

# **“At a Moment of Danger”: Subaltern Studies Historiography as a Critique of the Postcolonial Condition<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

The historical narrative . . . reveals to us a world that is putatively “finished,” done with, over, yet not dissolved, not falling apart.

—Hayden White,  
*The Content of the Form* (21)

In the world of Anglophone politics, India occupies a signal position. It came to postcolonialism first. Almost a century and a half after the Caribbean’s Haiti had achieved independence from France and all the major Latin American countries had thrown off the shackles of Spanish (and, in the case of Brazil, Portuguese) colonialism, India won its sovereignty from Britain. Because Indian independence was achieved, in anti-colonial terms, both relatively late and relatively early, India has come to symbolize contemporary postcoloniality. More than a century after the barely lettered slave Toussaint L’Ouverture led the *sans coulottes* to freedom after some bloody battles against the French, Mahatma Gandhi inaugurated a series of passive resistance campaigns in colonial South Africa protesting the salt tax levied against South Asians in the province of Natal. Gandhi’s non-violent strategy defined, as it reached its apogetic moment in the struggle against the Raj, the twentieth-century anti-colonial movement.

Cast within the broader postcolonial paradigm, India historically represents the “second wave” (or post-World War II period) of anti-colonialist movements that produced the contemporary Third World, a development that has (for a complex of reasons that range from the highly Anglophone nature of postcolonial theory to the contemporaneity of the Indian experience) displaced the “first wave”—with the exception of the Haitian revolution—and assigned it a subordinate theoretical and historical position.

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However, India's elevated postcolonial position is not only the consequence of its "originality," i.e., the historic effect of being the first past the independence post; it can also be attributed to the fact that, together with the Cold War (and its end in 1990), the anti-colonial movement was the most important socio-historical development in the second half of the twentieth century.

Once India and Pakistan freed themselves from British rule, the drive for independence rapidly gained pace. Among the subject communities, there was a strong desire to become post-colonial as black and brown peoples in Africa and the Caribbean set about expelling their European colonizers, enfranchising their populace, and taking on the task of governing themselves. The colonized were committed to taking their place as equals in the comity of nations after centuries of subjugation, exploitation, and degradation. Postcolonialism stands as a historic event because it transformed relations between the European colonial rulers and their now liberated subjects and, in the process, reconfigured global politics. Having liberated themselves politically, postcolonialist discourse enabled the historically oppressed to narrativize and, frequently, re-narrativize their own past (in Hayden White's sense of the "historical narrative" as an infinitely incomplete, transformative project [21]) and to script their own futures. Bearing the indelible marks of colonization, postcolonial peoples were, for the first time, free to historicize their subjectivity.

Within a few short years of Indian independence, colonies in Francophone and Anglophone Africa and the Caribbean achieved statehood. Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Trinidad and Tobago, and Kenya were all independent by the mid-1960s. By 1980, when Zimbabwe liberated itself from Ian Smith's white minority rule known as "UDI" (a unilateral declaration of independence by a government that was recognized neither by "Rhodesia's" ex-colonial master, Britain, nor the international community, because of its racist policies), only apartheid South Africa and South African-controlled Namibia (configured as the "province" of South-West Africa) had not achieved sovereignty. For historically explicable reasons, anti-colonialism sustained the existence of subjugated communities the Third World over even as the failures of the post-colonial condition were becoming increasingly apparent. From C. L. R. James's critiques of the legislative excesses of Kwame Nkrumah's new postcolonial government in Ghana, to the Naxalite Rebellion against the continued impoverishment of the peasants in and around the province of Bengal, India, to the brutal fate of Guyanese scholar and activist Walter Rodney at the hands of Forbes Burnham's government, the shortcomings of the postcolonial nation-state were everywhere in evidence by the end of the 1970s.

Within a decade after Zimbabwe, a scant forty years after Jawaharlal Nehru became India's first postcolonial prime minister and the Third World's preeminent statesman, Sam Nujoma became Namibia's new leader and Nelson Mandela was en route to achieving Mahatma-like status after his release from a twenty-seven year

incarceration in apartheid's gaols. Mandela's release from prison was, of course, secured by a historic combination of Gandhi's satyagraha philosophy (the largely—but not exclusively—peaceful Defiance Campaign of the 1950s) and Toussaint's more insurrectionary mode of resistance (the multi-pronged strategy of strikes, protest, and violent resistance intent on rendering apartheid society "ungovernable" in the 1980s).

The process of inscribing postcoloniality, of writing itself as both anti- and postcolonial, is crucial to India's standing as singular and "originary" Third World nation. From the famous "Mutiny" of 1857 to independence in 1947, Indian historiography—whether in the form of journalistic coverage of anti-colonial activities in metropolitan and local newspapers from the nineteenth century on, or the articulation of native resistance in fiction, autobiographies, or scholarly journals—has played a key role in establishing the nation's sovereignty as a groundbreaking event. Because of India's signal role in the postcolonial world, its status as the early Nehruvian leader of the Non-Aligned movement (erudite, well versed in the discourse of the metropolis, but deftly negotiating a position that defied easy alliance to either the Cold War East or West and yet possessing none of the withdrawal from ideological conflict associated with neutrality), it is historically appropriate that the first serious disenchantments with the newly independent Third World should have found articulation "in"—or, rather, from—the Subcontinent.

This critique of postcoloniality was offered by a collective of South Asian historians, the Subaltern Studies School, under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, a scholar working not from within India but Australia after he had spent time teaching at Sussex University in England. Writing back to South Asia about Indian historiography from the Antipodean diaspora after a deep immersion in the Cultural Studies milieu of New Left Britain, Guha's work represents a crucial engagement with what he labels the "disillusionment caused by failed possibilities" (Guha 1997, xii). Produced from an enabling dislocation and emphasizing the value of writing from beyond the context of origin and psycho-political investment, Guha's "disillusionment" marks, in the narrow sense, a disagreement with and a rewriting of "elitist" Indian historiography, the cornerstone of his critique of South Asian historians. In the strongly worded terms of his seminal 1982 essay "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," Guha writes,

The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. Both originated as the ideological product of British rule in India, but have survived the transfer of power and been assimilated to neo-colonialist and neo-nationalist forms of discourse in Britain and India respectively (Guha 1997, 37).

