The first volume of *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* appeared in Delhi in 1982. Edited by Ranajit Guha, an extraordinarily brilliant Indian historian and political economist resident in Australia, it comprised six substantial essays—five of them massively detailed and frankly revisionist, one of them, Guha’s, fiercely theoretical and intellectually insurrectionary. Guha’s claim for the group of scholars his editorship had gathered together was relatively simple—that hitherto Indian history had been written from a colonialist and elitist point of view, whereas a large part of Indian history had been made by the subaltern classes, and hence the need for a new historiography which these scholars were now going to write—but its enactment and implementation would turn out to be complex and difficult. For not only was a great deal of new and otherwise neglected or ignored material to be excavated; there was also to be an appreciably greater heightening of the theoretical and methodological element. The point was that if a new, or at least more authentic, history of India was to be written, its authors had better bring forth new material and carefully justify the importance of this material as sufficiently as it was necessary to displace previous historical work on India.

The contents of the present volume, drawn from the five published collections of *Subaltern Studies* between 1982 and 1987, testify to the robustness of these ventures so far as Indian history is concerned. To the Western reader, however, *Subaltern Studies* does in fact also have a less specialized, more general importance, which it may be useful to speak about here. The word “subaltern,” first of all, has both political and intellectual connotations. Its implied opposite is of course “dominant” or “elite,” that is, groups in power, and in
the Indian case, classes allied either with the British who held India for 300 years, or with a select number of disciples, students or epigones who in a sense collaborated with the British. The resonances of the word subaltern derive from Gramsci’s usage in the Prison Notebooks in which, ever the astute political analyst and theoretical genius, he shows how wherever there is history, there is class, and that the essence of the historical is the long and extraordinarily varied socio-cultural interplay between ruler and ruled, between the elite, dominant, or hegemonic class and the subaltern and, as Gramsci calls it, the emergent class of the much greater mass of people ruled by coercive or sometimes mainly ideological domination from above.

Yet for the student of Indian history it is not so easy a matter as dividing India into British overlord, on the one hand, Indian nationalist on the other. There is the further distinction amongst Indians themselves, between those whose view of history essentially sees Indian independence as the result of stimulus by and reaction to British imperialism, or those who believe that guidance in the independence struggle was maintained by a small association of leaders, the Gandhis, Nehrus, Jinnas, et al. According to Guha, there is a major insufficiency in all these formulations. What is missing is the constitutive role of an enormous mass of subaltern Indians, the urban poor and the peasants, who throughout the nineteenth century and earlier, resisted British rule in terms and modes that were quite distinct from those employed by the elite. So one important historiographical prerogative of the Subaltern Studies group is to rewrite the history of colonial India from the distinct and separate point of view of the masses, using unconventional or neglected sources in popular memory, oral discourse, previously unexamined colonial administrative documents. This new history—an excellent example of which is Pandey’s essay on peasant revolt—then provides an alternative history to the official one provided both by historians and by post-liberation Indian historians who adopt the formulae, the narratives and above all the ideology of history-writing from their own elite class alliances and from the British raj.

As an alternative discourse then, the work of the Subaltern scholars can be seen as an analogue of all those recent attempts in the West and throughout the rest of the world to articulate the hidden or suppressed accounts of numerous groups—women, minorities, disadvantaged or dispossessed groups, refugees, exiles, etc. And like
all the authors of those other histories the Subaltern group in its work necessarily entails an examination of why, given numerical advantage, the justice of their cause, the great duration of their struggle, the Indian people were subaltern, why they were suppressed. As Guha puts it in his methodological opening statement, why the nation (the mass of India’s people as distinct from the elite) did not come into its own is not just the failure of the people, “the study of this failure, . . . constitutes the central problematic of the historiography of colonial India.”

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say therefore that rewriting Indian history today is an extension of the struggle between subaltern and elite, and between the Indian masses and the British raj. This is another way of underlining the concern with politics and power in Subaltern Studies. Theirs is no history of ideas, no calmly 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 in 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. It is these types of strictly verbal and discursive tactics of which Gayatri Spivak speaks when she describes the “deconstruction” of historiography in Subaltern Studies.

The other side of this combative aspect of these scholars’ work is its self-reflective, theoretically self-conscious dimension, which is remarkably different in tone and, I think, intent. Nearly every essay in the collection makes direct reference or alludes to the sheer difficulty of gaining access to the sources of subaltern history. Thus we find frequent reference to such things as gaps, absences, lapses, ellipses, all of them symbolic of the truths that historical writing is after all writing and not reality, and that as subalterns their history as well as their historical documents are necessarily in the hands of others, the Indian elite and the British colonizers who ran, as well as wrote the history of, India. In other words, subaltern history in literal fact is a narrative missing from the official story of India. Somehow to supply the narrative, or to supplement the existing narrative with a new narrative—these are epistemological tasks of great difficulty. It requires, and indeed receives, what in another
connection Foucault has called a "relentless erudition," a deeply engaged search for new documents, a brilliantly resourceful re-deployment and re-interpretation of old documents, so much so that what emerges in such essays as Shahid Amin's extraordinary study of "Gandhi as Mahatma" is a new knowledge, more precarious perhaps than its familiar competitors, but strikingly rigorous, intellectually demanding, forceful and novel. Much the same can be said about Chakrabarty's essay on the knowledge of working class conditions, Gyanendra Pandey's history of a North Indian Qasba, Gautam Bhadra's alternative version of the 1857 rebellion.

