AHR Forum

Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism

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TO NOTE THE FERMENT CREATED BY Subaltern Studies in disciplines as diverse as history, anthropology, and literature is to recognize the force of recent postcolonial criticism. This criticism has compelled a radical rethinking of knowledge and social identities authored and authorized by colonialism and Western domination. Of course, colonialism and its legacies have faced challenges before. One has only to think of nationalist rebellions against imperialist domination and Marxism's unrelenting critiques of capitalism and colonialism. But neither nationalism nor Marxism broke free from Eurocentric discourses.[1] As nationalism reversed Orientalist thought, and attributed agency and history to the subjected nation, it staked a claim to the order of Reason and Progress instituted by colonialism. When Marxists turned the spotlight on colonial exploitation, their criticism was framed by a historicist scheme that universalized Europe's historical experience. The emergent postcolonial critique, by contrast, seeks to undo the Eurocentrism produced by the institution of the West's trajectory, its appropriation of the other as History. It does so, however, with the acute realization that its own critical apparatus does not enjoy a panoptic distance from colonial history but exists as an aftermath, as an after—after being worked over by colonialism.[2] Criticism

I am grateful to Frederick Cooper and Florencia Mallon for their comments and suggestions. Although I have not followed their advice in every instance, their careful and critical readings were helpful in rethinking and rewriting the essay.

[1] In calling these accounts Eurocentric, I do not mean that they followed the lead of Western authors and thinkers. Eurocentricity here refers to the historicism that projected the West as History.

[2] Elsewhere, I elaborate and offer examples of this notion of the postcolonial. See my forthcoming "Introduction: After Colonialism," in Gyan Prakash, *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton, N.J., 1995). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks of postcoloniality in similar terms. "We are always *after* the empire of reason, our claims to it always short of adequate." Spivak, "Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value," in *Literary Theory Today*, Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan, eds. (London, 1990), 228. While literary theorists have been prominent in forcing postcolonial criticism onto the scholarly agenda, it is by no means confined to them; the work of Subaltern Studies historians must be considered an important part of the postcolonial critique. For other examples of historians' contribution to this criticism, see *Colonialism and Culture*, Nicholas B. Dirks, ed. (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1992); *Confronting Historical Paradigms: Peasants, Labor, and the Capitalist World System in Africa and Latin America*, Frederick Cooper, Allen F. Isaacman, Florencia E. Mallon, William Roseberry, and Steve J. Stern, eds. (Madison, Wis., 1993); Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1990); and Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988). The essays by Frederick Cooper and Florencia Mallon in this issue of the *AHR* also mention a number of historical works that have contributed to the current postcolonial criticism.

formed as an aftermath acknowledges that it inhabits the structures of Western domination that it seeks to undo. In this sense, postcolonial criticism is deliberately interdisciplinary, arising in the interstices of disciplines of power/knowledge that it critiques. This is what Homi Bhabha calls an in-between, hybrid position of practice and negotiation, or what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms catachresis: "reversing, displacing, and seizing the apparatus of value-coding."[3]

The dissemination of Subaltern Studies, beginning in 1982 as an intervention in South Asian historiography and developing into a vigorous postcolonial critique, must be placed in such a complex, catachrestic reworking of knowledge. The challenge it poses to the existing historical scholarship has been felt not only in South Asian studies but also in the historiography of other regions and in disciplines other than history. The term "subaltern" now appears with growing frequency in studies on Africa, Latin America, and Europe, and subalternist analysis has become a recognizable mode of critical scholarship in history, literature, and anthropology.

THE FORMATION OF SUBALTERN STUDIES as an intervention in South Asian historiography occurred in the wake of the growing crisis of the Indian state in the 1970s. The dominance of the nation-state, cobbled together through compromises and coercion during the nationalist struggle against British rule, became precarious as its program of capitalist modernity sharpened social and political inequalities and conflicts. Faced with the outbreak of powerful movements of different ideological hues that challenged its claim to represent the people, the state resorted increasingly to repression to preserve its dominance. But repression was not the only means adopted. The state combined coercive measures with the powers of patronage and money, on the one hand, and the appeal of populist slogans and programs, on the other, to make a fresh bid for its legitimacy. These measures, pioneered by the Indira Gandhi government, secured the dominance of the state but corroded the authority of its institutions. The key components of the modern nation-state—political parties, the electoral process, parliamentary bodies, the bureaucracy, law, and the ideology of development—survived, but their claim to represent the culture and politics of the masses suffered crippling blows.

In the field of historical scholarship, the perilous position of the nation-state in the 1970s became evident in the increasingly embattled nationalist historiography. Attacked relentlessly by the "Cambridge School," which represented India's colonial history as nothing but a chronicle of competition among its elites, nationalism's fabric of legitimacy was torn apart.[4] This school exposed the

[3] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994), 22–26; Spivak, "Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value," 228.