Within Guha's historiographical paradigm, the "failed possibili-

ties" and the "neo-nationalist forms of discourse" are both effects of the postcolonial bourgeoisie. Ideologically and intellectually indigent, the comprador class served only elite interests, from the ways in which they organized the postcolonial state apparatus to their accounts of postcolonial history.

However, Guha's ideological disenchantments resonate beyond the narrow purview of South Asian coloniality. Within the genre of postcolonial historiography, the work of Subaltern Studies is salient because it is so symptomatic of the postcolonial condition. Subaltern historiography exceeds itself because it represents the first intellectually organized, cohesive, and structured critique of and intervention into the growing failures of the postcolonial nation-state. Guha's attack on Indian historiography is not, to amend Gayatri Spivak's terms, "fully containable" to the South Asian context because it points "askew from its received signifiers" (Spivak 11). "Elite" bourgeois historiography is not solely the experience of India or Pakistan; it is, regrettably, all too normative and familiar to Left and Subaltern communities from New Delhi to Nairobi. Writing at a specific conjuncture, the 1975-77 Emergency years in which Indira Gandhi ruled India through the suspension of democracy, Guha's critique nevertheless signifies beyond itself into—and onto—the larger postcolonial predicament. By unintentionally producing a mode of historiography that would prove crucial to other (anti-) postcolonial critics, the Subaltern historians gave voice to the dissatisfactions and struggles of postcolonial constituencies outside of their own locale.

In its effort to reject "elitist" accounts of South Asia's anti-colonial past in favor of the Gramscian practice of "history from below," Subaltern historiography ironically achieved the kind of status afforded Indian independence some three decades earlier. India came to Anglophone postcolonialism first, and Indian historiography stands as the first "school"—a self-consciously assembled group of scholars working on and toward a common project—of historiography that systematically critiqued the history of the postcolonial nation-state. This form of Subaltern school intellectual praxis became the model for radical thinkers throughout the postcolonial world who were at odds with their own, and other, postcolonial, bourgeois-nationalists. However, Subaltern historiography assumed, unlike Indian sovereignty, a salience in all spheres of the postcolonial world; in fact, radical Latin American historians borrowed directly from their Indian counterparts to found their equivalent of the Subaltern School in South America.<sup>2</sup>

The projection of Guha's critique girds this essay. The Subaltern school's model of historiography is read in terms of its conceptual influence: the work of the Indian historians had a tremendous impact on other postcolonial contexts. Guha and his colleagues wrote for and about the Indian experience of colonialism and postcolonialism, but their historiography, because of the larger condition of postcolonial "failure," captured the uneasy, sometimes turbulent spirit of the postcolonial times. As this essay will show, Subaltern dissatisfactions with India's various national move-

ments—in its anti-imperial and postcolonial guises—both precede and postdate Guha's critiques in "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India." The pervading "disillusionment" and sense of "failed possibilities" that motivate Guha's attack on Mrs. Gandhi's usurpation of power during the Emergency will be more broadly conceived here as an indictment of the entire postcolonial movement.

Following Guha's dissatisfaction with the dominant narratives of the colonialist, neo-colonialist, and neo-nationalist variety, this essay explores how Subaltern School historiography facilitates or compels a critical engagement with the postcolonial condition of the 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s. What are the ideological effects of postcolonialism experienced as "neo-nationalist" repression? How does the Subaltern historians' critique of Indira Gandhi, or, for that matter, the novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o's rebuke of Jomo Kenyatta's rule in Kenya (in the provocatively titled *Petals of Blood*<sup>3</sup>, or the Indo-Trinidadian dispute with Eric Williams, address itself to the condition of postcolonial abjection and the failure(s) of the independent Third World? And how, in the process of reading Subaltern historiography as symptomatic of the postcolonial predicament, does textual exchange take place among these various locales and discourses? How does South Asian Subaltern historiography speak to, of, and (more pertinently) for, the experience of the Sub-Saharan or Latin American underclass? How does the discourse of Subalterneity circulate? What are its modalities of exchange? What political possibilities do these intellectual trade routes create among Subalterns the Third or metropolitan world over?

At stake for the Subaltern School and all other critics of post-coloniality's failures (which is how Ngugi's works about Kenya or Lakshmi Persaud's and Salman Rushdie's novels about the Caribbean and the Asian subcontinent may be read) is the way in which official historiography is opened up to new interrogations. Resistance to "officiality" is possible because the historical rendering of the postcolonial state is always, as White reminds us, an aporetic ascription—an irresolvable "theoretical truth" that allows for contradictory possibilities and interpretations (21). The post- and anti-colonial project is at once imagined as an accomplished, unalterable fact ("putatively" finished" [Ibid.]), and in process, however dissolute the process may be ("not yet dissolved, not falling apart" [Ibid.]).

Because of the gaps between the contesting theoretical truths of the postcolonial state, Subaltern historiography—the under- or unacknowledged ideological locale, the history that the hegemonic nation cannot or will not be allowed public articulation—becomes the interstitial space in which the nation's past, its founding, and its complex present can be subjected to a scrutiny that emerges "from below." It is through this mode of historiography that the nation can be probed, exposed to a new historical light, and read anew. That tenuous territory between the competing truths that Subaltern historiography opens up can be mined by postcolonial critics and made to yield different, un-official histories

that contain a disruptive veracity. Once transfigured, these interstitial findings can be transcribed into a new historiographical discourse, one that simultaneously challenges the official account and lays bare the erasure (in the sense of concealing through revealing, inadequately) of the postcolonial state's history.

