

When the Subaltern Took the Postcolonial Turn

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article analyse l'évolution des directives éditoriales de Subaltern Studies, une série influente de livres lancée en 1982 et portant sur l'histoire de l'Asie du Sud. Dans cet essai, l'auteur étudie l'orientation de recherche suivie dès le début par le rédacteur en chef, Ranajit Guha, et la compare aux programmes que proposèrent par la suite plusieurs membres du collectif Subaltern Studies. À l'origine, Guha avait souhaité que les études sur l'Inde coloniale soient fondées sur une conception dualiste du gouvernement opposant « l'élite » et « les subalternes »; Guha voulait aussi que les auteurs s'efforcent de répondre à une question hypothétique, à savoir pourquoi « l'élite indienne » n'avait pas réussi à représenter la nation. Vers la fin des années 1980, la série prend une orientation différente qui délaisse le populisme rudimentaire et rigoureusement binaire de Guha, mais qui n'ouvre toutefois aucune nouvelle perspective sur l'histoire de l'Asie du Sud : certes, les débats sur la modernité et le postcolonialisme suscitent maints commentaires, mais ils ne sortent pas des sentiers battus. À force de vouloir découvrir une « modernité typiquement indienne » et s'éloigner des critères occidentaux, quelques membres du collectif ont fini par réifier le concept de la modernité et n'ont fait que resituer les mêmes vieux débats à l'intérieur du cadre de la théorie sociale occidentale.

When the Subaltern Took the Postcolonial Turn

JOHN ROOSA

Abstract

This essay evaluates the changing research agendas of Subaltern Studies, an influential series of books on South Asian history that began in 1982. The essay criticizes the original research agenda as articulated by the series editor, Ranajit Guha, and the subsequent agenda proposed by several members of the Subaltern Studies collective. Guha initially proposed that studies of colonial India understand power in terms of unmediated relationships between “the elite” and “the subaltern” and endeavour to answer a counterfactual question on why the “Indian elite” did not come to represent the nation. The subsequent agenda first formulated in the late 1980s, while jettisoning Guha’s strict binaries and crude populism, has not led to any new insights into South Asian history. The turn towards the issues of modernity and postcolonialism has resulted in much commentary on what is already known. Some members of the collective, in the name of uncovering a distinctly “Indian modernity” and moving beyond Western categories, have reified the concept of modernity and restaged tired old debates within Western social theory.

Résumé

Cet article analyse l'évolution des directives éditoriales de Subaltern Studies, une série influente de livres lancée en 1982 et portant sur l'histoire de l'Asie du Sud. Dans cet essai, l'auteur étudie l'orientation de recherche suivie dès le début par le rédacteur en chef, Ranajit Guha, et la compare aux programmes que proposèrent par la suite plusieurs membres du collectif Subaltern Studies. À l'origine, Guha avait souhaité que les études sur l'Inde coloniale soient fondées sur une conception dualiste du gouvernement opposant « l'élite » et « les subalternes »; Guha voulait aussi que les auteurs s'efforcent de répondre à une question hypothétique, à savoir pourquoi « l'élite indienne » n'avait pas réussi à représenter la nation. Vers la fin des années 1980, la série prend une orientation différente qui délaisse le populisme rudimentaire et rigoureusement binaire de Guha, mais qui n'ouvre toutefois aucune nouvelle perspective sur l'histoire de l'Asie du Sud : certes, les débats sur la modernité et le postcolonialisme suscitent maints commentaires, mais ils ne sortent pas des sentiers battus. À force de vouloir découvrir une « modernité typique-

ment indienne » et s'éloigner des critères occidentaux, quelques membres du collectif ont fini par réifier le concept de la modernité et n'ont fait que resituer les mêmes vieux débats à l'intérieur du cadre de la théorie sociale occidentale.

After publishing twelve volumes and two anthologies spread over more than two decades, the *Subaltern Studies* series on South Asian history has by now acquired a history of its own. Rarely has an academic venture among historians attracted such international attention and prompted such wide-ranging critical commentary, to the point that even collections of book reviews and commentaries about the series are marketable.¹ In academic discourse, the older meaning of the term “subaltern” (a low-ranking military officer) has now been firmly supplanted by the loose, quasi-Gramscian meaning used by the collective: the working class, peasantry, subordinate classes, or whoever is not part of “the elite.”² Just looking at the expanding interest in the series and the impressive publishing and employment records of the historians associated with it (the standard joke being that the subalterns are now colonels), one would be tempted to plot the trajectory of the series as a triumphal forward march. Some critics, however, have plotted the story as a decline from the laudable “history from below” agenda of the early volumes to a postcolonial agenda preoccupied with colonial discourse analysis in the later volumes.³

In this essay I propose an emplotment that is neither a rise nor a fall, neither a romance nor a tragedy. The multiplicity of authors, topics, and arguments prevents the telling of a neat unilinear story. Although the series as a whole lacks a single overarching intellectual trajectory, either up or down, forward or back, it does certainly contain something we can call a “postcolonial turn.” (The term “turn,” a horizontal movement to one side, avoids the evaluation carried by other topographical metaphors.) Its first anthology (1988) was introduced by both Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, two literary

1 Vinayak Chaturvedi, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London: Verso, 2000); David Ludden, ed., *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical Histories, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia* (London: Anthem, 2002).