[4] The classic statement of the "Cambridge School" is to be found in Anil Seal's study *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1968), which contended that Indian nationalism was produced by the educated elites in their competition for "loaves and fishes" of office. This was modified in *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics, 1870–1940*, J. Gallagher, G. Jognson, and Anil Seal, eds. (Cambridge, 1973), which advanced the view that nationalism emerged from the involvement of local and regional elites in colonial

nationalist hagiography, but its elite-based analysis turned the common people into dupes of their superiors. Marxists contested both nationalist historiography and the "Cambridge School" interpretation, but their mode-of-production narratives merged imperceptibly with the nation-state's ideology of modernity and progress. This congruence meant that while championing the history of the oppressed classes and their emancipation through modern progress, the Marxists found it difficult to deal with the hold of "backward" ideologies of caste and religion. Unable to take into account the oppressed's "lived experience" of religion and social customs, Marxist accounts of peasant rebellions either overlooked the religious idiom of the rebels or viewed it as a mere form and a stage in the development of revolutionary consciousness. Thus, although Marxist historians produced impressive and pioneering studies, their claim to represent the history of the masses remained debatable.

Subaltern Studies plunged into this historiographical contest over the representation of the culture and politics of the people. Accusing colonialist, nationalist, and Marxist interpretations of robbing the common people of their agency, it announced a new approach to restore history to the subordinated. Started by an editorial collective consisting of six scholars of South Asia spread across Britain, India, and Australia, Subaltern Studies was inspired by Ranajit Guha. A distinguished historian whose most notable previous work was *A Rule of Property for Bengal* (1963), Guha edited the first six Subaltern Studies volumes.[5] After he relinquished the editorship, Subaltern Studies was published by a rotating two-member editorial team drawn from the collective. Guha continues, however, to publish in Subaltern Studies, now under an expanded and reconstituted editorial collective.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SUBALTERN STUDIES was aimed to promote, as the preface by Guha to the first volume declared, the study and discussion of subalternist themes in South Asian studies.[6] The term "subaltern," drawn from Antonio Gramsci's writings, refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture and was used to signify the centrality of dominant/dominated relationships in history. Guha suggested that while Subaltern Studies would not ignore the dominant, because the subalterns are always subject to their activity, its aim was to "rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work" in South Asian studies.[7] The act of rectification sprang from the conviction that the elites had exercised dominance, not hegemony, in Gramsci's sense, over the subalterns. A reflection of this belief was Guha's argument that

institutions. As the official institutions reached down to the locality and the province, the elites reached up to the central level to secure their local and regional dominance, finding nationalism a useful instrument for the articulation of their interests.

[5] Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal* (Paris, 1963). I should also mention his important article, "Neel Darpan: The Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2 (1974): 1–46, which anticipates his fuller critique of elite historiography.

[6] Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies I* (Delhi, 1982), vii.

[7] Guha, *Subaltern Studies I*, vii.

the subalterns had acted in history "*on their own*, that is, *independently of the elite*"; their politics constituted "an *autonomous* domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter."[8]

While the focus on subordination has remained central to Subaltern Studies, the conception of subalternity has witnessed shifts and varied uses. Individual contributors to the volumes have also differed, not surprisingly, in their orientation. A shift in interests, focus, and theoretical grounds is also evident through the eight volumes of essays produced so far and several monographs by individual subalternists.[9] Yet what has remained consistent is the effort to rethink history from the perspective of the subaltern.

How the adoption of the subaltern's perspective aimed to undo the "spurious primacy assigned to them [the elites]" was not entirely clear in the first volume. The essays, ranging from agrarian history to the analysis of the relationship between peasants and nationalists, represented excellent though not novel scholarship. Although all the contributions attempted to highlight the lives and the historical presence of subaltern classes, neither the thorough and insightful research in social and economic history nor the critique of the Indian nationalist appropriation of peasant movements was new; Marxist historians, in particular, had done both.[10] It was with the second volume that the novelty and insurgency of Subaltern Studies became clear.

The second volume made forthright claims about the subaltern subject and set about demonstrating how the agency of the subaltern in history had been denied by elite perspectives anchored in colonialist, nationalist, and or Marxist narratives. Arguing that these narratives had sought to represent the subaltern's consciousness and activity according to schemes that encoded elite dominance, Guha asserted that historiography had dealt with "the peasant rebel merely as an empirical person or member of a class, but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion."[11] Historians were apt to depict peasant rebellions as spontaneous eruptions that "break out like thunder storms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires"; alternatively, they attributed rebellions as a reflex action to economic and political oppression. "Either way insurgency is regarded as *external* to the peasant's consciousness and Cause is made to stand in as a phantom surrogate for Reason, the logic of consciousness."[12]

How did historiography develop this blind spot? Guha asked. In answering this

[8] Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," *Subaltern Studies I*, 3–4.

[9] *Subaltern Studies I–VI*, Ranajit Guha, ed. (Delhi, 1982–89); vol. VII, Gyanendra Pandey and Partha Chatterjee, eds. (Delhi, 1992); vol. VIII, David Arnold and David Hardiman, eds. (Delhi, 1993); Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983); Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London, 1986); and Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, N.J., 1993); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890–1940* (Princeton, 1989); David Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India* (Delhi, 1987); and Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi, 1990).

[10] See, for example, Majid Siddiqi, *Agrarian Unrest in North India: The United Provinces, 1918–22* (Delhi, 1978); and Jairus Banaji, "Capitalist Domination and Small Peasantry: Deccan Districts in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12, no. 33 (1977): 1375–44.

