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SUBALTERN STUDIES: AN APPRAISAL OF THEORETICAL LEGACIES

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Abstract

The present essay is a brief analysis of the Subaltern Studies Collective's historiographical enterprise in order to understand some of its underlying theoretical assumptions and their shifts over a period of time. It underscores a change in the theoretical formulation of the subaltern from a 'culturalist' to a 'structuralist' (vis-à-vis Stuart Hall) framework in the works of Ranajit Guha and others. The culturalist moment of Subaltern Studies was characterized by emphasizing the retrieval of the agency of subaltern subject – which was autonomous and political – through a close-reading of the colonial archive. The structuralist underpinning of Subaltern Studies, on the other hand, emphasized the subject as effect of textual production. This reading of Subaltern Studies draws from the work of Stuart Hall who delineated the two strands of working class histories represented by Raymond Williams and E P Thompson. Other influences on Subaltern Studies were French structuralism and post-structuralism, Althusserian Marxism and Michel Foucault's notion of knowledge/power and discourse. The multiplicity of such theoretical legacies has made this school of historiography richer and more substantial.

Keywords

Subaltern Studies, culturalism, (post)structuralism, Stuart Hall, Althusser, subjectivity

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Subaltern Studies began at the end of 1970s as a revision of Indian historiography. It proved to be a paradigm shift in the methods used to write the history of nationalism in India. Its origins were entwined with certain historical developments in the 1970s and since then it has been received internationally as an important intellectual formation of global significance. As David Ludden argues, its reception has been varied: “in India, Subaltern Studies is read against liberalism, Marxism and religious fascism, whereas in the US, its principal novelty’ is its ability to represent India by being ‘read into’ ideologies of difference and otherness”. (Ludden: 4) In this paper, I would first trace the intellectual origins of the Subaltern Studies and its historical contexts and then try to show a paradigm shift within the three decade’s history of it. I would try to show this through a reading of Ranajit Guha, the central figure of this strand of historiography.

Subaltern Studies should be situated within a wider historical context of political mobilizations and changing approach to the history of Indian Nationalism. The Naxal insurgencies of the sixties and seventies, Indira Gandhi’s Emergency in 1975 and the new popular movements based on communal or regional expressions gave an impetus to the academic intervention that the Subaltern Studies group was making. Ludden remarks that popular resistance to state power became a prominent academic theme in the 1980s. This popular unrest could be read along with “a general dissatisfaction with historical interpretations of the ‘Freedom Movement’ in India which celebrated elite contributions in the making of the Indian nation while denying the politics of the people”. (Chaturvedi: vii – viii) Examining the intellectual origins of the Subaltern Studies, Vinayak Chaturvedi considers some of its sources and influences. He considers Susobhan Sarkar, who was a teacher of Ranajit Guha, as one prominent figure who had started translating Antonio Gramsci into the Indian context even before most of the Indian Marxists were familiar with the texts of Gramsci. The other theoretical source was the writings of E P Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm who were associated with the new mode of historiography called ‘history from below’.

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This new mode of history writing was also inspired by Gramscian Marxism that was mainly used to analyze peasant consciousness. These intellectual resources along with the popular disillusionment in the 1970-80s provided a context for the rise of Subaltern Studies.

The proclaimed objective of Subaltern school of historiography was to rectify 'the elitist biases' in the field of history. Ranajit Guha detected two types of elitism in the practice of history writing – colonialist elitism and the bourgeois-nationalist elitism. As opposed to these, the endeavor was to recover the insurgent peasant consciousness as the very subaltern subjectivity that was the active agent of history. This central theoretical focus on the "peasant consciousness" and its active agency in making its own history has undergone certain shifts in the later Subalternists and in the works of Guha himself. This characteristic shift in theoretical orientation can be termed, following Stuart Hall, the 'culturalist' and the 'structuralist' (and poststructuralist) approach to subalternity respectively. The structuralist/poststructuralist turn could be seen Guha's later works and especially with the introduction of Foucault and Derrida into the ambit of Subaltern Studies. David Ludden points out a further regroupment in which "the meanings of subalternity in Subaltern Studies shifted as the framework of study increasingly stressed the clash of unequal cultures under colonialism and the dominance of colonial modernity over India's resistant, indigenous culture". (Ludden 19) Thus, it would be historically wrong to consider Subaltern Studies as a unified expression of certain questions, theoretical as well as practical, relating to the historiography of India.

