CHAPTER 8

EPILOGUE

A distorted image—the logic of distortion—the generality of insurgency—its extension into more recent times and modern political movements—the paradigm of insurgency.

To go back to the point made at the very beginning of this work, the historical phenomenon of insurgency meets the eye for the first time as an image framed in the prose, hence the outlook, of counter-insurgency—an image caught in a distorting mirror. However, the distortion has a logic to it. That is the logic of opposition between the rebels and their enemies not only as parties engaged in active hostility on a particular occasion but as the mutually antagonistic elements of a semi-feudal society under colonial rule. The antagonism is rooted deeply enough in the material and spiritual conditions of their existence to reduce the difference between elite and subaltern perceptions of a radical peasant movement to a difference between the terms of a binary pair. A rural uprising turns thus into a site for two rival cognitions to meet and define each other negatively.

It is precisely this contradiction which we have used in the foregoing pages as a key to our understanding of peasant rebellion as a representation of the will of its subjects. For that will has been known to us only in its mirror image. Inscribed in elite discourse it had to be read as a writing in reverse. Since our access to rebel consciousness lay, so to say, through enemy country, we had to seize on the evidence of elite consciousness and force it to show us the way to its Other. In short, we have been led to conclude that the documentation on insurgency must itself be turned upside down in order to reconstitute the insurgent’s project aimed at reversing his world.

We had set out to describe the figure of insurgency in its common form and in terms of its general ideas. These, the reader will have
noticed, have been made to emerge out of a welter of individual instances not all of them of the same hue or arranged in quite the same way. Visualized as a pattern, that form may indeed be said to be made up not only of elements and tendencies which are in agreement but also of those which clash and contrast. Altogether, it stands for a generality in which ideas, mentalities, notions, beliefs, attitudes, etc. of many different kinds come together to constitute a whole. However, it is not a generality which is 'something external to, or something in addition to' other features or abstract qualities of insurgency discovered by reflection. On the contrary, 'it is what permeates and includes in it everything particular'—a pervasive theoretical consciousness which gives insurgency its categorical unity and helps to sort out its specific and separate moments.

This figure was of course a child of its times. It was predicated on a set of historical relations of power, namely the relations of dominance and subordination, as these prevailed in village India under the Raj until 1900. As explained in Chapter 1, this particular date was chosen only for the convenience of demonstration, that is, in order to show how the 'general ideas' of insurgency behaved in a 'pure' state prior to the involvement of the peasantry in latter-day politics. However, the actual career of this consciousness extends well beyond the nineteenth century. Many of the mass movements which have swept through our land since then bear at least some of its hallmarks. If one looks carefully at the popular mobilizations accredited to nationalist and communist leaderships—at Rowlatt Satyagraha and Quit India or at Tebhaga and Telengana, to take only a couple of instances respectively of each kind—one cannot help noticing the structural similarities between their articulation and some of the 'elementary aspects' discussed above.

The parallelism has been underscored by much new writing on the history and politics of the last thirty years of British rule. Pandey has shown in his pioneering study how in Uttar Pradesh mobilization for the nationalist campaigns of the inter-war

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1 Hegel (1975*): 240.

2 The recent work I have in mind in this and the next paragraph includes Pandey (1978, 1981), Henningham and T. Sarkar on nationalist politics; Chatterjee on communalism; and Chakrabarty on working-class history.
period relied considerably on local initiative at the grassroots levels so that an imprimatur of peasant struggle was often put on movements launched by the elite leadership of the Congress independently of the latter's directives and indeed in defiance of these on some occasions. Henningham's researches on Bihar and Sarkar's on Bengal have proved that the story was very much the same in those regions as well.

It is clear in the light of such findings that Indian nationalism of the colonial period was not what elite historiography had made it out to be. As a praxis involving the masses it did not always conform to the rule book of the Congress Party or the tenets of Gandhism. On the contrary, it derived much of its striking power from a subaltern tradition going a long way back before the Mahatma's intervention in Indian politics towards the end of the First World War or Nehru's discovery of the peasantry of his home province soon afterwards. However, it was not nationalism and the agrarian question alone which came under the influence of this tradition. Its presence was felt in many of the more extensive and vigorous struggles of the urban poor and the industrial workers too. And again as has been so clearly established in a number of recent studies on communal conflict, even when a corrupt sectarianism replaced class consciousness as the content of mass violence, the latter still continued to bear some of the distinctive traces of insurgency in its form—in the means and manner of mobilization, in signalling, in solidarity and so on—which is indeed why there was often such a confusing overlap between anti-landlord jacqueries and Hindu-Muslim riots.

The tendency of all these rather different types of mobilization to agree with the general form of insurgency derived essentially from the latter's role as a paradigm. This had its roots in the relationship of dominance and subordination characteristic of Indian society for a very long period both before and during colonial rule. However, the tradition of oppression and exploitation predicated on that relationship was only as pervasive as the counter-tradition of defiance and revolt. These were reciprocal terms which conditioned and reproduced each other cyclically over the centuries, and were helped by the inertia of an age-old pre-capitalist culture to congeal as a pair of mutually determin-
ing but antagonistic elements within it.

It was thus that the rival paradigms of landlord authority and peasant rebellion continued to inspire and sustain each other, generating many patterns of elitist thought and practice with regard to the weak and the underprivileged in one case and those of subaltern resistance in the other. Indeed, the latter was powerful enough to transfer, by *atidesa*, the formal attributes of insurgency to almost any militant activity of the masses even when that originated from a contradiction among the people themselves (as in communal strife) rather than from a contradiction between the people and their enemies. By contrast when content accorded more happily with form, at least some of the elementary aspects of peasant insurgency impressed themselves on even the most short-lived of popular movements aimed at effecting a mutual substitution of *adhara* and *uttara* in the power structure.

No jacquerie in the countryside, no street riot in our towns is an exception in that respect. And one has merely to refer to some of the anti-*nashbandi* disturbances in rural Haryana and urban UP in 1976–7 to realize how little the transfer of power has done to diminish the force of the paradigm illustrated above by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century events. So long as landlord authority continues to function as a significant element in the ruling culture—and continue it will for long even after the genuine (as against spurious) end of landlordism in the economy and in property relations—all mass struggles will tend inevitably to model themselves on the unfinished projects of Titu, Kanhu, Birsa and Meghar Singh.

It is in order to assist this tendency to recognize itself that we have defined the structure and related the moments of the paradigm on which it relies for so much of its drive and orientation. For if the task of historiography is to interpret the past in order to help in changing the world and such a change involves a radical transformation of consciousness, one can do no better than to be guided by the observation that ‘the reform of consciousness consists only in making the world aware of its own consciousness... in *explaining* to it the meaning of its own actions’.\(^9\) The purpose of this essay has been to try and explain

\(^9\) Marx to Ruge (Sept. 1843) in *MECW*: III 144.
the logic of a consciousness which informed some historic actions aimed at turning the rural world upside down. This, one hopes, may be of relevance for all efforts meant to bring about a more abiding and comprehensive reversal.