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## INTRODUCTION: THE POLITICS OF SUBALTERN STUDIES

*José Rabasa, University of Michigan  
and Javier Sanjinés C., Duke in the Andes*

This volume gathers together a number of papers on Subaltern Studies in the Americas. It is the collective product of work and discussions over the last three years. The common link is a geographic area and a concern with the crises of the nation-state under the impact of globalization—e.g., devising strategies for local struggles, writing histories that will not privilege more “developed” political forms in the interpretation of subaltern insurgencies, elaborating new forms of agency, defining the specificity of Latin American postmodernity and postcoloniality. Although all the papers address these issues, they differ in their methods, problematics, and topics. Some of the papers dwell predominantly on historical moments and others on specific countries or areas, but all of them share a theoretical practice. The Latin American Subaltern Studies Group Founding Statement (originally written as the rationale for an ultimately unsuccessful grant application to the Rockefeller Foundation published in a special issue of *boundary 2* and now reproduced here) also constitutes a commonality among the papers. To the extent that the Founding Statement was a collective enterprise in which several members of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group collaborated, our papers reflect the affinities, the internal debates within the Group, and the challenges that have been posed in the seminars and the panels where we have discussed our project. These events include a mini-conference at George Mason University in 1992, a larger conference at Ohio State University in 1994, and two panels at the 1994 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association in Atlanta, Georgia, and seminars by José Rabasa at the University of Maryland (Spring Semester 1994), Ileana Rodríguez at Ohio State University

(Fall Semester 1994) and John Beverley at the University of Pittsburgh (Spring Semester 1995). The Founding Statement has also provided the criteria for selecting essays that were written independently of the discussions within the group, but that nevertheless seemed suggestive to us of the kind of work that we find congenial or that contributed to a deepening of the debates. Of the contributors to the volume John Beverley, Robert Carr, Michael Clark, María Milagros López, Walter D. Mignolo, José Rabasa, Ileana Rodríguez, Javier Sanjinés and Patricia Seed are members of the group, and Sara Castro-Klarén, P. Peres, Julio Ramos, Ricardo Salvatore, Chela Sandoval and Marcia Stephenson are not.

Although the Founding Statement defined the conceptualization of constitutive agencies as the political task of the project, we do not want to imply that all the authors (especially those not from the Group) share our understanding of Subaltern Studies—we find their essays to contribute and further the themes, methods, epistemologies and ethico-political positions under debate. Because the Founding Statement first appeared in a special issue of *boundary 2* dedicated to *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America*, it has been read as one more instance of a postmodernism that denies the possibility of agency. A case in point is the critique of the Founding Statement in Florencia Mallon's recent essay "The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: Perspectives from Latin American History" (1994):

The rest of the group's members [apart from the one historian of Colonial Mexico and the two anthropologists who work in Central America] are spread more widely across the region—including people who work on the Andes, the Caribbean, and the southern cone—and they confront the challenge of Subaltern Studies from literary criticism and textual analysis. This preferred method comes out clearly in the founding statement, in which, aside from the early citations to Guha and one later reference to Carlos Vilas's book on revolutionary Nicaragua, almost all the specificity of the essay revolves around artistic and literary movements. (1505)

There are signs of a "turf battle" here. The issue is not the "turn to language" that Mallon identifies with the Foucauldian half of the subaltern studies in both the Latin American and the South Asian groups, but the reduction of our project to "literary criticism and textual analysis." Mallon grasps the political character of our project in passing: "But the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group went further [than Guha, et al.] and approached Gilbert Joseph's earlier efforts to (re)prioritize subaltern agency" (1504). But this recognition of the specific nature of our project—which has a lot to do with such historical and geographic determinants as the so-called demise of socialism after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the loss of the elections by the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in 1990—is subsumed (appropriated) under Joseph's (and ultimately Mallon's) historical and, by extension, anthropological project which she identifies with

