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Ranajit Guha (1923–)

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A pioneer of critical postcolonial historiography, Ranajit Guha was born in 1923 into a landed family in what is now Bangladesh. Due to his father’s legal practice in Calcutta, his family was protected from the impact of the general decline of landlordism in the Bengal countryside, which intensified greatly in the late colonial era (see Chatterjee 1984; Bose 1986). In the mid-1930s, he was sent to Calcutta for his secondary education, and later on began his university studies at the revered Presidency College. In a context characterized by the Second World War, a devastating famine, and communal violence, Guha was exposed to the political currents of the times – most significantly, perhaps, a nascent Communist movement whose ranks he would soon join (see Bhattacharya 2014; Mukherjee 2015). At Presidency College, he also developed an interest in the historical origins of the Permanent Settlement Act – that is, the colonial legal regime that established a specific form of landlordism in Bengal in the 1790s – which would result, much later, in his first book, published in 1963, *A Rule of Property for Bengal* (Guha 1996). He also came under the influence of the historian Susobhan Sarkar, who was a member of the Communist Party of India and one of the first scholars to introduce the work of Antonio Gramsci to an Indian audience.

After completing his Master’s degree in history from the University of Calcutta in 1946, he became a full-time member of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and relocated to Paris, where he spent six years working as an organizer at the secretariat of the World Federation of Democratic Youth. He returned to India in the early 1950s to take up a series of teaching jobs, before relocating to Britain in 1959, working first at the University of Manchester and later at the University of Sussex. It was in Brighton that the nucleus of what has become known as the Subaltern Studies project began to crystallize, as Guha brought together a younger generation of historians for regular discussions about South Asian historiography. Spurred in part by Guha’s encounter with Maoist activists in the early 1970s as well as his observations of the crisis of the Indian polity that was brought on by Indira Gandhi’s imposition of Emergency rule from 1975 to 1977, this project was as much a critique of the foundations of the postcolonial republic as it was a pathbreaking intervention in the scholarly craft of history-writing (see Nilsen 2017a, ch. 1). Guha edited the *Subaltern Studies* series from 1982 to 1989 – a period during which he was based at the Australian National University in Canberra. In later years, his attention turned to phenomenological questions in historiography – asking, in essence, what it might entail to recover a past appropriated by colonialism.
The Politics of Critique

In order to truly understand the full significance of the Subaltern Studies project that Guha spearheaded and forged the template for, it is necessary to appreciate the politics of the historiographical critique that he and his co-travelers developed in their writing about popular struggles in colonial India. The best starting point for doing so is arguably Guha’s own political writings – many of which appeared in the magazine *Frontier* in the 1970s (see Guha 2009).

In these writings, Guha, of course, was intervening in an explosive conjuncture in India’s postcolonial history. India was deeply embedded in the global revolt of 1968, which in the postcolonial states of the South found its expression in new social movements that took aim at the institutionalized elite politics practiced in these states (Watts 2001, 172). In India, this was expressed in the Naxalite movement’s guerrilla war against the Indian state from 1967 until the early 1970s and in the growth of a series of militant movements and protest waves in the 1970s (Banerjee 1984; Ray 2012; Omvedt 1993). This in turn was closely tied to the collapse of the nation-building model developed under independent India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, in the shape of economic stagnation and the breakdown of the Congress Party’s political legitimacy and consensus formation mechanisms (Frankel 2005).

In this context, Indian authorities resorted to coercion and authoritarianism in order to prevent the eruption of a revolutionary situation. In Guha’s home state of West Bengal, where the Naxalite revolt had begun in 1967, this was manifest in a profoundly violent crackdown on Maoist activists and insurgents. This crackdown, in which custodial torture played a central role, became the target of sharp criticism in an article that Guha penned for *Frontier* in 1971: “For all who care,” he wrote angrily, “it is time to wake up to the fact that, so far as political torture is concerned, we already have a bit of Algeria in West Bengal” (Guha 2009, 565). The resort to torture and coercion, as well as the acquiescence of the liberal Bengali bourgeoisie, Guha argued, were symptomatic of the colonial origins of Indian liberalism:

> our liberalism since its very inception in the early nineteenth century grew up with distinctly collaborationist traits expressed, above all, in a servile reliance on and unwavering faith in Law and Order – the most formal expression of the culture of the ruling class.  

