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Subaltern Studies

Sudeep Dasgupta

The historiographical intervention of the Indian *Subaltern Studies* Group took as their targets elite and nationalist accounts of the transition from colonialism to nationhood. However, they also included in their interventions a corresponding critique of Marxist analyses of the transition to nationalism. As Gyan Prakash argues “When Marxists turned the spotlight on colonial exploitation, their criticism was framed by a historicist scheme that universalized Europe’s historical experience” (Prakash 1994, 1375). *Subaltern Studies* thus also found a place within the field of Postcolonial Studies’ critique of Europe-centred analyses of history, politics and identity. The critique of Marxism targeted the Marxist reliance on “mode-of-production narratives” couched in terms of a “nation-state’s ideology of modernity and progress” which resulted in an inability to take seriously “the oppressed’s ‘lived experience’ of religion and social customs” (ibid., 1477).

At the same time, as the term “subaltern” indicates, the Group’s relation to Marx and Marxist thought was also one of a critical engagement with Marx’s historical and theoretical understandings of the political transformations in societies undergoing colonial exploitation. The place of Antonio Gramsci is crucial here, in particular his writings on Italian history during the complex political processes which constituted the *Risorgimento* (Gramsci 1992). Thus read more generously

and with nuance, *Subaltern Studies* could be seen as having a relation of *critical intimacy* with Marxist thought rather than an outright rejection of all of its analyses. This is clear in the Marxist and Leninist language employed by Ranajit Guha, the Group's founder, who argues that "the working class was still not sufficiently mature in the objective conditions of its social being and in its consciousness as a class-for-itself" (Guha 1988, 42), and the "*historic failure of the nation to come to its own* (sic)" (ibid, emphasis in original) is evidenced in the failure of a democratic revolution "under the hegemony of workers and peasants (ibid., 43). Similarly, Partha Chatterjee's influential "More on Modes of Power and the Peasantry" offers a historical and comparative analysis of the complex power relations set into motion among different classes (and class fractions) in which a Foucauldian analysis is combined with a reading of the *Grundrisse* to underscore the "differential impact on pre-capitalist structures" including "destruction, modifying them for surplus extraction, bolstering pre-existing social structures" (Chatterjee 1988, 388).

Two aspects of the relation between Marx and the *Subaltern Studies* group can be identified here. First, the explanations of historical *transformation from colonialism to the nation-state*; and second, the peculiar form of *identity of the subaltern classes* who are defined in opposition to the colonial and national elites. The first issue involved the necessity of transforming the "mode-of-production narrative" to include the complexity of transformations in pre-capitalist structures such as caste, religion and community which resulted in a sustained engagement with forms of "pre-modern" mobilization including magic, religion, rumour, and caste. Here however, the presumed split between Marxism's inadequacy with dealing with such issues, and the groups own interventions, must be nuanced by the fact that within the pages of the volumes of *Subaltern Studies* Marxist historians were invited to articulate their own understandings of the relation between caste, class and community for example. Asok Sen's reading of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* in *Volume V* of *Subaltern Studies*, for example, underscores that Marx's historical writings on the peasantry comprise a far more sophisticated understanding of the complex links between emergent power-blocs and strategic political alliances between the peasantry, the (petit-) bourgeoisie and owners of capital in the

transition from feudal to capitalist economies (Sen 1987, 207; see also Chaudhury). A wholesale rejection of "Marxist" thought implied in some formulations, such as by Prakash, seem thus unwarranted. Guha himself in his landmark essay "Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography" deploys Marx's nuanced reading of the global expansion of capitalism in the *Grundrisse* to situate his own historiographical critique of elite histories of Indian nationalism (Guha 1992).

The second issue of subaltern identity, and its recovery through historiographical research, came in for sharp critique from many quarters including a feminist and deconstructive analysis by Gayatri Spivak, and from a more broadly materialist and Marxist perspective by Dipankar Gupta and Rosalind O'Hanlon (Spivak 1988; Gupta 1985; O'Hanlon 1988). Guha's understanding of subaltern resistance as "the politics of the people" occupying "an autonomous domain [which] neither originated from elite politics nor [whose] existence depend[ed] on the latter" (Guha 1988, 40) was problematic, because it seemed to foreclose a relational analysis of how subaltern politics operated through external constraints and opportunities, as well as strategic linkages with other forms of social power. In fact, Chatterjee's essay had foregrounded precisely this complex *relational* understanding of power which made claims of an autonomous subaltern identity problematic. Dipankar Gupta's critique of Guha underscored the dangers of ethnicized formulations of autonomous peasant identity which relied on the "*independent* organizing principle of the insurgent's mind" (emphasis added) as the motor of historical change (Gupta 1985, 9). Developing Gupta's critique, O'Hanlon argues that such an idealist claim to autonomous subaltern identity "shuts off the whole field of external structural interaction and constraint" within which the politics of the people operated (O'Hanlon 1988, 202). It is precisely here that a materialist and Marxist critique of identity becomes relevant since such a critique exposes the humanist and liberal conception of human agency often implied in formulations of subaltern identity. In O'Hanlon's words: "we are left with the unfortunate, and I think unintended, impression, that the historiographical issue at stake is that of man's freedom as against the determining power of his external world. But this very juxtaposition, of the free man as against the man determined, is itself an

idealist conception, in which the mode of existence of the unitary subject-agent is never called into question" (ibid.).

The problematic question of subaltern identity, and the complex processes of political transformation involved in the transition from colonialism to nationalism, thus emerge less as points of fundamental divergence between Subaltern Studies and Marx. Rather, a productive form of critical intimacy best describes how the limitations and opportunities of both strands of thought could contribute (and interrupt) each other.

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