The purely disciplinary aspects of dealing only with language and with documents who provenance and proprietary morte-main complicate the research of the subaltern historian are set forth schematically by Guha in "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency." Yet even though his analysis is explicit on all the main issues, there is something that could perhaps be added to it here. And that is that no matter how one tried to extricate subaltern from elite histories, they are different but overlapping and curiously interdependent territories. This, I believe, is a crucial point. For if subaltern history is construed to be only a separatist enterprise—much as early feminist writing was based on the notion that women had a voice or a room of their own, entirely separate from the masculine domain—then it runs the risk of just being a mirror opposite the writing whose tyranny it disputes. It is also likely to be as exclusivist, as limited, provincial, and discriminatory in its suppressions and repressions as the master discourses of colonialism and elitism. In fact, as Guha shows, the subaltern alternative is an integrative knowledge, for all the gaps, the lapses and ignorances of which it is so conscious. Its claim is that by being subaltern it can see the whole experience of Indian resistance to colonialism more fairly than the partial histories provided by a handful of dominant native leaders or colonial historians. This is a claim not dissimilar in its moral force to Lukacs's theory of "proletarian" consciousness, where in a world of impoverished and yet fantastically widespread "reification," in which everything from the human soul to the product of human labor is turned into a commodity or an inert thing, only the view point of the human thing itself can comprehend and then resist the enormity of what has happened.

The bigger point of course is that Indian history continues into the present. Guha and his colleagues are oppositional critics, not only in their work about the past, but also in the conclusions their
work pulls into the present. In the first place they represent a whole generation of intellectuals in the formerly colonized world who have achieved intellectual maturity after independence. We must remember that until the end of World War I, Europe and America held almost 85% of the entire world in the form of colonies, dependencies, mandates and subjugated territories. After that begins the great age of de-colonization in which all across the Third World emergent nationalist and liberation forces declare insurgencies against the Western powers. These insurgencies culminate in the post-World War II years when the classical empires were dismantled, and dozens of new independent sovereign states take their place in the world of nations. In many instances, however, the new states are still often ideologically in thrall to, and practical satellites of, their former colonial masters. Above all, the great transformation of which Frantz Fanon spoke, that after liberation, nationalist consciousness must convert itself into a new social consciousness, has not often taken place. In many new countries, dictatorships, fascist parties, brazenly neo-colonial regimes take power. Those intellectuals whose immediate predecessors fought the war of decolonization awake to the reality that imperialism continues, in newer and more complex forms. They go into opposition, politically but, more interestingly for our purposes here, also culturally and intellectually.

The nationalism that fueled the struggle, and the slogans against classical European colonialism—the quit India movement, the ideology of Arab nationalism, the pan-African movement, etc.—will no longer serve, one, because mere nationalism is undifferentiated and, two, because its thinking actually ignores allies in the metropolitan centers. The rejection of indiscriminately nationalist notions like “India for the Indians”—the nativist attitude—is the second important feature of Subaltern Studies’ relationship to contemporary politics. The proper form of the slogan, they suggest, ought to be a question: which India for which Indians? Moreover there is the exciting intellectual discovery that the struggle against imperialism and its derivatives and heirs in the present may very profitably include the contribution of non-Indians, and indeed of many Europeans and Americans, whose oppositional strategies can be harnessed or solicited in the Indian context.

So in reading this selection from Subaltern Studies one becomes aware that this group of scholars is a self-conscious part of the vast post-colonial cultural and critical effort that would also include novelists like Salman Rushdie, García Márquez, George Lamming,
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Sergio Ramirez, and Ngugi Wa Thiongo, poets like Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Mahmud Darwish, Aime Cesaire, theoreticians and political philosophers like Fanon, Cabral, Syed Hussein Alatas, C.L.R. James, Ali Shariati, Eqbal Ahmad, Abdullah Laroui, Omar Cabezas, and a whole host of other figures, whose province is a post-independence world (the South of the new North-South configuration) still dependent, still unfree, still dominated by coercion, the hegemony of dictatorial regimes, derivative and hypocritical nationalisms, insufficiently critical intellectual and ideological systems.

Yet this extraordinary common effort is not, as I implied above, an exclusively non-European phenomenon. It is in fact a hybrid, partaking jointly of European and Western streams and of native Asian, Caribbean, Latin American, or African strands. None of the Subaltern Studies scholars is anything less than a critical student of Karl Marx, for example, and all of them have been influenced by many varieties of Western Marxism, Gramsci’s most eminently. In addition, the influence of structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers like Derrida, Foucault, Roland Barthes and Louis Althusser is evident, along with the influence of British and American thinkers, like E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and others. Some of the Subaltern themes—the notion of surveillance and bodily control in Arnold’s essay for example—are clearly indebted to earlier demystifications in Foucault, for example, but what we have here is the sharing of a paradigm, rather than slavish copying.

All in all the first appearance of a selection from Subaltern Studies before a general Anglo-American audience is a noteworthy event. The rigid boundaries between academic specializations has produced a whole gamut of jargons, of self-serving attitudes, of unattractive provincialisms. But such boundaries are an extension of the imperialism that decreed the principle of “divide-and-rule.” Subaltern Studies represents a crossing of boundaries, a smuggling of ideas across lines, a stirring up of intellectual and, as always, political complacence. As an intervention in our current intellectual situation this volume will accomplish an important shift in our awareness of how scholarship and intellectual commitment combine responsibly in an invigorated social engagement.