

Chaturvedi, Vinayak, ed. *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. (London: Verso, 2000)

How has the historiography of the late 20th century developed and been applied to the study of India? As its name implies, *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* is designed to provide the reader with a guide to the work of the Subaltern Studies project scholars. The call of the group was to become a 'point of convergence for all who wish to study the politics of India' and who found elitist historiography oppressive, decidedly shortsighted, and incomplete. The work of the group took the form of a series of volumes. The articles in this collection provide a representative sample of that work as well as an excellent and traceable route through recent historiographical trends.

"The historiography of Indian Nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism. Both the colonialists and the bourgeoisie-nationalists who attempted to adapt and prosper under their rule shaped the written history of India." (p. 1) With this opening sentence Guha presents both the essence of the early subaltern studies group's work as well as the themes and theoretical framework that would form its early years. The traces of Marxism are clearly present in Guha's reaction to an elitist reading of Indian history, as he frames his discussion in terms of struggle between elite colonials and Indian nationalists, while trying to define a role for the 'worker' or subaltern. It is equally clear that he is aware of those traces and finds Marxism an inadequate tool for the task.

In *The Nation and Its Peasant*, Partha Chatterjee follows on the work of Gramsci, who is actually responsible for the substitution of the word subaltern for the previously used term proletariat, and explores peasants, peasant consciousness, and the nature of peasant resistance to colonial domination. Like Guha, Chatterjee describes peasants as a

cohesive group, a group that is the object of manipulation by elites, engaged in resistance against those elites. In order to explain why or how that resistance sometimes had limited success, he asks for a "critique of both colonialist and nationalist historiographies by bringing in the peasantry as a subject of history, endowed with its own distinctive forms of consciousness and making sense of and acting upon the world on its own terms." (p. 10)

Discovering the 'peasant consciousness' seems a laudable goal, but as Rosalind O'Hanlon (*Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia*) makes clear, is a goal fraught with difficulties. Providing a general review of the state of subaltern studies to that date, O'Hanlon proposes to explore the limitations of the group's work and indicate areas for future development. She takes exception to definitions of 'the' peasant consciousness as one that assumes a singular, cohesive, even simplistic consciousness, and one that exists outside the influence of elites or other groups in their society. By casting peasants in the role of resisters, one also assumes that their ultimate goal is one of independence as it is defined by Western standards. The irony of such a situation is obvious: "like the subaltern himself, those who set out to restore his presence end only by borrowing the tools of that discourse, tools which serve only to reduplicate the first subjection which they effect, in the realms of critical theory." (p. 105) She advocates a move away from the current definition of resistance, violent, deliberately political, and towards an examination of other more subtle forms. (p. 111) C. A. Bayley (*Rallying Around the Subaltern*) situates the early work of the group in the leftist radical academy and, like O'Hanlon, calls for a more complex view of peasant groups by addressing the question of historical change.

In the center of the collection, both literally and theoretically, are a suite of point-counterpoint discussions by Gyan Prakash, O'Hanlon, and David Washbrook (respectively, *Rallying Around the Subaltern* and *Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography*, *After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism and Politics in the Third World*, and *Can the 'Subaltern' Ride?*) Prakash provides a brief look at past models of India's history and addresses the 'Orientalist' ideas of Said. He warns that saying 'the third world should write its own history' furthers the east/west, us/them, normal/abnormal dichotomies. In doing so he provides a fascinating point: The Orientalism of studying India may, ironically, be the best tool for studying "Westernism" not because they are essentialist differences but because "Western tradition was itself a peculiar configuration in the colonial world" (p. 186), that is, not a tradition but a historic construct developed and defined at a specific time.