Let me now elaborate the terms 'culturalist' and 'structuralist' I used previously. Stuart Hall, in the essay "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms", considers these two modes of enquiry as the two different paradigms of cultural analysis. The culturalist paradigm worked with a foregrounding of the questions of culture, consciousness and experience "and its accent on agency ... made a decisive break: with a certain kind of technological evolutionanism, with a reductive economism and an organizational determinism". (Hall: 58) Hall cites the books *The Long Revolution* by Raymond Williams and *Making of the English Working Class* by E P Thompson as major texts that brought out this shift. At the heart of this theoretical enterprise is the term "culture". Hall says: "the concept remains a complex one – a site of convergent interests, rather than a logically or conceptually clarified idea". (Hall: 59) In contrast to this, structuralism decentres the category of experience and elaborates the neglected category of 'ideology'. This also implied the bracketing of the question of the subject in structuralist thinking. Hall argues that, "whereas 'culturalism' would correct for the hyper-structuralism of earlier models by restoring the unified subject (collective or individual) of consciousness at the centre of the Structure, discourse theory, by way of the Freudian concept of the unconscious and the Lacanian concept of how subjects are constituted in language (through the entry into the Symbolic and the Law of Culture) restores the decentred and the contradictory subject as a set of positions in language and knowledge, from which culture can appear to be enunciated". (Hall: 70) But given these two theoretical positions, Hall also discusses how they are not always to be considered as mutually exclusive. Structuralism addresses the "subject-in-general" and is formal in its theoretical application, whereas culturalism foregrounds the "historically-determined" social subject. Thus, a concrete historical analysis cannot ignore both the strengths and weaknesses of both culturalism

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and structuralism. The broader argument here, based on the reading of Ranajit Guha, would be this: the early writings within Subaltern Studies can be seen as 'culturalist' and 'empiricist' in its orientation and Guha's own later writings such as "Dominance without Hegemony and Its Historiography" has structuralist underpinnings. With the introduction of poststructuralism within Subaltern Studies, it undergoes another shift where subalternity, in its Derridean variation is seen as effects of reading, and in its Foucauldian rendering has attempted concrete analysis of particular discursive formations, especially the linkages between colonialism and modernity in the Indian context. "Subalterns in India became the fragments of a nation; their identity and consciousness reflected India's colonial subjugation". (Ludden: 19)

It would be important to point out Hall's criticism of the Foucauldian position by quoting Hall at length here: "Foucault so resolutely suspends judgment, and adopts so thoroughgoing a skepticism about any determinacy of relationship between practices other than the largely contingent ... From such a position, neither a social formation, nor the state can be adequately thought". (Hall: 70) Hall's point is that Foucault's mode of analysis disrupts the totality of historical vision by fragmenting it. He argues that certain "correspondences" between all the major historical transitions traced by Foucault in the fields of sexuality, medicine, the asylum etc "converge around exactly that point where industrial capitalism and the bourgeoisie make their fateful, historical rendezvous". (Hall: 71)

Now, let me look at Ranajit Guha's works in detail to explore the paradigm shift within the Subaltern Studies. The aim of the Subaltern Studies Collective in the beginning was to provide meticulous and thick descriptions of peasant insurgency that would "disclose the otherwise concealed political character of peasant consciousness by reconstructing the vantage point, the spontaneous ideology of the peasant rebel". (Chaturvedi: x) Ranajit Guha's "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" can be seen as a paradigmatic essay in this sense. Guha conceived of the subaltern politics as "autonomous" and "independent of elite". He says about the colonialist and nationalist historiography that what is "left out of this unhistorical historiography is the politics of the people". (Guha: 3) This politics of the people relied on the traditional organization of kinship and territoriality or class associations depending on the level of the consciousness of the people involved. (Guha: 4) But, he adds, these forms of associations were "traditional only in so far as its roots could be traced back to pre-colonial timing, but it was by no means archaic in the sense of being out-moded". (Guha: 3) This form of politics derived from conditions of the exploitation the subaltern classes were put to.