[11] Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," *Subaltern Studies II* (Delhi, 1983), 2.

[12] Guha, "Prose of Counter-Insurgency," 2–3.

question, his "Prose of Counter-Insurgency" offers a methodological *tour de force* and a perceptive reading of the historical writings on peasant insurgency in colonial India. Describing these writings as counter-insurgent texts, Guha begins by distinguishing three types of discourses—primary, secondary, and tertiary. These differ from one another in terms of the order of their appearance in time and the degree of their acknowledged or unacknowledged identification with the official point of view. Analyzing each in turn, Guha shows the presence, transformation, and redistribution of a "counter-insurgent code." This code, present in the immediate accounts of insurgency produced by officials (primary discourse), is processed into another time and narrative by official reports and memoirs (secondary discourse) and is then incorporated and redistributed by historians who have no official affiliation and are farthest removed from the time of the event (tertiary discourse). The "code of pacification," written into the "raw" data of primary texts and the narratives of secondary discourses, survives, and it shapes the tertiary discourse of historians when they fail to read in it the presence of the excluded other, the insurgent. Consequently, while historians produce accounts that differ from secondary discourses, their tertiary discourse also ends up appropriating the insurgent. Consider, for example, the treatment of peasant rebellions. When colonial officials, using on-the-spot accounts containing "the code of pacification," blamed wicked landlords and wily moneylenders for the occurrence of these events, they used causality as a counter-insurgent instrument: to identify the cause of the revolt was a step in the direction of control over it and constituted a denial of the insurgent's agency. In nationalist historiography, this denial took a different form, as British rule, rather than local oppression, became the cause of revolts and turned peasant rebellions into nationalist struggles. Radical historians, too, ended up incorporating the counter-insurgent code of the secondary discourse as they explained peasant revolts in relation to a revolutionary continuum leading to socialism. Each tertiary account failed to step outside the counter-insurgent paradigm, Guha argues, by refusing to acknowledge the subjectivity and agency of the insurgent.[13]

Clearly, the project to restore the insurgent's agency involved, as Rosalind O'Hanlon pointed out in a thoughtful review essay, the notion of the "recovery of the subject."[14] Thus, while reading records against their grain, these scholars have sought to uncover the subaltern's myths, cults, ideologies, and revolts that colonial and nationalist elites sought to appropriate and that conventional historiography has laid waste by the deadly weapon of cause and effect. Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) is a powerful example of scholarship that seeks to recover the peasant from elite projects and positivist historiography. In this wide-ranging study full of brilliant insights and methodological innovation, Guha returns to nineteenth-century peasant insurrections in colonial India. Reading colonial records and historiographical representations with an uncanny eye, he offers a fascinating account of the peasant's insurgent consciousness, rumors, mythic visions, religiosity, and bonds of community. From

[13] Guha, "Prose of Counter-Insurgency," 26–33.

[14] Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia," *Modern Asian Studies*, 22 (1988): 189–224.

Guha's account, the subaltern emerges with forms of sociality and political community at odds with nation and class, defying the models of rationality and social action that conventional historiography uses. Guha argues persuasively that such models are elitist insofar as they deny the subaltern's autonomous consciousness and that they are drawn from colonial and liberal-nationalist projects of appropriating the subaltern.

It is true that the effort to retrieve the autonomy of the subaltern subject resembled the "history from below" approach developed by social history in the West. But the subalternist search for a humanist subject-agent frequently ended up with the discovery of the failure of subaltern agency: the moment of rebellion always contained within it the moment of failure. The desire to recover the subaltern's autonomy was repeatedly frustrated because subalternity, by definition, signified the impossibility of autonomy: subaltern rebellions only offered fleeting moments of defiance, "a night-time of love," not "a life-time of love."[15] While these scholars failed to recognize fully that the subalterns' resistance did not simply oppose power but was also constituted by it, their own work showed this to be the case. Further complicating the urge to recover the subject was the fact that, unlike British and U.S. social history, Subaltern Studies drew on anti-humanist structuralist and poststructuralist writings. Ranajit Guha's deft readings of colonial records, in particular, drew explicitly from Ferdinand de Sassure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roman Jakobson, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault. Partly, the reliance on such theorists and the emphasis on "textual" readings arose from, as Dipesh Chakrabarty points out, the absence of workers' diaries and other such sources available to British historians.[16] Indian peasants had left no sources, no documents from which their own "voice" could be retrieved. But the emphasis on "readings" of texts and the recourse to theorists such as Foucault, whose writings cast a shroud of doubt over the idea of the autonomous subject, contained an awareness that the colonial subaltern was not just a form of "general" subalternity. While the operation of power relations in colonial and metropolitan theaters had parallels, the conditions of subalternity were also irreducibly different. Subaltern Studies, therefore, could not just be the Indian version of the "history from below" approach; it had to conceive the subaltern differently and write different histories.