2 Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” *Subaltern Studies*, R. Guha, ed., vol. 1 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982): 8.

3 Arif Dirlik, “The Aura of Postcolonialism: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism,” *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, P. Mongia, ed. (London: Arnold, 1996); Richard Eaton, “(Re)imag(in)ing Otherness: A Postmortem for the Postmodern in India,” *Journal of World History* 11, no. 1 (2000): 57-78; Sumit Sarkar, “The Decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*,” in Chaturvedi, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies*; Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, “‘The Making of the Working Class’: E.P. Thompson and Indian History,” *History Workshop Journal* 42 (Spring 1997): 177-97.

critics whose books were then becoming the foundational texts of the post-colonial field.⁴ Some of the authors of the essays in the second anthology (1997) proudly positioned themselves within that field.⁵ Surprisingly, a word that had been absent in the early volumes of the 1980s had become the badge of honor on the subaltern historian's uniform by the 1990s.

This essay, instead of attempting an engagement with the full range of the subalternists' work, focuses on their research agendas, that is, their general ideas on the questions that South Asian historians should prioritize. I look at those texts in which they have theorized the articles in the series. This essay first reviews the original research agenda elaborated by Ranajit Guha and then examines the subsequent postcolonial agenda proposed in the writings of Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Gyan Prakash. The transition between the two agendas was not a complete rupture, but it was certainly enough of a break to merit the appellation of a "turn." I argue that both agendas have been inimical to the advance of research in South Asian history. What contributions the eleven volumes of the series have made to South Asian historiography (and there are many) have been accomplished largely in spite of these research agendas, not because of them. While I would prefer to ignore the programmatic statements and focus on the original contributions of the series, I believe they need to be addressed; they form the part of the series that travels. These agendas have become the topics of debates from Latin America to Southeast Asia, often among people who are unfamiliar with the broader literature in South Asian history.⁶ A rethinking of the individual articles outside of the frameworks through which they have been usually placed is sorely needed. For example, the laudable semiotic and Foucaultian approaches in many of the essays have remained largely undeveloped. But such a rethinking is beyond the scope of this essay. Here, in limiting myself to the programmatic side of the series, I will argue that Guha's proposals for the study of power and the post-colonialists' proposals for the study of modernity do not help historians move beyond the trivial and already-known. The problem is not, as some critics have

4 Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988). Bart Moore-Gilbert views Said, Spivak, and Homi Bhabha as the postcolonialism's foundational writers: *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997).

5 Ranajit Guha, ed., *A Subaltern Studies Reader 1986-1995* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

6 See for instance the way Ranajit Guha is lionized in Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994): 245-46, 249-51, 253-56. Also see how some scholars of Latin America have appropriated the series: Ileana Rodriguez, ed., *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Florencia Mallon, "The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: Perspectives from Latin American History," *American Historical Review* 99 (December 1994): 1491-515.

alleged, that the writings of the subalternists have become overly theoretical — quite the opposite. The problem is that they have not taken social theory seriously enough.

Guha's Structuralist Populism

Dipesh Chakrabarty, one of the original members of the collective, is certainly correct in arguing that *Subaltern Studies* did not begin as a simple application of an E.P. Thompson-style social history to India, as some scholars have assumed.⁷ It began as an intervention into the historiography of India's anti-colonial nationalist movement — a subject far from the concerns of the British New Left social historians. The collective was in agreement on the need to move beyond the “Cambridge school” historians (such as Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal), who saw the movement's popular support as the result of patrons mobilizing their clients in a cynical, faction-ridden contest for state resources, and the mainstream Indian nationalist approach which saw that support as the natural response of the slumbering masses to the call of their wiser, more enlightened leaders. In a recent interview, Partha Chatterjee stated that the central question in the early volumes, to the extent they had one, was on the relationship between the peasantry and Indian elite during the colonial and postcolonial periods.⁸ The subaltern historians pointed to the gap between the “elite-led nationalist movement” and the peasants who “had their own reasons for joining or not joining” the movement and who, when they did join, “did not join for the same reasons as the elite nationalists.”⁹ The peasantry's politics remained largely autonomous as the elite refused to build a strong cross-class alliance for the anti-colonial struggle. The series editor, Ranajit Guha, stated in the opening essay that the “important historical truth” that the collective would demonstrate was the “*failure of the Indian bourgeoisie to speak for the nation*” (italics in original).¹⁰ Guha argued that the history of the Indian nationalist movement could neither be written as if it had been an amalgamation of factional interests nor a unified project whose leaders expressed the collective will.

By the early 1980s, the question of the relationship between the peasantry and the Indian nationalist movement had already been posed; some historians, for instance, had scrutinized the patterns of participation in the various Gandhi-

7 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), chapter 1, “A Small History of *Subaltern Studies*.”

8 Partha Chatterjee, “Towards a Postcolonial Modernity: An Interview with *Asia Source*,” 3 February 2007, <http://www.asiasource.org/news/special_reports/chatterjee.cfm>, (viewed 30 April 2007).

