

Beyond Parochialism: A Critical Investigation of the Subaltern Studies Collective

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## **Beyond Parochialism: A Critical Investigation of the Subaltern Studies Collective**

“Indeed, I suspect that only if we get beyond politicized labels like “East” and “West” will we be able to reach the real world at all.” – Edward Said

“Historical materialism can exercise its full powers only when it is free from parochialism, of any kind.” – Perry Anderson

The purpose of this article is to investigate the theoretical innovations of the Subaltern Studies Collective (SSC) and situate both their contributions and legacy within the disjunction of Marxist and post-colonial theory. In order to establish these connections this article is broken down into three distinct parts: (1) a presentation of SSC as a distinct site of Marxist historiography being applied to the post-colonial State of India, (2) a summary of the thematic innovations produced by SSC as it relates both to elitist and nationalist Indian historiography and more generally as it relates to the broader trend of post-colonial theory, (3) an acknowledgement of the limitations of SSC as a critical model of knowledge-production that finds itself re-asserting the binary oppositions of Orientalist discourses.

### **Situating Subaltern Studies**

Before any comment can be made regarding the Subaltern Studies Collective it is necessary to put their project into conversation within the historical realities and transformations that are produced out of what Immanuel Wallerstein calls European universalism.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon of European universalism, which has its intellectual birth in the Enlightenment and its politico-economic realization in the bourgeois revolutions of England in 1640 and France in 1789, has become the defining feature of the modern world-system. Germane to this world-system is the construction of a capitalist-world economy that necessitated the “expansion of European states and peoples into the rest of the world.”<sup>2</sup> The method of expansion, which was legitimated through the historicism of bourgeois notions of development, progress, modernization, and the civilizing mission, catalyzed the colonial interventions of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Of course, there is no singular, homogenous program that each individual European nation-state adhered to in their colonial occupations. Dutch and English colonialism followed a very different model than the French variety, and

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<sup>1</sup> Wallerstein, Immanuel Maurice. *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power*. New York: New, 2006. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 1.

all three are distinct from the motivations of Italian colonialism in Libya and Ethiopia. However, despite the diversity in motivation and implementation there are three important features that are consistent.

The first consistent feature is the proliferation of academic discourses that manage and regulate the colonial subjects. Modern colonialism – beginning in 1798 with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt – was exceptional because it augmented military occupation with the expertise of the social sciences. Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt was accompanied by a team of social scientists who were employed to produce extensive knowledge of Egypt and its people for the direct service of colonial administration and management. “[Napoleon’s] plans for Egypt therefore became the first in a long series of European encounters with the Orient in which the Orientalist’s special expertise was put directly to functional use.”<sup>3</sup> The logic of colonialism shifts drastically with this one encounter. The colony was no longer to be perceived as an inferior site to dominate but as a resource to be managed, regulated, and ultimately capitalized upon. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) illuminated the many ways in which modern academic knowledge-practices, which claimed scientific neutrality, were complicit with colonial occupations.

The second consistent feature of colonialism is bound up with capital’s drive for accumulation, which necessitates subsuming cheap labor within the capitalist mode of production and the creation of new markets for the sale of their goods. This unquenchable thirst for surplus value pushes the European powers outwards and is the principle catalyst of colonial occupation. However, the particular manifestations of this drive have taken many different forms – from the horrors of the African slave trade, the imposition of political and economic modernization that works to disembed traditional social bonds, to the development of transnational organizations (the IMF and World Bank) that function to maintain the global interests of the capitalist class. This element of colonialism will become especially important for the Subaltern Studies Collective. They question the veracity of the thesis that capitalism always strives to become a universalizing and totalizing system but will end up espousing problematic and ahistorical conclusions.

The third element is the development of the modern nation-state as a centralized apparatus of State control, which become the pervasive and dominant model of global affairs. Theoretically, the nation-state exists to represent the people and embody their political desires. In order to achieve legitimacy the modern-nation state has to establish a monopoly on law, coercion, power, and violence. This notion of representation and legislation is very different from the empires of the past, which were maintained through blood relationships. Within an empire, various class interests – merchants, bankers, and peasants – do not wield any political power. However, with the shift into the modern nation-state ordinary people become the vehicles of historical change. In fact, the notion of history as a product of human will that can be progressed towards some desirable end is a product of Enlightenment thought. This transformation is also fraught with challenges and has been conducted and pursued for the maintenance of an emergent, but highly unequal, balance of powers. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the arbitrary borders of the modern Middle East, which continue to be contested into the present-day. These borders were established at the

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<sup>3</sup> Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979. Print. 80.

close of the First World War by European powers that were dividing up their spoils from the now bereft Ottoman Empire. Not surprisingly, this process of division did not take local conditions into consideration and it has exasperated local conflicts for over a century in the region. The other problem that the modern nation-state is always confronting is how it deals with difference and more specifically how it deals with minority groups. Given that ordinary people are now the agents of historical change it becomes unavoidable for local conditions and identities (religion, ethnicity, gender, and class) to become sites of highly politicized contestation. What the modern-nation state requires is a hegemonic ideology that binds people together, along some common identities and interests, into what Benedict Anderson will call an 'imagined community.' This project of developing a unifying ideology and establishing hegemonic authority, whereby diverse classes and interests consent to the authority of another, is of particular interest to the Subaltern Studies Collective, as well as the broader gamut of post-colonial theory.