THIS DIFFERENCE HAS GROWN in subsequent Subaltern Studies volumes as the desire to recover the subaltern subject became increasingly entangled in the analysis of how subalternity was constituted by dominant discourses. Of course, the tension between the recovery of the subaltern as a subject outside the elite discourse and the analysis of subalternity as an effect of discursive systems was present from the very beginning.[17] It also continues to characterize Subaltern

[15] Veena Das, "Subaltern as Perspective," *Subaltern Studies VI* (Delhi, 1989), 315.

[16] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Trafficking in History and Theory: Subaltern Studies," *Beyond the Disciplines: The New Humanities*, K. K. Ruthven, ed. (Canberra, 1992), 102.

[17] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay in *Subaltern Studies IV* pointed out this tension. "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *Subaltern Studies IV* (Delhi, 1985), 337–38.

Studies scholarship today, as Florencia Mallon notes in her essay in this issue of the *AHR*. Recent volumes, however, pay greater attention to developing the emergence of subalternity as a discursive effect without abandoning the notion of the subaltern as a subject and agent. This perspective, amplified since *Subaltern Studies III*, identifies subalternity as a position of critique, as a recalcitrant difference that arises not outside but inside elite discourses to exert pressure on forces and forms that subordinate it.

The attention paid to discourse in locating the process and effects of subordination can be seen in Partha Chatterjee's influential *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (1986). A study of how Indian nationalism achieved dominance, this book traces critical shifts in nationalist thought, leading to a "passive revolution"—a concept that he draws from Gramsci to interpret the achievement of Indian independence in 1947 as a mass revolution that appropriated the agency of the common people. In interpreting the shifts in nationalist thought, Chatterjee stresses the pressure exerted on the dominant discourse by the problem of representing the masses. The nationalists dealt with this problem by marginalizing certain forms of mass action and expression that run counter to the modernity-driven goals that they derived from the colonial discourse. Such a strategy secures elite dominance but not hegemony over subaltern culture and politics. His recent *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993) returns once again to this theme of appropriation of subalternity, sketching how the nation was first imagined in the cultural domain and then readied for political contest by an elite that "normalized" various subaltern aspirations for community and agency in the drive to create a modern nation-state.

Investigating the process of "normalization" means a complex and deep engagement with elite and canonical texts. This, of course, is not new to Subaltern Studies. Earlier essays, most notably Guha's "Prose of Counter-Insurgency," engaged and interrogated elite writings with enviable skill and imagination. But these analyses of elite texts sought to establish the presence of the subalterns as subjects of their own history. The engagement with elite themes and writings, by contrast, emphasizes the analysis of the operation of dominance as it confronted, constituted, and subordinated certain forms of culture and politics. This approach is visible in the treatment of the writings of authoritative political figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru and in the analyses of the activities of the Indian National Congress—the dominant nationalist party. These strive to outline how elite nationalism rewrote history and how its rewriting was directed at both contesting colonial rule and protecting its flanks from the subalterns.[18] Another theme explored with a similar aim is the intertwined functioning of colonialism, nationalism, and "communalism" in the partition of British India into India and Pakistan—a theme that has taken on added importance with the recent resurgence of Hindu supremacists and outbreaks of Hindu-Muslim riots.[19]

[18] Fine examples in this respect are Shahid Amin's "Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921–2," *Subaltern Studies III* (Delhi, 1984), 1–61; and "Approver's Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The Case of Chauri Chaura," *Subaltern Studies V* (Delhi, 1987), 166–202.

[19] See Pandey, *Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*; and Gyanendra Pandey, "In

The importance of such topics is self-evident, but the real significance of the shift to the analysis of discourses is the reformulation of the notion of the subaltern. It is tempting to characterize this shift as an abandonment of the search for subaltern groups in favor of the discovery of discourses and texts. But this would be inaccurate. Although some scholars have rejected the positivistic retrieval of the subalterns, the notion of the subalterns' radical heterogeneity with, though not autonomy from, the dominant remains crucial. It is true, however, that scholars locate this heterogeneity in discourses, woven into the fabric of dominant structures and manifesting itself in the very operation of power. In other words, subalterns and subalternity do not disappear into discourse but appear in its interstices, subordinated by structures over which they exert pressure. Thus Shahid Amin shows that Indian nationalists in 1921–1922, confronted with the millennial and deeply subversive language of peasant politics, were quick to claim peasant actions as their own and Gandhian. Unable to acknowledge the peasants' insurgent appropriation of Gandhi, Indian nationalists represented it in the stereotypical saint-devotee relationship.[20] Amin develops this point further in his innovative monograph on the peasant violence in 1922 that resulted in the death of several policemen and led Gandhi to suspend the noncooperation campaign against British rule. Returning to this emotive date in Indian nationalist history, Amin shows that this violent event, "criminalized" in the colonial judicial discourse, was "nationalized" by the elite nationalists, first by an "obligatory amnesia" and then by selective remembrance and reappropriation.[21] To take another example, Gyanendra Pandey suggests that the discourse of the Indian nation-state, which had to imagine India as a national community, could not recognize community (religious, cultural, social, and local) as a political form; thus it pitted nationalism (termed good because it "stood above" difference) against communalism (termed evil because it did not "rise above" difference).[22]

Such reexaminations of South Asian history do not invoke "real" subalterns, prior to discourse, in framing their critique. Placing subalterns in the labyrinth of discourse, they cannot claim an unmediated access to their reality. The actual subalterns and subalternity emerge between the folds of the discourse, in its silences and blindness, and in its overdetermined pronouncements. Interpreting the 1922 peasant violence, Amin identifies the subaltern presence as an effect in the discourse. This effect manifests itself in a telling dilemma the nationalists faced. On the one hand, they could not endorse peasant violence as nationalist activity, but, on the other, they had to acknowledge the peasant "criminals" as part of the nation. They sought to resolve this dilemma by admitting the event in the narrative of the nation while denying it agency: the peasants were shown to act the way they did because they were provoked, or because they were insufficiently trained in the methods of nonviolence.

Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today," *Representations*, 37 (Winter 1992): 27–55.

[20] Amin, "Gandhi as Mahatma," 2–7.

[21] See Pandey's forthcoming *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922–1992* (Berkeley, Calif., 1995).

[22] See Pandey, *Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, 235–43, 254–61.

Subalternity thus emerges in the paradoxes of the functioning of power, in the functioning of the dominant discourse as it represents and domesticates peasant agency as a spontaneous and "pre-political" response to colonial violence. No longer does it appear outside the elite discourse as a separate domain, embodied in a figure endowed with a will that the dominant suppress and overpower but do not constitute. Instead, it refers to that impossible thought, figure, or action without which the dominant discourse cannot exist and which is acknowledged in its subterfuges and stereotypes.

This portrait of subalternity is certainly different from the image of the autonomous subject, and it has emerged in the confrontation with the systematic fragmentation of the record of subalternity. Such records register both the necessary failure of subalterns to come into their own and the pressure they exerted on discursive systems that, in turn, provoked their suppression and fragmentation. The representation of this discontinuous mode of subalternity demands a strategy that recognizes both the emergence and displacement of subaltern agency in dominant discourses. It is by adopting such a strategy that the Subaltern Studies scholars have redeployed and redefined the concept of the subaltern, enhancing, not diminishing, its recalcitrance.

THE SUBALTERN STUDIES' RELOCATION OF SUBALTERNITY in the operation of dominant discourses leads it necessarily to the critique of the modern West. For if the marginalization of "other" sources of knowledge and agency occurred in the functioning of colonialism and its derivative, nationalism, then the weapon of critique must turn against Europe and the modes of knowledge it instituted. It is in this context that there emerges a certain convergence between Subaltern Studies and postcolonial critiques originating in literary and cultural studies. To cite only one example, not only did Edward Said's *Orientalism* provide the grounds for Partha Chatterjee's critique of Indian nationalism, Said also wrote an appreciative foreword to a collection of Subaltern Studies essays.[23] It is important to recognize that the critique of the West is not confined to the colonial record of exploitation and profiteering but extends to the disciplinary knowledge and procedures it authorized—above all, the discipline of history.

In a recent essay, Dipesh Chakrabarty offers a forceful critique of the academic discipline of history as a theoretical category laden with power. Finding premature the celebration of Subaltern Studies as a case of successful decolonization of knowledge, Chakrabarty writes that,

> insofar as the academic discourse of history—that is, "history" as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university—is concerned, "Europe" remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call "Indian," "Chinese," "Kenyan," and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called "the history of Europe." In

[23] Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 36–39; Edward Said, "Foreword," *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds. (New York, 1988), v–x.

this sense, "Indian" history itself is in a position of subalternity; one can only articulate subaltern subject positions in the name of this history.[24]

The place of Europe as a silent referent works in many ways. First, there is the matter of "asymmetric ignorance": non-Westerners must read "great" Western historians (E. P. Thompson or Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie or Carlo Ginzburg) to produce the good histories, while the Western scholars are not expected to know non-Western works. Indeed, non-Western scholars are recognized for their innovation and imagination when they put into practice genres of inquiry developed for European history; a "total history" of China, the history of *mentalité* in Mexico, the making of the working class in India are likely to be applauded as fine studies.

Even more important, Chakrabarty suggests, is the installation of Europe as the theoretical subject of all histories. This universalization of Europe works through the representation of histories as History; even "Marx's methodological/epistemological statements have not always successfully resisted historicist readings."[25] Chakrabarty's study of jute workers in Bengal runs up against precisely the same Eurocentrism that undergirds Marx's analysis of capital and class struggle.[26] In his study, Chakrabarty finds that deeply hierarchical notions of caste and religion, drawn from India's traditions, animated working-class organization and politics in Bengal. This posed a problem for Marxist historiography. If India's traditions lacked the "Liberty Tree" that had nourished, according to E. P. Thompson, the consciousness of the English working class, were Indian workers condemned to "low classness"? The alternative was to envision that, sooner or later, the Indian working class would reach the desired state of emancipatory consciousness. This vision, of course, assumes the universality of such notions as the rights of "free-born Englishmen" and "equality before the law," and it posits that "workers all over the world, irrespective of their specific cultural pasts, *experience* 'capitalist production' in the same way."[27] This possibility can only arise if it is assumed that there is a universal subject endowed with an emancipatory narrative. Such an assumption, Chakrabarty suggests, is present in Marx's analysis, which, while carefully contrasting the proletariat from the citizen, falls back nonetheless on Enlightenment notions of freedom and democracy to define the emancipatory narrative. As a result, the jute workers, who resisted the bourgeois ideals of equality before the law with their hierarchical vision of a pre-capitalist community, are condemned to "backwardness" in Marxist accounts. Furthermore, it allows the nation-state to step onto the stage as the instrument of liberal transformation of the hierarchy-ridden masses.

