

Reading subaltern studies : critical history, contested meaning, and the globalization of South Asia / Edited by David Ludden; New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001 (304-339p)

CHAPTER II.5

Subaltern Studies:
Radical History in the
Metaphoric Mode

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The history of subaltern groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. There undoubtedly does exist a tendency to (at least provisional stages of) unification in the historical activity of these groups, but this tendency is continually interrupted by the activity of the ruling groups; it therefore can only be demonstrated when an historical cycle is completed and this cycle culminates in a success. Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up; only 'permanent' victory breaks their subordination, and that not immediately.

—Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the prison notebooks*

... The critique is by its very nature still rather precocious, incomplete and generally endowed with all the immaturity of a thing in its formative stages. But it is this very want of maturity that drives the critique audaciously, if not prudently in every instance, to probe those fundamental contradictions of the existing system which prefigure its demise.

—Ranajit Guha, 'Dominance without hegemony and its historiography'

WHEN VIEWED from the perspective of 1970s' history, two distinct strands of a solution to the dilemma of colonial middle-class consciousness can be seen to have emerged in

recent years. One strand sinks more deeply into the 'collaborationist' middle-class consciousness that Barun De so roundly castigated in the early 1970s and that Marxist historians had decried since at least the mid-1930s, hoping to see in it an enabling duplicity that might offer an opening for criticism. The second strand attempts to bypass the bourgeois delusions of the cultural heritage by 'sinking into the subaltern.' Both are necessarily related. The latter takes its name from *Subaltern Studies*, a series of publications edited by Ranajit Guha beginning in 1982.¹

Opening the subaltern perspective can be described as the invention of a break through the impasse confronted by middle-class consciousness. I will limit my comments here to Guha's contributions, which should not be taken as representative of the group's varied researches (he has been its major theorist, but never a programmatic voice), but which are characteristic of the spirit animating the formation of the *Subaltern Studies* project. I do so since, in my opinion, Guha more than any of the other contributors to the series maintains the strongest links with the specific traditions of cultural history writing in modern Bengal, even as his call for a new historiography declares itself a radical break from the past. This closeness to the object of inquiry is what charges his statements with their characteristic flamboyance; in their radicalness they can be seen as closing a chapter in Bengali cultural history. To this end, I read his substantial oeuvre synchronically, for while various interests brought to the *Subaltern* project have necessarily changed its direction, I feel that Guha's work possesses an internal consistency whose basic problematic has remained coherent over two decades. I will argue that the *Subaltern* project does not so much uncover a new object for history writing as show us how history is written, and in the process it attempts to pay the debt to Europe that has always been seen as the nemesis of writing cultural history in colonial India.

As we saw in Guha's earlier analysis of *Nildarpan*, by the mid-1970s the renaissance legacy had been substantially revised, and its greatest achievements could now be seen as expressing a duplicitous class interest. This ambivalence, tragic because unavoidable, marked even the most complex and beautiful expressions with the guilt of

betrayal. *Subaltern Studies* attempts to rewrite the history of colonial and post-colonial India by resetting the parameters of historiography itself. It hopes to short-circuit the logic of complicity between indigenous and colonial élites by setting out to find a new object (of desire?): now not a nationalist or ethnic identity, and far less a civilisational advance up the evolutionary scale, but rather a field of heterogeneous forces that either resisted the 'official' nationalism of the Congress or had no access to the symbolic discourses of nation forming.² The impact of this 'field' on the anti-colonial movement has never been accurately registered in either colonialist or nationalist history writing. Perhaps its telling will unlock new dimensions of the Indian reality.

The field is described in the project's opening manifesto as the '*politics of the people*. For parallel to the domain of élite politics there existed throughout the colonial period in India another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors . . . were the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country, that is, the people. This was an *autonomous* domain, for it neither originated from élite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter.³ Guha is clearly appropriating a narrow definition of 'subalternity' here, at variance with the earlier usage we had seen in Barun De, for whom the term designated the 'subordinate' middle class. This shift in valence of the term partially reflects an evolution within Indian historiography's understanding of the work of Antonio Gramsci, whose writings were introduced to Bengali historians through the teaching of Susobhan Sarkar in the late 1950s, contemporaneous with their first English translation.⁴ In more recent uses of the term, 'subaltern' seems to have returned to its earlier broad strokes, as when Partha Chatterjee wrote in 1994 of middle-class subordination as 'the subalternity of an élite.'⁵ A first, cursory understanding of the term subaltern should therefore alert us to a certain mobility in its usage.

Guha's definition explicitly attempted to return to the original Gramscian perspective, in which 'subaltern' designated the lower strata of an underdeveloped society lacking in 'naturally' revolutionary classes. For Gramsci, the term subaltern, used interchangeably with 'popular classes' or 'masses' described the inferior social positions of a small industrial and agricultural proletariat subsisting alongside a

massive peasantry, all of whom were 'left out' of the historic formation of the Italian state in 1870. The risorgimento was a 'revolution without a revolution,' or a 'passive revolution' that captured state power for the moderate bourgeoisie through the exercise of hegemony, 'intellectual and moral leadership' over the policies of the weak opposition parties, rather than by winning the allegiance of the people.⁶ Far from the assertion of a popular, 'national' will, the Italian state was formed by men who 'were not capable of leading the people, were not capable of arousing their enthusiasm and their passion. . . . They said that they were aiming at the creation of a modern State in Italy, and they in fact produced a bastard. They aimed at stimulating the formation of an extensive and energetic ruling class, and they did not succeed; at integrating the people into the framework of the new State, and they did not succeed.' The consequences of that failure were 'a paltry political life . . . the fundamental and endemic rebelliousness of the Italian popular classes, the narrow and stunted existence of a sceptical and cowardly ruling stratum . . . and . . . the sullen passivity of the great mass of the people. . . . They made the people-nation into an instrument, into an object, they degraded it.'⁷ Crucially, Gramsci notices that in Italy the subaltern strata 'are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State."' Thus 'the historian must record, and discover the causes of, the line of development towards integral autonomy, starting from the most primitive phases; he must note . . . every assertion of an independent will and its efforts to break with those above it and to unite with those of others in its class.'⁸ In developing a movement to unseat the hegemonic bourgeoisie, 'every trace of independent initiative on the part of subaltern groups should therefore be of incalculable value for the integral historian.'⁹

In India, where power has historically been consolidated by a minority at the top, and where even the colonial bourgeoisie that led the freedom movement numbered a mere fraction of the total population, the lower strata are immense and extremely heterogeneous. Were they to come to account in any representative reckoning of the populace, they could exert on the democratic process an influence of catastrophic proportions. The existence of such immense and highly diversified subaltern strata within the post-colonial state, prevented from forming adequate political coalitions that might include them

in the processes of state power, obviously casts severe doubts upon the representational validity of the state and raises provocative questions about the eventual destiny of 'the people.' For the study of history, it is clear that any understanding of anti-colonialism as a mass movement must come to terms with this overwhelming majority of lower-strata agents, who were selectively mobilised for nationalist agitation but did not participate in the ideological and practical debates of élite leadership.¹⁰

In an interesting move, Guha's massive study of peasant revolt under the Raj, *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in colonial India*, attempts to analyse subaltern consciousness in what he calls its "pure" state, before the politics of nationalism and socialism begin to penetrate the countryside on a significant scale.¹¹ In focusing on this 'pure state,' Guha hopes to isolate the 'general form' of the 'theoretical consciousness' of the subaltern, a consciousness in which conservative and radical tendencies battle each other 'in order to arrive,' as Gramsci puts it, 'at the working out at a higher level of one's own conception of reality,' that is to say, free and independent.¹² Guha finds that this consciousness in its 'pure state' consistently struggled against itself to assert its radical side, most successfully when it expressed itself in rebellion. Rebellion signified the true vocation of the peasant: to end his oppression and assert his independence by turning things upside down. This did not necessarily mean that peasant rebellion needed to manifest itself as systematic, long term, or horizontally based to be conscious of the forces that denied the peasant freedom; but rebellion did indicate a basic 'political character' at the heart of subaltern identity.