*(Guha 2009, 574)*

Five years later, in an article published in *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Guha developed a critique of the Emergency that took aim at what he perceived to be the liberal self-deception contained in the argument that the sudden authoritarian turn in the Indian polity had to be understood in terms of Indira Gandhi’s personal and psychological idiosyncrasies:

> The truth is that nothing has been well with Indian democracy ever since its inception and that the present Emergency is merely a climactic act in a process going back to the very circumstances of the birth of the Indian republic.  

*(Guha 2009, 579)*

The Indian republic, he went on to argue, was established as “a decolonized but undemocratic state” and state violence was foundational to its emergence – most clearly evident in the mobilization of military force against the Communist-led peasant insurrection in Telangana (see Roosa 2001). And since its inception, despite the liberal tenor of Nehru’s political credo, the Indian state had relied on coercion in many forms in order to ensure the reproduction of elite rule – for example, through the use of pre-emptive detention, the steady expansion of the police
apparatus, suppression of democratic expressions of popular discontent, and the torture of political prisoners by the police. “Thus it will be fair to conclude,” Guha (2009, 597) claimed, “that democracy in India has long been dead if it was ever alive at all.”

The Subaltern Studies Project

“The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism – colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism.” This is how Guha (1982, 1) announced the arrival of the Subaltern Studies project on the academic stage. Both colonial and nationalist historiographies, he argued, shared the assumption that “the making of the Indian nation and the development of the consciousness – nationalism – which informed this process, were exclusively or predominantly elite achievements.” In opposition to this elitism, Guha (1982, 4) asserted the existence of a “politics of the people” that constituted an “autonomous domain,” parallel to and isolated from the elites’ mental world and sphere of influence:

For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the laboring population and the intermediate strata in town and country – that is, the people.

(Guha 1982, 4)

This politics found expression in the countless uprisings and protest movements that developed among the small peasants and indigenous populations of the Indian village and among India’s dawning urban proletariat in the course of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.

A new historiographical approach, Guha argued, was needed in order to establish and understand the nature and dynamics of the domain of subaltern politics – and this was not just an intellectual imperative.² For, as Guha (1982, 6) saw it, the struggles of India’s subaltern groups were not capable of propelling “the nationalist movement into a full-fledged struggle for national liberation.” This in turn meant that independence arrived in the form of a “historic failure of the nation to come to its own” (Guha 1982, 7) – a historic failure that was write large in the lapses and limits of bourgeois democracy that had been the target of critique in Guha’s political writings, as discussed previously.³ Ultimately, then, the Subaltern Studies project was not just a quest to restore popular agency as an autonomous force in India’s struggle for independence, but also a research program that intended to shed light on the historical origins and political economy of India’s postcolonial state.

In intellectual terms, the Subaltern Studies project was nourished by the intersection between British Marxist historiography and Antonio Gramsci’s perspectives on hegemony and popular resistance (see Ludden 2002b; Chaturvedi 2000b). The goal of writing “history from below” was drawn from the British Marxist historians’ analysis of the bourgeois revolution in England and the transition to industrial capitalism (see Hill 1975; Thompson 1966). The assumption that subaltern political consciousness and repertoires of action constituted an autonomous domain was taken from Gramsci’s program (1971, 52) for the study of what he called “subaltern classes” (see Green 2011). However, Guha – who left the CPI in 1956, in protest against the Soviet invasion of Hungary – did not conceive of the project as a straightforward exercise in Marxist historiography. In his seminal essay “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” which was published in the second volume of Subaltern Studies, Guha (1983a) argued that the presentation of peasant revolts

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in dominant Indian historiography as spontaneous events erases insurgent forms of consciousness and experience, and thus also the meanings that the insurgents ascribed to their own actions. This, he argued, was also the case with the orthodox Marxist understanding of the history of the independence struggle, since it replaces the actual subaltern insurgent with an abstraction frequently entitled “Worker-and-Peasant” (Guha 1983a, 33).

