposite of E. P. Thompson’s (1979, 210, 222) use, in the course of his polemic with Althusser, of the

passive metaphor of listening in describing the hermeneutic activity of the historian.¹⁷ This emphasis on reading also left *Subaltern Studies* historiography open to the influences of literary and narrative theory.¹⁸

In thus critiquing historicism and Eurocentrism and using that critique to interrogate the idea of the nation, in emphasizing the textual properties of archival documents, in considering representation as an aspect of power relations between the elite and the subaltern, Guha and his colleagues moved away from the guiding assumptions of the “history from below” approach of English Marxist historiography. With Guha’s work, Indian history took, as it were, the proverbial linguistic turn. From its very beginning, *Subaltern Studies* positioned itself on an unorthodox territory of the Left. What it inherited from Marxism was already in conversation with other and more recent currents of European thought, particularly those of structuralism. And there was a discernible sympathy with early Foucault in the way that Guha’s writings posed the knowledge-power question by asking, “what are the archives and how are they produced?”

Subaltern Studies Since 1988: Multiple Circuits

Guha retired from the editorial team of *Subaltern Studies* in 1988.¹⁹ In the same year, an anthology entitled *Selected Subaltern Studies* published in New York launched the global career of the project. Edward Said (1988, v) wrote a foreword to the volume describing Guha’s statement regarding the aims of *Subaltern Studies* as “intellectually insurrectionary.” Gayatri Spivak’s essay “Deconstructing Historiography” (1988), published earlier in the sixth volume under Guha’s editorship in 1986, served as the introduction to this selection. This essay of Spivak’s and a review essay by Rosalind O’Hanlon (1988) published about the same time made two important criticisms of *Subaltern Studies* that had a serious impact on the later intellectual trajectory of the project. Both Spivak and O’Hanlon pointed to the absence of gender questions in *Subaltern Studies*. They also made a more fundamental criticism of the theoretical orientation of the project. They pointed out, in effect, that *Subaltern Studies* historiography operated with an idea of the subject—“to make the subaltern the maker of his own destiny”—that had not wrestled at all with the critique of the very idea of the subject itself that had been mounted by poststructuralist thinkers. Spivak’s famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1994), a critical and challenging reading of a conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, forcefully raised these and related questions by mounting deconstructive and philosophical objections to any straightforward program of “letting the subaltern speak.”

Subaltern Studies scholars have since tried to take these criticisms on board. The charges about the absence of gender issues and the lack of engagement with feminist scholarship in *Subaltern Studies* have been met to some degree in seminal essays by Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee, and by contributions made by Susie Tharu and others on contemporary feminist theory in India.²⁰ Partha Chatterjee's 1986 book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* creatively applied Saidian and postcolonial perspectives to the study of non-Western nationalisms, using India as an example. This book extended Guha's criticisms of nationalist historiography into a full-blown, brilliant critique of nationalist thought itself. With this work of Chatterjee's and with Gyanendra Pandey's forthcoming book on the history of the partition of India in 1947, postcolonial critique may be truly said to have become postnationalist critique as well. The influence of deconstructionist and postmodern thought in *Subaltern Studies* may be traced in the way the work of Gyanendra Pandey, Partha Chatterjee, and Shahid Amin in the 1990s has come to privilege the idea of the fragment over that of the whole or totality. Pandey's book *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (1991) and his 1992 essay "In Defense of the Fragment"; Chatterjee's 1994 book, *The Nation and Its Fragments*; Amin's experimental and widely acclaimed book *Events, Memory, Metaphor* (1995)—all question, on both archival and epistemological grounds, even the very possibility of constructing a totalizing national history in narrating the politics of subaltern lives. This move has also understandably given rise to a series of writings from *Subaltern Studies* scholars in which history itself as a European form of knowledge has come under critical investigation. Prakash, Guha, Chatterjee, Amin, Ajay Skaria, Shail Mayaram, and others have made significant contributions on the question of analyzing "colonial discourse."²¹ Gyan Prakash's recently completed study of the discourse of science in Indian nationalist writings shows a deep engagement with the thoughts of Homi Bhabha.²²