Guha's great contribution is having restored to history the record of 110 peasant rebellions spanning 117 years of British occupation, a history that at once counters British assertions that they ruled the subcontinent by consent as well as Orientalist visions of India as the land of tranquillity. The subaltern identity was 'political' inasmuch as 'the existing power nexus had to be turned on its head as a necessary condition for the address of any particular grievance' (*EAP*, 8). British power permeated every level of rural structure under which the peasant laboured, and the rebellions thus translated back in every case to

a social arrangement in which the Raj could be seen to play some determining part. This link of peasant rebellion to colonial power situates it as a counter-tradition to the nationalist freedom struggle, the failures of which had been amply detailed by the previous generation. Perhaps by virtue of their very exclusion from élite politics, the subaltern strata escaped the immense resources of middle-class bad faith exposed by the 1970s historiography. Guha's overriding preoccupation is to challenge the vocation of mainstream historiography, which has consistently misrepresented the middle class as speaking for the Indian nation. 'We want to emphasize [subaltern consciousness's] sovereignty, its consistency and its logic in order to compensate for its absence from the literature on the subject' (*EAP*, 13).

In this context it is tempting to read Guha's 'On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India' in the first volume of *Subaltern Studies* as a manifesto explicitly arising from the impasse of the 1970s. In this inaugural statement he tends to separate élite and subaltern realms into mutually repelling existences, defying Gramsci's emphasis on the necessary interrelation between them. Gramsci insists that subalterns must 'attempt . . . to influence the programs of these [dominant] formations in order to press claims of their own,' making the history of subaltern groups 'intertwined with that of civil society and thereby with the history of State and groups of States.' Gramsci clearly states that the history of subaltern organisation 'can only be demonstrated when . . . this cycle culminates in a success,' that is, in revolution.¹³ He is far too sceptical of the power of history writing, which is by definition always in the service of the state, to believe that subaltern experience or 'consciousness' can be adequately represented by a state whose very survival depends on repressing such consciousness. 'Only "permanent" victory breaks their subordination.' Is *Subaltern Studies* in fact premature?

Guha claims that 'the experience of exploitation and labour endowed [subaltern] politics with many idioms, norms and values which put it in a category *apart* from élite politics' ('OSA,' 5, my emphasis), and 'there were vast areas in the life and consciousness of the people which were *never integrated* into their [élite] hegemony' ('OSA,' 5-6, my

emphasis). He thus implies that a truly alternative historiography can be written of subaltern existence that does not rely on the colonial or national state for its characteristic forms. In fact, as he asserts in a later essay, the pre-colonial Indian reality persisted throughout the British period as a 'distinct paradigm' with only tenuous translations of the dominant idioms of English rule penetrating its exterior, thus reducing all British representations of the 'Indian reality' to the thinnest veneer ('DWH,' 232–70). In stressing the radical difference, if not complete alterity, of subaltern politics, Guha stretches Gramsci's term here, if he is borrowing it at all. Though he fully admits it is not the case that 'these two domains were hermetically sealed off from each other and there was no contact between them' ('OSA,' 6), he does imply that subaltern consciousness was unpredictable and imminent, characterised far more than bourgeois nationalism by a tendency to accelerate into revolt, and thus properly unrepresentable in the sober annals of respectable history writing. Subaltern consciousness was so volatile that, once aroused, it terrified even nationalist leaders with the threat of 'things getting out of control.' As such, 'pure' subaltern consciousness remained outside the capacity of mainstream historiography ('the history of States') to record it with any accuracy. Far more frequently, elite historiography is charged with recording the suppression of peasant revolts, writing the subaltern out of its history. Élite nationalism and its historiography are characterised by a 'relatively greater reliance on the colonial adaptations of British parliamentary institutions' and are 'more legalistic and constitutionalist in orientation . . . more cautious and controlled' ('OSA,' 4–5). By separating the spontaneity and volatility of subaltern politics from the parliamentary decorum of both the national freedom struggle and its historiography, Guha implicitly unseats the claims to legitimacy of both the independent Indian state and mainstream academic history writing. 'The prose of counter-insurgency' provides a textbook example of how the tools of literary criticism can be used to unravel the truth-claims of historical discourse and restore the subaltern as agent of his own history.¹⁴

The reasoning seems as much theoretical as practical. The independent Indian state is the last and most dramatic legacy left over from colonial rule; it stands as the living testimony of the Raj's influence on the constitutional forms of life in post-colonial India. Yet according

to Guha the independent Indian state, like the Raj, exercises a 'dominance without hegemony' in its replication of European forms of law and politics, a replication that neither sufficiently considers the specific nature of Indian reality nor adapts its principles of representation to fit that reality. Combined with the uneasiness towards the cultural legacy that the 1970s' historiography revealed, *Subaltern Studies* begins to appear as an attempt within the realm of disciplinary historiography to counteract the negative effects of previous efforts at representing the complexity of Indian life in the name of something else—the people, the nation, the culture, the state. Cambridge historians of the post-independence era had repeated this gesture with disastrous results. Anil Seal, for one, had claimed that independence was a mere outgrowth of imperial governance: 'The British built the framework; the Indians fitted into it' ('DWH,' 295). This to Guha is a mere continuation of James Mill's early colonialist plan of writing Indian history as 'an interesting portion of the British History.' Subaltern historiography, by contrast, will escape the falsity of such élitist forms of representation by self-consciously measuring the distance between the official forms of history writing and the inscrutable objects they claim to represent.

To do this, it is crucial that subaltern historiography restore an 'outside' to what has previously passed for 'the Indian reality.' For if the bestowal of colonial ideology onto the subject population was indeed as partial as Guha claims, vast territories of incomprehension must exist alongside the English-educated upper crust that were never incorporated into the patterns of dominance and were therefore unrecognisable as forms of conscious thought. These territories could include knowledges, practices, traditions, and techniques having the ability to resist, subvert—or just ignore—the intrusion of Eurocentric modes of governance and representation. The immediate problem for the academic historian is to find the calling of solidarity that can place him, as a member of the elite camp, within this circle of erstwhile compatriots. Methodologically, it would be both too easy and too politically disabling to simply reject the tools of European history, partial as they are, as has been done as much in certain strains of Afrocentrism as in Indian revivalist movements.¹⁵ Instead, Guha turns to a Western Marxist tradition indelibly coloured by Hegel to uncover

the historical 'difference' between the consciousness of dominator and dominated. 'Where then does criticism come from? *From outside the universe of dominance which provides the critique of its object, indeed from another and historically antagonistic universe . . .*' ('DWH,' 220, emphasis in original). 'It must begin, in short, by situating itself outside the universe of liberal discourse' ('DWH,' 228–9). Subaltern historiography must do both: it must relocate the subaltern as a site of energy oppositional to both colonialist and nationalist projects of domination, and it must resituate the practice of historiography as one that 'takes sides' with this subaltern project, rewriting what has passed for knowledge. It is both a discovery and a reorientation, an operation which, by demanding a new object of knowledge, will reorganise the practices through which the object is studied. 'The task of historiography is to interpret the past in order to help in changing the world and such a change involves a radical transformation in consciousness' (*EAP*, 336). Whose consciousness?

If Guha's manifesto polemically overstates the alterity of the category 'subaltern,' at least in relation to Gramsci, it does so within a methodological self-consciousness that recognises a pressing need to begin this rewriting immediately. Definitions may be seen as part of an overall strategy. 'On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India' opens with the declaration. 'The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by élitism—colonialist élitism and bourgeois-nationalist élitism' ('OSA,' 1). In his contribution to *Subaltern Studies II* the following year, Guha asserted that even the contemporary Indian historians who displayed sympathy for subaltern actors were enmeshed in the colonialist mindset of 'tertiary discourse,' a form of writing that denied the subaltern its agency and thus participated in a form of neocolonialist 'counter-insurgency.' 'It is still trapped in the paradigm which inspired the ideologically contrary, because colonialist, discourse of the primary and secondary types. It follows, in each case, from a refusal to acknowledge the insurgent as the subject of his own history. . . . Tertiary discourse, even of the radical kind, has thus distanced itself from the prose of counter-insurgency only by a declaration of sentiment so far. It has still to go a long way before it can prove that the insurgent can rely on its performance to recover his place in history' ('PCI,' 38–40).

How can the subaltern ever rely on historiography to 'recover his place in history?' As Gramsci attested, the recovery of subaltern agency within the discourse of history would pose a fundamental challenge to both the historical tradition and the state; indeed its writing can occur only when the 'cycle is completed . . . [and] "permanent" victory breaks their subordination.' Guha's admission that the *Subaltern* 'critique . . . is still rather precocious' strikes one as utterly honest in this context, and one must search for logics that explain its continued audacity. If subaltern history will not bring down the state overnight, it may be capable of illuminating the insufficiency and arbitrariness of the state's historiographical tradition up to now, and of instilling an awareness that new tools of practical research and theoretical analysis are needed.

