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**Middle East Studies & Subaltern Studies**SABRA J. WEBBER, *Ohio State University**"in between* is as much a place to be at home as any other"

DESPITE the physical proximity of the birthplace of Subaltern Studies, South Asia, to the Middle East and despite the convergent, colliding histories of these two regions, scholars of the Middle East attend very little to the Subaltern Studies project or to the work of Subaltern Studies groups. Although certain stances of Fanon and Said, with their focus on cultural strategies of domination and resistance, have a currency in Middle Eastern studies, no literary theorist, folklorist, anthropologist, political scientist or historian in the field of Middle Eastern Studies, so far as I am aware, explicitly draws upon Subaltern Studies with any consistency as an organizing principle for his or her studies. It is the Latin Americanists (and to a lesser degree Africanists) who have been most eager to build on South Asian Subaltern Studies to respond to Latin American (or sub-Saharan African) circumstances. Perhaps it is time to take a closer look at what Subaltern Studies might contribute to Middle Eastern studies if we were to make a sustained effort to apply and critique that body of literature.

"Subaltern" is Gramsci's term that was adopted in the early 1980s by Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies Group in India. Guha's refreshingly unaffected challenges to nationalist histories and Western liberal/Marxist interpretations, along with those of colleagues such as Veena Das, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Shahid Amin, drew the attention of South Asianists, especially historians. Gayatri Spivak's well-known essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), brought Subaltern Studies to the attention of a wider audience in the West at a time when many scholars—particularly anthropologists, historians and literary theorists—were wrestling with postmodern/neocolonial/postcolonial/poststructural issues of honest representation. The focus of Subaltern Studies on the unmasking of overlooked consequences of unequal power relations, on representational inequalities embedded in cultural productions and on collusion between the dominator and dominated—on the "political" (in a broad sense)—resonated with such scholars. Subaltern Studies scholarship went beyond much of the work done in the postcolonial period to emphasize the importance of finding and including in historical and cultural dialogue the insights and theories of those outside the literate or elite. Historically based, the effort was to think and think again, crossing disciplines and national boundaries in the process, always taking into account the perspective of "the" subaltern. Rather than starting with a subaltern predetermined by colonialist, socialist, Marxist, Marxian theory, Guha's group undertook to "read against the grain," to call into question traditional models, to see subalterns as individuals culturally and centrally located in particular times and places and to discover what kinds of conversations we could create together. This move is not exactly an Annales school, or "history from below," approach. Subalternity or the subaltern condition is approached as an effect or outcome of certain kinds of discourses (or lack thereof), and the Subaltern Studies project is

a means to carry on particular kinds of dialogues with those we have not listened to, a dialogue with those Guha calls the “small voices” of history.

Certain of the critical tools and techniques of Subaltern Studies may prove useful for Middle East Studies scholarship. Although many of us hearken to some of the same scholarship important to the Subaltern Studies project—work by Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Raymond Williams, Jacques Derrida and so on—unless we systematically attend to Subaltern Studies as such, certain key issues and emphases may be overlooked. And there is something to be said for a methodology and philosophy that emerges from the Third World, however much in collusion those Third World scholars may be with counterparts in the North.

Most obviously, Subaltern Studies keep us searching for the individual “small voices” whose insights we need. For example, in the late 1940s and early 1950s in the small town of Kelibia, Tunisia, there was a water carrier with his horse and cart who used his access to every home, to women, men and children, to whisper news coded in poetic riddles of the return of the freedom fighters and the dawning of new independence movements. We need micro studies about this man and others like him—as named individuals, not a category—that attend to their words and actions in all their creative complexity and in their specific social and political contexts in order to resist the flattening steamroller of theory. In the postmodern intermingling of disciplines, cultures, histories and historical periods, the breakdown of disciplinary and media boundaries and of categories of “high” and “low,” folk and popular, the Subaltern Studies project enjoins communication with—not just representations about or even of—such voices not previously attended to. It provides not just the impulse, but the tools through which voices once they are recognized can be recovered by a combination of new fieldwork philosophies and reading techniques. For example, collapsing the analytical distinctions between the economic and domestic or the political and spiritual domains, whether in field studies or in the documents of the dominator, yields new perspectives on cultural discourses by and about the marginalized, the colonized, women, the handicapped and people of color. If Gramsci’s or Marx’s vision of the subaltern had to be modified in such approaches to the practical experience of India, so Middle Eastern Subaltern Studies approaches first force us to look anew at the practical experiences over time and writ small in, say, Iran or Algeria. This exercise in turn leads to modification, reconceptualization of Subaltern Studies.

