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The subaltern, the postcolonial, and cultural sociology

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There is no history of ideas, no calm Olympian narrative of events, no disengaged objective recital of facts. It is rather sharply contestary, an attempt to wrest control of the Indian past from its scribes and curators of the present, since, as we shall see, much of the past continues into the present. And if there can be no actual taking of power in the writing of history, there can at least be a demystifying exposure of what material interests are at stake, what ideology and method are employed, what parties advanced, which deferred, displaced, defeated. (Said 1988: vii)

In the late 1970s, a group of Indian historians in England launched a movement that first came to public light in 1982 with the publication of a volume called Subaltern Studies, Volume 1. “The declared aim of Subaltern Studies was to produce historical analyses in which the subaltern groups were viewed as the subjects of history” (Chakrabarty 2000a: 15). Writing in the early 1980s against the backdrop of South Asian states’ failure to live up to their promises thirty years after independence (and, indeed, the apparent failure of the postcolonial world)—“the historic failure of the nation to come into its own” (Guha 1982: 6)—subaltern historians sought explanations that lay outside of orthodox Marxist or developmentalist paradigms. They looked instead at the ways that postcolonial nations were imagined and understood, and at the failures of national elites to be genuinely inclusive of non-dominant groups that comprised most of their nations’ populations. Their work was marked by simultaneous attention to questions of power, culture, and the politics of the dispossessed. Today, twelve volumes later, the project has spilled out of the bounds of South Asia and history, into other areas of the world and other disciplines, but it has stopped short of sociology. In this essay we make the case for how the Subaltern Studies approach to Indian history can enrich sociological understandings of culture, specifically with regard to thinking about nations, colonialism, and the production of knowledge.

Subaltern subjectivity

Central to the Subaltern Studies project was the Gramscian figure of the subaltern. As used by Gramsci, the term subaltern referred to those excluded from state power.
“The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a ‘State’,” Gramsci (1971: 52) wrote, but the term was commonly assumed to refer specifically to workers and peasants. Yet, in the essay in which he introduced subaltern studies to the world, Ranajit Guha defined the subaltern simply as those who were not among the elite, specifically, as the “demographic difference between the total Indian population” and the dominant indigenous and foreign elite (Guha 1982: 7). This capacious formulation opened up the possibility of bringing to the center those who had been excluded and marginalized—on the basis not just of class, but also of caste, gender, and indeed office. In widening the scope of subalternity, Guha facilitated the theorization of multiple forms of domination in ways that were not reducible either to pluralism or economistic Marxism (O’Hanlon 2000: 84).

In putting the subaltern at the center of their analysis, subaltern scholars intended to recuperate the subaltern as an agent. Indeed, in the early scholarly writings, subalterns seem to inhabit a separate sphere and capacity for self-determination—a characterization that has led to its share of criticisms, notably the charge of essentialism. Guha specifically argued that the politics of the people in the colonial period formed a culturally “autonomous” domain, parallel to the elite, but neither originating from it nor dependent upon it (1982: 3). In his formulation, peasants enjoyed the most powerful form of this autonomy. However, other scholars (Bhadra 1989; Amin 1984) represented the subaltern as possessing a more contradictory consciousness.

The loose definition of the subaltern permitted a reconceptualization of different modes of power, notably religious, colonial, caste-based, and the (otherwise invisible) power of marginal groups. Just as subaltern studies scholars documented multiple forms of domination, so too they documented multiple forms of resistance. In analyzing grain riots, small-scale peasant insurgencies, and the uprising of hill peoples (Sivaramakrishnan 2002: 217), studies—especially in the early volumes of Subaltern Studies—revealed the multiple workings of non-hegemonic cultural forms (e.g. magic, oral traditions, local religious customs, etc.) in shaping resistance. Simultaneously, this work reconceptualized resistant agency, holding that resistance was possible not only through violent conflict but also through cultural negation and inversion (see, for example, Sarkar 1989). The powerful but uneven structuring effect of colonialism, as well as the interactive effects of the precolonial and colonial on subaltern consciousness, were central ideas in the formulations of scholars engaged in Subaltern Studies.