It is into this breach of partial dissolution and partial revelation that the Subaltern historians step. Writing against the repressive, anti-democratic backdrop of the Emergency and with the 1967 Maoist rebellion in Naxalbari (an event which will be vital to the reading of Subalterneity in this essay) still fresh in their thinking, Guha and his colleagues recognize both the fragility of the postcolonial state (its critics, its very populace, can only be silenced and controlled by extraordinary, undemocratic measure) and its resoluteness (it is still functional; it may be under threat but it will not be "dissolved" nor is it "falling apart"). The uncertain, split condition of the postcolonial state compels thinkers such as the Subalterns into political ambivalence, a moment in which the nation's vulnerability both enables and warns against—even implicitly threatens—opposition as it lurches resolutely or uncertainly toward authoritarianism.

In order to address their historic postcolonial aporia, the Subaltern thinkers invoke that other key moment of subcontinental crisis: the Raj, when historical accounting was interstitially poised between an opaque colonialist confidence in its capacity to quell rebellion and quash resistance, in any mode, irrespective of its size or organizational capability—in effect, a largely unarticulated cognition that British rule was already "putatively" done with." The postcolonial aporia demands that the Subalterns address themselves to the urgency of the present through a reconsidered analysis of the official historical portrait of the colonial past. So entangled are these various modalities and temporalities that, to invoke Walter Benjamin's critique of anti-materialist history as being composed of "homogenous, empty time," there is something "homogenous" and "heterogenous" (so superimposed and intertwined are the different epochs), yet also "empty" and excessively full (evacuated of and impacted with temporally specific meaning as it is) concerning the "time" of Subaltern intervention into India's postcolonial crisis (260). Through the Subalterns, the past is put to work against the conditions of the present. The postcolonial state is critiqued for where it is because of how it accounts for where it came from, for how it made (represents and inscribes) and is making (principally by not allowing for a critical counter-narrative of) its history.

### **Subalterneity as Anti-Postcoloniality.**

Historical narration without analysis is trivial, historical analysis without narration is incomplete.

—Peter Gay, *Style In History* (189).

Although the Subaltern School came into epistemological being

in Delhi in 1982 with the publication of the first volume of *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, its intellectual and ideological roots can be more accurately traced to 1950s Calcutta. It is, however, a complicated temporal and geographical trajectory. The path from Calcutta to Delhi leads from newly independent India's province of Bengal to nineteenth century English historiography as well as wending its way through agrarian southern Italy and the newly industrialized city of Turin, in northern Italy, before, some thirty years later, addressing itself to the nineteenth century Raj and finding its voice in the postcolonial Indian capital. Guha's Subaltern School drew on the work of the 1950s anti-Stalinist British Marxist historians and the historiographical paradigm developed by the Italian Marxist Gramsci during Mussolini's Fascism. Thus, Subaltern School historiography represents not only a circuitous conceptual journey, but also a complex intellectual hybrid melded out of the peripheral (India), the metropolitan (Britain), and the semi-peripheral (Italy and the Mediterranean). Knowledge, methodology, praxis, and ideology are produced out of a complex exchange between these various sites and cities. While the context of the Asian subcontinent was fundamental to the work of the Subaltern historians, their historiography emerged out of a broader process: the adapting of paradigms, the borrowing of concepts, and the adjusting and translating of modes of thinking from one geographical and philosophical locale to another. Conceived in intellectual hybridity, it is appropriate—and perhaps inevitable—that Subaltern historiography should have an application outside of its specific geographical context and influence postcolonial thinking across linguistic and historical (Anglo- versus Luso- or Hispanophone) boundaries.

While the Subalterns would resonate beyond the Asian subcontinent into the broader postcolonial world from the 1980s on, their work was founded in close links to 1950s Left British historiography. It was in this decade that the British New Left historians, led by the *Reasoner* collective of E. P. Thompson, Rodney Hilton, and Christopher Hill, were forging a tradition of writing "history from below." Following Gramsci, who argues that the "history of Subaltern groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic" (54), the English historians (Thompson in particular) worked to redress this condition: their project, like their Indian counterparts', was to recover, investigate, and recreate British Subaltern historiography. In place of its fragmentation, they worked to provide it with a wholeness and coherence. Based in the northern English county of Yorkshire, the *Reasoner* historians introduced a genre of writing premised upon the experience of the working class. Published in 1958, Thompson's groundbreaking text *The Making of the English Working Class* established itself as a model for the recovery of nineteenth-century English working class radicalism, organization, agency, and resistance. Offering thick accounts of working men's associations, trade unions, and the Dissenters, Thompson and his colleagues wrote against the grain of dominant British historiography.

Whereas existing histories focused almost exclusively on the experience of the ruling classes, the Marxist-inspired *Reasoner* mode disrupted the prevalent tradition. Thompson, Saville, and Hill reconfigured the terrain of British historiography by demonstrating how the eighteenth and nineteenth century working classes frequently opposed the landed gentry, the aristocracy, the clergy, and the new capitalist class produced by the Industrial Revolution. The working class, as Thompson so famously reminds us, “was present at its own making” (9). Possessed of a critical historical consciousness since its very constitution, the working class made its own history, frequently in antagonistic relation to the various ruling elites. Thompson’s work, more so than that of his *Reasoner* colleagues, enabled both a reconceptualization of metropolitan historiography and impacted the formation of the Cultural Studies school at the University of Birmingham in the late 60s. Cultural Studies, as its practitioners and critics are well aware—and as the work of Guha and his fellow Indian historians demonstrate—was specially indebted to the work of Gramsci. This is particularly true of its leading theoretician, Stuart Hall, who relies extensively on Gramsci’s writing in *The Hard Road to Renewal*, his 1988 critique of Thatcherism.

At more or less the same moment that the *Reasoner* collective was writing against the dominant historiography, a new generation of Indian historians was producing its own accounts of a radical South Asian underclass opposed to colonial rule that drew mainly from two sources. Firstly, *Subaltern Studies* “employed the analytical tool of history writing inherited from the British Marxist historians,” among whom Thompson and Hill featured prominently (Chaturvedi xi). Secondly, the Indian historians relied heavily—after an extended period of reflection—upon the work of Gramsci. While both models were foundational to the work of Subaltern historiography, they can be said to have performed different functions for Guha and his colleagues. Gramsci and Thompson were both rooted in a radical politics of opposing hegemony.