The Subaltern Studies Collective made important critical interventions into the previously described modern world-system and its accompanying features of the capitalist global economy and colonial subjugation but they were not alone in doing so. They were also responding to centuries of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist resistance, which had coalesced into national liberation movements throughout what would be called the Third World or the Global South. The second half of the twentieth century is defined by these decolonization efforts that sought to transform and reverse the moral, political, and economic logic of the modern world-system.<sup>4</sup> Many of these political engagements were politically aligned and organized around an already well-developed school of thought – Marxism. In fact, post-colonial theorists often will situate themselves as the offspring of these counter-hegemonic movements, both as political practice and theoretical analysis. For example, Robert J.C. Young, a leading figure in post-colonial theory, stresses the need to “foreground [post-colonial theories] interventionist possibilities.”<sup>5</sup>

The historical irony of Marxist theory is that it was grounded within a European and metropolitan context that stressed the political importance of an urbanized proletariat as the vehicle for revolutionary change. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century unfolded, however, almost every successful Communist movement was to occur in a largely agrarian society that lacked a preexisting liberal, bourgeois State apparatus – Lenin’s Bolshevik Revolution, Mao’s China, Ho Chi Minh’s Vietnam, Castro’s Cuba, etc. These national liberation struggles were also in conversation with one another and established networks of cultural cooperation and unified resistance in the global opposition to colonial and imperial impositions, i.e. the Bandung Conference and the emergent Non-Aligned Movement. Eventually, these struggles crystallized in the world revolutions of 1968, which destabilized the modern world-system and caused it to suffer “from a structural undermining of its ability to continue the endless accumulation of capital that is its *raison d’être*.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wallerstein, Immanuel Maurice. *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power*. New York: New, 2006. Print. 12, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Robert J.C. Young, “Editorial,” *Interventions* 1:1 (1998), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Wallerstein, Immanuel Maurice. *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power*. New York: New, 2006. Print. 48.

Although the legitimacy of the modern world-system was called into question and disrupted during 1968, the scaffolding that supported its functioning was largely undisturbed. Consequently, the aftermath of many successful national liberation struggles that resulted in independence and self-government, was met with a capitalist counter-offensive – neoliberalism. This was the realization that Frantz Fanon had on his deathbed as he wrote *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>7</sup> It was not enough to overthrow colonial authority if the young nation was not prepared to seize control out of the hands of the native bourgeoisie, who had been groomed to seize State control by the ex-colonial powers. The fundamental problem of the post-colonial State is the disillusioning realization that independence does not necessitate freedom and equality. In fact, there is often an immediate fragmentation, on the basis of relative privilege, within the newly independent post-colonial nation. In the case of Algeria, the native bourgeoisie quickly filled the vacuum of power left by the ex-colonial powers and proved to be incapable of fulfilling their historical role as both the bourgeoisie and as the representatives of the young nation-state. The effect is that the nationalist parties, which were the driving forces of the colonial resistance movement, were unwilling to integrate the peasantry into their political programmes, nor were they willing to educate them politically. The consequence of this is that the Manichean world of colonial occupation is structurally reproduced within the newly independent post-colonial State. The peasantry in this instance, as will also be the case in India, constitutes the subaltern classes who are ignored by the politically emergent native bourgeoisie to the detriment of the development of the young nation as a whole. *It is out of this crisis that the Subaltern Studies Collective emerges.*

But there wasn't just an historical crisis that prompted the intervention of the Subaltern Studies Collective. There was also an epistemic crisis, or at the very least a political stagnation, that had been unfolding within Marxist theory and historiography on the European continent. This crisis had two forms: one was internal to debates occurring with Western European Marxism, which had become divorced from the political landscape and had shifted almost entirely into the academy, and the other was whether or not these theoretical models were too imbued by the Eurocentrism of the modern world-system to be applicable to the previously described post-colonial condition. Many members of the Subaltern Studies Collective would have a lot to say on this second point, especially Dipesh Chakrabarty, but it is the former – the theoretical and political stagnation within Western Marxism itself – that has to be considered first.