In a similar vein, Subaltern Studies, aiming to take into account the power relationships not simply among cultural domains but between classes, genders, races, religions, nationalities and regions, keep us focused on unmasking representational authority, on problematicizing writings about the Other. Without such subaltern expertise, the postmodern enterprise, whether confessional ethnography, works of literary theory or translation, always risk ultimately instilling authority on the writer/compiler. As Margaret Mills (Webber & Lynd 1996: vii) asks, now that we are “devising new rules for responsible representation of other people and cultures, will the ‘post-modern turn,’ so focused on discursive practices and narrative persuasions, be just the newest rhetorical ploy designed to cover the tracks of our own authority claims?”

A set of theoretical touchstones drawn from multiple disciplines, Subaltern Studies, while history-based, brings scholars together outside disciplinary boundaries to ponder mutual concerns. As a certain "take" on postcolonial criticism, this effort to rethink the past and re-see the present from the perspective of the subaltern attracts scholars across a spectrum who are searching for a means to recover knowledge of the agency of the subaltern. From the beginning it has focused on the study of conscious action (rather than the instinctive reaction) by the subaltern while continuing to take into account the textual productions and actions of colonialist officials, landlords, national leaders, scholars and representatives of moneyed enterprises.

Such studies problematize the autonomous subject or object in a particularly reflective way. We find that the power of the subaltern over our attempts to understand "how we got here(?) from there" is not to be underestimated. Jay Slawney observes that the other is always gazing back at the gazer (the subject/researcher, theorist) for whom s/he is the object. The object will not hold still to be "captured" by the subject. Any representation that assumes it does is immediately flawed. What we are left with, given this observation, is not two autonomous subjects, but colluding subjects/objects. This disruption of duality and focus on collusion is then another profitable emphasis within the Subaltern Studies project and related studies. The "notion of the subaltern's radical heterogeneity with, though not autonomy from, the dominant remains crucial. [S]ubalterns and subalternity do not disappear into discourse but appear in its interstices, subordinated by structures over which they exert pressure... [T]he actual subalterns and subalternity emerge between the folds of the discourse, in its silences and blindness, and in its over determined pronouncements" (Prakash 1994: 1482).

From this emphasis on perspective as collusive, Third World subaltern cultures are found not to self-identify as peripheral, or to conduct their lives simply in response to a domination by a northern or western (or even local) "center" or metropolis, but rather to celebrate or grapple with on-going issues and concerns in which they are the principal players. Without this insight, every Middle Eastern history/story turns out to be a variation "...on a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe'" (Chatterjee 1986: 36-39).

More generally, the Subaltern Studies project provides Middle East studies an important link to work done in South Asia, Latin America and Africa. Attending to Subaltern Studies projects in other parts of the world could help us students of the Middle East elude the parochialism of "reinventing the wheel" and provide a dialogue with colleagues from various cultures who more or less share a conceptual language. Close convergence/engagement with elite writings is of course one link we share with scholars globally who draw upon certain kinds of historical, ethnographic, literary and cultural studies to interrogate the effects of political/cultural power on the products of western scholarship. We are only beginning to tease out, for example, how, like South Asian institutions of higher learning, those in the Middle East and departments or centers for Middle East studies in the West have barely taken into account the effects on who gets heard and how they get heard of, "[d]ifferential access to the resources of research,

publishing, and scholarly interchange" (Cooper 1994: 1543), a point that has been strongly argued by Aijaz Ahmad (1994).