It is not surprising, therefore, that themes of historical transition occupy a prominent place in the writing of non-Western histories. Historians ask if these societies achieved a successful transition to development, modernization, and capitalism and frequently answer in the negative. A sense of failure overwhelms

[24] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations*, 37 (Winter 1992): 1.
[25] Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History," 4.
[26] See Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*.
[27] Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, 223.

the representation of the history of these societies. So much so that even contestatory projects, including Subaltern Studies, Chakrabarty acknowledges, write of non-Western histories in terms of failed transitions. Such images of aborted transitions reinforce the subalternity of non-Western histories and the dominance of Europe as History.[28]

The dominance of Europe as history not only subalternizes non-Western societies but also serves the aims of their nation-states. Indeed, Subaltern Studies developed its critique of history in the course of its examination of Indian nationalism and the nation-state. Guha's reconstruction of the language of peasant politics in his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* is premised on the argument that nationalist historiography engaged in a systematic appropriation of peasants in the service of elite nationalism. Chatterjee's work contains an extended analysis of Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India*, a foundational nationalist text, showing the use of History, Reason, and Progress in the normalization of peasant "irrationality."[29] The inescapable conclusion from such analyses is that "history," authorized by European imperialism and the Indian nation-state, functions as a discipline, empowering certain forms of knowledge while disempowering others.

If history functions as a discipline that renders certain forms of thought and action "irrational" and subaltern, then should not the critique extend to the techniques and procedures it utilizes? Addressing this question, Chakrabarty turns to "one of the most elementary rules of evidence in academic history-writing: that your sources must be verifiable."[30] Pointing out that this rule assumes the existence of a "public sphere," which public archives and history writing are expected to reproduce, he suggests that the canons of historical research cannot help but live a problematic life in societies such as India. The idea of "public life" and "free access to information" must contend with the fact that knowledge is privileged and "belongs and circulates in the numerous and particularistic networks of kinship, community, gendered spaces, [and] ageing structures." If this is the case, then, Chakrabarty asks, how can we assume the universality of the canons of history writings: "Whose universals are they?"[31]

IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT "Europe" or "the West" in Subaltern Studies refers to an imaginary though powerful entity created by a historical process that authorized it as the home of Reason, Progress, and Modernity. To undo the authority of such an entity, distributed and universalized by imperialism and nationalism, requires, in Chakrabarty's words, the "provincialization of Europe." But neither nativism nor cultural relativism animates this project of provincializ-

[28] Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History," 4–5. In this essay, Chakrabarty includes the initial orientation of Subaltern Studies toward the question of transition, as reflected in Guha's programmatic statements in "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" and Chakrabarty's own *Rethinking Working-Class History*.

[29] Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India* (New York, 1946); Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*.

[30] Chakrabarty, "Trafficking in History and Theory," 106.

[31] Chakrabarty, "Trafficking in History and Theory," 107.

ing Europe; there are no calls for reversing the Europe/India hierarchy and no attempts to represent India through an "Indian," not Western, perspective. Instead, the recognition that the "third-world historian is condemned to knowing 'Europe' as the original home of the 'modern,' whereas the 'European' historian does not share a comparable predicament with regard to the pasts of the majority of humankind," serves as the condition for a deconstructive rethinking of history.[32] Such a strategy seeks to find in the functioning of history as a discipline (in Foucault's sense) the source for another history.

This move is a familiar one for postcolonial criticism and should not be confused with approaches that insist simply on the social construction of knowledge and identities. It delves into the history of colonialism not only to document its record of domination but also to identify its failures, silences, and impasses; not only to chronicle the career of dominant discourses but to track those (subaltern) positions that could not be properly recognized and named, only "normalized." The aim of such a strategy is not to unmask dominant discourses but to explore their fault lines in order to provide different accounts, to describe histories revealed in the cracks of the colonial archaeology of knowledge.[33]

This perspective draws on critiques of binary oppositions that, as Frederick Cooper notes in his essay in this *Forum*, historians of former empires look upon with suspicion. It is true, as Cooper points out, that binary oppositions conceal intertwined histories and engagements across dichotomies, but the critique must go further. Oppositions such as East/West and colonizer/colonized are suspect not only because these distort the history of engagements but also because they edit, suppress, and marginalize everything that upsets founding values. It is in this respect that Jacques Derrida's strategy to undo the implacable oppositions of Western dominance is of some relevance.

> Metaphysics—the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own *logos*, that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form that he must still wish to call Reason . . . White mythology—metaphysics has erased within itself the fabulous scene that has produced it, the scene that nevertheless remains active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible design covered over in the palimpsest.[34]

If the production of white mythology has nevertheless left "an invisible design covered over in the palimpsest," Derrida suggests that the structure of signification, of "différance," can be rearticulated differently than that which produced the West as Reason. Further, the source of the rearticulation of structures that produce foundational myths (History as the march of Man, of Reason, Progress) lies inside, not outside, their ambivalent functioning. From this point of view, critical work seeks its basis not without but within the fissures of dominant

[32] Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History," 19.