9 Ibid.

10 Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” 5.

led civil disobedience movements.¹¹ Some of the subalternists built upon the existing literature by approaching agrarian politics through local case-studies based on an impressive amount of previously untouched documentation. They combined empirically rich, localized studies with a critique of the much-lauded national leaders, such as the “great soul” himself, Mahatma Gandhi. Certain essays were revelatory for many historians, such as Gyan Pandey’s “Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism” (in volume one), which described peasant associations forming in early twentieth century Awadh and organizing no-rent and no-tax campaigns in the face of Congress opposition; and Shahid Amin’s essay “Gandhi as Mahatma” (in volume 3) on how a deified image of Gandhi became the means through which Congressmen in a small town mobilized the peasantry in the early 1920s.

In criticizing the heroes of a movement for democracy for not being democratic enough, the *Subaltern Studies* group was returning to the earlier ideas of Indian Marxist intellectuals. Writing in the decade before independence, R. Palme Dutt and D.D. Kosambi, for instance, had routinely referred to the Congress as a “bourgeois” organization and condemned it for betraying the anti-colonial cause and refusing to represent peasants and workers.¹² In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Communist Party leadership took that criticism to the extreme by declaring that the newly independent Congress-led government was nothing more than a puppet of neo-colonialism. With little success, it attempted to organize a nationwide insurgency against the government. Such condemnations of the Congress declined after the party reversed course in 1951 and emphasized national unity. As Indian communists split into three different communist parties in the 1960s, the writing of Marxist history tended to be directed at scoring sectarian points. The freshness of the *Subaltern Studies* approach in the 1980s partly derived from its return to an earlier, partly abandoned Marxist critique and an avoidance of the sectarianism that marred many Marxist histories of twentieth century peasant and working class struggles. That avoidance, however, came at a price: the subaltern historians wrote the Indian communist movement out of the picture altogether. The reader of the series would have to be forgiven for thinking that the communists from the 1920s to the 1940s played no role in the peasant movements that Guha and his colleagues extolled as “autonomous.”

The subalternists’ early writings in social history were burdened by the series editor’s remarkably crude theorizing about a divide in India between “the elite” and “the people,” a capacious, residual category that comprised everyone

11 D.A. Low, ed., *Soundings in Modern South Asian History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968).

12 R. Palme Dutt, *India Today* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940); D.D. Kosambi, “The Bourgeoisie Comes of Age in India,” *Science and Society*, 10 (1946): 392-8.

who was not part of the elite. Guha, by arbitrary fiat, divided Indian politics during the colonial period into two separate domains: the elite and the subaltern. In the latter category were the “subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the laboring population and the intermediate strata in town and country — that is, the people.”¹³ In his later writings, Guha reaffirmed that the “thematizing of the structural split of politics” between the subaltern and the elite was the “central concern” of *Subaltern Studies*.¹⁴ Guha did not bother to explain the principle on which this division was based. What were the sources of the elite’s power? What were, for instance, the circuits of commodity exchange, profit, taxation, rent, or finance capital out of which “the elite” emerged? Guha used “bourgeoisie” (as in the quote above) as synonymous with “elite,” yet did not really view that elite as a bourgeoisie in the usual senses of the term. His elite was a grand conflation of the state, business groups, and landlords. From the start, *Subaltern Studies* rejected a class analysis of Indian society in favour of a jumble of vague class-like categories divorced from determinations of property: the peasantry, people, subaltern, subaltern classes, elite, and middle class. As provisional, general rubrics under which more detailed studies could be conveniently grouped, the terms elite and subaltern were no worse than any other. They were useful for pointing to a general area of concern, in the way that the phrases “history from below” and “people’s history” do. However, they were entirely inadequate as the key terms for an ambitious sociological analysis.

By the time Guha divided both his elite and the subaltern into sub-categories, it was obvious the distinction between them was not just blurry at the edges but hopelessly ambiguous. He divided the colonial-era elite into three different groups: the “dominant foreign groups,” the “dominant indigenous groups,” and lower-level “social strata,” who acted in the interests of the elite “and not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own social being.”¹⁵ This third intermediate category throws a spanner in the whole works. The idea that a “strata” does not act according to its interests raises the possibility that no “strata” acts according to its interests, even those Guha would see as the highest. After all, who knows what the “true social being” of any group is? Does that group even know itself? Are not the indeterminacies surrounding one’s own interest great sources of social change? Guha’s attachment to the idea that an observer can know the essential truth of a collective identity and even the totality of all social identities is even worse than vulgar Marxism, which at least worked with classes (defined by property ownership) instead of vague “strata” locked in relations of pure, unmediated power.

13 Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” 8.

14 Guha, *A Subaltern Studies Reader*, xv.

15 Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 44.

That Guha believed the people vs. elite dichotomy was theorizable seems to have been due to his grounding in the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss; he turned nearly every topic he touched into a binary opposition. In his essay “Colonialism in South Asia,” he defined power as a relationship between “domination” and “subordination.”¹⁶ Such a simplistic definition, that “may be said to obtain wherever there is power,” from the Arctic to Australia, from the Neolithic Age to the neoliberal age, is hardly better than repeating the old parody of a student paper on the British empire: Britain was “top dog” and India was the “underdog.”¹⁷ Again, Guha’s move was a step back from Soviet-style Marxism which retained, in however attenuated a form, Marx’s idea of classes in mutually constituting relations, not binary opposition.