How far can we go in acknowledging this claim? Subaltern historians clearly continue to practice something that looks like 'history,' and they do it, moreover, by drawing on many of the great European traditions of historical method as well as on archives held in the service of the state. And Guha's claims to have discovered history's 'outside' are not unproblematic. Beyond the 'pure state' of the theoretical consciousness examined in *Elementary aspects*, the actual definition of 'subaltern' given in *Subaltern Studies I* deserves closer scrutiny. At the end of Guha's lead essay an appended note defines the terms 'élite,' 'people,' and 'subaltern.' Here Guha unambiguously, though somewhat elliptically, states that subaltern is a situational term, in contrast to its earlier alterity. It is used synonymously with the term 'people,' and the two are defined by their 'difference' from the élite. 'The social groups and elements included in this category represent *the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the "élite"*' ('OSA,' 8, emphasis in original). In deciding on the specificity of this 'difference,' the historian must determine when particular groups or elements are acting '*in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own social being*' ('OSA,' 8, emphasis in original). Élites acting in their own interests are fairly easy to identify; more ambiguous are members of inferior social strata acting in the interests of the élite. Still more ambiguous are those fallen from grace—the 'lesser rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper middle peasants who "naturally" ranked among the "people"

and the “subaltern”’ (‘OSA,’ 8)—the proliferating scare quotes seem significant—who did *not* act in proper conformity to their social being at all times. Finally, subalterns really seem subalterns for themselves only when their actions correspond ‘truly to their social being,’ and thus only when they act antagonistically towards their oppressors. Is the term ‘subaltern’ then reserved for the lower classes only when they are insurgent, or does it cover larger sections of the population when *they* rise up, as did the middle and elite classes in 1942 and 1946? ‘In spite of such diversity one of its [subaltern activity’s] invariant features was a notion of resistance to elite domination’ (‘OSA,’ 5). A subaltern seems most properly a subaltern when he or she is in rebellion, and one must decide when this rebellion is directed against elite domination, as opposed to local grievances, to determine its ultimate consciousness. Determining this difference poses a fundamental choice for the historian, one that will declare whether his or her work will escape the complicity of tertiary discourse: ‘It is up to the historian to sort out on the basis of a close and judicious reading of his evidence’ (‘OSA,’ 8). It is the historian who is the final arbiter of ‘social being’ and the ‘truthfulness’ of the actions that conform to it or not.

Similar perceptions of the arbitrary and constructed nature of the historical enterprise colour post-modern historiography in the West, but it is somewhat jarring to hear this assertion made in relation to both the earthiness of its subject matter and the assertions of authenticity—‘pure form’ ‘corresponding truly to their social being’—that accompany it. In this respect I think it is a mistake to characterise *Subaltern Studies* as a wholesale rejection of Western Enlightenment Reason along with British historiography, as some reviewers have done. Instead, it seems more correct to characterise it as a strong rereading of Hegel—of whom Alexandre Kojève would be one precursor—rather than an outright denunciation of Reason as such. Guha’s emphasis throughout is on the historic failure of the British to perform up to their stated rational ideals, a failure that extended from economics to general improvement, education to historiography. Far from rejecting Enlightenment categories, Guha resolutely challenges the claims of British rule to have measured up to its proclaimed liberal ends. He locates the misery of the colonial situation in this

practical failure rather than in any more philosophical deficiency of Reason itself.

Needless to say, the definitional slippage in the term ‘subaltern’ alerts us to a theoretical error in the valuation by the historian of the ‘true’ or ‘proper’ consciousness of the subaltern. It is one thing to return historiographical authority to the Indian historian, but something different to insist on the purity of the object that the historian is called upon to judge. This circularity, which informs Guha’s methodological procedure in *Elementary aspects* as well, can be charted as follows: subaltern consciousness has never been accurately recorded by elite historians; subalterns themselves do not leave historical records that could be admitted as new evidence to the historical record; any search for subaltern consciousness must be an interested interpretation by historians committed to its recovery, and must be limited to correcting the inaccurate records of their predecessors. Thus a ‘proper’ subaltern historiography is a logical impossibility, since subaltern consciousness in itself can be retrieved neither through existing accounts nor through previously unexamined records. Any account of such indecorous people acting ‘properly,’ ‘*in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their social being,*’ must be a self-conscious fiction, since neither accurate observers nor recorded statements accord with what is imputed to be the ‘true social being’ of the subaltern. Thus if a separate and autonomous subaltern domain can be said to be retrievable to history, its only necessary condition is its ‘antagonism’ to the realm of the elite, since neither articulated utterance nor accurate interpretation of historical records can mark its appearance.

In the tenaciously dialectical spirit of the argument, the subaltern becomes everything that elite discourse is not: its Other. Guha does not press this point far enough: if the subaltern is truly history’s Other, then it cannot by definition be ‘included’ within history’s discourse. Or rather history can never speak its ‘proper’ name; subalternity can be felt only through its symptoms as they arise in history’s discourse and disturb its smooth appearance. These symptoms are then subject to all the misapprehensions, contradictions, and mistaken identities of dreams. No ‘true’ identity can be apprehended in the mirror; as Lacan reminds us, the specular image of the ‘I’ is both

fiction and asymptote, a condition of partiality that will remain 'irreducible,' 'whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality.'¹⁶

With such constraints acting on the recovery of an authentic subaltern consciousness, the only task that can be left for historians is to read mainstream history in a new way, searching out oppositional moments from the textual record and interpreting them anew. Chatterjee is thus surely right in calling Guha's method of retrieving subaltern consciousness a 'mirror image' of the counter-insurgent documents used to suppress it, a 'paradigmatic form' rather than a 'history of this consciousness as a movement of self-transformation.'¹⁷ As such, as Lévi-Strauss commented on his own structural method, it is a 'myth of mythology'; subaltern historiography is the 'myth' about an object, subaltern consciousness, itself unknowable outside the immediate context of its articulation.¹⁸ While Guha's formal dexterity in rereading the documents of counter-insurgency is impressive and provocative, as he displays to great effect in 'The prose of counter-insurgency' and 'Chandra's death,'¹⁹ it remains by necessity a far cry from recovering an authentically *historical* subaltern voice from the ashes of time. Having revealed the very nature of middle-class ideology to be mythological, is Guha here trumping his earlier work? Is *Subaltern Studies* actually the myth of middle-class mythology? *Nildarpan* attempted to identify the urban middle class as protectors of the rural peasantry, compatriots in colonial oppression. Does *Subaltern Studies* identify the radical historian as the true agent of subaltern consciousness?

If the project seemed somewhat theoretically idealist from the start, perhaps its very existence, however feasible in the long term, could generate certain immediate benefits. Sumit Sarkar commented on the project's ambiguities in his contribution to *Subaltern Studies III* (1984), in an essay which, from almost the beginnings of the project, began to push its theoretical limits to extremes. As a historian Sarkar found that 'a serious problem in some "subaltern" writing has been the tendency to concentrate on moments of conflict to the exclusion of much longer time-spans of subordination or collaboration.'²⁰ He suggested that documents of subaltern antagonism do not unambiguously reveal subaltern 'participation in anti-imperialist struggle.' In

fact, in the Bengal countryside from 1905 to 1922, mobilisations around local grievances such as banning cow slaughter or contesting price hikes were far more common than overt acts of resistance to British rule. The relation between subaltern activity and anti-colonialism is extremely detailed: 'One does not automatically lead to the other without a variety of complex mediations in which the specific socio-economic structure of a region, historical traditions, efforts at mobilisation by the élite . . . and British strategies all play a part' ('CNS,' 276). Nonetheless, Sarkar claimed that he could deduce a 'collective mentality underlying apparently very different forms of popular militancy in the period under study. Certain recurrent patterns do seem to emerge. . . . Something like a very tentative "structure" of popular militancy can be reconstructed in the Lévi-Straussian sense of an implicit, perhaps largely unconscious logical system lying beneath the surface of myths, beliefs, values, and activities' ('CNS,' 277).