Where does *Subaltern Studies*, both the series and the project, stand today? At the crossing of many different pathways, it seems. The original project—understood here as one that effects a relative separation between the history of capital and that of power—has been developed and furthered in the work of the group. David Arnold's study of British colonialism in India in terms of histories of contested bodily practices, *Colonizing the Body* (1993); David Hardiman's studies of the political and economic culture of subaltern lives caught in emergent forms of capitalism in the Indian state of Gujarat, *The Coming of the Devi* (1987) and *Feeding the Baniya* (1996);

and Gautam Bhadra's study of a number of texts to do with peasant society in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Bengal, *Iman o nishan* (1994) are all examples in which the possibilities of the original theoretic historiographic project are worked out and illustrated through concrete, historical examples.

At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that *Subaltern Studies* has exceeded the original historiographical agenda that it set for itself in the early 1980s. The series, as I said at the outset, now has both global and even regional locations in the circuits of scholarship that it traverses. This expansion beyond the realms of Indian history has earned for the series both praise and criticism. Much of the controversy follows roughly the contours of the global and ongoing debate between Marxists on the one hand and postmodernists on the other. Like Marxists elsewhere, Indian Marxists charge that the postmodernist valorization of the fragment in subaltern historiography hurts the cause of the unity of the oppressed. Many of the Marxist opponents of *Subaltern Studies* believe that such unity is aided by social analyses that help bring the different "publics" of the oppressed together by finding global and totalizing causes behind their oppressions. The debate is complicated further in India by the rise to political power of Hindu fundamentalist parties and organizations. Critics of *Subaltern Studies* often claim that the critique of Eurocentrism and post-Enlightenment rationality inaugurated by the series, in combination with the criticisms of "secularism" and "modernity" launched by Indian writers such as Ashis Nandy, end up providing intellectual ammunition to the right-wing Muslim-baiting Hindu political parties. Defenders of *Subaltern Studies* point out in reply that the public sphere—in India and elsewhere—has fragmented under the pressure of democracy anyway; it cannot be united artificially by a Marxism that insists on reducing the many diverse experiences of oppression and marginalization to the single axis of class. Getting a critical perspective on European forms of knowledge, they would add, is part of the critical interrogation of their colonial inheritance that postcolonial intellectuals must carry out. Their critique of nationalism, they would insist, has nothing in common with the nationalist chauvinism of the Hindu parties.

I cannot do justice here to evaluating this debate, which will take us beyond the scope of the present discussion. Besides, it is also my feeling that the polemical aspects of this debate overstate the differences between the two sides. The point of this exercise has been to rebut the charge that *Subaltern Studies* lost its original way by falling into the bad company of postcolonial theory. I have sought to demonstrate through a discussion of

what Guha wrote in the 1980s some necessary connections between the original aims of *Subaltern Studies* and current discussions of postcoloniality. *Subaltern Studies* was not a case of application to Indian material of methods of historical research already worked out in the metropolitan Marxist traditions of “history from below.” *Subaltern Studies* was in part a product of this lineage, but the nature of political modernity in colonial India made this project of history writing nothing short of an engaged critique of the academic discipline of history itself.²³

Notes

My grateful thanks to Ranajit Guha, Anne Hardgrove, Sanjay Seth, and colleagues in *Subaltern Studies* for discussions that have helped me write this essay. An earlier version of this essay will appear in a reader on postcolonial studies to be published by Blackwell, U.K.