As aforementioned, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxism took a detour into philosophical inquiry and away from the praxis of class politics. The brutal, violent forms of counter-revolution beginning in 1929 broke the strong unity of theory and praxis that Marxism benefited from at the beginning of the century. As Perry Anderson notes, “the terrorist dictatorships of fascism were the historical solution of capital to the dangers of labor in this region: they were designed to suppress every trace of proletarian resistance and independence, in an international conjecture of escalating anti-imperialist antagonisms.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, European Marxists resigned themselves to social and economic analysis during the inter-war period. Marxism became the preoccupation of academics and the

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<sup>7</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove, 1965. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, Perry. *Considerations on Western Marxism*. London: NLB, 1976. Print. 29.

majority of their output tended to focus on systematizing a Marxist philosophy, which could be complimented by Hegel, Kierkegaard, or Spinoza. With that in mind, the thematic innovations produced during this period should not be overlooked and are essential to understanding the intellectual heritage of SSC.

There were several disparate threads of Marxist thought developing within the European continent at this time. The first is the Frankfurt School, which in the 1920s began its gradual shift away from the science of historical materialism towards social philosophy. A major catalyst in this shift is the reappearance of Karl Marx's early texts, especially his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, which stresses the alienation of man from nature in the capitalist era. The other major school is the existential milieu of post-War France – typified by figures like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. All three developed political sympathies to the increasingly powerful labor movement in France but their theoretical contributions are negligent. Neither of these theoretical threads was of particular importance to the Subaltern Studies Collective. It was Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist, who developed their earliest guiding theoretical model, as well as the name they came to adopt – subaltern. Gramsci understood better than anyone the autonomy and efficacy of cultural superstructures as a *political* problem.<sup>9</sup> His fundamental thematic innovation was the notion of hegemony, which he defines as the superstructures (cultural, institutional, ideological, etc.) that maintains the authority and legitimacy of bourgeois, liberal capitalism. The mechanisms of control operated not through authoritarian repression, but a complex ensemble of ideologies and mechanisms of cultural institutions – churches, newspapers, and political parties – that inculcated the modern political subject. As Anderson points out, “the flexible and dynamic hegemony of capital over labor in the West through this stratified consensual structure, represented a far harder barrier for the socialist movement to overcome than it had encountered in Russia.”<sup>10</sup>

The final influence for the Subaltern Studies Collective is the burgeoning field of Marxist historiography, which was especially prevalent in England with the work of E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Karl Polanyi. The premise of their projects was constructed around the notion of a retelling of history ‘from the bottom’ that challenges elitist histories and illuminates the crises that the economic and political transformations of bourgeois capitalism had for the working classes. The Subaltern Studies Collective would adapt this model of historical inquiry in their earliest volumes and their project, broadly speaking, began as a continuation of the Marxist historiography being produced by the likes of Antonio Gramsci, E.P. Thomson, and Eric Hobsbawm.

By the close of the 1960s, the philosophical detour of Marxism had all but run its course. It remained the case that “the hidden hallmark of Western Marxism as a whole is [that it] is a product of *defeat*.”<sup>11</sup> The discourse as a whole was bound together by a shared, common pessimism and disillusionment. Nowhere was this more evident than the buildup to the events in Paris during 1968. As the student movement gained momentum and attempted to build inroads within the French Communist Party (PCF), the structuralist philosopher Louis

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 78.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 80.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 42.

Althusser had almost entirely absorbed class politics within the textuality of theory. The divorce between theory and praxis had become so intensified that it was no longer possible to have any productive, let alone dialectical, relationship between the two. In the aftermath of the world revolutions of 1968, it was not only the modern world-system that had become unsettled, so had the predominant counter-hegemonic discourses of resistance. In other words, the Subaltern Studies Collective wasn't just responding to an historical crisis. They were also responding to, and perhaps resuscitating, the possibility of a surreptitious discourse that could challenge the scaffolding of global inequality.

### **Subaltern Studies Reviewed**

In the particular case of India, these global trends manifested themselves in several particular ways. The death in 1964 of Jawaharlal Nehru, then the leader of the Indian National Congress (INC), left a vacuum of power that would be filled by his daughter Indira Gandhi. In 1971, a second war with neighboring Pakistan broke out, which had devastating economic consequences for the laboring classes. It was during this period that nationwide labor strikes – most notably the historic railway strikes that included over a million workers – stalemated the national economy. Meanwhile, in the Indian countryside, the Naxalites – a militant Maoist counter-insurgency movement that had broken away from the Communist party – began to assert itself into political and national life. This decade-long crisis resulted in Indira Gandhi's declaration of a nationwide 'state of emergency,' which involved a suspension of the democratic process and free speech. This authoritarian action called into question the legitimacy of the INC to speak on behalf of the nation and the disillusioning effects catalyzed the earliest critical interventions of the Subaltern Studies Collective. It is important to stress, however, that "at its origins, the project, while reflecting the 'disillusionment' of the 1970s, was meant to explore the relationship between revolutionary theory and mass struggle in India."<sup>12</sup> The earliest publications from SSC were concerned with the historical traces, many of which had gone unnoticed, that had gone into producing the current historical conjecture within the postcolonial state of India.