Whether in deference to the spirit of the project as a whole or through a kind of oblique criticism that takes its references for granted, Sarkar refrained from taking the next decisive critical step towards Guha's manifesto. He could well have done it through his allusion to Lévi-Strauss, had he followed his own reference and considered the famous and devastating rejoinder to the French anthropologist written by Jacques Derrida in 1967.²¹ Briefly, Derrida called into question the concept of structure altogether as a legitimate organising tool for the social sciences, illustrating how all structures depended on a paradoxical point or 'center' which served both to ground the structure and to permit the infinite play of its elements. Lévi-Strauss, by positing a 'reference myth' from the Bororo people of Brazil as the centre of his structure of primitive mythology, showed how all subsequent variants of the myth served to emphasise its same basic features. Rather than take the regional or chronological differences of the myths into account as illustrations of variation between the people who told them or in the social contexts of their telling, Lévi-Strauss hoped to illustrate the parameters of a coherent *pensée sauvage* common to all primitive peoples and every bit as logical and orderly as that of the European engineer.

But by assuming that every variant of a myth contributed to the overall structure of this 'savage mind,' Lévi-Strauss committed two fundamental errors. The first error was in assuming the principle of totalisation: that his system could account for any further variants that should arise. This assumption logically demanded that all myths function in essentially the same way, which undercut his assertion that variation was significant in itself. The second error was the inverse of totalisation: empiricism. If the centrality of the reference myth was to be proved by the manifestation of its structure in all subsequent variations, then all the variants must be collected. One deviant example would be enough to bring the structure crashing down. Derrida thus showed that the very positing of a central reference myth was an illusion presupposed by the decision to analyse it structurally. The centre of any structure is in fact *outside* the structure; it is the point that 'escapes the structurality of the structure,' and as such is both arbitrary and theological: arbitrary because the supposed centrality of the ur-myth was in fact decided at random by the researcher; theological since its very positing would govern the subsequent shape of the structure itself, like the God of Christian cosmology. Not itself subject to the rules of the structure it governs, the centre is a site of endless deferral rather than the locus of a stable presence. Derrida calls the entire history of Western philosophy the 'history of such substitutions of the center.' For a project committed to the 'science of the concrete,' as was Lévi-Strauss's, this observation seriously undermined its claims to accuracy. One centre could be substituted for another without altering the structure; and this quality revealed the nature of the stable centre to be its very opposite: *play*.

Similar charges could be levelled at a 'structure' of subaltern consciousness. Not all popular militancy could be considered as acting in conformity to its true social being. Was there never any collaboration between peasantry and reactionary forces? If subaltern insurgency always acted 'in conformity to interests corresponding truly to [its] social being,' then how could the sheer quantity of this interest possibly have been resisted by the élite? Why hadn't it snowballed? Could the very 'centre' of Guha's structure, the proposition that subalterns rebelled against oppression, be substituted for another, equally verified by empirical observation—that they didn't?

In his essay, Sarkar refrained from recalling this already-classic challenge to the concept of structure, and one wonders if the hesitation—like that of the editors of *Selected Subaltern Studies* in choosing not to reprint Sarkar's essay in their introductory selection—is intentional and in some sense permissive.²² On the one hand, both the theoretical and practical ambiguities in Guha's definitions are troubling and have troubled the subsequent history of the collective, although probably no more so than in other 'history from below' movements.²³ On the other hand, the rhetorical force of recovering 'people's history' in the context of decolonisation is persuasive. Even if subaltern consciousness as theorised here is finally unrecoverable in fact, it remains a crucial utopian aspiration for a fully decolonised historiography, and should be pursued to the point where its very non-attainment begins to stretch the bounds of 'acceptable' history. Élite nationalist leaders well understood the rhetorical value of popular history when they recorded their own versions of the freedom struggle as rebuttals to the official British story and encountered censorship and repression in the process. Nationalist autobiography is replete with references to the mobilisation of the masses in the cause of decolonisation, and today 'common sense' says that Gandhi and other élite leaders in India were solicited organically by an upsurge of the popular will. That assumption, however historically inaccurate, lent tremendous moral force to the élite's demand for a self-governing state.

Subaltern Studies does posit a large-scale resistance to domination on the part of the peasantry, but it parts company with nationalist history in refusing to interpret this resistance as directed solely or even predominantly against the colonial rulers. Subaltern insurgency, in its proper relation of antagonism, could just as surely be directed against the nationalist leadership as it was towards local landlords, tax collectors, health inspectors, schoolteachers, and other forms of authority that impinged upon its autonomy. The question then becomes one of *specific* antagonism: does the historian define 'correct' subaltern behaviour by its causes or by its effects? Does 'true accordance with social being' describe *any* resistance to oppression or only those with some consciousness of establishing an alternate social order outside colonial or nationalist rule? Guha asserts that the structure of

subaltern rebellion is politically conscious: 'Insurgency . . . was a motivated and conscious undertaking on the part of the rural masses' ('PCI,' 2). Yet this assertion cannot unearth a more recognisable 'history,' based on records or other facts, of wide-scale organisations to support its claim. Structure becomes more determining than historical fact; the structure of subaltern consciousness in its pure state in essence overdetermines the historical record and, if it can be accepted, must be accepted as the radical failure of previous historiography to have recorded its appearance.

Guha claims that in its paradigmatic form subaltern consciousness is in fact organised and 'political,' but this organisation shows no lasting traits that could be extrapolated into an actually existing historical movement, or what Gramsci termed a 'historic bloc.' Javeed Alam noted this seeming contradiction in his review of *Subaltern Studies I*. 'Can autonomy be equated with episodic actions, whatever be the sources or motivational mainsprings of action? . . . In none of these studies do we find any evidence from which it could be inferred that the domain of peasant politics had come to acquire the character of a stable condition that defines the availability of concrete options and choices for these classes or strata in a long term sense.'²⁴ Guha emphasises that the paradigm of authority and rebellion reappears 'cyclically over the centuries' rather than as a continuous or teleological development (*EAP*, 335). Yet the question remains: if the possibility of peasant insurgency remains merely imminent or cyclical, how does that affect the rewriting of history?

To Gramsci, the Italian peasantry clearly lacked any sense of organised leadership and required intervention from intellectuals to provide it: 'Given the dispersal and the isolation of the rural population and hence the difficulty of welding it into solid organisations, it is best to start the movement from the intellectual groups.'²⁵ Guha's peasants, by contrast, seem to possess a pure, antagonistic consciousness that defies homogeneous leadership, yet unites them on the basis of this common consciousness. In *Elementary aspects*, their territoriality is overcome by its negation, the ability to define one's identity by what it is not. All outsiders come to symbolise potential sources of disturbance which generate common, if unconnected, forms of resistance.²⁶ Guha's

strategic use of Gramsci thus results in both a contraction and an inflation of the term subaltern. In its contracted form, on the one hand, it seems to confine the definition of subaltern to a perpetual mobilisation against the dominant groups in society. Although *Elementary aspects* is a monumental contribution to the study of this sort of under-class revolt, a great mass of additional scholarship will be needed to challenge the prevailing view of Indian passivity. Far more prevalent in the existing historiography is Marx's view, famously indigenised by D.D. Kosambi, that India has remained a country of torpor, inactivity, and 'the idiocy of village life.'²⁷ When joined by such an authoritative and committed voice as Sarkar's, the reminder that collaboration as much as resistance characterised the *longue durée* is well taken.

On the other hand, in its inflationary form antagonistic behaviour can lift great masses of mid-strata actors into the properly subaltern realm of 'conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own social being.' Against this backdrop of rural mobilisation, two dimensions of middle-class consciousness emerge more vividly. The first is the almost complete neglect, as evidenced in their historiography, by urban élites of the realities of rural India. The second is the striking juxtaposition of the interests of the colonial élite and those of the masses. Subalterns acting truly are capable of intense and far-reaching rebellions. But 'élite subalterns' acting untruly can be revealed with greater accuracy to be a failed bourgeoisie incapable of exercising hegemony over the masses it claims to speak for. In fact, this may be the real object of the theorisation of the subaltern as 'outside.' Even as the outside is unapproachable in theory, its postulation as a utopian impulse drives the inside to come to terms with it, to confront its lack of revolutionary conviction as the experience of defeat in opposition to the 'true' revolutionary consciousness of the authentic, imagined, subaltern.²⁸ If 'subaltern' is just a transposition of 'subordinated,' as it seems to be when applied to the colonial middle class, then the mildness of middle-class nationalism pales in comparison to the glorious spontaneity of its rebellious countrymen. Is subaltern, in short, a sociological category or an attitude? Indeed, the project's subsequent publications indicate a shift from studies of agrarian relations, rebellious

hillmen, and peasant revolt to imaginary institutions, urban domesticity, and the disciplinary practices of élite mobilisation.²⁹ Perhaps the concept of the subaltern is, finally, a provocation, a theoretical fiction designed to prod the middle class into awareness of its own historic complicity in disciplining the masses it could never learn to represent.