The theoretical inspiration in the early years, certainly between Volumes I and IV, was the work of Antonio Gramsci. However, with Volume V, published in 1987, contributions came increasingly to draw on Foucault’s conceptualization of knowledge and power, as well as Derridian deconstructionism— influences similar to those on British approaches to cultural studies. It was at this time both that Edward Said praised the project and that subaltern theorizing began to take on shades of postcolonial theory. In the words of Vinayak Chaturvedi, “what starts as a project trying to establish the autonomy of subaltern agency is now challenging the foundation of Enlightenment thought while attempting to hold on to a certain version of Marxism” (2000: xii–xiii). But the move from Gramsci to Foucault and postcolonial theory also pushed the work beyond the specificity of colonial India to the possibility of thinking about late twentieth–century imperialism (Chaturvedi 2000: xiii)—even as the core themes remained the exploration of agency, subject formation, and hegemony.

Whereas a Gramscian–inspired notion of subalternity highlighted the distinction between the dominant and the dominated, adapting a modified notion of hegemony, the
turn to Foucault was accompanied by the increased use of discursive analysis and an understanding of power as diffuse and multilayered. These two strands of scholarship within the Subaltern Studies series did not go easily together, and each attracted its own share of critics. Historians of Latin America and Africa grappled with this tension as they engaged with the histories of colonialism and imperialism in their own areas (Cooper 1994; Mallon 1994). Scholars in literature departments, for whom subaltern studies was part of a larger turn towards study of the postcolonial, tended toward the more deconstructionist end of subaltern studies scholarship, while grappling with the work of subalternist writings published outside the series, most notably Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Indeed, the emergence of diverse interlocutors highlights what we would argue is a productive tension between Gramscian and poststructuralist conceptualizations of power.

This tension is most clearly illustrated in the divergent conceptions of the subaltern contained in Ranajit Guha’s opening essay that introduced Subaltern Studies to the world, and Gayatri Spivak’s “Deconstructing Historiography,” initially published in Volume IV. Guha (1982) reworked Gramsci’s notion of hegemony to conceptualize dominance that was possible without consent: in his formulation, neither those who mobilized against colonialism nor subalterns more generally consented to bourgeois rule. Even as Guha expanded and pushed the boundaries in his reworked notion of dominance by acknowledging diverse modes through which power is articulated, however, his conceptualization continued to distinguish clearly between the dominated and the dominating, and remained within a binary/dialectic framework. Spivak, in contrast, argued that subaltern studies as a project, while continuing to assert such binary dialectics in theory, was in practice and method deconstructionist, and had the potential to bring dominant historiography to the point of crisis precisely because it (implicitly) acknowledged that “subaltern consciousness is … irreducibly discursive” (Spivak 1988: 11) Subaltern “voices,” in this formulation, are inaccessible because they are already constituted through elite power.

How can these two approaches be reconciled with one another, if at all? On one hand, Guha’s “autonomous sphere” of the subaltern is politically attractive because it asserts the existence of subaltern consciousness outside of colonial and nationalist power, and aims to articulate the specific actions, ideologies, and cultures of those outside the realm of elitist accounts of history. Spivak’s approach, on the other hand, does not completely deny the existence of an autonomous sphere. Rather, she argues that such a proposition can never be verified, and that a truly radical historiography can only be deconstructionist—understanding the diffusiveness of power relations and the pervasiveness of elite power in constituting a subaltern consciousness that is perhaps only theoretically possible. Scholarship that continues the Guha line of argumentation can be found in the literature on resistance, while the Spivakian approach can be seen in postcolonial critiques of knowledge.

Among studies of consciousness, sociologists and anthropologists are most familiar with James Scott’s (1985) analysis of resistance among Malay peasants, published almost simultaneously with Subaltern Studies in the mid-1980s. Scott sought to account for subaltern acts of resistance that did not result in peasant revolt, aiming to rethink notions of false consciousness and hegemony that dominated especially history and political science at the time. In many ways, notions of “subaltern agency” emerging from the writings of the Subaltern Studies collective resonated with Scott’s core concepts and intent. However, although his account of resistance theorized an unconsenting peasant
subjectivity, Scott’s idea of resistance included only intentional action aimed at undermining superordinate classes (cited in Moore 1998). In contrast, subaltern studies questioned the ability to know and apprehend the intentionality of the subaltern. By questioning the relationship between the power of the subaltern and the knowledge we might come to acquire about her, subaltern studies provided a less positivist, more reflexive, and more multilayered account of agency, acknowledging not only the possibility of subaltern resistance, but also the extent to which the nature of that resistance may be hidden from view.