The project was officially launched in the 1982 with the publication of *Subaltern Studies I*, which introduced the work of Ranajit Guha as the leading voice. The publication in 1982 of Guha's *On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India* serves as the theoretical introduction that would inform the early corpus of the Subaltern Studies Collective. With Guha's directive, "Subaltern Studies began as an attempt to transform the writing of colonial Indian history by drawing on the fluid concepts of class and State articulated in the *Prison Notebooks* of Antonio Gramsci."<sup>13</sup> The cornerstone of the Collective's critical intervention was directed at the elitist historiography of Indian history, especially its narration of the nationalist anti-colonial movement and the historical role and function of the native bourgeoisie. This elitist account "represents nationalism as the sum of the activities and ideas by which the Indian elite responded to the institutions, opportunities, resources, etc.

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<sup>12</sup> Chaturvedi, Vinayak. "Introduction." *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. London: Verso, 2000. Print. x.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. vii.

generated by colonialism.”<sup>14</sup> This reductive interpretation “fails to acknowledge, far less interpret, the contribution made by the people *on their own*, that is, *independently of the elite* to the making and development of this nationalism.”<sup>15</sup> It follows then that the historical material of the Subaltern Studies Collective is the political activity and resistance of groups that existed outside of the cultural and institutional hegemony of both the colonial and native bourgeoisie.

What defines the political exteriority of the subaltern classes is the condition of being outside of the consent-based authority of the modern bourgeois nation-state. What Guha uncovered was the structure of duality inherent to the bourgeoisie’s political project, wherein two disparate domains of politics were established with minimal contact between one another. There was the domain of organized political institutions and associations that were formed and conditioned by colonial rule and adopted in the postcolonial era by the native bourgeoisie. And on the other hand, “was the domain of peasant politics where beliefs and actions did not fit into the grid of ‘interests’ and ‘aggregation of interests’ that constituted the world of the bourgeois representative politics.”<sup>16</sup> Marxists have often interpreted this subaltern domain of the political as the realm of the spontaneous. This inability to grasp the nature of peasant agency and consciousness speaks not to the inherent backwardness of the subaltern classes but the theoretical poverty of the politically dominant groups. Guha’s project seeks to develop methodological tools through which the historian can accurately investigate the structures of peasant consciousness in order to interpret the motivations of their political behavior and acts of resistance. The purpose is to interrupt the myth of “peasant insurrections being purely spontaneous and unpremeditated affairs.”<sup>17</sup> Guha reveals a truth that is entirely to the contrary. Wherein peasant insurrections can be appropriately analyzed as intentional acts of political resistance that rebel against their own exploitation and repression as well as the structural conditions and codes that defined their existence.

The difficulty for the historian of the subaltern classes is their dependency on the literature of the hegemonic classes, which typically interpret peasant insurgency as though it were a natural phenomenon. One reason for this naturalizing tendency is to dismiss the historical and political character of resistance by a conscious, active peasantry. The Indian historian of peasant struggles has to creatively read between the lines of governmental correspondence in order to broach the distinctive qualities of peasant consciousness. Guha describes this process of reading history as the search for interrupting indices or fragments, that function to create a subversive meaning within the linear, supposedly neutral historical narrative of events as dictated by the State. The elitist history, responding to the class interest of the bourgeoisie, narrates the transformation of Indian society in teleological terms with an end goal being the inexhaustible search for cheap labor. This colonialist and elitist historiography usually functioned as a sort of ‘policy historiography,’ which helped to

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<sup>14</sup> Guha, Ranajit. "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India." *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. London: Verso, 2000. Print. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

<sup>16</sup> Chatterjee, Partha. "The Nation and Its Peasants." *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. London: Verso, 2000. Print. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Guha, Ranajit. "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency." *Selected Subaltern Studies*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. Print. 45.

inform the appropriate governmental measures of the ruling classes. Politically and economically, this involved wrenching individuals from their communal networks and re-inscribing them as a modern political subject whose interests were always contingent upon the axioms of the marketplace. The prose of counter-insurgency and the history of the subaltern classes develop from a perspective of resistance that disrupts the neutrality of the elitist narratives of both the colonial and nationalist anti-colonial periods. In order to accomplish this, it stresses the political agency of the peasantry and their ability to thoughtfully navigate the modernizing agendas of the political elites. Guha also distinguishes his historical method from that of leftist historiography that produces idealized accounts of the political insurgent that is unwilling to account for any social contingencies or political motivations other than class. This secular whitewashing of the history of anti-colonial resistance produces an intentional misreading for a direct political purpose. It has the intention of creating a myth of insurgency – like the fables of Robin Hood. Guha’s criticizes leftist historiography because when “blinded by the glare of a perfect and immaculate consciousness the historian sees nothing, for instance, but solidarity in rebel behavior and fails to notice its Other, namely, betrayal.”<sup>18</sup>