We have seen how the floating, situational definition of subaltern as antagonist can result in a rather static binary. In fact, in *Elementary aspects* Guha begins with an epigraph from Buddhist scripture that indigenises the famous Hegelian dialectic of lordship and bondage, a marvellous simplification of struggle in a country divided not only by class but by caste, foreign occupation, religion, gender, region, and numerous other factors. Guha's epigraph records the Buddha exclaiming in amazement to his disciple Assalayana, 'Have you heard that in Yona and Kamboja . . . there are only two varnas [castes], the master and the slave? And that having been a master one becomes a slave; having been a slave one becomes a master?'³⁰ As they both know, this simplification of antagonism into master and slave is impossibly idealistic. But the reduction of the multiplicities of struggle serves a strategic purpose: by rewriting resistance in absolute terms, it seriously challenges the legitimacy of élite dominance. This subjects all its ideologies of caste, religion, and obligation, as well as its historiographical records, to serious doubt. In the specific context of India, this was above all a pragmatic, short-term strategy, subsequently outgrown. Partha Chatterjee concurs: 'The point, therefore, is no longer one of simply demarcating and identifying the two domains in their separateness, which is what was required in order first to break down the totalising claims of a nationalist historiography. Now the task is to trace in their mutually conditioned historicities the specific forms that have appeared, on the one hand, in the domain defined by the hegemonic project of nationalist modernity, and on the other, in the numerous fragmented resistances to that normalising project.'³¹

II

Guha's work goes on to complicate this dichotomous view of resistance. But in terms of the first few volumes of *Subaltern Studies* it is possible to see the positing of a static binary—however questionable—as a

necessary first step. The Indian middle classes achieved independence at the expense of their underclass compatriots. The exploits of middle-class leaders are well researched, but the story of their collaboration with English power and their betrayal of the immense and heterogeneous underclass remains untold. Subaltern consciousness is predicated as autonomous in order to deduce the possibility of an 'outside' from that of middle-class collaboration. By doing so, a new Indian culture will spring into view: not the canonised cultural heritage, but the culture that resisted all forms of domination through the long night of foreign occupation. The emancipated bourgeoisie has its national hero in the figure of Gandhi. But as Ajit K. Chaudhury observes, up to *Subaltern Studies V* (1987) there is a profound 'silence in subaltern studies: Lenin.'³² It is a silence in name only; the entire project points towards an overlooked vanguard party without being able to name it as such. Without historical records that could prove the existence of the Indian Lenin, radical historiography becomes the agent for releasing the full potential of popular mobilisation. History may not necessarily find something new, but it will do something new: it will rewrite its past from a perspective never before considered, and in the process it will revolutionise that story. If the search for the 'outside' is a structuralist fiction, pursuing it a certain way may serve to reorganise the procedures of the inside—an inside-out revolution. The subaltern thus becomes a technique more than an object, a 'perspective,' as Veenā Das has framed it, more than a person.³³

Guha's impatience is directed towards his contemporary Indian colleagues, but the real antagonist can be seen as the whole disciplinary apparatus of 'élite historiography,' running from early colonial records and memoirs to administrative accounts right through indigenous nationalist and explicitly leftist histories. None of these representational vehicles has so far produced an 'Indian historiography of India.' The methods of narrative analysis he explicates in two articles in particular, 'The prose of counter-insurgency' and 'Chandra's death,' and which he uses to unseat the truth-claims of previous appropriations of this material, could equally well be turned upon any truth-claims, including his own. Guha seems so aware of this danger, however, that his appeals to the alternate truths revealed through his methodology must be placed in quotations. The 'truth' produced by subaltern readings

will be the self-conscious production of 'truth-effects.' Historiography as a discipline is to be understood as a class-bound exercise in self-legitimation; nonetheless, it is immensely important as the tool—along with literature—that 'helped the bourgeoisie to change or at least significantly to modify the world according to its class interests in the period of its ascendancy, and since then to consolidate and perpetuate its dominance' ('DWH,' 215). This proposes a dual stance on the nature of historiographical inquiry: retaining the strategic strength of history as a discipline which arose, along with the bourgeoisie, with the division of knowledges in the European universities of the late eighteenth century; and at the same time usurping the claims of European historiography to be the objective, legitimate custodian of *global* history, replacing them with the greater verisimilitude of marginal knowledges uniquely available from the perspective of the subordinated. Coming as they do from history's 'outside,' these knowledges may well be expressed in forms more closely allied to the 'story' that lies at the etymological root of 'history.' Subaltern historiography will replace liberal/colonist historiography as the authentic utterance of the colonised Indian people. Having lost its formal tools of legitimation, the bourgeoisie will wither away.

This self-consuming rhetorical strategy, combined with the ambiguous definition of subalternity and the immediacy of Guha's political demands, allows me to proceed with a reading of *Subaltern Studies* somewhat against the grain of its stated intentions. Rather than accuse his theoretical statements of idealising subaltern politics as a space sealed off from and therefore uncontaminated by elite nationalism, I find it more pertinent to read Guha's texts as a methodological auto-critique directed at displacing the authority of the accepted traditions of both indigenous and foreign historical discourse. Guha's rewriting of Indian history is double edged. The point is not to speak for or in place of the subaltern—that project's disastrous history is certainly not to be repeated—nor is the point to achieve the impossible ideal of allowing an unmediated subaltern voice to speak through the historian's work. Rather, much closer to Gramsci, the historical activity is being reconceived as a *transactional* project in which the traditions of acceptable history writing are transformed by the objects they wish to represent. 'Élitist historiography should be resolutely fought

by developing an *alternative discourse* based on the . . . recognition of the co-existence and interaction of the elite and subaltern domains of politics' ('OSA,' 7, my emphasis). An alternative discourse is not necessarily a diametrically opposed one, although at times, to be sure, Guha's rhetoric can lead one to believe that the historian is uniquely positioned to reclaim such an unmediated subaltern consciousness. Frequent mentions of 'truth,' 'reality,' 'restoration,' and 'reclamation' mark this project as a redemptive one that will restore misrepresented accounts to some version of a historical 'real,' but the juxtaposition of such claims against theoretical tools for de-realising their effects leave their 'real' status ambivalent. I would argue that the postulation of the subaltern can be seen as the blind spot that undercuts *any* historiography's claims to representational validity. Serious reflection on the possibilities of identifying subaltern consciousness will necessarily challenge the social status of the observer; this will entail a new self-consciousness about the practice of historical studies in general.

The seeming paradox between observer and observed is amply illustrated in 'The prose of counter-insurgency,' the methodological blueprint that claims to restore subaltern agency by debunking its prior historical inscriptions.

But however noble the cause of an instrument of such appropriation, it leads to the mediation of the insurgent's consciousness by the historian's—that is, of a past consciousness by one conditioned by the present. The distortion which follows necessarily and inevitably from this process is a function of that hiatus between event-time and discourse-time which makes the verbal representation of the past less than accurate in the best of cases. . . . There is nothing that historiography can do to eliminate such distortion altogether, for the latter is built into its optics. What it can do, however, is to acknowledge such distortion as parametric—as a datum which determines the form of the exercise itself, and to stop pretending that it can *fully* grasp a past consciousness and reconstitute it. Then and only then might the distance between the latter and the historian's perception of it be reduced significantly enough to amount to a close approximation which is the best one could hope for. ('PCI,' 33)

'The best one could hope for.' Had these words remained firmly in view, much spurious searching after authentic voices could have been avoided. Subaltern consciousness is always mediated by the historian.

The point is not to retrieve the subaltern, but to bring the historian closer to the realisation of the inherent fictionality of his work.