The *Reasoner* historians provided a model of how to do “thick” research, in the anthropological sense of recreating events in thorough, painstaking detail. The Englishmen, Thompson and Hilton, provided a paradigm for their Indian counterparts about how to document, value, and transcribe local instances of Subaltern organization and resistance; and, as importantly, how to simultaneously translate particular accounts into paradigms for a more generalized opposition to the colonial or ruling class bureaucracy or state. Gramsci, on the other hand, lent a theoretical edge to Subaltern scholarship; he offered Guha and the Subaltern historians a set of critical concepts, among which “hegemony” and, of course, “Subaltern” are arguably the most salient with which to engage the accounts they were recovering and subjecting to, in Peter Gay’s term, “historical analysis.” Among the Subaltern scholars, these two modes of historiography find distinct articulation. It is in Guha’s writing that Gramsci and Thompson seem to meld most fluently; Dipesh Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee can be more



aply characterized as theoreticians for whom Gramsci is only one of several influences; while in the work of Gautam Bhadra and David Arnold it is the Thompsonian model that holds sway.

For Indian historians such as Guha, their initial acquaintance with Gramsci's notion of Subaltern agency in the 1950s would take a long time to manifest itself in their work. "The translation of *The Modern Prince and Other Essays* in 1957," Chaturvedi writes, "generated a small Gramsci-literate public" in newly postcolonial India that read but did not incorporate the Italian's work into their historiography until some twenty years later (Chaturvedi xiii). After having been introduced to Gramsci's work in the 1950s by "Susobhan Sarkar, eminent Bengali historian who taught Ranajit Guha as a student at President's College in Calcutta," it would take Guha and his Subaltern School colleagues until that "first volume" in the early 1980s before the work of the Italian philosopher found articulation in Indian historiography (Ibid.).

Subaltern Studies can be conceived of as a three-stage process that is simultaneously marked by chronological discreteness and overlap. The temporal lag between the moment of reception (reading Gramsci under Sarkar's tutelage), the moment of Subaltern conception (using Gramsci's writing as the model for their historiography), and the moment of critical enunciation (the publication of *Subaltern Studies 1*) marks more than a long period of gestation, reflection, and discussion in the group of historians. It also turns on a more crucial historical event: the epoch of crisis in postcolonial Indian society that begins in Naxalbari in 1967 and culminates with Indira Gandhi's State of Emergency between 1975 and 1977. "The Naxalite movement erupted violently in 1967," Prakash Singh writes, "its flames spreading to almost all parts of the country" (33). Located at the juncture of India, Nepal, and (contemporary) Bangladesh,<sup>4</sup> the village of Naxalbari became the lodestar for resistance against the Indian state. What began as a local campaign for land reform, after a "group of peasants surrounded a plot of land" owned by the *jotedars*, became a Maoist movement for social transformation that spread through the states of Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar – among others (Roy 9).

As its "flames spread" (Mao likened the Naxalite rebellion to a "prairie fire" that was sweeping across India) and the movement's tactics became more violent (including assassinations), it became clear that the Naxalbari peasants' rebellion was distinctly postcolonial in character: "Two decades had passed since the dawn of Independence and yet large segments of the Indian population – peasants, workers and tribals – continued to suffer the worst forms of exploitation" (Mao qtd. in Singh 3; Ibid.). Twenty years of sovereign rule by the Congress Party of Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi had yielded Indian Subalterns nothing but the broken promises of postcolonialism. After resisting the British Raj and winning independence, the Naxalite Subalterns were the first grouping to organize against and oppose the postcolonial "failures" that Guha would write about some fifteen years later in the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*. Such was the salience of the

Naxalite movement that, as Singh argues, their disruption of Indian political life could only be fully grasped analogically—when the peasants from Bengal were set in relation to other radical anti- or postcolonial groups.

The Naxalite “movement,” Singh writes, “came to be compared with the Huks of Phillipines, the Al Fatah of Palestine, and the Tupamaros of Uruguay” (Ibid.). In constructing a Subaltern historiography, Guha and his colleagues were compelled—by history—to conceive of Indian peasant resistance as a mode of opposition that—especially during the 1960s and ’70s—signaled beyond itself. Even with the most local of resistances, the most contained of grievances, the Indian Subalterns were insistently postcolonial and radical; their ideological bedfellows were the militant “Al Fatah” of Yasser Arafat’s Palestinian Liberation Organization, not the ensconced Congress Party of Nehru or Mrs. Gandhi. The Naxalites were committed to social transformation through (often violent) confrontation, not political appeasement. Reaching its insurgent peak between 1967 and 1971, this peasant rebellion represents a paradigm shift within Indian historiography. The Naxalites were an anti-postcolonial movement in the mold of the Mau Mau, Mao, and Che Guevara, a radical group that broke completely with the Gandhian philosophy of satyagraha; the Naxalites were (infinitely) more 1857 Mutiny than 1940s passive resistance. The Anglophone model of (largely peaceful) transformation revealed itself, like its predecessor the British Raj, to be especially vulnerable to internal challenge. It was not externally susceptible to, say, the military threats of Pakistan or the “West,” but it was shown to be open to interrogation and attack (quite literally) by radical local constituencies who rejected the neo-colonial tendencies and practices of the Congress Party.