[33] See, in this connection, Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 85–92.

[34] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Alan Bass, trans. (Chicago, 1982), 213.

structures. Or, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts it, the deconstructive philosophical position (or postcolonial criticism) consists in saying an "impossible 'no' to a structure, which one critiques, yet inhabits intimately."[35]

The potential of this deconstructive position has been explored effectively in the recent readings of the archival documents on the abolition of *sati*, the Hindu widow sacrifice in the early nineteenth century. The historian encounters these records, as I have suggested elsewhere, as evidence of the contests between the British "civilizing mission" and Hindu heathenism, between modernity and tradition, and as a story of the beginning of the emancipation of Hindu women and about the birth of modern India.[36] This is so because, Lata Mani shows, the very existence of these documents has a history that entails the use of women as the site for both the colonial and the indigenous male elite's constructions of authoritative Hindu traditions.[37] The questions asked of accumulated sources on *sati*—whether or not the burning of widows was sanctioned by Hindu codes, did women go willingly to the funeral pyre, on what grounds could the immolation of women be abolished—come to us marked by their early nineteenth-century history. The historian's confrontation today with sources on *sati*, therefore, cannot escape the echo of that previous rendezvous. In repeating that encounter, how does the historian today not replicate the early nineteenth-century staging of the issue as a contest between tradition and modernity, between the slavery of women and efforts toward their emancipation, between barbaric Hindu practices and the British "civilizing mission"? Mani tackles this dilemma by examining how such questions were asked and with what consequences. She shows that the opposing arguments assumed the authority of the law-giving scriptural tradition as the origin of Hindu customs: both those who supported and those who opposed *sati* sought the authority of textual origins for their beliefs. In other words, the nineteenth-century debate fabricated the authority of texts as Hinduism without acknowledging its work of authorization; indigenous patriarchy and colonial power colluded in constructing the origins for and against *sati* while concealing their collusion. Consequently, as Spivak states starkly, the debate left no room for the widow's enunciatory position. Caught in the contest over whether traditions did or did not sanction *sati* and over whether or not the widow self-immolated willingly, the colonized subaltern woman disappeared: she was literally extinguished for her dead husband in the indigenous patriarchal discourse, or offered the choice to speak in the voice of a sovereign individual authenticated by colonialism.[38] The problem here is not one of sources (the absence of the woman's testimony) but of the staging of the debate: it left no position from which the widow could speak.

The silencing of subaltern women, Spivak argues, marks the limit of historical

[35] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Making of Americans, the Teaching of English, the Future of Colonial Studies," *New Literary History*, 21 (1990): 28.

[36] This discussion of *sati* draws heavily on my "Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography," *Social Text*, 31–32 (1992): 11.

[37] Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India," *Cultural Critique*, 7 (Fall 1987): 119–56.

[38] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. (Urbana, Ill., 1988), 271–313, esp. 299–307.

knowledge.[39] It is impossible to retrieve the woman's voice when she was not given a subject-position from which to speak. This argument appears to run counter to the historiographical convention of retrieval to recover the histories of the traditionally ignored—women, workers, peasants, and minorities. Spivak's point, however, is not that such retrievals should not be undertaken but that the very project of recovery depends on the historical erasure of the subaltern "voice." The possibility of retrieval, therefore, is also a sign of its impossibility. Recognition of the aporetic condition of the subaltern's silence is necessary in order to subject the intervention of the historian-critic to persistent interrogation, to prevent the refraction of "what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other."[40]

These directions of postcolonial criticism make it an ambivalent practice, perched between traditional historiography and its failures, within the folds of dominant discourses and seeking to rearticulate their pregnant silence—sketching "an invisible design covered over in the palimpsest." This should not be mistaken for the postmodern pastiche, although the present currency of concepts such as decentered subjects and parodic texts may provide a receptive and appropriative frame for postcolonial criticism. Postcolonial criticism seizes on discourse's silences and aporetic moments neither to celebrate the polyphony of native voices nor to privilege multiplicity. Rather, its point is that the *functioning* of colonial power was heterogeneous with its founding oppositions. The "native" was at once an other and entirely knowable; the Hindu widow was a silenced subaltern who was nonetheless sought as a sovereign subject asked to declare whether or not her immolation was voluntary. Clearly, colonial discourses operated as the structure of *writing*, with the structure of their enunciation remaining heterogeneous with the binary oppositions they instituted.

This perspective on history and the position within it that the postcolonial critic occupies keeps an eye on both the conditions of historical knowledge and the possibility of its reinscription. It is precisely this double vision that allows Shahid Amin to use the limits of historical knowledge for its reinscription. His monograph on the 1922 peasant violence in Chauri Chaura is at once scrupulously "local" and "general." It offers a "thick description" of a local event set on a larger stage by nationalism and historiographical practice. Amin seizes on this general (national) staging of the local not only to show that the Indian nation emerged in its narration but also to mark the tension between the two as the point at which the subaltern memory of 1922 can enter history. This memory, recalled for the author during his field work, is not invoked either to present a more "complete" account of the event or to recover the subaltern. In fact, treating gaps, contradictions, and ambivalences as constitutive, necessary components of the nationalist narrative, Amin inserts memory as a device that both dislocates and reinscribes the historical record. The result is not an archaeology of nationalism that yields

[39] For more on this argument about the colonized woman caught between indigenous patriarchy and the politics of archival production, see Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives," *History and Theory*, 24 (1985): 247–72.