Guha’s quest to uncover the subjective experience and consciousness of peasant rebels under the Raj yielded the highly influential study *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Guha 1983b). Colonial rule, Guha argued, subjected the Indian peasantry to the domination of the state, the landlord and the moneylender, and the overthrow of this triumvirate in turn became the main objective of peasant insurgency – and it was a deeply conscious objective:

"The peasant obviously knew what he was doing when he rose in revolt. . . . By trying to force a mutual substitution of the dominant and the dominated in the power structure it left nothing to doubt about its own identity as a project of power."

(Guha 1983b, 9)

Underpinning and animating these revolts was a general form of insurgent consciousness, which Guha deciphered and conceptualized in terms of six elementary aspects: negation, that is, the rejection of the inferiority and stigma attributed to subaltern groups by dominant groups; ambiguity, that is, engaging in acts that dominant groups label criminal in order to upend established symbolic hierarchies; modality, that is, the ways in which peasant revolts is enacted through practices that are public, collective, destructive and total; solidarity, that is, the coming together of insurgent groups on the basis of class, caste, regional and ethnic affinities; transmission, that is the ways in which peasant revolts would spread through the use of signs and symbols; and territoriality, that is, the manner in which a sense of belonging to a lineage and habitat pitted insurgent peasants against alien enemies. These, he argued, were the constitutive elements of “a consciousness which informed some historic actions aimed at turning the rural world upside down” (Guha 1983b, 337).

**Dominance Without Hegemony and Beyond**

*Elementary Aspects* quite possibly embodies the ambition of the template that Guha laid out in his introduction to the first volume of *Subaltern Studies* in its fullest form – namely, to define “a subaltern consciousness separate from hegemonic cultural forms, and rooted in myth, religion, and magical belief, that was realised in the practice of rural resistance” (Sivaramakrishnan 2002, 217). In the way that it accomplishes this task, the book also testifies to the profoundly binary structure of Guha’s thought, which is evident, as K. Sivaramakrishnan has put it, in the tendency to decipher social phenomena in terms of “structured oppositions” (Sivaramakrishnan 2002, 217; see also O’Hanlon 2002).

This tendency was also strongly evident in Guha’s further development of his critique of elitist historiography – most importantly in his long and important essay “Dominance Without Hegemony and Its Historiography,” which appeared in the sixth volume of *Subaltern Studies* (Guha 1989). In this essay, Guha effectively formulated a thoroughgoing critique of the emergence and trajectory political modernity in India. Hegemony, for Guha, was the hallmark of the political in Western capitalist democracies. In this context, he argued, the bourgeoisie had gained the consent of subaltern groups as it emerged at the helm of the struggle against feudalism. Following the paradigmatic bourgeois revolutions in England and France, a hegemonic liberal political culture was crafted that incorporated subaltern groups within the ambit of
democratic nation-states. In contrast, the colonial state established by the British in India rested fundamentally on coercion: “As an absolute externality, the colonial state was structured like a despotism, with no mediating depths, no space provided for transactions between the will of the rulers and that of the ruled” (ibid., 274). Furthermore, the political culture that emerged under the Raj was one in which its key idioms of rule were mediated through precolonial political traditions. As a consequence, Guha argued, colonial rule failed to generate a hegemonic political culture: “For, under conditions of dominance without hegemony, the life of civil society can never be fully absorbed into the activity of the state” (Guha 1989, 72).

This analysis, of course, connects with and elaborates Guha’s claims about the historic failure of the Indian nation to truly come into its own in the wake of the freedom struggle. The Indian bourgeoisie, he argued, was unwilling and unable to dislodge semi-feudal structures of power and willingly struck compromises with their British overlords:

The destruction of the colonial state was never a part of their project. They abjured and indeed opposed all forms of armed struggle against the raj and settled for pressure politics as their main tactical means in bargaining for power.