Historians of Latin America especially embraced the Subaltern Studies strategy of melding textual methods with a commitment to advancing the political aims of the poor (Mallon 1994; Rodríguez 2001). For those Latin American scholars who formed the Latin American Subaltern Studies collective, subaltern studies provided a rich set of “traveling theories,” and thus offered an opportunity to borrow theory developed in the global South for advancing post-Marxist analysis of Latin American history, specifically to provide a set of tools for radical critique of dominant colonial cultures in Latin America. Most useful for sociology, perhaps, is the way the Latin American version of subaltern studies focused upon the history of societies’ “Others” as a means of thinking through the limitations and incapacities of bourgeois knowledge production (Rodríguez 2001: 9).

By de-centering the West and, in the same move, de-centering bourgeois ways of knowing and being, subaltern studies provided for Latin Americanists a critical epistemology that bears important lessons for sociology as well. Overall, the Latin American project expanded upon the scope of the original collective to examine questions of citizenship and governance through the vehicle of radical critique, deconstructing cultures of dominance while retaining a political agenda meant to further counterhegemonic ideals.

Guha’s founding claim of an “autonomous sphere” attracted as much criticism as admiration, and became a magnet for scholars in related fields to engage (Cooper 1994; Brass 1997). Related to the charge of essentialism is the charge that viewing subaltern politics as an autonomous sphere misleads by ignoring the dynamism and immediacy of subaltern subjectivity and struggle. Drawing from his own ethnographic work in rural parts of Eastern Zimbabwe, for example, anthropologist Donald Moore criticizes the idea of the autonomy of subaltern subjectivity and politics by arguing instead that “[s]ubalternity, understood as a relational process of identity formation and the crafting of agency within multiple matrixes of power, may shift” (1998: 370). Other critics of subaltern studies charge that the complexity of subaltern politics is not adequately theorized, although these same critics adapt the term “subaltern,” choosing to interpret the term strictly in the context of Hall’s notion of “articulation” (see, for example, Li 2001: 650–51; Escobar 2001). These interlocutors benefit from the revival that the term “subaltern” has enjoyed in the wake of subaltern studies, which becomes for them an important analytical concept.

The awareness of how elite power constitutes knowledge that is embedded within subaltern studies and the resulting critique of conventional historiography has led to a broader reflexivity about methods across disciplines. Anthropologists, for the most part, have welcomed the critique of ethnography and the position of the intellectual that subaltern studies demands, especially after Volume V, and have embraced new fields of inquiry under its influence (Pels 1997). Still, many have also found the apparent refusal of the ethnographic in favor of a discursive, deconstructionist approach to be politically troubling. In her critique of Spivak’s reading of the debates surrounding *safi*, or
widow-burning, in colonial India, for example, Sherry Ortner (1996) argues, “feminists who might want to investigate the ways in which satū was part of a larger configuration of male dominance in nineteenth century Indian society cannot do so without seeming to subscribe to the discourse of colonial administrators.”

**Sociology and subaltern studies**

The most significant insight that subaltern studies and postcolonial theories bring to the sociology of culture is that analyses of the relations between the dominant and the dominated, including those between colonizer and colonized, must be made central to understandings of cultural forms of expression and knowledge. Here, we limit ourselves to three issues in which this insight manifests itself and in which sociology of culture and subaltern studies can have the most productive conversations—the relationship of culture to the nation, knowledge production, and marginalization and internal colonialism.

**Culture and the nation**

The cultural entity of the nation has been a point of critical focus for sociologists of culture. Subaltern scholarship provides tools with which to deepen this engagement while expanding our notion of the nation as a politicized cultural entity and, as such, a specific site of empirical study. Within cultural sociology, nationalism has been viewed most importantly as enacted through secular collective ritual, a display of Durkheimian solidarity. Lyn Spillman’s work on centennial and bicentennial celebrations in the United States and Australia highlights this aspect of the nation, emphasizing that in “settler societies” like the United States and Australia a sense of collective solidarity had to be gradually built through specific kinds of rituals (Spillman 1997). Because such studies view rituals of the nation as being fundamentally similar to other types of collective rituals in “traditional” or “primordial” societies, understanding the nation as secular ritual problematizes the divide between “traditional” and “modern” societies in a way that resonates well with the political intent of subaltern studies (Hall et al. 2003). The work of subaltern scholars also feeds into and extends work on collective memory and nation as they show how the same events (such as within the anti-colonial struggle) may be memorialized differently in elite and subaltern cultural spheres, and yet how master narratives of these events may ultimately displace others to forge a powerful single narrative of the nation (Amin 1984; Pandey 1989).