Chakrabarty has defended Guha’s resort to the generic concepts of domination and subordination by arguing that they match the indeterminate character of power in colonial India. He claims that “the domain of the political” in colonial India was “heteroglossic in its idioms and irreducibly plural in its structure, interlocking within itself strands of different types of relationships that did not make up a logical whole.”¹⁸ This passage, amid its ambiguous metaphors, suggests that colonial India was somehow exceptional from all other places in the world, as if its power relations were so complicated, perhaps even to the point of inscrutability, that only the most general terminology is applicable. To say that “the political” was complex in colonial India is to say nothing at all since it is complex everywhere and no society makes up a “logical whole.” It is unnecessary to argue that “the global history of capitalism need not reproduce everywhere the same history of power,” unless Chakrabarty believes his only interlocutors are adherents of the Soviet version of historical materialism.¹⁹ It is just as unnecessary to argue that class analysis does not encompass the entire “domain of the political.” By presenting “traditional European Marxist thought” as being wedded to the idea that the state is nothing more than the executive committee of the bourgeoisie, he misses the creative efforts by Marxists (such as E.P. Thompson) to analyze property relations, material interests, surplus extraction, and politics in non-capitalist and non-European societies.²⁰ Chakrabarty affirms Guha’s claim, that in India power has to be analyzed as the “subordination of the subaltern by the elite,” as

16 Ibid., chapter 1.

17 Ibid., 21.

18 Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, 13.

19 Ibid. Even the “histomat” of the USSR, while insisting on the universality and inevitability of the iron laws of capitalist development, did not really state that capitalism reproduced itself uniformly across the globe; it allowed for strange admixtures of the capitalist mode of production with pre-capitalist modes and for different forms of imperialism.

20 Ibid. As Sumit Sarkar pointed out, E.P. Thompson’s analysis of eighteenth century England, employing the terms patrician and plebeian, was a creative attempt to represent class relations of that time. Sarkar, “The Decline of the Subaltern,” 304-05.

if these terms, “subaltern” and “elite,” were something more than Guha’s own empty signifiers.

For each term in his pair “domination” and “subordination,” Guha created another pair. Domination should be analyzed as a combination of “coercion” and “persuasion,” and subordination should be analyzed as a combination of “resistance” and “collaboration.”²¹ Guha’s elaboration of this schema, complete with a diagram and abbreviations modelled on Marx’s analysis of the organic composition of capital, veers into the absurd. Basic ideas that historians already take for granted are dressed up in pretentious language. Any advance in the study of power would need to bypass or transcend these dichotomies, not restate them. One way of moving beyond them would be to take up the idea of overdetermination, which would, for instance, problematize how a particular act is interpreted as resistance or collaboration. How does an observer, with only partial knowledge of the infinity of events behind an action or event, construct the chain of causal factors for it? Overdetermination (a term originally used by Freud in his interpretations of dreams and later reworked by Lacan) raises the problem of working with a multiplicity of separate but equally valid explanations. Guha mentioned overdetermination and quoted from Lacan’s essay “Function and Field of Speech and Language,” only to assimilate it into his fixed dichotomies. He drew on the idea to argue that power in colonial India was a fusion of the ideologies of “pre-colonial India” and “modern England.”²² Guha presented “pre-colonial India” and “modern England” as two separate monoliths that suddenly collided in the mid-eighteenth century, producing something that was overdetermined. In treating overdetermination to mean nothing more than an odd fusion of the two terms of a binary opposition, Guha persisted with positing the structure of human experience in what Lacan called in the same essay “merely dual terms,” which are “inadequate to it in theory.”²³ What Guha missed in this instance was the already overdetermined character of “pre-colonial India” and “modern England”; they were not neatly bounded entities formed by a finite set of factors, partly because India and England had been long connected with each other and with global processes.²⁴

Chakrabarty, when writing his retrospective account of *Subaltern Studies*, delicately sidestepped the vulgarities of Guha’s analysis. After the postcolonial turn, expressions such as “true social being” and the “historic failure of the nation to come into its own” (as if the nation had some pre-determined

21 Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony*, 20-3.

22 Ibid., 61-2.

23 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Routledge, 1989), 61.

24 Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s writing of “connected” or “interconnected” histories for the early modern period are necessary antidotes to old dichotomies: *Explorations in Connected History: Mughals and Franks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

authentic identity to realize) became prime targets of criticism. They were evidence of essentialism, positivism, teleology, and historicism. Also, Guha's binarism did not accord very well with the new postcolonial emphasis on the hybridity and fluidity of identities.²⁵ It is intriguing that the subalternists-turned-postcolonialists, while strongly condemning others for such sins, have ventured nothing more than gentle chidings of Guha. In writing his retrospective account, Chakrabarty wished to retrieve something valuable from Guha's essays. Indeed, he wished to present Guha as the pioneer of a "paradigm shift" in Indian historiography and to argue that this shift prefigured Chakrabarty's own later postcolonial critique of the idea that societies develop through pre-determined stages (what he calls historicism). Thus, he refers to a certain "tension" in Guha's book *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* (1983) between an old-fashioned Marxist historical materialism and a "more radical understanding" of capitalism. He argues that those moments where Guha falls into the tropes of a "stagist view of history" are redeemed by the "larger significance of Guha's critique of the category *prepolitical*" (italics in original).²⁶