the Gramscian “side” of subaltern studies: “In my experience, it is the process itself that keeps us honest: getting one’s hands dirty in the archival dust, one’s shoes encrusted in the mud of field work; confronting the surprises, ambivalences, and unfair choices of daily life, both our own and those of our ‘subjects’” (1507). Mallon would thus define the terms of a debate between literary critics or those employing postmodern approaches who cannot go beyond seeing documents as textual constructs, and historians or anthropologists who harbor the hope that “just for a moment, someone [a subaltern subject] comes out of the shadows and walks next to us” (1507). Although many of us work in literature programs, our project is not conceived as bound by the methods of a discipline, nor even as interdisciplinary, but as non-disciplinary. Mallon sees subaltern studies essentially as a new way of “doing history,” “with the people,” so to speak (see for example her new book on the relation of peasants and nationalism in Mexico and Peru, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru*). But there is an important sense in which subaltern studies can be read as a critique of history, of the place of history and historians, including those who make the claim to represent subaltern agency in the making of history, in the arrangements that construct and maintain the elite/subaltern distinction in the first place. As Guha makes clear in the opening chapter of *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, the essential modality of the subaltern is Negation. What does it mean to translate that modality into our own work?

The point of the Founding Statement was to draw an inventory of forms of hegemony, but more importantly, of spaces for political action. The papers in this volume have begun to explore the dual project of investigating processes of subalternization and emergent subaltern subjects within heterogeneous public spaces. Heterogeneity and migrant subjects are particularly relevant to (but not an exclusive phenomenon of) postmodernity (i.e., a name given to a series of global changes that are a result of the crisis of the nation-state and the transnationalization of the economy). However, postmodernism—an intellectual response to the specific manifestations of postmodernity in Latin America—should not be opposed to a politically committed scholarship that defines itself in terms of a privileged access to materiality (e.g., Gramscian social histories and Althusserian claims of the economy as the last instance). Historical knowledge of political movements should not be confused with political action. This is not to deny that historical and economic analyses have political implications.

As we have pointed out above, central to the Founding Statement is devising new forms of acting and thinking politically. Although recent socio-economic forms of globalization are more oppressive than ever, we must conceptualize the parallel growth of power in democratic contestatory movements. These emergent subjectivities comprise, as exemplified in any number of demonstrations and social movements in Latin American and U.S. Latino communities, a mass of people composed of street children, women, radicalized

high school students, the homeless, the unemployed, workers, bankrupt small businessmen, alternative unions, intellectuals, and (very marginalized) representatives of the opposition parties.

The importance of Subaltern Studies, then, resides in the capacity to understand the multiple possibilities of creative political action. The fact that we do not constitute ourselves as intellectuals with a privileged access to subalterns defines our group as one more entity in the contestatory movements. In developing practices the intellectual should grow parallel to the emergent social actors and their interventions in everyday life.

One of the defining positions of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group (itself subject, however, to considerable debate within the group) is the questioning of the adequacy of the models of intellectual and political protagonism that correspond to the struggles in the sixties in which many of us were formed, particularly those that privilege the status and role of intellectuals. We would like to suggest that this radical questioning of the adequacy of intellectuals is a result of the logical development of the (South Asian) Subaltern Studies Group's critique of elite historiography as well as of some forms of Marxist historiography. Only from that locus of enunciation could the Founding Statement address the following epistemological and ethico-political issues of subaltern studies: "Clearly, it is a question not only of new ways of looking at the subaltern, new and more powerful forms of information retrieval, but also of building new relations between ourselves and those human contemporaries whom we posit as objects of study."

This statement suggests that epistemology, the positing of new ways of looking and constituting objects of study, must be tempered by an ethos that knows how to respect silences in subaltern discourses. The Founding Statement concludes by citing Rigoberta Menchú's injunction: "I am still keeping secret what I think no-one should know. Not even the anthropologists and intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets." Menchú, in this statement, seems to question the will "to turn out the pockets" of subalterns, as well as the possibility of knowing the totality of a culture. Her warning evokes Marcel Griaule's call to "shake down" other cultures: "We'd make him smile, spit up the truth, and we'd turn out of his pockets the last secret polished by the centuries, a secret to make him who has spoken it blanch with fear" (quoted by Clifford 77). However offensive this statement might be to a postcolonial ethic of fieldwork, it does not constitute a breach of objectivity. Quite the contrary, it manifests a will to sift biased information in the pursuit of a neutral account. Positivistic knowledge of subalterns as objects of study, moreover, runs the risk of providing information to those institutions whose goal is to control and thus perpetuate subalternity. But beyond the misuse of empirical knowledge we must question the epistemology that first emerges in the modern period that we readily identify with the emergence of the distinction of objectivity and subjectivity in Descartes (see Heidegger; Foucault). This split of the subject and object of knowledge implies a

series of forms of disciplining subjectivity. From this perspective the issue would no longer be one of misuse of knowledge but of the power embedded in the epistemological apparatus itself. The problem now resides in the production of the subaltern as an object of knowledge, rather than claiming that subaltern studies will produce a more accurate representation. Subaltern studies cannot continue to practice a Cartesian epistemology where the subject refines its cognitive apparatuses to gain a more objective perspective. This modernist project would aim to formulate a form of life, a horizon of communication where knowledge would no longer distort its object. The modernist project presumes that the form of life of the subaltern can be contained within the objectification of the intellectual; moreover, it obviates the conflict between Western epistemology (as theory of what we can know and what counts as knowledge) and forms of life with different truth values.