The Naxalite insurgency exposed one major failing of the postcolonial Indian state—its ideologically soft underbelly—while the 1975 Emergency revealed the other characteristic shortcoming of postcolonial regimes: the corruption, repression, and suspension of democracy when the ruling party, especially its leadership, was accused and found guilty of legislative and judicial impropriety. Stanley Wolpert maps the events that led to the Emergency: “On June 12, 1975, Judge Jag Mohan Lal Sinha of Allahabad’s High Court found Prime Minister Gandhi guilty of two counts (out of fifty-two charges brought against her) of campaign malpractice in connection with her race against Raj Narain for a seat in Parliament four years earlier. The conviction carried a mandatory penalty of barring Mrs. Gandhi from running for or holding any elective office for a period of six years” (Wolpert 396). After protests by ordinary citizens and denunciations by opposition politicians in Parliament, Indira Gandhi’s response two weeks later was emphatic: on “June 26, 1975, the president of India proclaimed a state of national emergency, ‘suspending’ all civil rights, including *habeas corpus*, clamping a lid on the press, placing armored units on special alert, and grounding air flights over Delhi” (Ibid. 397).

While belonging to different ideological strands, the material

deprivations of neo-colonialism that the Naxalites struggled to redress and the antagonism to challenge in any form (autocratic tendencies all too often innate to postcolonial regimes) confirmed the Subaltern historians' central critique: for all the trappings of independence, in these Benjaminian "moments of danger," the postcolonial state showed itself to be far more like its colonialist predecessor than different. Elites of different ideological stripes, races, and ethnicities perhaps, but elites intent on guaranteeing their self-interest, nonetheless. Confronted by insurgent peasants or rebuked by its own courts (an event, granted, far less likely to occur during the Raj), the hegemonic state—regardless of its guise—responded with its repressive apparatus, or it rode roughshod, however temporarily, over the rulings of its own judiciary; the full functioning of the democratic state was contingent upon, if not Subaltern quiescence, then certainly the absence of Subaltern challenge to the authority of the ruling bloc. In a moment of crisis, the power of the elites revealed itself to be completely non-ideological. Instead, the ruling bloc's primary instinct manifested itself: the protection of narrow, sectarian interests.

In this regard, the events of "1967" and "1975" do more than lend credence to Guha's later debunking of the Indian elite in his attempt to rewrite the nation's historiography. Their self-representation, in Guha's terms, is a patently false one: their "role as promoters of the cause of the people rather than that as exploiters and oppressors, their altruism and self-abnegation rather than their scramble for the modicum of power and privilege granted by the rulers in order to make sure of their support for the Raj" demonstrates how, as the ruling party in postcolonial India, the Congress Party is the latest incarnation of an elite that has acted against the Subaltern class (1988, 38).

During the Emergency, the promises of postcolonialism (and the very democratic foundation of the independent Third World state) were not only unfulfilled but severely abrogated by Mrs. Gandhi. Because of the Congress Party's consolidation of "power," the rhetoric and ideology that had sustained the anti-colonial movement and the early phases of Third World independence now showed themselves to be conceptually inadequate. Working at that critical juncture, the nascent Subaltern School's writing was informed by Gramsci's "Notes on Italian History," his view of the founding of the Italian state that can be cast—if not irreducibly—as a contemplation on historical crisis. In his essay, Gramsci accounts for Italy's lack of a bourgeoisie (unlike France); its fragmented nature as a state (really a collection of city-states) further divided by regional conflict between the industrializing North and the rural South a tendency to reify geographical difference that Gramsci explicitly critiques; and the process by which figures such as Mazzini, Garibaldi, and Cavour secured a state.<sup>5</sup> At a moment when a new mode of subjugation was instituted against the Indian people, Guha and his colleagues were well positioned to turn away from the present crisis and toward Gramsci. In Foucault's terms, the Subaltern scholars proceeded to mine an "archeology of (past)

knowledge" so as to make it textually relevant to the ideological demands of their moment.

"Subaltern groups," Gramsci writes, "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" (55). Gramsci's call for Subaltern vigilance (and, to a lesser extent, a Trotskyist revolution) resonates in two historical registers. Firstly, it draws attention to the transhistoricality of hegemony: "Subalterns" are, as postcolonial subjects in independent India discovered during the Emergency, perpetually vulnerable to "ruling groups." However, while subjugation is not new, the mode of subjection is, and this is the task that confronts the Subaltern historians: how to respond to the particularities of this crisis. Secondly, a factor that has greater pertinence for the Subaltern project as a whole, the underclass is "permanently" susceptible to ruling class interpellation and appropriation. The history of Subaltern resistance in the Raj cannot, as Guha is all too well aware, stand independent of officiality—it can be expropriated, like any other discourse or experience of resistance, by the dominant narrative. The struggle of the Subaltern is never owned by the underclass—it can always be reconfigured, misrepresented, and consumed by hegemonic narratives.

### Reinscribing the Past and Critiquing the Present

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.

—Walter Benjamin,  
"Theses on the Philosophy of History" (255)

Faced with a crisis they could understand but not fully explicate, the Subaltern historians cast their intellectual glance away from the urgencies (and exigencies) of the present not in order to escape it, but to better grasp its antecedents, its workings, and its effects for the underclass and the Left. It is in such a Benjaminian "moment of danger"—when the state is no longer accountable to its constituents, when the democratic right to resist is denied, and when the state is no longer the representative of the collective but the guardian of elite or sectarian interests—that the Subaltern historians "seized" the past as a politicized "memory." Through their reclamation of anti-colonial Subalternity, they simultaneously challenge the dominant conception of the "way it really was" and convert the past into a modality of theoretical, philosophical, and historiographical resistance. Like Benjamin's overburdened "angel of progress," the past is made to stand for something other than its own moment; the past is chronologically displaced and critically grafted onto the present.

The Subaltern scholars turned toward the past so that they could interrogate and account for the "failed possibilities" of postcolo-

nialism. Within the 1970s India of Indira Gandhi's "Emergency," Guha and his colleagues Pandey, Chakrabarty, and Shahid Amin had a great deal to be "disillusioned" with since the suspension of civil society concretized precisely the kind of "failed possibilities" of—the promises renege on by—the sovereign Third World state. Within a few short decades in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean, postcolonial leaders from Nkrumah to Kenyatta to Bhutto to Forbes Burnham had all shown themselves prone to abuse power in all its many forms, from rank corruption to routine exploitation of the underclass. With the Third World nation already in an advanced state of disrepair, the Subalterns were subjected to a litany of (by now familiar) problems, ranging from insufficient healthcare to badly administered education systems to inadequate housing. And the repressive violence of the postcolonial state was, as in India (and in too many postcolonial states), everywhere in evidence.