The flip side to this cross-cultural work is that, Prakash writes, "As this project [Subaltern Studies] is translated into other regions and disciplines, the discrepant histories of colonialism, capitalism and subalternity in different areas will have to be recognized" (Prakash 1994: 1490) in order to avoid the dangers of over-generalized statements, the danger of working with overly rigid or over-generalized definitions for categories like "subaltern," "resistance" or "the past." In fact, the project will stagnate, I expect, unless this kind of geographical and cultural translation continues to move forward.

The project of recovery may, as Spivak observes, depend on the historical erasure of the subaltern voice, since colonial knowledge categories set up even the opposition that gets talked about and entered into it. The very idea of a postcolonial debate may leave no obvious position from which the subaltern could speak in any sustained way, no "subject-position" from which any particular subaltern can speak. There is the tendency for even non-western scholars or those associated with the Subaltern Studies project to write Third World history, including recent political history, as one of "failed transitions" vis-à-vis the model history of the West (Chakrabarty 1992: 4-5) or to fail to consider how models of decolonization such as pan-Arabism were written out of decolonization possibilities. Yet, as Prakash illustrates by drawing upon Shahid Amin's combination of literary study and fieldwork, the insertion of other memory into the historical record both dislocates it and reinscribes it: "the subaltern insurgency left its mark, however disfigured, on the discourse—'an invisible design covered over in palimpsest'. So the subaltern has emerged as a position from which the discipline of history [or ethnography, folklore, or critical theory] can be rethought" (Prakash 1994: 1489).

Scholars of the Middle East are well-positioned to provide theoretical tools and data with which to address at least two perceived concerns with the current direction of Subaltern Studies. Mallon (1994) has reservations about the somewhat lopsided attention to texts as opposed to field study among the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group. Out of 12 members for whom she could identify disciplines, nine are literary critics while two are anthropologists and only one is a historian. Scholars of the Middle East, though, for more than a decade have placed what seems to me an unusually sophisticated emphasis not simply on collecting but on leading-edge research into folk and popular as well as "classic" expressive culture, the close study of oral as well as textual literature (e.g., Slyomovics 1987, Booth 1990, Mills 1991, Reynolds 1995) and on the interstices of already artificial categories and discourses that are "outside" or even unrepresented in "the dominant discourse." A Middle Eastern Subaltern Studies, because of the dual focus in recent years on expressive culture and on work in the "field," might pick up a thread that in Latin American Subaltern Studies has been let drop recently in favor of close studies and criticisms of dominant texts. If Subaltern Studies in Latin America is overbalanced in its attention to texts, studies from the Middle East demonstrate how reading "against the grain" can combine profitably with fieldwork to stem what seems to me an alarming postcolonial "escape into theory." Works such as those above as well as by Dale Eickelman (1985), Tim

Mitchell (1988), Cornell Fleischer (1986) and others already demonstrate the value of sustaining a tension between field and library, history and story, political engagements and scholarly distance.

Combining Subaltern Studies methodologies and foci with the synergy of melding library and field studies yields an improved understanding of what assumptions people were/are operating under. Producing direct evidence of vulnerability and overdetermination from elite texts, compared with insights derived from the study of expressive folk or popular culture among subaltern groups in the same historical context, might even lead to the discovery, as Cooper hints, that the texts of the "autonomous" subaltern are not so "fragmented" as has been regretfully assumed (Cooper 1994: 1534). Heterogeneity is not only located in discourses woven into the fabric of dominant structures where it is manifest as domestication of subaltern agency as unconscious, "pre-political," instinctive group responses. James Scott's concept of "hidden transcripts," for instance, elicits precisely *subaltern* agency, and the vulnerability of elites (including scholars, western and non-western) to having it hidden from them. Drawing upon Subaltern Studies, at least methodologically, would insist that looking afresh at old documents should take into account the "new documents" and new agents encountered in field research micro-studies, especially of folk and popular expressive culture, to recover subaltern cultures' own diversities and diversions. With such a dual focus we find a means of identifying multiple "histories" of a time, of a place, while never expecting, and even resisting, a resolution.

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