The task of the Subaltern Studies Collective was not just to produce an account that serves the interest of the oppressed. Rather, their method of writing a ‘history from below’ was designed to highlight the degree of resistance and contestation that existed alongside colonial domination, bourgeois authority, or capitalist exploitation. The task is to demonstrate for their readership that these historical processes did not happen as a neutral process, which is how it is narrated in nationalist and elitist accounts, but are always imbued with power and contention. In the anti-colonial movements of India, the biggest subaltern group was the landless, agricultural laborers of the Indian peasantry and Guha’s canonical text – *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* – takes this group as its subject matter. Rather than focusing solely on the ways in which the peasantry were controlled and dominated by the modernizing Indian nation-state, Guha documents the forms of everyday struggle that the peasantry were engaged in. In *Elementary Aspects*, Guha uncovers six different features of peasant resistance. The first is negation, which is the process whereby peasant consciousness differentiates itself in opposition to the dominant classes. The second is ambiguity, which is an element within nationalist historiography that is caused by the pervasive misreading of peasant rebellions by the ruling classes, which can only theorize these events as criminal transgressions and not political acts of defiance. The third is that peasant movements had their own discrete forms and modalities that often involved negation and destruction of the signs of bourgeois State authority. The fourth, solidarity, describes the communal aspect of peasant movements that were often formed in terms of kinship, ethnic, or religious ties. This is an essential feature because it challenges the Marxist assumption about the centrality of class in political movements. The fifth is the speed of transmission among the peasantry, which posits the seditious nature of communication – namely rumor – in the development and organization of a politically conscious and mobilized peasantry. And the sixth and final aspect is the geographic or territorial quality of peasant activity, which played a crucial role in the formation of peasant solidarity.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 84.

Taken together, these six aspects suggest the primacy of the communal as the principle site of peasant politics. In “the rebel’s self-definition of the territorial space of insurgency, a principle of community gives to all these specific aspects a fundamental constitutive character as the purposive political acts of a collective consciousness.”<sup>19</sup> The centrality of the territorially defined community based upon kinship ties is what gives peasant consciousness its paradigmatic form, which is distinguished from the class-interest based solidarity of bourgeois politics. It’s important to note that the domain of peasant politics, with its community formed aspects, should not be misinterpreted “as an egalitarian and harmonious community, free from internal dissension and struggle.”<sup>20</sup> Guha and the Subaltern Studies Collective are not proffering the populist idealization of the peasantry as a pre-modern utopia. The reality of agrarian communities is that they each have unique and complex relationships of power and inequality that extend to social status, the means of production, and subsistence. The distinction Guha is making is not that peasant communities were culturally or politically superior, only that they constituted an autonomous realm of politics that consciously participated in acts of struggle against the authority of the Indian nation-state.

While Guha stresses the local and communal conditions that serve as the precondition in the formation of peasant consciousness, he also emphasizes the fifth aspect – transmission. It is the communicable quality of peasant politics that makes it a totalizing and autonomous realm of national politics. Chatterjee underscores the importance of this aspect by differentiating it from its European counterpart, namely the agrarian politics of medieval Europe. Accordingly, “what appears to be only ‘localized’ in the context of a vast country like India may often be found to involve a territory and a rebel population larger than those in even the most famous peasant revolts in European history.”<sup>21</sup> The reason for this difference is that peasant politics in India were never fully disciplined or regulated by the juridical powers of the Indian nation-state. Consequently, the domain of peasant politics within India “encompasses a field of social relations far wider than what is conventionally regarded as appropriate in European history.”<sup>22</sup> It follows then that the movement of peasant consciousness in the Indian context is not limited to the legal-political relationships constituted by State authority. Instead, the predominant manifestations occur within the layered communal context and take place through everyday practices. In other words, peasant consciousness and political acts are not formalized legally in the Indian context but take on an almost ‘Brechtian form of class struggle,’ as James Scott will suggest.<sup>23</sup> However, in distinguishing the Indian context (which at times stands in for the post-colonial East) from the European theater of peasant politics in the medieval period, the Subaltern Studies Collective risks reifying the binary oppositions of Orientalist knowledge-practices. It is this element of the Collective’s project that has attracted a great deal of attention from contemporary critics and theorists.

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<sup>19</sup> Chatterjee, Partha. "The Nation and Its Peasants." *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. London: Verso, 2000. Print. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 20.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>23</sup> Scott, James. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press. 1985. Print.