The essential difference between *Subaltern Studies* and earlier Marxist approaches to Indian history (even when that historiography looked to 'the people') is in the mediatory concepts associated with the historical activity itself. What sets *Subaltern Studies* apart from the self-professed and often idealised populism of early Indian Marxism is its interrogation of the complex mediating apparatus between the recorder of an event, who is by definition a member of the élite camp, and the object of inquiry, the 'autonomous,' 'heterogeneous,' and 'spontaneous' subaltern insurgent. Far from claiming the subaltern as an unambiguous or clearly knowable object of history to be objectively recorded by the historian, *Subaltern Studies* problematises the very act of doing history. Subaltern methodology seems as much an analytical tool for debunking inaccurate truth-claims as one designed to produce new narratives about 'what happened in the past.' It is a quintessential *bricolage*: borrowing from literary criticism and taking the historical text as its object, or approaching a cultural or interpretive anthropology when it turns to kinship structures and rituals in order to interpret in a new way a particular event recorded in official historical sources such as court records or administrator's diaries, Guha's procedures relentlessly resituate events within a thick description that restores their contextual immediacy.

But this new context is no more 'true' than any other narrative choice; the high methodological claim for this procedure is often that by dismantling and reaggregating the biased methods and materials of the coloniser's accounts covering a particular event, the contemporary historian can 'reclaim the document for history' ('CD,' 135). But what *is* history? As opposed to the colonial judicial discourse examined in 'Chandra's death,' for instance, we find that a definition of 'history' emerges only in opposition to the procedures of the law. Turning an event into a legal case involves 'detaching an experience from its living context and setting it up as an empty positivity outside history. It is a process intended to take out of these statements all that stands for empathy and pity and leave nothing to show for their content except the dry bones of a deixis—the "then" and "there" of a "crime"' ('CD,'

140). The work of 'history,' by contrast, is to restore 'empathy and pity' to this 'dry' account, contextualising the story within new borders that make it a 'tragedy' of 'women's solidarity and its limitation' ('CD,' 165). Guha recreates, far from a 'true' story, a context for Chandra's grim fate that is designed to 'heighten its drama' ('CD,' 148). By illustrating the process through which historical accounts are constructed, all prior historical work is exposed as the cobbling together of data and context to produce an effect of authenticity. Partha Chatterjee write, with some irony, 'The project then is to claim for us, the once-colonised, our freedom of the imagination.'³⁴ Guha provides the tools both to free the imagination from colonial appropriation and to begin interpreting this freedom once it has been won.

I have three points in conclusion. First, by exposing 'the possibility of the impossible' in recovering subaltern consciousness as the locus of an authentic imaginary, the *Subaltern Studies* project reminds us that *all* identities are imaginary and that there can be no going back to some nostalgic point of origins, no pre-linguistic stability before the signifier, no 'subaltern' before its inscription in the texts of counter-insurgency. This is quite different from claiming that the subaltern as such does not exist empirically on the ground. The scandalous fact exposed by *Subaltern Studies* is that this existence has escaped historical narration. This theoretical/practical point as much ensures the longevity of history as a disciplinary procedure as it debunks the authority of its practice. Rather than a mere objective recorder, the historian simultaneously serves as recorder, scribe, translator, and inventor.

Second is the related practical point that since there is no subaltern consciousness before its articulation, and since illiterate insurgents keep few records of their activities, the search for subaltern consciousness can only be continued by rethinking what constitutes a text. Veena Das offers a pointed practical agenda when she writes: 'It is not that non-official sources are not abundant or not easily accessible, but rather that the legitimacy of those who are producing these materials needs to be recognised by official history.'³⁵ This redefinition of legitimate sources challenges both the reliance on written (mainly British) documents on subaltern activity up to now and the related

rules and norms of academic history writing as a discipline. If the subaltern is to speak, it is high time that speaking subjects were introduced as evidence, and not solely in the coerced forms in which their 'statements' appear on the peripheries of essays.³⁶ Opening the disciplinary bounds of history to other forms of textual production through which the 'subaltern-effect' can be read would necessarily ally it with what passes as 'cultural studies' in the US academy today: unstable combinations of literary analysis, anthropological description, gender marking, sociological conditions of production and reception, and the mediation of all these forms that makes the practice of history extremely risky business—and all the more worth doing.

Finally, we turn to the dimension of power. Let us assume for heuristic purposes that a subaltern consciousness, in whatever form, can be recovered from the historical record. If we do so, the Freudian dilemma of transference returns with a vengeance. In its most limited form, transference signals the analysand's active participation in producing the narrative he or she thinks the analyst wants to hear.³⁷ If the subaltern is interviewed in its position 'as subaltern,' that is, in relation to an élite historian, what is to prevent him or her from telling a story he or she might think will satisfy the customer? That possibility should be entertained in the most positive light: subalterns can actually write their own histories outside the conventions of acceptable historiographical style. In the other direction, counter-transference designates the possibility that the historian-analyst will tend to speak in the place of the analysand, preinterpreting historical meaning from an always already occupied position of mastery. By displacing the class categories of Marxist historiography in order to examine the autonomous space of subaltern insurgency, the largest claim of Guha's project aims at an analysis without transference, a history that would let the subaltern speak in full self-possession of his or her words. As Freud himself argued, such a relationship, if possible, would form the analytic ideal. If the symptom rather than the analysand could speak up, what would it say? But we know this is impossible for two reasons: the analysand cannot fully possess his consciousness, neither for himself nor for others, and the analyst is in no position to do anything about it. So what if the subaltern speaks? The real

point is that the symptom is speaking all the time, but it is easier to repress than to redress it. Or, as perhaps in the case of the larger utopian desire that the *Subaltern* project attempts to articulate, many may hear the symptom speaking but very few do anything about it. The bottom line, as always, is the power of any imagined historiography to effect social change.

Guha suggests, however—and this I would argue is the necessary and insurmountable challenge of the *Subaltern Studies* project as a whole—that such a historiography is possible. It intends to produce not merely a popular history but an Indian history, one better adapted to the totality of Indian social and political life, by which is meant not only the two or so per cent of ruling élites who have traditionally made history, but the vast and uncharted multitudes who possess the potential, if heard, to liberate India from the ideological hangovers of colonial rule and post-colonial corruption by exposing the immense realm of the 'un-said' of everyday life. According to Guha, the call for 'an Indian historiography of India' that originated with Bankimchandra Chatterjee in the late nineteenth century 'amounted to nothing less than challenging Britain's right to rule India. In other words, *no historiography of colonial India would be truly Indian except as a critique of the very fundamentals of the constitutive power relationship of colonialism itself.*'³⁸ By implication, the new historiography of *Subaltern Studies* amounts to a continued critique of the textual power relationships of a neocolonialist project of knowledge, challenging the standards of acceptable historiography. Yet it must practice history in order to change it; as did the European bourgeoisie, so must the decolonised radical historian: 'Historiography [is] one of the two principle instruments—the other being literature—which would . . . be put to use' in reclaiming the Indian past. To my mind, this insistence on practice largely reclaims the project from the various criticisms charging it with a philosophic idealisation of the subaltern as a Rousseauist subject in nature, or with post-structuralist overtones to debunk the authority of Western Reason as a whole. Gayatri Spivak registers this positive ambivalence when she asserts that the project is *self-consciously* metaphysical, enacting a 'strategic essentialism' whereby the movement to 'retrieve the subaltern consciousness [is]

the attempt to undo a massive historiographical metalepsis and “situate” the effect of the subject as subaltern . . . in a scrupulously visible political interest.³⁹ I find it indicative of the moment at which subaltern historiography emerged that it should serve as an example of what Spivak terms ‘affirmative deconstruction’ while its practitioners could resist being recast in the language of post-modernism: using ‘the force of anti-humanism . . . even as they share its constitutive paradox: that the essentialising moment, the object of their criticism, is irreducible.’⁴⁰

Must this declaration of fictionality—parametric distortion, strategic essentialism—mark the larger claims of the project as mythopoetic? Recalling Derrida’s critique of Lévi-Strauss, are we indeed in the hands of a methodology that declares its referential value as a conscious falsehood, and thus in an area of irresponsibility? Certainly not. In the larger institutional framework of Indian academic history, which has struggled mightily for fifty years to deliver the event of Indian independence to its nationalist élites, the eruption of the rebellious peasant as the covert agent of independence represents the unthinkable. It is a ‘terrifying form of monstrosity,’⁴¹ a possibility that something new and unseen, but something that has secretly conditioned all the visible actions of history past, will emerge as the hidden organisational principle of the present.