According to Chakrabarty, that critique of "the prepolitical" was Guha's "critical theoretical break."²⁷ Here, Guha supposedly parted company with the British Marxists who had dismissed all protests prior to those organized by modern trade unions and political parties as prepolitical: "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 to which colonial rule gave rise in India."²⁸ Guha supposedly broke with the usual narrative told by European Marxists about the universal pattern for the transition to capitalism:

First, the peasants' land is expropriated. Then the peasants join the ranks of the urban and industrial workers, whereupon they negotiate the disciplining process of the factory. Next, they engage in machine breaking and other forms of Luddite protest until trade unions arrive on the scene and certain formal freedoms — indicative of a growing democratic consciousness — are put in place."²⁹

Peasants were, for Guha, always already (to use a familiar Derridean turn of phrase), political.

25 John Beverly, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 83-113.

26 Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, 11.

27 *Ibid.*, 8.

28 *Ibid.*, 9.

29 *Ibid.*, 10-11.

Chakrabarty's attribution of originality to Guha's "break" with the British Marxist historians is highly misleading. He does not mention that E.P. Thompson's classic work, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), was meant precisely as a refutation of that very same narrative of the transition to capitalism that Chakrabarty outlines. The book was path-breaking because it viewed worker protests outside of a teleological framework; workers protested in ways that were, as Thompson put it, "valid in terms of their own experience."³⁰ The Luddites, in his account, were not dismissed as pre-political, backward-looking agents. When referring to the British Marxists' commitment to a "stagist view of history," Chakrabarty cites Hobsbawm, who indeed remained committed to the shibboleths of a Soviet-style teleology of history, just as he remained committed to the Communist Party (the two are connected). The title of his book, *Primitive Rebels* (1959), says much about his difference with Thompson on this score. To lump him with Thompson in a discussion of historicism is to ignore the fundamental disagreement between them. Chakrabarty is correct, as noted above, to argue against the claim that *Subaltern Studies* was purely derivative of the social history pioneered by the British Marxists, but its original contribution cannot be located in Guha's critique of the prepolitical. Thompson should, of course, not be understood as the first or last word on social theory (his one major attempt at it, *The Poverty of Theory* (1978), is perhaps his worst book), but his contributions are at least worth remembering in the face of the enormous condescension of postcolonialism.

Modernity

It may seem paradoxical that a series devoted to "the subaltern" should come to devote so many of its essays to what it has called the "Indian elite." Chatterjee has explained this paradox in a recent interview by retracing the logical progression of the collective's arguments. According to his account, he and at least some of his colleagues believed that the Indian elite in power after independence in 1947 treated the peasantry in much the same way that the colonial state had:

many of the techniques of rule, the governing practices on which these regimes were based, were very similar. This was one of the strongest political arguments we were trying to make The district administration still dealt with the rural population on the lines of the old colonial administration."³¹

30 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1963); Michael Merrill, "An Interview with E.P. Thompson," *Radical History Review* 3, no. 4 (Fall 1976): 4-25.

31 Chatterjee, "Towards a Postcolonial Modernity."

They viewed the colonial state as an absolute despotism and the postcolonial state as a kind of despotism-lite. Seeing this continuity, they then wondered why the Indian elite was incapable of creating more original forms of governance better suited to Indian society. It replaced British officialdom only to create a kind of replica of British imperial government. Why did the elite mimic the colonialists? Did that not mean that the minds of the elite had been colonized? The subalternists believed that one necessary part of a radical political agenda in India, one that would serve the interests of the “subaltern classes,” would be a critique of the ideas of the Indian elite. If nationalism was derivative of colonialism, “then the weapon of critique must turn”, as Prakash has argued, “against Europe and the modes of knowledge it instituted.”³²

Guha had begun the series by proclaiming that the Indian elite had failed to represent the nation. Chatterjee put it explicitly: “The origin of *Subaltern Studies*, as a specific postcolonial project, was in fact to understand the failures of the Indian nationalist elite.”³³ The series began by identifying those failures as ones of democratic representation: the elite betrayed the nation by not representing peasants and workers when fighting for independence. The series’ later postcolonial turn identified those failures as ones of national identity: the elite betrayed “Indian-ness” by cravenly adopting ideas “completely derived from the whole body of modern, *Western* political thought and social theory” (italics in original), ideas somehow unsuited to India’s conditions.³⁴ Chatterjee argues, correctly I think, that the difference between the early and later *Subaltern Studies* is not a shift from one research agenda to another; rather it is a shift in the method of fulfilling the same research agenda. The concept of “elite failure” was there from the start. The new method of analyzing that failure called for studies of the points at which the Indian elite either capitulated to Western modernity or forged a distinctly Indian form of being modern.