## The Orientalist Trappings of Subaltern Studies

Nowhere is this contradiction more evident than Guha's problematic parochialism and his thesis that the native bourgeoisie's failure to achieve a consensual and hegemonic authority was a uniquely postcolonial or Eastern condition. For Guha and others in the Subaltern Studies Collective this assertion discredits the universalizing drive of capital. By holding up historical examples of the bourgeoisie's failure to align their socio-economic project as beneficial to the interests of the nation as a whole they disintegrate the veracity of the capitalist metanarrative. However, there is also a problematic undercurrent within this assertion, which is that the bourgeoisie's success was a uniquely European or Western phenomenon, as though Western culture was exceptionally endowed with this ideological capacity. In contrast, the post-colonial Eastern world is said to lack the institutional framework, political and legal guidelines, and cultural capacity to develop and realize the revolutionary and transformative project of bourgeois liberalism. This distortion of history is embedded in the essentializing tendencies of Orientalist discourses and it is this distortion that needs to be challenged and subverted.

To do so, we return to the historical reality of Gramsci's political life in 20<sup>th</sup> century Italy. As aforementioned, it was the theoretical contributions of Antonio Gramsci that catalyzed the Subaltern Studies Collective. Within the canon of 20<sup>th</sup> century Western Marxism, Gramsci functioned as the sole exception to the philosophical institutionalization of Marxist theory. "He alone embodied in his person a revolutionary unity of theory and practice, of the type that had defined the classical heritage."<sup>24</sup> Part of the reason that Gramsci was uniquely capable of embodying the unity between theory and praxis was his upbringing in Sardinia. He was born into extreme poverty in the Sardinian countryside and as a young man it was Sardinian nationalism, not the class politics of Marxism, which animated him politically. It wasn't until he moved to Turin, at the time a hotbed of labor unions and Marxist activity, that he joined the Italian Socialist Party in 1913. By 1924, Gramsci had become a leading figure of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). His prominence in the political party resulted in his imprisonment in 1926 by the emergent Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini. It was during his decade-long confinement that Gramsci produced the series of essays that have been compiled into *The Prison Notebooks*. The defining feature of Gramsci's heterodox Marxism is the central importance that he gives to politics at a time when economic determinism was the dominant theoretical model. Gramsci's lasting influence is a result of his recognition of the malleable quality of capitalist control. However, at the time of his writing, Gramsci's concern was with the crisis of the immediate present and the historical traces and failures that produced the capitalist counter-attack embodied by Mussolini's Fascist regime.

The defining moment in Gramsci's political life is when the Italian State employed and armed willing Sardinian mercenaries to suppress the labor strikes occurring in Turin. This disillusioning event, which showcased the breakdown of revolutionary class politics, forced Gramsci to reconsider the role that the political party – especially the Communist party – must play within society. Gramsci was forced to recognize what many other Marxist theorists were blind to, what Guha called the 'Other of solidarity' – betrayal. What became

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 45.

obvious was the need to develop a counter-hegemonic party, which would include the peasantry of Southern Italy alongside the industrial laborers of Northern Italy. However, Gramsci's realization didn't just affect his political sensibilities. He was equally motivated by the need to challenge the nationalist and elitist conception of Italian historiography and in doing so he uncovered the historical failures of the Italian bourgeoisie, which produced a political crisis that the reactionary Fascist movement was able to exploit.

Gramsci analyzes these historical failures in the section entitled *Notes on Italian Politics*. It is here that one of the first theorizations of subalternity is found. In the unity between the State and civil society it is "the subaltern classes, by definition, [which] are not unified and cannot unite."<sup>25</sup> In other words, the subaltern classes are the social groups that are ignored by the politically dominant social group. In the economic and political landscape of bourgeois capitalism the subaltern classes were often the agricultural laborers of the countryside. In the Italian context, this involved a schism between the industrializing Northern regions and the largely agricultural regions of Southern Italy, Sicily, and Sardinia. However, unlike the bourgeois revolution of France in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Italy lacked a Jacobin party that could effectively fuse the disparate class interests within a unifying ideology. "The Italian bourgeoisie was incapable of uniting the people around itself, and this was the cause of its defeats and the interruptions in its development."<sup>26</sup> One of these major defeats was the inability to function as the moral directive of the nation and effectively transform the whole of the country away from pre-capitalist social bonds. This was the case throughout Europe, where the bourgeois revolutions were resisted by the reactionary politics of feudal landowners and nobles who wanted to keep the rural masses tied to the land. Gramsci's diagnosis of the Fascist counter-offensive is two-fold: it is the capitalist classes response to the political threat of unified industrial laborers, but it is also the cumulative effect of the hegemonic failure of the Italian bourgeoisie dating back as far as the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Guha's claim does not hold up to the historical scrutiny. The phenomenon of 'dominance without hegemony' is not a uniquely post-colonial condition that is spatially limited to the East. Gramsci's diagnosis of the historical failures of the Italian bourgeoisie to develop a unifying, hegemonic nation-building project is only one example but it effectively falsifies the Orientalist distinction that Guha and others are subtly proffering. Of course, this doesn't discredit the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective. They were, first and foremost, historians of the local and their concerns and criticisms were effectively directed at the particular case of India and the distortions of elitist and nationalist historiography. They were hugely influential and attracted a global audience. Their problematic reliance on Orientalist categories is not a dismissal of their entire project but a necessary recognition of its theoretical limitations. The root of the criticism is not that Guha and others ended up accepting a problematic misreading of European history. After all, they are not European historians and they are only tangentially interested in this comparative analysis. The criticism is not of their conclusions but of their obsessive disavowal of liberalism and the universalizing drive of capital, which became especially prominent in their later work.