1. I italicize *Subaltern Studies* when it refers to the actual volumes in the series by that name or to the series itself. When left unitalicized, the expression refers to an intellectual project, a field of studies, or to the editorial collective of the series.
2. As it exists now the collective has the following members: Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Gautam Bhadra, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, Sudipta Kaviraj, Shail Mayaram, Gyan Pandey, M. S. S. Pandian, Gyan Prakash, Susie Tharu, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Ajay Skaria. Sumit Sarkar was a member of the collective for a specific period in the 1980s.
3. See, for instance, the symposium on *Subaltern Studies* in the December 1994 issue of the *American Historical Review* in which three historians of South Asia (Gyan Prakash), Africa (Frederick Cooper), and Latin America (Florencia Mallon) participated.
4. See Guha and Spivak 1988; Cusicanqui and Barragán 1998; Chatterjee and Bhadra 1997; Amin and Pandey 1996.
5. See their “Founding Statement” in Beverley, Oviedo, and Aronna 1993.
6. This is the insistent burden of much of what Sumit Sarkar (1997) has written in criticism of *Subaltern Studies*.
7. See my discussion of the relationship between nationalism and Marxism in Indian historiography in “Marxism and Modern India,” in Alan Ryan 1992, 79–84. Sanjay Seth (1995) provides a good analysis of the historical connections between Marxist thought and nationalist ideologies in British India.
8. As one respected Indian historian wrote responding to the work of the Cambridge scholars: “once, not so very long ago, to countless Indians nationalism was a fire

- in the blood.” See Tapan Raychaudhuri’s review essay “Indian Nationalism As Animal Politics” (1979).
9. See Pandey 1978; Siddiqi 1978; Kumar 1984; Arnold 1977; Sanyal 1994; and Hardiman 1981. See also the essays in Low 1977.
 10. See the introduction to Guha 1998.
 11. See Antonio Gramsci, “Notes on Italian History” (1973).
 12. Guha examines and critiques such Marxist positions in his essay “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency” in Guha and Spivak 1988.
 13. Both Nehru’s writings of the 1930s and Bipan Chandra’s of the 1970s assumed without question that the nationalist movement was “essentially a bourgeois movement” (Nehru [1936] 1962, 66) and that its function was to establish “bourgeois ideological, political and organizational hegemony . . . over the vast mass of peasants, workers and the lower middle classes” (Chandra 1979, 135).
 14. This aspect of the project later came to be developed by Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey, and Shahid Amin. See below.
 15. Cf. E. P. Thompson (1979, 199) on “experience”: “A category which, however imperfect it may be, is indispensable to the historian, since it comprises mental and emotional response, whether of an individual or of a social group, to many inter-related events.” See also Thomas 1963.
 16. Guha’s own reading strategies are spelled out in his essay in Guha and Spivak 1988 and are implicit throughout *Elementary Aspects*.
 17. To be fair, Thompson does not write only about “voices clamour[ing] from the past”—“not the historian’s voice, please observe; *their own voices*”—he also has much to say about how historians interrogate their sources in order to listen to the lost voices of history.
 18. This is best exemplified in Guha’s essay in Guha and Spivak 1988. See also Chakravorty Spivak’s introduction to that volume.
 19. See Guha’s (1988) statement in his introduction to *Subaltern Studies VI*.
 20. Cf. Guha, “Chandra’s Death,” originally published in *Subaltern Studies V* and reprinted in Guha 1998, 34–62; Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question,” reprinted as “The Nation and Its Women” in Chatterjee 1994; and Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, “Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender” in Amin and Chakrabarty 1996, 232–60.
 21. Prakash has led the debate on nonfoundational histories with his well-known essays “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography” (1990) and “Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography” (1992). Guha’s essay “An Indian Historiography of India: Hegemonic Implications of a Nineteenth-Century Agenda” in Guha 1997;

- Chatterjee's chapter entitled "The Nation and Its Pasts" in Chatterjee 1994; Pandey's essay "*Subaltern Studies: From a Critique of Nationalism to a Critique of History*" (unpublished); and Amin's "Alternative Histories: A View From India" (unpublished) are contributions to debates on historiography and the status of historical knowledge that *Subaltern Studies* has given rise to. In this connection, see also Shail Mayaram's treatment of memory and history in her "Speech, Silence, and the Making of Partition Violence in Mewat" in Amin and Chakrabarty 1996; and Ajay Skaria's forthcoming book, *Hybrid Histories*.
22. Prakash's forthcoming book analyzes the discourses of science and modernity in colonial India; see also his "Science between the Lines," in Amin and Chakrabarty 1996.
23. For a more detailed exposition of this point, see my forthcoming book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*.

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