The subalternists-turned-postcolonialists, in redefining failure, did not explicitly denounce Guha’s original formulation, though it became, in their new terms, an awful case of Eurocentric historicism. Guha had judged the elite to be a failure in terms of the Marxist conception of the bourgeois revolution; the Indian elite did not behave like those supposedly revolutionary bourgeoisies of England, America, and France and become a hegemonic class, integrating the subalterns into its struggle. It did not create a “full fledged struggle for national liberation” and lead the nation to a “decisive victory over colonialism.” It did not achieve what, according to Guha’s normative framework, it should have achieved and thus the nation did not “come into its own.” He had assumed that

32 Gyan Prakash, “Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism,” *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1483.

33 Chatterjee, “Towards a Postcolonial Modernity.”

34 Ibid.

Indian politics should be evaluated as to how well it conformed to European models. India's bourgeoisie had an "inadequacy"; it was lacking something.³⁵ Thus, he posed a counterfactual — something that did not happen — as the centrepiece of a research agenda. The subalternists-turned-postcolonialists realized that Guha's invocations of historical destiny and European models had to be jettisoned. They did not, however, jettison his counterfactual research agenda. They kept the signifier "failure" and replaced its signified. But the question then became: what was their new normative framework that could justify an evaluation of failure or success? Why should India have come up with "its own" modernity? Chatterjee, on the first page of his book *The Nation and Its Fragments*, notes that the postcolonial critique "has been unable to adequately vindicate its own normative preferences," and then proceeds to entirely ignore the issue.³⁶

For all of the subalternists' preoccupation with "the Indian elite" and the continuities from the colonial to the postcolonial, they have written nothing that specifies the composition of that elite and illuminates the precise characteristics of the transition to independence. Their discussions have been more speculative than substantial; they have moved little beyond the simple dichotomy subaltern-elite, a dichotomy so undifferentiated as to be useless for any examination of particular configurations of class relations in India.³⁷ The serious investigative and analytical work on decolonization and the construction of the postcolonial state has been done by other researchers who have had little use for the idea of a "failure" of some undifferentiated Indian elite in forging "modernity." It is revealing that the best analysis of Indian industrialists and bureaucrats around the time of independence in 1947, Vivek Chibber's book *Locked in Place* (2003), does not draw on a single article from *Subaltern Studies*.³⁸ For an eleven-volume series supposedly dedicated to the study of "Indian elite failure," it has produced astonishingly little of lasting significance on the topic. After all, what subalternist theory would consider a failure — the

35 Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," 7. There is the debate on how accurate the concept of bourgeois revolution is for European history itself. See, for example, Benno Teschke, "Bourgeois Revolution, State Formation and the Absence of the International," *Historical Materialism* 13, no. 2 (2005): 3-26; Neil Davidson's article "How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?" appeared in two parts in *Historical Materialism* 13, no. 3 (2005): 3-31; no. 4 (2005): 3-54.

36 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Delhi: Oxford Universities, 1994), xi.

37 The multi-sided conflicts during the Telangana revolt (1946-51) cannot be understood in dichotomous terms, especially since the class structure was being radically transformed: John Roosa, "Passive Revolution Meets Peasant Revolution: Indian Nationalism and the Telangana Revolt," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 28, no. 4 (July 2001).

38 Vivek Chibber, *Locked in Place: State Building and Late Industrialization in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

failure of the elite to represent the nation — was a real historic success for members of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce who neither wanted the workers and peasants to be mobilized nor the state to control their businesses. The subalternists have opted for comparisons of the Indian elite's behavior to groundless normative ideals and dismissed studies of class practices as too economic. They have hardly advanced over D.D. Kosambi's description of "the principle characteristic" of the "Indian middle class" around the time of independence: "the ravening greed which is now so obvious in the black market, in enormous bribes spent in making still more enormous profits, in speculation in shares and an increasingly callous disregard for the misery and even the lives of their fellow Indians."³⁹

Perhaps one reason the subalternists have written so little of value about the problem that has motivated their work (according to Chatterjee's account at least), is that they are already secure in knowing the answers to all the big questions of history. Consider the quotes below from the first pages of three key postcolonial books:

By now knowledgeable people all over the world have become familiar with the charges leveled against the subject-centered rationality characteristic of post-Enlightenment modernity. This subject-centered reason, we have now been told, claims for itself a singular universality by asserting its epistemic privilege over all other local, plural, and often incommensurable knowledges; it proclaims its own unity and homogeneity by declaring all other subjectivities as inadequate, fragmentary, and subordinate; it declares for the rational subject an epistemic as well as moral sovereignty that is meant to be self-determined, unconditioned, and self-transparent. Against this arrogant, intolerant, self-aggrandizing rational subject of modernity, critics in recent years have been trying to resurrect the virtues of the fragmentary, the local and the subjugated in order to unmask the will to power that lies at the very heart of modern rationality and to decenter its epistemological and moral subject. (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, xi.)