O'Hanlon and Washbrook are skeptical of Prakash's 'post-foundational' approach to Indian history. They take exception to what they see as the downplaying of class and material relation as a signifying identity, suggesting that what this means is that "the true underclasses of the world are only permitted to present themselves as victims of the particularistic kinds of gender, racial and national oppression which they share with preponderantly middle-class American scholars and critics, who would speak with or in their voices. What such underclasses are denied is the ability to present themselves as classes: as victims of the universalistic, systemic, and material deprivations of capitalism which clearly separate them off from their subaltern expositors. In sum, the deeply unfortunate result of these radical postmodernist approaches in the minorities debate is thus to reinforce and to give new credence to the well-known hostility of American

political culture to any kind of materialist or class analysis." (p. 215) They contend that if one studies subalterns to emancipate them, to 'hear their voice,' one cannot use Foucaultian methods because he casts power in terms of relationships, not emancipation. To try to do so is to try and "ride two horses."

Gyan Prakash takes the metaphor of the rider of two horses and uses it to frame a spirited reply to O'Hanlon and Washbrook in *Can the Subaltern 'Ride'*. He dismisses their complaints as a misrepresentation of both Foucault and Derrida, implies that their objections are merely an example of cross-Atlantic academic infighting, and asks the reader to consider that "it is one thing to recognize that certain systems of dominance operate by conferring and constituting identities such as the woman and man, colonizer and colonized, and quite another to assume that such homogeneous identifications do not split and open themselves up to heterogeneous formations in historical articulation." (p. 235) In other words, while today one may be classified as woman, and tomorrow as resisting oppression, this does not mean that one need always be classified as resisting oppression of women. That resistance may be against many other kinds of oppression as well.

As the work of the group morphs from post-Marxist to Orientalist and post-structuralist, Sumit Sarkar and Dipesh Chakrabarty bring the difficulties engrossing the field to the present day. They point out that a balance between historiographical analytical traditions, with an awareness of the limitations inherent in each, is required. Sarkar reiterates this by calling for "development of analytical tools appropriate for South Asian colonial contexts which will be able to handle more effectively the nuances, ambiguities and interrelationships of multiple kinds of power and oppression." (p. 253)

Chakrabarty points out possible directions for complex study by recognizing the role of Enlightenment rationalism and secularism on Indian historians and historiography, asking historians to at least bring religion into their considerations of that history. He closes with a plea that both acknowledges a possible outcome of that omission and celebrates a potential for the future: "It would be sad if we ceded this entire heritage [poetry, mysticism, romanticism] to the Hindu extremists out of a fear that our romanticism must be the same as whatever the Europeans produced under the name in their histories, and that our present blunders, whatever these are, must be the same as theirs in the past. What, indeed, could be a greater instance of submission to a Eurocentric imagination than that fear?" (p. 277)

In addition to presenting many historiographic methods and ideas, the authors provide tell-tale glimpses at what they consider to be the role of the historian and at the difficulties facing historians at the turn of the 21st century. Chatterjee states that the "relation between history and the theoretical disciplines of the social sciences is necessarily one where structural neatness of the latter is constantly disturbed and refashioned by the intransigent material of the former." O'Hanlon and Washbrook posit that "the historian must undertake the prior, and in part subjective, tasks that only the historian can do: to turn the noise into coherent voices through which the past may speak to the present and to construct the questions to which the past may give the present intelligible answers." (p. 198) In the closing article, literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *The New Subaltern: A Silent Interview* shows both the trajectory and the challenges facing the subaltern studies group if it tries to be both historian in this traditional sense as well as postcolonial voice, not only for the subaltern but for the

subaltern studies group itself. In what is unfortunately the most opaquely unreadable of the essays, Spivak struggles to reconcile the historian's role as gatekeeper, the scholars changing perceptions of the postcolonial and the intersections between current literary theory, especially that informed by Derrida, and history. For readers unfamiliar with her other work and its subtleties, this article is a struggle indeed and one ripe for misinterpretation. The editors would have done well to include some of her more accessible writing or at least to provide links to interpretive material like that found at <http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Spivak.html>.

Overall, the collection remains an excellent introduction to the field and its core group. By tracing a topic that is unfamiliar to many, it both introduces the complexities of the field and makes the evolving and changing practice of that work apparent. While the subaltern studies group may find it ultimately impossible to give the subaltern a voice, they have certainly succeeded in giving their small group of scholars a voice that can enrich the larger academic historians' worlds.

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