It is in this way that the Emergency years signified not only a(nother) "failed possibility," but, at that moment, the failure of Indian postcolonialism, symptomatic of Third World problems the globe over. The repressions of the colonialists had returned in India (as it did, *inter alia*, in Kenya and Guyana), refracted through the machinations of the sovereign Third World state. In Guha's almost poetic reconstruction of the "Emergency years," "the turbulence of the 1970s and its pain owed a great deal to this clash of doubt and self-doubt, interrogation and response . . . . One of its many unsettling effects was to bring the impact of the twenty-year old nation state's crisis to bear on a settled and in many respects codified understanding of the colonial past" (1997, xiii).

Recovering, reinscribing, and reclaiming the "past" is one of the major accomplishments of the Subaltern School. However, that "codified past" is—both historiographically and theoretically—most susceptible to reinterpretation at precisely the moment of crisis because, with the repression of civil society, the established historiographical verities are implicitly subject to challenge. The rhetorical and ideological truths upon which the postcolonial nation was founded revealed themselves to be, at this signal conjuncture, less aporetic than inadequate: they could not sustain the democracy signified by "1947." The official, elitist rendering of the past can no longer be relied upon; the past has had to be sundered. For Guha et al., the past has to be ripped apart violently by a new historiographical analysis, it has to be undone and rewritten from below: historiography and postcoloniality have to be Subalternized, written from below, but as the experience of an agential underclass who acted; Subalternized historiography restores the underclass to history as full participants in the making of their historical experiences. Subalternized postcoloniality translates the history of underclass resistance into vocabularies that have an impact in and for other locales, other historical conjunctures, and for different moments.

The problematic condition of the postcolonial paradigm in Naxalite and Emergency India enabled Subaltern Studies, lent the

work of these historians its special edge, and allowed this brand of scholarship to operate across a range of temporalities. The Subaltern school sought not only to reclaim and re-present the past, but to make the past critically available for reading the present; Guha and his colleagues speak at once to the peculiarities of their moment, to the anti-colonial experience, and their work continues to have an application to the “failures” and violences of the current postcolonial conjuncture. As a theoretical and historiographical strategy, for this reason, Subaltern Studies resonates both geographically—across continents and regions—and temporally—across different historical moments. Subaltern Studies could serve as a model for, say, Latin American critics of the postcolonial or post-dictatorial condition because it was founded upon reinserting into nationalist histories the voices and experiences, the disenfranchisements and the struggles, of the underclass, the silenced, the “disappeared”: those unrepresented by repressive, coercive, and undemocratic regimes, those denied the speaking of their own dissident pasts, and their various histories of resistance. Committed to articulating a politics from below, Subaltern historiography proved itself to be temporally and contextually flexible: it was adaptable to different moments and conditions of anti-imperial and postcolonial struggle.

The need for Subaltern historiography marks a crucial epistemological inadequacy: the production of a Subaltern account of the colonial past represents the extent to which postcoloniality is constituted out of a series of “failed possibilities.” The Subaltern subject, newly recovered and agential, stands as the definitive marker of postcolonial inadequacy. Subaltern historiography is the consequence of postcolonial failure. Indian postcoloniality, conceived in the violence of 1947, has to be reconceived because of the internal violence of the Naxalite movement and the 1975 Emergency. “1947” is itself a temporal designation that has to be interrogated. It cannot stand simply as a temporal marker that ante- and post-dates Indian independence and that is inevitably theorized within the metaphors of non-violence, satyagraha, and bourgeois liberalism. “1947” is as much a symbol of the achievement of independence as it is symptomatic of the earliest failings of postcolonial Indian historiography: it is the founding moment, the first public occasion on which the nationalist elite first undermine the contributions to Indian sovereignty and that instance when the specificities of the Subaltern class—their distance from the elite—are unrecognized.

Calcutta is thus doubly inscribed as a point of Subaltern origin: through the Naxalite violence, and the violent repression during the Emergency, Sarkar’s 1950s Calcutta confronts and enunciates itself as the 1970s’ Maoist rebellion in the state of Bengal. The Marxist struggle, contained in Gramsci’s writings and activism, that provided the theoretical foundation for the Subaltern School are transformed into the anti-bourgeois nationalist revolutionary practice by the Naxalites. The 1970s revolution was anticipated (and facilitated) by the early Calcutta years.

### Writing Against the Sixties

The sense that something epic was happening was pretty hard to miss.

—Tom Hayden

(qtd in Gitlin, *Democracy Is In The Streets*).

Much as Guha reads the 1970s repression and “crisis” as a catalyst for revisiting, revising and “interrogating” the “codified colonial past,” he is also implicitly compelling an engagement with the future of postcolonial India—and the condition of postcoloniality itself. Guha is inviting more than a retrospective historical reconstruction by “unsettling” the “codified” accounts of the colonial past. His work, and that of the Subaltern School in general, transforms the contemporary crisis into a moment of historic possibility: the recognition that the “understanding” of coloniality and, by inevitable temporal and conceptual extension, postcoloniality, is partial (to the elite classes) and incomplete (bearing the weight of Subaltern silence) and consequently in urgent need of reconsideration. The Subaltern has to be historicized, in the process of which historiography is Subalternized by a range of agents largely denied voice and interventionist capacity in and by elite accounts.