The phenomenon of "political modernity" — namely, the rule by modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy, and capitalist enterprise — is impossible to think of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe. Concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between the public and the private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality, and so on all bear the burden of European thought and history. One simply cannot think of political modernity without these and other related concepts that found a cli-

39 Kosambi, "The Bourgeoisie Comes of Age in India," 395.

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matic form in the course of the European Enlightenment and the nineteenth century. (Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 4)

To speak of India is to call attention to the structures in which the lives of its peoples are enmeshed — railroads, steel plants, mining, irrigation, hydroelectric projects, chemical and petroleum factories, public health organizations and regulations, the bureaucracy and its developmentalist routines, educational and technical institutions, political parties, media and telecommunications, and now, the bomb. Together they constitute a grid, a coherent strategy of power and identity underpinned by an ideology of modernity that is legitimated in the last instance by science. (Prakash, *Another Reason*, 3)

The operative term in the three quotations is modernity. In the first, it is identified as the subject-centred philosophy of the Enlightenment; in the second, it is some sort of a combination between the Enlightenment, the bureaucratic state, and capitalism; in the third, it is an “ideology” that “underpins” just about everything. Modernity encompasses politics, economics, culture, science, the military, the mass media ... one is not sure where it ends. Its meaning does not become any clearer from the habit of these authors to keep modifying the word: political modernity, capitalist modernity, nationalist modernity, colonial modernity, Western modernity, Indian modernity, post-Enlightenment modernity, postcolonial modernity, and so on. What is gained by deploying such a catch-all category that seems to mean nothing by meaning everything? I have not been convinced that anything has been gained at least in so far as it comes to understanding South Asian history.

In reading these three postcolonial texts one feels that one is seeing a mirror image of the typical Eurocentric narrative of Western civilization as some coherent thing that becomes enlightened through science and then spreads its wisdom throughout the world on a noble-minded civilizing mission. The only change to this narrative the postcolonialists offer is to reverse the evaluation from positive to negative. Instead of treating it as a fairy tale they reaffirm its fantastical core. By presenting the rise of the Enlightenment as a descent into intolerance, violent conquest, and disciplinary power, they still treat the Enlightenment as though it was a single thing that defined the very essence of European society, as a thing perfectly integrated into all other changes in bureaucratic power and commercial exchange.

The primary problem with the term modernity is that it promotes the idea that all these different processes amount to a coherent package.⁴⁰ One can cer-

40 Bernard Yack, *The Fetishism of Modernities: Epochal Self-Consciousness in Contemporary Social and Political Thought* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997); Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 113-49.

tainly try to reconcile the paradoxical simultaneity of political equality and class inequality, bureaucratic power and the anarchy of the market, rationalism and romanticism, the respect for tradition and the embrace of ceaseless technological change; but what does one have at the end but a narrative that misses all of the moments when these contradictory tendencies clashed and political structures broke down? Is not one task of a left historiography the recovery of moments when seemingly fixed structures broke down and imaginings of new social relations proliferated?

How these authors see coherence in “the modern age,” where others see contradictions, discontinuities, and repressed possibilities, can partly be explained by their abandonment of the historian’s vocation. State power, the Enlightenment, capitalism, and science can all be seen as One Big Grid (to slightly modify Prakash’s terms) only once we restrict our vision to the present. Coherence appears after the fact. The term modernity has been particularly popular among sociologists who use it to describe the present as the sum total of all these different processes in the past.⁴¹

If one objects that the idea of Western modernity reifies “the West,” one would be told by the postcolonialists, surprisingly enough, that indeed it does. Chakrabarty admits that the idea of a “homogenous, uncontested ‘Europe’” is a “reified” category, one that “dissolves under analysis,” but one that he will use nevertheless.⁴² More advanced scholars, he suggests, might know it is a reification, but other people do not; they use it all the time. So a careful analysis of the term “does not make it go away.”⁴³ Here, Chakrabarty performs a sleight of hand. His argument justifies the study of the social meanings of a term, how it is used in popular discourse, but his practice is to adopt the term as his own and make it the bedrock of his social theory. He follows what Lacan described as the paradigmatic maneuver of the fetishist: “I know very well, but all the same” He knows that the concept “Western modernity” is a fetish but persists in using it all the same.

Possessing such an all-powerful word that lumps all sorts of contradictory forces together in a unified field theory for the humanities, the subalternists-turned-postcolonialists have not felt the need to be more discriminating in their historical analyses. With so many old questions obviated, one of the few items left on their new research agenda has been to find out whether any Indians managed not to succumb to the One Big Grid of modernity that Britain clamped down on India. Chatterjee states that his book is meant to trace the “numerous fragmented resistances” to modernity’s “normalizing project” and the subaltern

41 Stuart Hall, et al., eds., *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

42 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 27.

43 *Ibid.*, 28.

resistances to the nationalist elite's "hegemonic project of nationalist modernity."⁴⁴ He is also concerned to trace how that nationalist elite itself resisted "the sway of the modern institutions of disciplinary power."⁴⁵ Given that modernity has an unlimited meaning in postcolonial discourse, the task of identifying what is opposed to or complicit with modernity is entirely arbitrary. Chatterjee claims that the exclusion of the private sphere from state regulation is resistance to modernity and that "by its very nature the idea of the community marks a limit to the realm of disciplinary power."⁴⁶ Once he has conjured up his own definition of modernity, he is, of course, free to decide the limits of its realm. And Prakash is free to contradict him and argue that the imagination of the "national community" already contained within it from the start the imagination of a state with disciplinary power.⁴⁷ Given the free-floating terms of the debate, there is no point in trying to determine who is correct.