III

The radical implications of Guha’s positions become even clearer when juxtaposed with White’s account of the acceptable modes of history writing in the West. Indeed, this most linguistically conscious of Indian historians embodies a tropological configuration seemingly of his own ingenious design, just as much as the subaltern is designed to boondoggle any conception of an acceptable subject of history. Essentially writing in the metaphoric mode (according to White’s schema), Guha uses a romantic emplotment (as did Dinesh Sen) to describe the fall from grace of native culture under the pressure of British rule, and just as surely envisions its comic redemption from that fallen state—a movement traced at least in part by the *Subaltern*

Studies’ emphasis on recuperating an Indian history. This movement is explicitly Hegelian, as Guha repeatedly asserts in his references to the tragic, immediate perspective of the bondsman set within the macrocosmically comic drama of self-consciousness it promotes.

This fundamentally romantic emplotment is placed within a narrative argument that we have not yet had occasion to study in this survey, an argument I would term formist, as opposed to the more classically mechanist modes of the earlier Marxists. The formist mode, according to White, aims at ‘the identification of the unique characteristics of objects inhabiting the historical field. . . . The task of historical explanation is to dispel the apprehension of those similarities that appear to be shared by all objects.’⁴² This is clearly in keeping with the motivation to restore historical specificity to the subaltern consciousness, and the meticulous correction of the errors of both nationalist and Cambridge School historians that native élites spoke for the nation. Finally, the important difference separating Guha’s project from the nineteenth-century European discourses of a Michelet or Tocqueville (who in White’s scheme would be the historical precursors to this narrative alignment of formist argument with romantic emplotment) is the strong ideological assertion of radicalism—the view that the goals of the reforming critique are *imminent*, as opposed to the anarchism of Michelet in which the fallen state of man is redeemed in a remote and inaccessible temporal dimension, or the liberalism of de Tocqueville which projected ‘a minimal but hopeful freedom for his heirs.’⁴³

The tropological figure of metaphor mediates between these seemingly incommensurable oppositions by asserting a figurative similarity between two objects, despite the obvious differences between them. Metaphor thus *combines* qualities of distinct objects without reducing or negating them. Guha implies that the standard forms of colonial historiography have tended to negate the specificity of the Indian reality or to reduce it to a mere epiphenomenon of English history. The synecdochic and metonymic modes of this type of history remain blind to their objects, instead producing self-referential autobiographies of colonial or élite power. Instead, Guha would restore the Indian reality to the status of a discrete or autonomous object similar to but

distinct from elite power, 'intertwined' with it, as Gramsci said, but not smothered by it.

Such a conception of the historical field has direct repercussions for the notion that British power was exercised as a hegemony, or rule by consent. The concept of hegemony, which has often been used to describe the durability of British power in India, is to Guha a deeply troubled one. It is not historically possible to locate any rule by consent in either the colonial or nationalist periods ('DWH,' 229–32). Indian politics was instead, he argues, always a highly differentiated and fluid terrain in which control repeatedly broke down and had to be adjusted periodically, from place to place, more often by force than through agreement. Consent among the subject population to the intentions of government was never achieved on the order of the historic coming-to-consciousness of the European bourgeoisie. The use of the concept of hegemony in the Indian context is inappropriate because of the socio-economic structure of colonialism, which itself caused the failure of British capital in India to aspire to 'the *ideal of capital's* striving towards self-realisation' ('DWH,' 228), its 'universalist tendency' of subjecting all 'pre-capitalist relations in material and spiritual life sufficiently enough to enable the bourgeoisie to speak for all of that society as it had done in its historic incarnations in England in 1648 and in France in 1789' ('DWH,' 228). Ironic in terms of British claims to have ruled the subcontinent by consent, it was probably largely due to British economic policy itself that capital never acquired the momentum that might have resulted in a hegemonic form of politics in the colony. Instead, planned underdevelopment, perpetuated through an asphyxiating system of land rents and forced deindustrialisation, allowed India to maintain the unique mixture of pre-capitalist, proto-capitalist, and imperialist relations of production that effectively rendered the populace ungovernable from the point of view of liberal bourgeois politics. To invoke a distinction made by Benedict Anderson, the English government in India promoted a form of official nationalism through their history writing, a form of representation not duplicated but appropriated by the Indian nationalist elite. No compensatory popular nationalism emerged in India as it did from the combination of print capitalism, languages of power, and the imagined

communities that demanded territorial sovereignty from the late seventeenth to late nineteenth centuries in Europe and the American colonies.⁴⁴

Rather, what the British and later the nationalist elite achieved was a 'dominance without hegemony.' A properly Indian historiography is outlined in Guha's essay as a full-scale totalisation of nineteenth-century social and political ideology, conceived as an 'organic composition of power.' The essay's most important moves are to (1) break up the myth of British hegemony over the social and political life of colonial India, and (2) restore the self-directedness of both collaboration and resistance among the natives by nominalising their distinct idioms. To this end, Guha offers a schematic breakdown of the 'General Configuration of Power.' The relationship between the two terms 'Dominance' and 'Subordination' is 'determined and indeed constituted by a pair of interacting elements—Dominance by Coercion and Persuasion, and Subordination by Collaboration and Resistance' ('DWH,' 229). By interrogating the colonial system of power in this way, Guha finds that hegemony simply was not operative as 'a condition of Dominance, such that . . . Persuasion outweigh[ed] Coercion' ('DWH,' 231). Rather, for every term employed in the British vocabulary of persuasion, a native idiom existed that transported the intended meaning of the word and its associated concepts into a similar but crucially different semantic constellation. This two-paradigm model is fundamentally metaphoric.

Thus, for the British notion of order, which evolved with 'the dialectical shift as colonialism outgrew its predatory, mercantilist beginnings to graduate to a more systematic, imperial career' ('DWH,' 234), the subject-population understood the indigenous concept of *Danda*, 'an ensemble of power, authority and punishment' ('DWH,' 238) it had inherited through the *shastras* from the Laws of Manu. British ideology met a readymade native concept of 'order' and obedience that allowed the subordinate population to understand and comply with government—to a degree. Similarly, the colonial idiom of improvement, which embodied the benign aspect of British stewardship, or persuasion—in Western-style education, patronage of the arts, missionary activity, Orientalist projects, paternalistic attitudes

towards the peasantry, tenancy legislation, standardisation of weights and measures, legal prohibition of 'barbaric customs,' and so on—was appropriated differentially by the native élite. When the concept of improvement was taken up in reformist projects, it was often referred to an ancient Indian correlate in the concept of *dharma*, 'virtue, the moral duty.' '... [I]t was to Dharma that the indigenous élite turned in order to justify and explain the initiatives by which they hoped to make their subordinates relate to them as non-antagonistically as possible' ('DWH,' 244).

In the notion of collaboration or obedience, a utilitarian principle by which it was maintained that the 'subjects owed their loyalty to the government for the sake of their own happiness' ('DWH,' 249), the traditional concept of *Bhakti* could be referred to. 'All the collaborationist moments of subordination in our thinking and practice during the colonial period were linked by *Bhakti* to an inert mass of feudal culture which had been reproducing loyalism and depositing it in every kind of power relation for centuries before the British conquest' ('DWH,' 257). Finally, resistance or rightful dissent was met by the native counterpart of dharmic protest. Rightful dissent had obviously enjoyed special prestige as one of the ideological triumphs of the bourgeois revolution, and was subsequently codified in theoretical statements on natural law and inalienable rights from Locke to the utilitarians. The concept of *dharma* differed fundamentally from that of the liberal notion of right, however, in that it included no semblance of a contract between the ruler and the ruled, and no notion of citizenship or individual right; the ruler himself was responsible for the protection of his subjects, and indeed, 'the king's failure in his protective function amounts to the most serious violation of *dharma*, and leads to the destruction both of himself and his subjects' ('DWH,' 268). No less an authority than the *Mahabharata* advises the latter to abandon a bad king 'like a leaky boat on the sea' ('DWH,' 268). Dharmic protest, though deriving from the pre-colonial past, erupted throughout the colonial period. Rightful dissent against British authority was tolerated and even encouraged by the government in many of the institutions that grew up to channel it—petitions, letters to government officials, angry editorials, and even the Indian National Congress, which after 1885 became the central organisation

for the expression of dissent within an officially approved form. But rightful dissent was evidently misplaced in a social context having no equivalent notion of right. 'Dharmic Protest remained, therefore, as one of the most incalculable factors of politics under colonial rule' ('DWH,' 269), inspiring fear even in native nationalist leaders, who treated with dread the prospect of things getting out of control. Its outbreak was particularly manifested in subaltern consciousness, where 'the official mind went on, throughout the entire period, to misread and misrepresent' it ('DWH,' 269). Nationalist leaders never 'came to terms with subaltern resistance in its dharmic idiom. The volatility of the latter was something which no liberal-Hindu or liberal-nationalist formula could fully comprehend' ('DWH,' 269).