The ethics of epistemology that we have outlined above still must be considered in relation to a politics. Just as we found that the subject of historical knowledge is not the subject of political action, knowing and divulging the sources of oppression should not be conflated with acting on them, as Gayatri Spivak has recently argued (138). Another turn to this proposition would be that the subject of knowing (the subaltern studies scholar) is not identical with the subject of acting (the subaltern insurgent). As we have pointed out above, this distinction would not preclude intellectuals from theorizing on a parallel plane, and we do indeed envision this practice as central to our project. This new ethics that informs our epistemology cannot be reduced to some sort of postmodern literary sensibility. On the contrary, what we are proposing is a “politics of sensibility” where our task as intellectuals would consist of articulating emergent new structures of feeling, to borrow Raymond Williams’s phrase.

The solidarity of thousands of Mexicans shouting in demonstrations, “Todos somos indios” [We are all Indians], “Todos somos Marcos” [We are all Marcos] in a massive demonstration in February 1995 to protest the warrant for the arrest of Subcomandante Marcos and others associated with the EZLN would seem to augur (at least on a symbolic plane) the possibility of a radical change in structures of feeling, in which the plurality of the Indian peoples of Mexico would be recognized and respected. This emergent sensibility would ultimately depend on the indigenous and Zapatista movements, and their capacity to negotiate on their own with the government. Beyond solidarity with the Zapatistas, these slogans, shouted in demonstrations, bring to mind the recent *comunicados* of Subcomandante Marcos:

El México de abajo tiene vocación de lucha, es solidario, es banda, es barrio, es palomilla, es raza, es cuate, es huelga, es marcha y mitin, es toma tierras, es cierre de carreteras, es ‘¡no les creo!’ es ‘¡no me dejo!, es ¡órale!’” (*La Jornada* 22 Sept 94)

[The Mexico of the underdog has a vocation for struggle; it is solidarity, it is band, it is *barrio*, it is gang, it is *raza*, it is buddy,

it is strike, it is march and rally, it is squatter, it is roadblock, it is  
 “I don't believe you!”, it is “I will not take it!”, it is “Enough!”]

This language is impossible to translate literally. This passage is important because it entails both a politization of aesthetics (as a reminder that art is not a disinterested, autonomous realm) and an aesthetization of politics (as a reminder that politics is not a serious-elite form of discourse, an exclusion of the popular). The threatening “orale” from the “México de abajo” forms part of a performance that is not detached from a call to action that is definitely political in the sense that the end result is a generalized performance of a broad array of the masses shouting “Todos somos Marcos,” “Todos somos indios.” The represented, the performed *México de abajo*, emerges as embodied social force in the streets of Mexico City.

These new subjects are denouncing the two-faced nature of the State. In her analysis of the recent mobilization against coca cultivators, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui traces a pattern of behavior in the State practices that are repressive of subalterns but permissive of the powerful. The *doble moral*, as Rivera puts it, is a way of understanding the behavior of the *q'ara*'s white supremacist ideology shared by the neoliberal Bolivian government. This two-facedness of the State affects the totality of social relations not only in Bolivia, but also elsewhere in the Americas. The call for democracy that emerges in the conjunction of the Zapatistas and the generalization of Chiapas all over Mexico implies the possibility of breaking this *doble moral* precisely in the questioning of the authority and representativity of opposition parties, unions, and any form of political mediation that resides outside the processes of the masses.

In addressing issues of agency, epistemology, and ethics we have touched issues that in one way or another are present in the essays in this volume. Beyond interdisciplinarity, the ensemble of pieces suggests an effort to be non-disciplinary. Thus conceived, Subaltern Studies would not aspire any longer to be a new history nor, for that matter, a new ethnography, but a new theoretical practice.

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