Intersectional approaches within sociology are already engaged with questions of how race, class, and gender simultaneously figure into questions of personal identity. The work of subaltern studies scholars encourages us to add nationality as a vital axis of difference, as individuals are constituted through nationality or a sense of national belonging, even as they are simultaneously of a certain gender, class, and racial makeup. Subaltern and postcolonial studies posit the nation as more than ritual performance or even identity, treating the nation itself rather as an embodied practice that is lived out through gendered, classed, and raced bodies. In a well-known set of examples, the work of subaltern and postcolonial scholars signals the importance of women in the creation of postcolonial nations not just as actors but as symbols of the nation, historicizing this role in the context of particularly nationalist and colonial projects (Chatterjee 1990).
has yielded important synergies with a burgeoning literature on gender and the nation that acknowledges this gendered symbolic role as one of the central ways in which the nationalist project engages women (other ways include as biological producers and as overtly political actors) (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; Enloe 1990; McClintock 1995; Walby 1996). Subaltern scholars have focused specifically on the ways in which women’s bodies became icons for the nation in the South Asian context. For example, in the case of the debates surrounding sati, the immolation of widows, in colonial India, Lata Mani has famously shown how women were deployed in colonial and nationalist discourses only as symbols, never as subjects or potential citizens in their own right (1990). In this instance, the method of “reading against the grain” that is so embedded in subaltern studies yields a generalizable insight, which complements the broader theoretical and empirical work of the gender and nationalism literature by demonstrating how subaltern subjects figure into hegemonic discourses as objects even though they are apparently excluded as subjects. Such an insight opens up new areas of exploration for thinking through the embodied character not only of the nation, but also of “tradition” and “modernity,” which are always constructed in relation to a sense of nation, and often configured through gender.

How might the bodies of women and men who are outside the realm of political discourse serve as symbols of national projects by virtue of their ostensible oppression or marginalization? Alternatively, how do gendered bodies become symbols in ways that support or undermine nation-building projects? To address this question, we can look, for example, to post-apartheid South Africa, where the public artistic, cultural, and political performances of South African Indian women may be a result of deeply felt individual choices, but they also take on much broader symbolic valences associated with the gendered and racial understandings of a “new” South Africa over which women themselves often have little control (Radhakrishnan 2005). By opening up these kinds of inquiries, subaltern studies extend the scope of our conceptualization of the nation, viewing it as a simultaneously symbolic and strategic site for the production and navigation of culture.

**Knowledge production**

Subaltern scholars’ work on the politics of knowledge production speaks directly to the question of power by asking whose narratives contribute to a “universal” truth and whose authorial voices are given more credibility.

If sociology as a discipline came into existence at least in part to address the character of modernity, this dominant story has been told in a limited way from within the discipline. The analytic stories of the unfolding of modernity as narrated by Marx, Weber, Durkheim (whether the stories center on rationalization, increasing complexity of organization, or division of labor) assumed that a self-contained Europe formed the empirical crux; it was on the basis of this assumption that they generated their theories. Thus Raewyn Connell (1997) has recently argued that the engagements of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sociologists with questions about the structure of world society emphasized differences between civilization (here) and primitiveness (there). Their methods—comparative and based on external examination—she suggests, reflected the viewpoint and methods of imperialism, a history that was erased with the self-conscious formation of the sociological “canon” in the 1920s. Although modern sociology, apart from World Systems Theory, continued to assume the same self-contained Europe,
Historians and postcolonial theorists have demonstrated that Europe was not self-contained, as previously imagined. Yet the story of modernity and capitalism as commonly narrated (except for the accounts by dependency theorists) ignored or glossed over the effect of Europe’s relationship to its colonies in constituting both its capitalism and its modernity. In this vein, the sociological stories that we know, tell, and act upon, how we understand the constitutive parts of entire societies, or the roots of social problems, or even the consequences of social and political action—all these are at best incomplete and at worst inaccurate. Those of us in the West do not only misrecognize other parts of the world, but we misrecognize ourselves.