Because of the place from which he is speaking—Australia, a society where the history and devastating consequences of colonialism remain unaddressed in too many crucial ideological ways—and about whom he is speaking (India, the mother of the Anglophone anti-colonial movement), his focus, his several audiences, and the scope of the project of Subalternity (the Gramscian determination to write “history from below”), Guha’s vision could not be restricted to that single 1970s crisis—significant as it was for democratic forces in India. The mid-1970s was, of course, a moment of generalized postcolonial crisis as much as it was a moment of postcolonial achievement. During this period, the Manley government in Jamaica found itself under ideological and economic attack by the America government (Secretary of State Henry Kissinger visited the Caribbean nation in 1976 to issue warnings about Prime Minister Michael Manley’s fraternizing with Fidel Castro). In Kenya, the declining years of the Kenyatta regime saw widespread disillusionment with a regime that became increasingly dictatorial and indifferent to the fate of the severely embattled Subalterns. Further south, Tanzanians grappled with the fallout of Julius Nyerere’s “African socialism” as the country’s populace struggled with the effects of a largely unsuccessful experiment in blending African traditions with orthodox Marxist economic policies.

However, in the mid-1970s, both Portuguese colonies, Angola and Mozambique, achieved independence as Angusto Neto and Samora Machel, respectively, took office as their sovereign country’s leaders in 1974 and ‘76. At this stage, Mozambique’s neighbor Zimbabwe was only four years from liberation. In South Africa

and Namibia, however, the mid-1970s marked a period of turbulence as students led the resistance against apartheid and Sam Nujoma's SWAPO (the somewhat anachronistic acronym for the South West African People's Organisation) movement stepped up its fight against the apartheid military forces, mainly in the country's northern regions. After 1976, Nujoma's forces were aided by the ability to take refuge in a neighboring, Marxist Angola vigorously opposed to the apartheid regime. Playing host to SWAPO cost the Angolans dearly, not only in that period and up until South Africa's "liberation," but right up until now, as the on-going devastation of that country attests. In the "first wave" postcolonial states in Latin America, conditions were no better. From Pinochet's Chile to the Argentine juntas to the Revolutionary Party in Mexico came the recurring horror of the "disappeared," a history whose "memory" has been insistently seized but not resolved. In the Indonesian archipelago, Suharto's military forces wreaked havoc and destruction, as well as waging a widespread terror campaign against the East Timorese. All this in the name of postcolonial independence. The price of sovereignty for the postcolonial Subaltern or the resisting subject critical of the independent government or the religious (as is the case with the predominantly Catholic East Timorese) or ethnic minority was a different, but often no less brutal form, of subjugation. Postcoloniality did not guarantee equal protection for all its citizens.

However, in so far as the Subaltern commentary on the Indian condition was applicable to the larger postcolonial paradigm, it was also "retrospectively" a critique of the "high"—or the "epic" (and optimistic)—moment of postcoloniality. The 1960s, the epoch of postcolonial optimism and "possibility," a moment inducted by Indian independence in 1947. If Indian sovereignty defined Anglophone postcoloniality, it is in part because it remained for so long the inaugural event: the anti-colonialist movement that not only initiated the process, but remained for a decade the "only" independent government (Pakistan and Sri Lanka, which achieved its status in 1948, were overshadowed by India). It was not until 1957 that Kwame Nkrumah (a Nehruvian figure in his own way) led Ghana, previously the Gold Coast, to independence. While Ghana's independence reverberated around and for Sub-Saharan Africa, its signality never equaled that of India. However, what Nkrumah's nation did mark was, to invoke Harold MacMillan's famous speech, how swiftly the "winds of change" were blowing through—and in the process, liquidating—the British Empire.

Writers such as James Miller and Todd Gitlin have, *inter alia*, represented the Euro-American experience of the 1960s as the decade of cultural revolution, but also as a transnational movement that was influenced in no small measure by the practices of the anti- and postcolonial world.<sup>6</sup> Within this conceptualization, the "60s" can be said to begin with the moment just before John Kennedy became the first Roman Catholic President of the United States and only concludes some time after Watergate—perhaps with the Iran hostage situation; Fredric Jameson, among other critics, periodizes



the 60s as that moment that extends from 1958, the Cuban Revolution, until 1973, the year of the oil embargo.

For the Anglophone postcolonial world, the 60s also have to be conceived as a long decade. It was a historical moment that extended beyond narrow chronology; it was a historical modality that could not be neatly demarcated as beginning in 1960 and ending in 1970; it was a period inaugurated by Ghanaian independence in 1957 and ended with the achievement of Zimbabwean sovereignty in 1980—that is, invoking a periodization of the 60s that emphasizes the trope and mode of anti-colonialism. Anti-colonialism in the British colonies was tremendously influenced by charismatic figures such as Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and Frantz Fanon, demonstrating the links between the “first” and what might be conceived of as the “third” postcolonial wave in parts of South America and the Francophone and Hispano-Caribbean, a rare but crucial link between the Anglophone and Latin anti-colonialism. With his work in Algeria, Fanon aligned Africa with the Caribbean in a way that echoed but was distinct from the connections conceptualized by his philosophical “predecessors” Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor. Another anti-imperialist vector was also crucial to this moment: the Chinese Revolution, with its unusually programmatic attention to culture, bequeathed the iconic Mao to anti-colonialists from Africa to South Asia. Those twenty-three years represent not only an extended temporality, the “decade” marked not so much by the passing of the years as by the growing list of British colonies that won independence, but also an ideology of resistance and possibility very different from that experienced by the activism and critique of Euro-American Subalterns.

Located at the far end of that moment and having witnessed its long and ambivalent unfolding (i.e., the celebration of independence followed by an “Emergency” of one variety or another), the Subaltern historians wrote from a locale deeply saturated by the failures of the decade and the postcolonial experience in India. Immunized in 1975 against the countercultural optimism and the famously eulogized “spirit” of the era—the 60s as the decade of radical possibility—Guha and his colleagues took the “long view” (in Raymond Williams’s sense of the “long revolution,” a transformation that would take a considerable amount of time and would have to be philosophically struggled over and for). By virtue of having “inaugurated” Anglophone postcoloniality, the Indian historiographers had the benefit of observing how Third World independence revealed itself as “failed possibility.” It was not, however, the movement toward or the achievement of independence that the Subaltern scholars were most critical of; it was, rather, growing understanding about how the past was used to enshrine—without national self-reflection or critique—a bourgeois-nationalist discourse that would later, though not much later, be used to silence Indira Gandhi or Kenyatta-like oppositionality.