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<sup>25</sup> Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971. Print. 52.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 53.

The three principal elements of Eurocentrism, as outlined by Wallerstein and others, is instructive here. Theorists like Dipesh Chakrabarty wholly ignore the second element, the universalizing drive of capital, which served as the principle motivation of European colonialism. Rather than focus on the material realities of Eurocentrism, the Subaltern Studies Collective assume that Eurocentrism is synonymous with any theoretical school of thought that has a European origin, including Marxism. This is an obscuring shift that wrongly posits that Eurocentrism is a purely imagined and discursive phenomenon that can be analytically separated from its material realities. With this shift in mind, the focus of the Subaltern Studies critique is not of the formal elements of Eurocentrism – the modernizing state and its bureaucratic apparatus constructed to the benefit of the capitalist classes interests.

One example of this is Chakrabarty's article on Bengali jute mill workers in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In *Conditions for Knowledge of Working-Class Conditions: Employers, Government and the Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1890-1940*, Chakrabarty calls into question the veracity of the Foucauldian conception of the modalities of power and discipline that operate within a capitalist system. For Marx, the two components of work-discipline operating within industrial capitalism are technical subordination and supervision. This latter component is embodied by the labor surveyor, who attains a heightened governmental and bureaucratic importance with the passage of the English Factory Acts of 1833. Marx noted in this legislation the process whereby "the English state's interest in closely monitoring the conditions of labor had an extremely useful role to play in the development of English capitalism."<sup>27</sup> In simpler terms, Marx noticed the emerging modality of disciplinary power germane to the capitalist mode of production, whereby it became politically expedient for the capitalist classes to have inexhaustible documented knowledge about the conditions of their laborers. This was a particular modality of power, which was also dependent upon the notion of the free contract and equality before the law. Chakrabarty challenges these conceptions of the capitalist mode of production through the example of the Bengali jute mill workers, who were "mostly migrant peasants from Bihar and UP, [and who] did not have a culture characterized by any ingrained notion of 'human equality' and were thus very unlike the workers of Marx's assumption."<sup>28</sup>

What Chakrabarty uncovers is a very different process, one that is in fact much murkier, than what Marx encountered in industrial England. What initially puzzled Chakrabarty was "the relative poverty of information in the documents of the [Indian] state – especially documents that needed the co-operation of capital, the factory inspector's reports for instance – which compare rather badly with the apparent richness of similar English documents that Marx put to such effective use in the first volume of *Capital*."<sup>29</sup> The reasons for this are diverse and difficult to flesh out. However, the most obvious factor is the high level of corruption that occurred within the labor recruitment process in the Jute industry. It wasn't just that the Indian state lacked any political will or interest in documenting working

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<sup>27</sup> Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Conditions for Knowledge of Working-Class Conditions: Employers, Government and the Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1890-1940." *Selected Subaltern Studies*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. Print. 180.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 184.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 184.

class conditions and culture. Although, it is true that the large surplus of expendable labor-power within the Jute industry didn't make it a pressing concern. "The mills obviously found it cheaper to carry with them some excess labor (to meet contingencies like epidemics and absenteeism) than to invest in a healthy, vigorous, efficient working class."<sup>30</sup> It wasn't until the industry experienced their first labor shortage, in 1902, that the first documented census became a political priority. And even then, the effort produced a very partial, inaccurate, and even forged documentation. The main reason for this was Sardari corruption. These were individuals who were tasked with maintaining the factories documents and their unique role as the supervising class allowed them certain privileges and advantages. "Sardari was primarily about supervisory workers making money at the expense of the ordinary worker through such means as money lending, bribery, etc."<sup>31</sup> These practices were well kept secrets that were largely tolerated by factory owners because it did nothing to impair either the labor process or the attainment of surplus value, and were helpful practices in the recruitment of low wage laborers.