The postcolonialists, having identified Western modernity as the nemesis, have been chasing phantoms. The targets of their critiques do not have the solidity that is projected onto them; the targets melt away through immanent critiques before being touched by frontal assaults. The Enlightenment, for instance, was not a single thing; different Enlightenment thinkers had very different ideas of reason. The idea of a reason that created its own normative grounding in the present (instead of basing itself on tradition or prophecy) contained its own internal contradictions. Moreover, one would be hard-pressed to prove that it has defined European society from the time of Descartes, Locke, Kant, or whichever philosopher one wants to locate as the origin of "Enlightenment reason."⁴⁸

Chakrabarty targets historicism because it had supposedly "enabled European domination of the world in the nineteenth century."⁴⁹ Certainly, European powers justified imperial rule in the name of civilizing backward people and eventually bringing them stage-by-stage up to the level of Europeans. But was that an indispensable part of imperial rule? What does he mean by "enabling"? Let us ignore for the moment that Chakrabarty defines historicism as a tautology (the idea that "a certain amount of time elapses in the very process of development") and as historical knowledge pure and simple

44 Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 13.

45 Ibid. 75.

46 Ibid. 237.

47 Prakash, *Another Reason*, 201-02.

48 Peter Osborne, "Modernity is a Qualitative, Not a Chronological, Category," *New Left Review* 192 (March-April 1992): 65-84; Thomas Blum Hansen, "Inside the Romanticist Episteme," *Social Scientist* 24 (January-March 1996): 59-79; James Schmidt, "What Enlightenment Project?" *Political Theory* 28, no. 6 (December 2000): 734-57; Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

49 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 7.

(“the idea that to get a grip on things we need to know their histories”). Let us stick to his definition of it as a “stagist view of history.” How was that historicism enabling? Was it necessary to dupe the colonized, convince the public in the home country, provide a sense of purpose among officials, all of the above? The answer is not clear from his writings. Non-historicist and non-Enlightenment versions of history also enabled imperialism. Think of the men who revelled in power and cared nothing for the future progress for “the natives” and those missionaries for whom worldly progress was comparatively unimportant. To assume that the imperialists took the civilizing mission seriously would be overly charitable; it would be to assume that they would not have tried to profit from the colonies if they had not been convinced that their actions were beneficial for “the natives.” That historicism was a symbolic displacement, a kind of diversionary tactic, is indicated by the fact that the imperialists kept moving the yardstick of what was modern, creating an infinite game that the colonized could never win. Indian nationalists grasped well enough that it was a ruse. If they had not they never would have demanded independence or instituted universal suffrage after independence. If the “Indian elite” persisted with historicism vis à vis the post-1947 “subalterns” (as if some Indians were immature citizens needing training to be modern), then that testifies to their new class interests, not to the irresistible power of an ideology they had just defied. Chakrabarty, by targeting historicism, has us chasing after what was always meant to be an artful dodge.

Precisely when Chatterjee and Chakrabarty explain what is new about their research agendas regarding an “Indian modernity,” they fall back on the most clichéd tropes of Western philosophy. Chatterjee calls for studying “community,” which has supposedly been marginalized by the concepts of bourgeois liberalism (individual rights, civil society, etc.).⁵⁰ Chakrabarty calls for the study of the affective and religion, which have supposedly been misunderstood by analytical reason, and suggests that Marx and Heidegger be combined. Here we see a restaging of an old debate in postcolonial dress. Once modernity is defined as “Enlightenment reason” (and that is defined in caricatured terms) then the predictable response is to appeal to “community” and “emotion.” As James Schmidt remarked on many contemporary criticisms of the Enlightenment, “they usually do little more than repeat arguments that the Enlightenment’s contemporaries (and for that matter, the Enlightenment itself) had already offered.”⁵¹ The postcolonialists’ appeal for a writing of a non-Eurocentric history, one that avoids and reworks the “imported instruments” of “European social philosophy” (in Chatterjee’s words),⁵² is a return to the already widely

50 Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 220-39.

51 Schmidt, “What Enlightenment Project?” 734.

52 Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 169.

accepted simplicities of Orientalism and area studies programs. Such an appeal might be interesting for those who believe that “European social philosophy” is a consistent entity and neatly corresponds to European society itself.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the original research agenda with which *Subaltern Studies* began, Guha’s subaltern-elite dichotomy combined with a generic analysis of power, was too crude to be of much use to historians. Its replacement with an agenda centred on modernity was no advance in theoretical sophistication; in many ways it was a regression to old dichotomies in European social theory even as it went under the new name of postcolonial. By making an indeterminate category (modernity) into the focus of debates on South Asian history, the new postcolonial agenda has encouraged researchers to pursue phantoms at random, searching for creatures such as nefarious universals of Western reason and authentic South Asian fragments. Now that the subaltern has been taken for a ride (the *double entendre* intended) into the field of postcolonialism, we have discovered, after a *frisson* from the surprise, very little that is new. Many of the individual articles in the *Subaltern Studies* series are valuable contributions, but they have not been well-served by the theorizing around them. It would be entirely possible to rethink the series’ articles and construct a very different type of research agenda, one developing their semiotic and Foucaultian insights in ways so far neglected by the series’ programmatic statements.

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