Guha's major contention in this essay seems to be concerned with the "leaving out" of the subaltern classes from history. It was a recovery of this suppressed history, and thus the retrieval of the agency of the peasant, that Guha sought to do by a re-reading of the colonial archive. The 'culturalism' in Guha's formulation is clear here as he endows this subject with autonomy and agency in making their own history. In other words, Guha's conceptualization can also be called as a "realist" notion of the subject. The humanism of the Enlightenment is confident in the 'empirical' observation of the material realities that can produce an objective knowledge of the world. The subject of subalternity here is conceived as a social actor recoverable from an empirical historical data. Gyan Prakash remarks that Guha "views subalternity as an essential object in place of class –

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an effect of power relations and expressed through a variety of means – linguistic, economic, social and cultural. (Prakash: 179) Thus, the ‘subaltern’ creates historical events. The fault with elite historiography is that it has not adequately recognized the contribution of the subalterns in the historical process. Guha writes: “we are convinced that elitist historiography should be resolutely fought by developing an alternative discourse based on the rejection of the spurious and unhistorical monism characteristic of its view of Indian nationalism and on the recognition of the co-existence and interaction of the elite and subaltern domains of politics”. (Guha: 6) Here, though Guha does not use the word, it would be interesting to see the implications for understanding a concept like ‘ideology’. Ideology, in Guha’s description, becomes “false consciousness” that operates as a wall restricting the true historical vision. In contrast to this, the structuralist conception of ideology conceives it as “an organic part of every social totality”. (Althusser: 232) For Althusser, it would be difficult to imagine a ‘communist’ social order without ideology. Ideology cannot be the wall that hinders historical vision but the very field that constructs the vision. The difference between these two positions can be further clarified by looking at the category of “experience”. Stuart Hall argues: “whereas in culturalism experience was the ground – the terrain of the ‘lived’ – where consciousness and conditions intersected, structuralism insisted that experience could not, by definition, be the ground of anything, since one could only ‘live’ and experience one’s conditions in and through the categories, classifications and frameworks of culture”. (Hall: 66) Structuralism questions the empiricism and positivism implied in the culturalist formulation of experience by giving prominence to the social totality. This position can alternatively be called “constructivist”. Althusser, in “Marxism and Humanism” elaborates this epistemological shift within Marxism as it occurred in Marx’s own life. Of the two stages of Marx’s humanist period, “the first stage was dominated by a liberal-rationalist-humanism ... [and] Marx’s political struggle and the theory of history sustaining it were based theoretically on a philosophy of man”. (Althusser: 224) Marx decisively breaks with this liberal conception in 1845, and Althusser argues that this rupture contained three elements; the introduction of new conceptions such as social formation, relations of production, superstructure etc, a critique of the theoretical pretensions of philosophical humanism and the definition of humanism as an ideology. Althusser proposes that this rupture is Marx’s scientific discovery and a fundamental change in the problematic that he was addressing.

To come back to Ranajit Guha, it is specifically these problematics, that of ideology and history, that he is addressing in his later works. In “The Small Voice of History” he raises the question of how a ‘historic event’ is constituted and says, “in most cases the nominating authority is none other than an ideology for which the life of the state is all there is to history. It is this ideology, to be called statism, which is what authorizes the dominant values of the state to determine the criteria of the ‘historic’”. Though here the critical revision does not find its proper articulation Guha’s “Dominance without Hegemony and Its Historiography” proposes a completely new understanding of dominance and subordination which is structural in its orientation. Let me here quote an important paragraph from this essay,

In colonial India where the role of capital was still marginal in the mode of production and the authority of the state structured as an autocracy that did not