The “past,” newly interrogated and freshly conceptualized by the Subaltern School after having been so easily and uncritically marshaled in the cause of anti-colonial liberation, had to be made to

respond to and speak against the 1960s. The Subaltern School of historiography stands as an “anti-60s” postcolonial epistemology because it is crafted as a body of knowledge—a collection of re-readings of the Indian colonial past—that is written from a distinct, difficult, and asynchronic position. Produced from a present inordinately marked by failure, Subalterneity constitutes a rejection of the hegemonic past, a recognition of the postcolonial Left’s inability or reluctance to challenge dominant constructions of history by the postcolonial elite. The present is, in this conception, accountable to the past only because it is, paradoxically, only by acknowledging the neglected actors of the colonial era that it can claim agency for the postcolonial Subaltern.

By writing the colonized Subaltern into history (anew), Guha, Pandey, and their colleagues insist upon the urgent need of the postcolonial underclass to demand their right to make not only their own past but also their own contemporaneity. The postcolonial underclass’s agency is, within the Subaltern account, contingent upon its historical predecessor: the history of the colonized has to be reconstituted in order for the present and the future to be radicalized. The Subaltern School historiography almost juxtaposes itself in relation to the 60s. It offers itself, in contradistinction to the dominant mode of reading the 1960s as an apogetic moment in postcolonial history, as an intellectual modality produced out of and because of postcolonial “failure”: Subaltern historiography draws attention to the incidental and the systematic un-democratizing of the Third World in a moment that African, Asian, and Caribbean sovereignty was widely, all too frequently, and uncritically celebrated. Because of the salience of its moment of conception, in the midst of the postcolonial euphoria of the 1960s through 1980, Subaltern historiography offers itself as a caution—calling attention to how historical discourses work and to what function they perform for the elite and the Subaltern alike in constructing the national subject—against how narratives of the nation implicitly rely on silencing, partiality, and deliberate exclusion. The Subaltern historiographers argue against understanding elite accounts of national events as the only history of a nation or a movement.

Ironically, it is only by writing against or metaphorically rejecting the 60s, by gainsaying the “spirit” of the era, and by recovering the Gramscian ethos of Calcutta from its three-decades silence that the Subaltern School can realize the promises of “1947.” It is by interrogating the cultural purchase and critiquing the ideological hegemony of elite historiography that the structural and intellectual disenfranchisement of the postcolonial underclass can be countered. Conceived in and because of a “moment of danger,” Subaltern historiography has a highly developed accountability to the past and present experiences of its constituents.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Thanks to Tess Chakkalaka: friend and interlocuter; and to Saurabh Dube for his comments.

<sup>2</sup>See, among others, Ileana Rodriguez's essay "El Grupo Latinoamericano de Estudios Subalternos," *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader (Latin America Otherwise)*, edited by Ileana Rodriguez, and John Beverley's *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Contemporary Cultural Theory (Post Contemporary Interventions)* for an account of the founding of Latin American Subaltern Studies and its links to the South Asian historians.

<sup>3</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1982.

<sup>4</sup>At the moment of the conflict, Bangladesh was known as East Bengal and still a part of Pakistan.

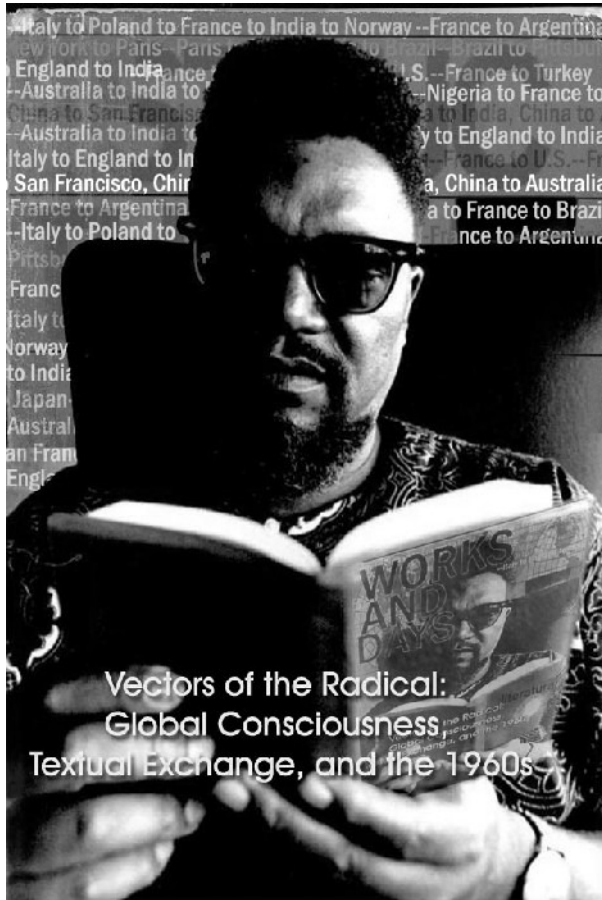
<sup>5</sup>Demonstrating an unexpected, a-chronological symmetry between his prison writings and that of the Subaltern historians several decades later, Gramsci shows himself to be a critic of anti-colonial resistance modalities, and moralities, in the Raj – and opposed to literary forms and moralities in pre-Revolutionary Russia. The "current phenomenon of Gandhism in India," he writes, "Tolstoy's theory of non-resistance to evil, both of which have so much in common with the first phase of Christianity (before the Edit of Milan). Gandhism and Tolstoyism are naïve theorisations of the 'passive revolution' with religious overtones." (Gramsci, 107).

<sup>6</sup>See James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago*, and Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope Days of Rage*.

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Vectors of the Radical:  
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———— **ABSTRACT:** ————

Centered on a consideration of the poet Milton Acorn's various roles as the public face of the radical-fringe Canadian Liberation Movement, this essay explores the performative and textual strategies of contesting Maoist parties in Canada in the late 1960s and early '70s.