[40] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985): 253.

lifeless layers of suppressed evidence and episodes. Instead, we get a stage on which several different but interrelated dramas are performed, jostling for attention and prominence; curtains are abruptly drawn on some, and often the voices of the peasant actors can only be heard in the din of the other, more powerful, voices.

To read Amin's work in this way shows, I hope, that his deconstructive strategy does not "flatten" the tension that has existed, as Florencia Mallon notes correctly, in this scholarship from the very beginning. To be sure, Amin's account is not animated by the urge to recover the subaltern as an autonomous subject. But he places his inquiry in the tension between nationalism's claim to know the peasant and its representation of the subalterns as the "criminals" of Chauri Chaura. The subaltern remains a recalcitrant presence in discourse, at once part of the nation and outside it. Amin trafficks between these two positions, demonstrating that subaltern insurgency left its mark, however disfigured, on the discourse—"an invisible design covered over in the palimpsest."

Neither Amin's retelling of the 1922 event nor Chakrabarty's project of "provincializing Europe" can be separated from postcolonial critiques of disciplines, including the discipline of history. Thus, even as Subaltern Studies has shifted from its original goal of recovering the subaltern autonomy, the subaltern has emerged as a position from which the discipline of history can be rethought. This rethinking does not entail the rejection of the discipline and its procedures of research. Far from it. As Chakrabarty writes, "it is not possible to simply walk out of the deep collusion between 'history' and the modernizing narrative(s)."[41] Nor is it possible to abandon historical research so long as it is pursued as an academic discipline in universities and functions to universalize capitalism and the nation-state. There is no alternative but to inhabit the discipline, delve into archives, and push at the limits of historical knowledge to turn its contradictions, ambivalences, and gaps into grounds for its rewriting.

IF SUBALTERN STUDIES' POWERFUL INTERVENTION in South Asian historiography has turned into a sharp critique of the discipline of history, this is because South Asia is not an isolated arena but is woven into the web of historical discourse centered, as Chakrabarty argues, in the modern West. Through the long histories of colonialism and nationalism, the discourse of modernity, capitalism, and citizenship has acquired a strong though peculiar presence in the history of the region. The institutions of higher education in South Asia, relatively large and thriving, have functioned since the mid-nineteenth century in relation to the metropolitan academy, including centers for South Asian studies in the West. For all these reasons, India's historical scholarship has been uniquely placed to both experience and formulate searching critiques of metropolitan discourses even as its object remains the field of South Asia. To its credit, Subaltern Studies turned South Asia's entanglement with the modern West as the basis for rendering its

[41] Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History," 19.

intervention in South Asian history into a critique of discourses authorized by Western domination.

Subaltern Studies has arrived at its critique by engaging both Marxism and poststructuralism. But the nature of these engagements is complex. If the influence of Gramsci's Marxism is palpable in the concept of the subaltern and in treatments of such themes as hegemony and dominance, Marxism is also subjected to the poststructuralist critique of European humanism. It should be noted, however, as Spivak points out, that while "there is an affinity between the imperialist subject and the subject of humanism," the European critique of humanism does not provide the primary motive force for the Subaltern Studies project.[42] Thus, even as this project utilizes Foucault's genealogical analysis to unravel the discourse of modernity, it relies on the subaltern as the vantage point of critique. The recalcitrant presence of the subaltern, marking the limits of the dominant discourse and the disciplines of representation, enables Subaltern Studies to identify the European provenance of Marx's account of capital, to disclose Enlightenment thought as the unthought of his analysis. It is outside Europe, in subaltern locations, that Marx's emancipatory narrative is disclosed as a *telos* deeply implicated in a discourse that was once part of colonialism and now serves to legitimate the nation-state.[43] Such a critical and complex engagement with Marxism and poststructuralism, deriving its force from the concept of the subaltern, defines the Subaltern Studies project.

Clearly, Subaltern Studies obtains its force as postcolonial criticism from a catachrestic combination of Marxism, poststructuralism, Gramsci and Foucault, the modern West and India, archival research and textual criticism. As this project is translated into other regions and disciplines, the discrepant histories of colonialism, capitalism, and subalternity in different areas would have to be recognized. It is up to the scholars of these fields, including Europeanists, to determine how to use Subaltern Studies' insights on subalternity and its critique of the colonial genealogy of the discourse of modernity. But it is worth bearing in mind that Subaltern Studies itself is an act of translation. Representing a negotiation between South Asian historiography and the discipline of history centered in the West, its insights can be neither limited to South Asia nor globalized. Trafficking between the two, and originating as an ambivalent colonial aftermath, Subaltern Studies demands that its own translation also occur between the lines.

[42] Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," 337.
[43] Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, 224–29.