Subaltern historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000b) reminds us that Europe was a specific place with a specific history and that it has been costly for us to have universalized that story to create a single model of historical progress. If Western Europe developed certain forms of capitalist modernity, it did so because of its particular history, which makes its replication unlikely in other parts of the world. Thus, “provincializing Europe” would necessitate a shift away from belief in one model of the history of capitalism and of modernity, and toward an acceptance of multiple models. Much modern sociological theory took the opposition between tradition and modernity as given, such that it would only be necessary to understand the conditions under which tradition per se was transformed into modernity per se. Yet if we grant that there are multiple ways of being modern—in part due to the traditions that existed prior to colonialism and capitalism—then we can no longer treat the question of transition to modernity as linear or simply time-lagged from place to place.

The subaltern turn to Foucault refocused attention on the knowledge effects of colonial rule. One result of colonial rule was, in fact, the loss of earlier intellectual traditions in colonized countries: intellectual traditions in Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic ceased to thrive, and whole categories of thought and analysis were relegated to history in a way in which, for example, Plato has not been (Chakrabarty 2000b: 5–6). Although European scholars generally have not engaged with these intellectual traditions’ concepts of power, authority, and morality, they nevertheless live on and intersect with European traditions. For sociologists of culture, then, subaltern studies brings the challenge of understanding the coexistence of multiple traditions and the necessity of working with plural models of knowledge.

In Provincializing Europe, arguably the strongest statement about the subalternity of knowledge production, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that given the asymmetries of power in global knowledge production and circulation, the very production of South Asian history occupies a subaltern position: “Third-world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history; historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate. … The problem, I may add in parentheses, is not particular to historians” (2000b: 28). Thus, subaltern and postcolonial theorists challenge us to decolonize and democratize knowledge production.

**Marginalization and internal colonialism**

Sociologists of culture have been actively interested and engaged in the ways in which people construct “the Other.” Subaltern studies offers opportunities to deepen that engagement in order to further nuance our understanding of the “Other” and its construction. Perhaps the greatest project of subaltern studies has been its multilayered effort to access, engage, and represent the voices of non-dominant groups. As we have shown
here, subaltern scholars highlight the ways in which regimes of power—whether colonial, nationalist, or bourgeois—structure and limit our ways of knowing about cultural “Others,” whether external (as in the case of colonial productions of knowledge about India) or internal (as in the case of bourgeois Indian nationalists speaking on behalf of peasants). Borrowing these insights, as sociologists, we can extend our understanding of marginalization, which we tend to view in more or less dichotomous terms, towards a cultural theory of internal colonialism.

Although the expansive scholarship on cultures of globalization has focused extensively on the global South, little of it has examined how the dynamics of the global political economy have rendered marginalized communities in the United States and Europe invisible. Hurricane Katrina revealed to the world a subaltern sphere that appeared to be more of the “Third World” than of the “First World,” and yet it is those who occupy that very sphere—low income, black, and lacking in political capital—whose worlds have been most affected by the deindustrialization of the US and the globalization of the economy. Subaltern scholars’ emphasis on the structure of hegemony allows us to think about the United States as a political territory in which subaltern groups are ruled, but without consent or participation in the social and political mainstream.

“Othering” then becomes not just a question about the interactions between East and West, but also a question about layers of power and privilege within the West. We can then attempt to assess the effects of that power on how we come to know and characterize non-dominant groups. Linking this kind of marginalization to similar dynamics of colonialism and bourgeois nationalism can allow sociology to ask a new set of questions about subaltern groups around the world, while exploring the linkages between them. In using a set of sociological tools informed by subaltern studies to study, for example, marginalized communities in New Orleans’s Ninth Ward, we could not only focus upon the relationships of power that constitute their everyday experiences, but also reflect upon how we come to know what we do about these communities. In so doing, we introduce (with full consciousness of the contradictions that such a conceptualization raises) explorations of the role of state power in the formation of subjects, and the possibility of political spheres existing “autonomously.”

Such an exploration raises new kinds of questions, some of which could be transnational or multi-sited in scope. How, for example, does the Ninth Ward as an ethnographic field allow for some kinds of representation and not others? How might understanding the struggles of displaced subaltern groups in Mumbai or the Narmada Valley in India inform a global conversation on subaltern cultures and politics of displacement? By integrating an interest in the politics of representation with a broad conceptualization of political engagement, subaltern studies offer the field of sociology the tools with which to ask innovative questions that are relevant to our ethnographies of the contemporary world.

References