The crucial distinction is that this process doesn't give way to any totalizing power-knowledge regime that functioned to discipline, survey, and document industrial working class conditions. The Sardari overseers functioned out of personal self-interest rather than political or economic alignment with the factory owners and were tolerated because they coincidentally created beneficial results for the capitalist class. In other words, Chakrabarty effectively makes use of the Indian jute mills and their deficient documentation to make a very crucial point about the analytical limitations of Marx's first volume of *Capital*. At this level, his essay is a brilliant intervention that forces us to rethink many assumptions about the way in which power might operate within a capitalist system. The problematic shift is when this is used as evidence to suggest that Marx, or Marxism generally, is an inherently Eurocentric mode of analysis that is both incapable of accounting for the particularities of the post-colonial world and might even exist in epistemic hostility to any further understanding. It at this level, one that has become pervasive within post-colonial theory, that produces these Orientalist reconfigurations and reiterations and it is detrimental to the political imaginings of an internationalist movement capable of combating global inequality. The problem, in the simplest of terms, is when every instance of cultural variance is treated as an inexorable ontological difference. This is Vivek Chibber's criticism in *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*. He stresses the distinction between cultural practices and economic processes in order to stake his claim, which is that "all capital's universalization requires is that the economic logic of capitalism be implanted in various parts of the world and that it be successfully reproduced over time."<sup>32</sup> He admits that this will of course "generate a certain degree of cultural and political change as well" but it "doesn't require that all, or even most, of the cultural practices of a region be transformed along some kind of identifiable capitalist lines."<sup>33</sup> Of course, this doesn't necessitate that cultural analysis is abandoned and that cultural variance and difference is of lesser importance. However, the distinction is of vital importance because without it there is an

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 210.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 214.

<sup>32</sup> Chibber, Vivek. "How Does the Subaltern Speak?" *How Does the Subaltern Speak?* Web. <<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2013/04/how-does-the-subaltern-speak/>>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

entrapping quality to any sociological, political, or economic analysis of the postcolonial world, wherein the entire history of encounters and interconnection are obscured by an unavoidable, insurmountable, and ontological cultural difference. This cultural and ontological framing reproduces the same essentializing binary distinctions that Edward Said discovered in the European social sciences. The problem, now, is how we think our way outside of this reductive, antagonistic duality.

### **Subaltern Studies Revitalized**

As aforementioned, the intervention made by the Subaltern Studies Collective in the early 1980s was crucial in helping to revitalize the social sciences after decades of stalemated debates within Western Marxism. Their emphasis on the agency, intentionality, and political consciousness of the non-hegemonic classes (mostly the agrarian peasantry) was a necessary intrusion into the field and its influence is unparalleled. The paradox is that in solving the epistemic crisis internal to Western Marxism, the Subaltern Studies Collective fell prey to its own political stagnation and malaise. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Collective ceased its output and a new set of political and economic concerns came to the fore – characterized by globalization. The Subaltern Studies Collective was responding to the upheaval of the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, typified by anti-colonial nationalist uprisings and their contributions were indispensable in helping to bring greater historical clarity to this turbulent period. With the evolution of capitalist economic logic and the rise of neo-liberal state governance, a new set of concerns has arisen that necessitate a shift in our analytical frameworks.

However, the basic methodology of Subaltern Studies is uniquely capable of navigating this quandary. The challenge is not to deconstruct their contributions but to expand their scope both spatially and temporally. The challenge, in contemporary terms, is to interrupt the imperialist political strategies that maintain the interests of the capitalist class. In order to do so, we have to shift our attention towards a “subaltern entity which [is] diasporic, cosmopolitan, and sophisticated.”<sup>34</sup> This shift in perspective, which involves a transnational scope, is of fundamental importance given the current modality of capital and its globally entrenched circulatory processes. The basic project of SSC and their historical perspective, one that is a retelling ‘from the bottom,’ is the ideal methodology when attempting to politically counter or problematize the hegemonic discourses and justifications of the imperialist empires of today. And, at least according to Gramsci himself, this perspective is germane to the recounting of the subaltern condition itself. Accordingly, he states, that “the history of the parties of the subaltern groups is very complex [and it] must include all the repercussions of party activity, throughout the area of the subaltern groups themselves *taken globally*.”<sup>35</sup> It is this foundational statement, and its emphasis on the global interconnectedness of the subaltern classes, that provides a statement of purpose for the continuation and advancement of subaltern studies.

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<sup>34</sup> Ho, Engseng. "Empire through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat." *Weatherhead Center for International Affairs* (2004): Harvard University. Web.  
<[http://wcfia.harvard.edu/files/wcfia/files/1089\\_eh\\_empirediasporic.pdf?m=1426991635](http://wcfia.harvard.edu/files/wcfia/files/1089_eh_empirediasporic.pdf?m=1426991635)>.

<sup>35</sup> Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971. Print. 52-53.