The mediation of native idioms did little to ensure direct communication, much less compliance, between colonial authority and the Indian masses. In this regard, Guha's conception of metaphor could be termed post-structuralist, in that it denies the formal adequacy between tenor and vehicle that is conveyed by more traditional accounts of the tropes. Rather, the non-fit between Indian concepts of government and the discourse of colonialism helped foster an immense domain of subordination without consent, 'the *co-existence of two paradigms as the determinant of political culture*' ('DWH,' 272, emphasis in original) characterising the entire colonial period. The imperative to recover an 'Indian historiography,' then, entails raising and revealing the native 'paradigm,' which has perpetually lain unrecognised beneath a veneer of historiographical appropriations, whether by outright colonialists or by the well-intentioned heirs of colonialist thought. This assertion of the hidden existence of a plane of native discourse alongside the discourse of the coloniser is essentially metaphorical. It asserts that the ultimate value of the history of the colonised is fully equal to the history of the coloniser, that these two domains occupy an object-object relationship with no sense of inferiority or negation implied between them. Nor are they seen to share the same essence. The relationship between the two planes of discourse is therefore figurative, but not mimetic: one misrepresents the other, but without replacing it. The failure of colonial historiography has been its fundamental misrecognition of the distinct elements of native culture, representing the Other as simply a manifestation of itself. Ironically,

the Indian paradigm then forms the Other of any imported historiographical élitism, colonialist or nationalist. Only through the radical assertion of the metaphoric value of native culture would it be possible to comprehensively explore the ironies that constituted the intellectual world of the *bhadralok*, to see the composition of colonial middle-class identity not as a mere repetition and derivation of the 'world-historical' European bourgeoisie, but as its own distinct formation. Though Guha nowhere explicitly states this, his argument implies that élitist nationalism and its historiography are really the inscription of the Other of itself; wherever it writes itself it misrecognises the Other it claims to represent. Where can we look for a historiographical recovery of this otherness? If not precisely in the 'subaltern,' then perhaps in the double consciousness of the colonial middle class itself.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian history and society, I-VI* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982-90). Eight volumes have been published up to 1996; at least two more are in production. A compilation volume intended to popularise the group's work for the US audience was brought out in 1988, with a foreword by Edward Said and an editor's note and introduction by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

I should note that it is not my intention to summarise or review the group's work here. Review articles include Javeed Alam, 'Peasantry, politics and historiography: Critique of new trend in relation to Marxism,' *Social Scientist*, 117 (February 1983): 43-54; Sangeeta Singh, et al., 'Subaltern Studies II: A review article,' *Social Scientist*, 137 (October 1984): 3-41; Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Recovering the subject: *Subaltern Studies* and histories of resistance in colonial South Asia,' *Modern Asian Studies*, 22, 1 (1988): 189-224. Also see Gyan Prakash, 'Writing post-Orientalist histories in the third world: Perspectives from Indian historiography,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32, 2 (April 1990): 383-408; 'Post-colonial criticism and Indian historiography,' *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992): 8-19; 'Subaltern Studies as post-colonial criticism,' *American Historical Review* (December 1994): 1475-90. Prakash has been challenged by Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, 'After Orientalism: Culture, criticism, and politics in

the third world,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 34, 1 (January 1992): 141-67. His reply, 'Can the Subaltern ride? A reply to O'Hanlon and Washbrook,' appears in the same issue.

2. The formulation is Spivak's. See 'Negotiating the structure of violence: A conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,' in *The post-colonial critic*, ed., Sarah Harasym (London: Routledge, 1990).
3. Ranajit Guha, 'On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India,' in *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian history and society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 4, emphasis in original. Further references to 'OSA' in the text are given by page number.
4. Susobhan Sarkar's essay 'The thought of Gramsci' was published in 1968. Its first line reads 'The name of Antonio Gramsci as a foremost Marxist leader reached our country barely a decade back.' *Towards Marx* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1983), p. 97. Louis Marks translated and edited *The modern prince and other essays* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1957).
5. Partha Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments*, p. 37.
6. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the prison notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 59.
7. Gramsci, *Selections*, p. 90.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
10. Guha, 'Discipline and mobilise,' in *Subaltern Studies VII: Writings on South Asian history and society*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 69-120.
11. Guha, *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 13. Further references to *EAP* in the text are given by page number.
12. Gramsci, *Selections*, p. 333.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 52, 54-5.
14. Ranajit Guha, 'The prose of counter-insurgency,' in *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 1-42. Further references to 'PCI' in the text are given by page number.
15. See, for example, the work of the Institute for the Rewriting of Indian History, a neo-Vedic group that attempts to restore the primacy of Sanskrit learning and an undiluted allegiance to Hindu 'scripture.'
16. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 2.
17. Partha Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments*, pp. 162-4.

18. Lévi-Strauss, *The raw and the cooked*, p. 12.
19. Guha, 'Chandra's death,' *Subaltern Studies V*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 135–65. Further references to 'CD' in the text are given by page number.
20. Sumit Sarkar, 'The conditions and nature of subaltern militancy: Bengal from swadeshi to Non-Cooperation, c. 1905–22,' in *Subaltern Studies III*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 273. Further references to 'CNS' in the text are given by page number.
21. Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the human sciences,' in *Writing and difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 278–94.
22. Spivak, 'Editor's Note,' *Selected Subaltern Studies*, p. xi.
23. For some of the promises and dilemmas of this form of history, see Gregor McLennan, *Marxism and the methodologies of history* (New York: Verso, 1981), pp. 112–28. A recent essay of Sarkar's poses similar challenges to what he calls the 'Saidian framework' of subsequent subaltern work. 'Orientalism Revisited: Saidian frameworks in the writings of modern Indian history,' *Oxford Literary Review*, 16, 1–2 (1994): 205–24.
24. Alam, 'Peasantry,' p. 47.
25. Gramsci, *Selections*, p. 75.
26. Guha, *Elementary aspects*, pp. 278–332.
27. D.D. Kosambi, *The culture and civilisation of ancient India in historical outline* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1970). Also see Gramsci, *Further selections from the prison notebooks*, ed. and trans. Derek Boothman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 118–24.
28. For a broader discussion of utopian thinking in India and the third world, see Ashis Nandy, *Traditions, tyranny, and utopias: Essays in the politics of awareness* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987). Fredric Jameson has offered the most persuasive arguments for the 'necessity' of utopian thinking in general. See especially *The political unconscious*, pp. 281–300; *Marxism and form: Twentieth-century dialectical theories of literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 116–59; *The ideologies of theory: Essays, 1971–1986*, vol. 2, *The syntax of history*, pp. 75–102.
29. This assertion comes from a comparison of the contents of *Subaltern Studies I* and *VII*.
30. Guha, epigraph to *Elementary aspects*.
31. Partha Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments*, p. 13, my emphasis.
32. Ajit K. Chaudhury, 'Discussion: In search of a subaltern Lenin,' in *Subaltern Studies V*, ed. Ranajit Guha, p. 236.
33. Veena Das, 'Subaltern as perspective,' in *Subaltern Studies VI*, ed. Ranajit Guha, pp. 310–24.

34. Partha Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments*, p. 13.
35. Das, 'Subaltern as perspective,' p. 324.
36. Upendra Baxi has commented on this peripheralisation of witnesses in "The state's emissary": The place of law in Subaltern Studies,' in *Subaltern Studies VII*, ed. Ranajit Guha, pp. 247–64.
37. J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The language of psycho-analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), pp. 455–62.
38. Guha, *An Indian historiography*, p. 50, emphasis in original.
39. Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing historiography,' in *Subaltern Studies IV*, pp. 341–2.
40. Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies,' p. 342.
41. Derrida, *Writing and difference*, p. 293.
42. White, *Metahistory and difference*, p. 293.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 229.
44. Anderson, *Imagined communities*, esp. pp. 83–111. One of the most convincing studies of the display of English official nationalism in India is Bernard S. Cohn, 'Representing authority in Victorian India,' in *The invention of tradition*, eds Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 165–209.