(Guha 1989, 21–14)

As he put it in a subsequent essay, the willingness to compromise and accommodate with landlordism and the colonial state also meant that the nationalist movement also failed “to assimilate the class interests of peasants and workers effectively into a bourgeois hegemony” (Guha 1992, 102). This, of course, went a long way toward explaining the deficiencies that Guha identified in his political writings on the postcolonial Indian state – and he believed dominance without hegemony was intrinsic to this form of state as well (Guha 1989, 307).

Reflecting, arguably, a more general turn in the Subaltern Studies project, Guha’s later work came to focus on meta-questions pertaining to postcolonial historiography. In a particularly poignant essay entitled “The Small Voice of History,” he singles out for critique the manner in which the ideology of the state – or what he calls statism – has come to “determine the criteria of the historic” (Guha 1996, 1). In Indian historiography, he argues, statism was bequeathed to the educated elite through colonialism, but, precisely because colonial rule never gained hegemonic status, the history of India’s civil society “would always exceed that of the Raj, and consequently an Indian historiography of India would have little use for statism” (Guha 1996, 3). In its place, Guha argued that it was necessary to listen to “the small voices which are drowned in the noise of statist commands” (Guha 1996, 3). These voices, he argued, were unlikely to fit those historiographical designs – be they colonial, bourgeois or Marxist – that privilege one specific societal contradiction over all others. In making this argument, Guha was in fact returning to a concern that he had grappled with already in the mid-1980s, in the essay “Chandra’s Death,” in which he asked what it might mean for historiography that was attentive toward “the small drama and fine detail of social existence, especially at its lower depths” (Guha 1987, 138). Ultimately, such a historiography was necessary in order for “the colonized to recover their past appropriated by conquest and colonization” (Guha 2002, 2).

A Critical Assessment

Any critical assessment of Guha’s work – as well as the wider Subaltern Studies project – needs to take its point in a foundational acknowledgment of it pivotal and pathbreaking nature. Besides the signal achievement of directing critical scholarly attention toward the significance of popular politics and mobilization from below in the history of modern India, Guha and the Subaltern
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Studies project have also debates and dialogues that have been of singular importance in terms of pushing the conceptual boundaries of the study of subalternity, subaltern politics and hegemony – not just in India but in the Global South more generally (see Nilsen and Roy 2015). Many of these advances have occurred, I would argue, despite the best efforts of Marxist academics, who too often have been preoccupied with denouncing Guha and his fellow-travelers for their departures from Marxian orthodoxy (see, for example, Alam 2002; Singh et al. 2002).

This, of course, does not absolve Guha from criticism from a Marxist point of view. As I have pointed out elsewhere, there is, despite the invocations of Gramsci in the opening essay in the first volume of Subaltern Studies and in Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India, very little that is actually Gramscian about Guha’s understanding of subalternity and hegemony (see Nilsen 2017a, ch. 1). First of all, Gramsci did not conceive of subalternity and the political agency of subaltern groups as constituting an autonomous domain. On the contrary, subalternity is a form of adverse incorporation in hegemonic formations, and the collective action of subaltern groups gravitates around engaging institutional ensembles, framing claims through discourses, and mobilizing through political forms that are commensurable with the reproduction of unequal structures of power: “Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up: only ‘permanent’ victory breaks their subordination, and that not immediately” (Gramsci 1971, 55; Gramsci 1975, I, 299–300; Q3 (XX) §14; see also Nilsen and Roy 2015; Green 2002; Roseberry 1994). This also means that the binary that Guha proposes between state ideologies and subaltern forms of consciousness is false. Subaltern groups, as Adam Morton (2007, 62) puts it, are fundamentally “intertwined with processes of state formation” and, consequently, state ideologies become “sites of protracted struggle as to what they mean and for whom” when subaltern groups mobilize to contest their adverse incorporation in a hegemonic formation (Corrigan and Sayer 1985, 6; see also Nilsen 2015; Mallon 1995).