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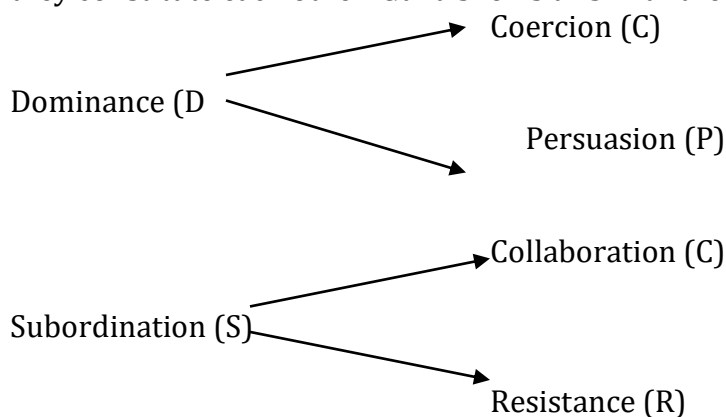
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recognize any citizenship or rule of law, power simply stood for a series of inequalities between the rulers and the ruled as well as between classes, strata and individuals among the latter themselves. However, these unequal relationships in spite of the bewildering diversity of their form and character and their numerous permutations, may all be said to have derived from a general relation, that of dominance and subordination. These two terms imply each other: it is not possible to think of D (dominance) without S (subordination) and vice versa. As such, they permit us to conceptualize the historical articulation of power in colonial India in all its institutional modal and discursive aspects as the interaction of these two terms – as D/S in short”. (Guha: 229)

What is important here is the fact that both dominance and subordination are relational, that is, they constitute each other. Guha shows this with the help of a diagram:



Here, the relation between C/P (coercion and persuasion) and C/R (collaboration and resistance) is dependent on the historical context or in other words the specific form C/P and C/R may take is subject to historical contingency. Partha Chatterjee, in “The Nation and Its Peasants”, continuing with this theorization suggests that there existed two different domains of politics, the ‘formally organized’ politics of the elite and the ‘spontaneous’ subaltern politics. Chatterjee argues, “by placing the forms of peasant consciousness within a dialectical relation of power, peasant consciousness would be assigned its proper theoretical value: its significance was to be established only in relation to its other, namely, the consciousness of the dominator”. (Chatterjee: 11) Subaltern Studies tried to learn from structuralist anthropology and semiology to ‘de-code’ the subaltern political activities and mentalities through the analysis of the elite representations of them. But there was a far reaching consequence of this step; that it ousted the subject of history from its acclaimed position. History within this conceptualization is, in Althusserian sense, “a process without a subject and telos”. Althusser rejects the notion of a ‘constitutive subject’ which is present within liberal humanism and proposes the constitution of the subject by ideology. On the contrary, the category of the subject becomes important for ideological functioning as ‘misrecognition’. A close look at Guha’s description of dominance and subordination would also

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suggest the central problem he was dealing with. It was the failure of bourgeois hegemony or in other words, the specific forms in which the movement of capital has been made possible in the Indian context. Guha, suggests that the Indian situation was very complex in that there were so many different, competing forces that tried to hegemonize the political process and there are multiple contradictions within various classes that cannot merely be reduced to the economy. Althusser has called this presence of multiple contradictions as 'overdetermination'. A revolution would be possible only when the accumulation of contradictions is coupled with a conjecture which allows an internal re-structuring.

The prominent feature of the poststructuralist turn within Subaltern Studies was an exploration of language and the textuality of discursive power. (Ludden: 17) For example, Gayatri Spivak, in the essay "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" gives a literary turn within Subaltern Studies by foregrounding the question of textuality in constructions of the subaltern subject and thus de-essentialising the whole project of this school of historiography. Vinayak Chaturvedi argues that of late Subaltern Studies series "have moved towards culture, conceived in terms of textual and discourse analysis, and away from the economic base as the central zone of power and contestation ... What was initially a project of uncovering subaltern agency and consciousness as a means of revisiting political histories of the Indian nationalist movement, underwent a shift towards critical theories of discourse which challenged the foundations of Enlightenment thought while attempting to maintain vestiges of a negotiated Marxist past". (Chaturvedi: xii) Another theoretical development refer to the use of Foucauldian framework to understand the conflict between what can be called as modernity and the traditional native culture within the colonial context.

What is attempted here is to show the theoretical shifts that happened in Subaltern Studies within the past three decades, from a humanist position to a structuralist one. Further, the theoretical orientation saw a poststructuralist shift with the introduction of Derridean and Foucauldian frameworks into Subaltern Studies. Today Subaltern Studies has become a critical project of global dimension especially influencing alternative histories in other parts of the world such as Latin America and the US. As Chaturvedi argues the relevance of Subaltern Studies has crossed the boundaries of the Indian context to construct a critical theory of subalternity, while it deal with new questions relating to questions of agency, subjectivity and hegemony.

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