Second, Gramsci’s acute understanding of the negotiated character of hegemony – that is, the insight that hegemonic processes advanced through the construction of “unstable equilibria” of compromise between dominant and subaltern groups (Gramsci 1971, 182; Gramsci 1975, III, 1584; Q13 (XXX) §17) – is entirely absent in Guha’s work. This is most evident in his theorization of India’s colonial political modernity as a case of dominance without hegemony. As Vivek Chibber (2013) has pointed out, Guha’s contrast between the development of political modernity in the West and in colonial India is deeply problematic. In terms of Western political modernity, the link between bourgeois revolutions and political liberalism is very tenuous. The bourgeois revolutions in France and England, Chibber argues, created “an oligarchic state with an expanded scope for political participation – but only for members of the ruling order that had hitherto been excluded” (2013, 77). Ultimately, the inclusion of subaltern groups in these new political orders was an achievement of mobilization from below, rather than an intrinsic feature of bourgeois hegemony: “For more than a century after the new states were installed, laboring classes had to wage unceasing struggle to gain any substantial political rights – the very rights that Guha seems to associate with a hegemonic order” (Chibber 2013, 87). Subalterns, in other words, are not passive in their adherence to the hegemony of dominant groups, and hegemony must therefore be understood as an incomplete process that must be constantly be “renewed, recreated, defended, and modified” (Williams 1977, 112).

Ultimately, what is missing in Guha’s work, and in the Subaltern Studies project more generally, is a dialectical conception of the internal relationships between dominant and subaltern groups and the practices through which they seek to exercise and legitimate power and resistance within a historically defined set of social relationships. This, I hasten to add, is not merely a scholastic criticism. On the contrary, it is a criticism that is moored in ambitions that are very
similar to those that led Guha to his intellectual program for a subaltern historiography in the first place – namely to produce knowledge that is relevant to the imperative of bringing about progressive social change. This ambition will be better served by a perspective that sees power and resistance as relational practices, and which understands subaltern politics as a process that arises and develops through the appropriation and reinterpretation of dominant ideologies and active use of existing political institutions and practices. Through such a perspective, in my view, we can come closer to the actual terrain that subaltern groups move on as they develop their oppositional projects. And by doing this, we can initiate a debate on the possible limitations of such political practices – a discussion that in turn can play a role in the further development of oppositional practices capable of breaking with institutionalized power relations and their ideological legitimation.

Notes

1. This biographical introduction is based on Chatterjee (2009) and Amin and Bhadra (1994).
2. As Partha Chatterjee (2009, 13) notes, the initial statement of this intellectual program was made in Guha’s critical analysis of the Bengali play Neel Darpan, which was published in the Journal of Peasant Studies in 1974. Challenging its status in the Indian nationalist imagination, Guha (2009, 180) argued that the play merely “shows where the liberal stands at the time of a peasants revolt: he stands close to the power of the state seeking cover behind the law and the bureaucracy.”
3. What Guha is alluding to here is the idea that India’s struggle for independence is best understood in Gramscian terms as a passive revolution – that is, as a molecular transformation toward capitalist modernity, which reproduces the economic and political position of precapitalist ruling classes. This idea was more fully articulated at a later stage in the work of Partha Chatterjee (1986, 1993) and Sudipta Kaviraj (1997).
4. This was the last volume in the series that was edited by Ranajit Guha.
5. Toward the late 1980s, publications in the series became ever more strongly marked by theoretical debates about historiography in postcolonial contexts and analyses of discursive power in colonial situations. This turn was signaled by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s interventions in the collective’s work, as well as by Edward Said’s foreword to the Selected Subaltern Studies edited collection, which introduced an American audience to the series in 1988. See Sarkar (1997), Chapter 3 for an insider’s critique of this turn in the project.
6. Interestingly, a key butt of Guha’s critique in this essay is P. Sundarayya’s standard history of the Telangana movement, a text that he cited approvingly in his 1976 article on the flawed nature of Indian democracy.
7. It is significant of course, that both in “Chandra’s Death” and “The Small Voice of History,” it is precisely the dynamics of gender relations in subaltern communities and subaltern movements that enable Guha to tease out these small dramas and fine details.
8. This does not, of course, entail that Chibber’s critique and the Marxist approach that he proposes are unproblematic. As I have argued elsewhere, his perspective is deeply marred by an entrenched Eurocentrism that does little to help us build the many passages that should run between Marxism and postcolonialism: Nilsen (2017b); see also Lazarus (2016) and Hitchcock (2015).

Bibliography

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