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**Selected Works of  
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak**

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# Subaltern Studies

## Deconstructing Historiography

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(1985)

This influential essay marks the occasion of Spivak's official collaboration with the Subaltern Studies collective of historians, who are rewriting the history of colonial India from below, from the point of view of peasant insurgency. This is a paradoxical historical project since the documentary evidence is so one-sided that no positive, or positivist, account of subaltern insurgency is possible. There simply are no subaltern testimonials, memoirs, diaries, or official histories. Yet as one of the collective, Ranajit Guha, argues, though the documentary evidence of the colonial archive, or what he calls the prose of counterinsurgency, takes its shape from the will of the colonial administrators themselves, it is also predicated upon another will, that of the insurgent. Consequently, it should be possible to read the presence of a rebel consciousness as a factor in the construction of that body of evidence. Dipesh Chakrabarty, another of the Subalternists, in attempting to represent the conditions of the jute mill workers of Calcutta during a specific period, tries to account for gaps in the historical record. He argues that those gaps are as revealing of working-class conditions as any direct reference to them. As Spivak herself observes, "it is only the texts of counterinsurgency or elite documentation that give us the news of the consciousness of the subaltern."

Who or what is this subaltern? Loosely derived from the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, the term "subaltern" designates nonelite or subordinated social groups. It is at once without any particular theoretical rigor and useful for problemizing humanist concepts of the sovereign subject. In the unrevised first version of her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Spivak cites Ranajit Guha's definition of subalternity: "The social groups and elements included in this category represent *the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the 'elite.'*" As Spivak observes, "The object of the group's

investigation, in the case not even of the people as such but of the floating buffer zone of the regional elite-subaltern, is a deviation from an ideal—the people or subaltern—which is itself defined as a difference from the elite.” Guha’s definition of this floating buffer zone of elite-subalternity is close to Marx’s well-known comments on the French peasantry in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*: “At the regional and local levels [the dominant indigenous groups] . . . if belonging to social strata hierarchically inferior to those of the dominant all-Indian groups acted in the interests of the latter and not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own social being” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?,” pp. 284–85).

According to Spivak, then, the subaltern as subject-effect shows up the contrivance of more positivist models of the subject. The subaltern emerges from the Subalternists’ research not as a positive identity complete with a sovereign self-consciousness but as the product of a network of differential, potentially contradictory strands. However successful traditional history-writing might be at hiding this sleight-of-hand substitution of an effect for a cause, the effort is still doomed to cognitive failure, since it is merely a convenient disciplinary fiction.

In one sense, then, this essay initiates Spivak’s continuing relationship with the discipline of history and historiography, or the art of history-writing. From the early through the mid-1980s, Spivak was reading in the East India Company archives and engaging in dialogue with colonial historians. Other essays germinated during this period represent her substantive contributions to Subalternist history by way of research on the Rani of Sirmur and on the larger question of *sati* within British imperial governance of India. “The Rani of Sirmur,” “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” and “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” are three important essays from this fruitful period that form the basis of her long-awaited book from Harvard University Press, *An Unfashionable Grammatology*.

This essay’s engagement with the Subaltern Studies group, however, also represents an extension of Spivak’s work as a historically grounded literary critic: she is in the archive, but in there busily theorizing deconstructive reading. Thus she is able to read the Subalternists both with and against the grain of their appropriation of French poststructuralism and antihumanism, particularly the work of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. The crux of her reading of the texts of Subaltern Studies is that in practice the group are more deconstructive than they might themselves admit.

Spivak sees their positing of a theoretically and historically possible, if finally irrecoverable, subaltern consciousness as a form of “strategic essentialism.” Particularly because the group write as if aware of their complicity with subaltern insurgency—they do not only work *on* it—Spivak

praises their “*strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.” At the same time, gender and the figure of woman operate in relatively unexamined ways in the Subalternists’ texts. Making a start on that particular decolonizing of the mind represented by feminist critique, while attending to the new possibilities for historical research opened up by it, constitutes the grounds of Spivak’s own contribution to the Subaltern Studies collective project, theoretically and archivally speaking.

## CHANGE AND CRISIS

The work of the Subaltern Studies group offers a theory of change. The insertion of India into colonialism is generally defined as a change from semi-feudalism into capitalist subjection. Such a definition theorizes the change within the great narrative of the modes of production and, by uneasy implication, within the narrative of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Concurrently, this change is seen as the inauguration of politicization for the colonized. The colonial subject is seen as emerging from those parts of the indigenous elite that have come to be loosely described as “bourgeois nationalist.” The Subaltern Studies group seems to me to be revising this general definition and its theorization by proposing at least two things: first, that the moment(s) of change be pluralized and plotted as confrontations rather than transition (they would thus be seen in relation to histories of domination and exploitation rather than within the great modes-of-production narrative) and, second, that such changes are signaled or marked by a functional change in sign-systems. The most important functional change is from the religious to the militant. There are, however, many other functional changes in sign-systems indicated in these collections of writings: from crime to insurgency, from bondsman to worker, and so on.

The most significant outcome of this revision or shift in perspective is that the agency of change is located in the insurgent or the “subaltern.”

(In fact their concern with function changes in sign-systems—the phrase “discursive displacements” is slightly shorter—extends beyond the arena of insurgent or subaltern activity. In more than one article Dipesh Chakrabarty discusses how the “self-consciously socialist discourse” of the left sector of the indigenous elite is, willy-nilly, attempting to displace the discourse of feudal authority and charge it with new functions.<sup>1</sup> Partha Chatterjee shows Gandhi “political[ly] appropriat[ing] the popular in the evolving forms of the new Indian state [3, 156]. The meticulously documented account of the emergence of Gandhi—far from a “subaltern”—as

a political signifier within the social text, spanning many of the essays in the three collections, is one of the most stunning achievements of these studies.)

A functional change in a sign-system is a violent event. Even when it is perceived as “gradual,” or “failed,” or yet “reversing itself,” the change itself can only be operated by the force of a crisis. What Paul de Man writes of criticism can here be extended to a subalternity that is turning things “upside down”: “In periods that are not periods of crisis, or in individuals bent upon avoiding crisis at all cost, there can be all kinds of approaches to [the social]...but there can be no [insurgency].”<sup>2</sup> Yet, if the space for a change (necessarily also an addition) had not been there in the prior function of the sign-system, the crisis could not have made the change happen. The change in signification-function supplements the previous function. “The movement of signification adds something...but this addition...comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified.”<sup>3</sup> The Subaltern Studies collective scrupulously annotates this double movement.

They generally perceive their task as making a theory of consciousness or culture rather than specifically a theory of change. It is because of this, I think, that the force of crisis, *although never far from their argument*, is not systematically emphasized in their work, and sometimes disarmingly alluded to as “impingement,” “combination,” “getting caught up in a general wave,” “circumstances for unification,” “reasons for change,” “ambiguity,” “unease,” “transit,” “bringing into focus”; even as it is also described as “switch,” “catching fire” and, pervasively, as “turning upside down”—all critical concept-metaphors that would indicate force.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, a general sobriety of tone will not allow them to emphasize sufficiently that they are themselves bringing hegemonic historiography to crisis. This leads them to describe the clandestine operation of supplementarity as the inexorable speculative logic of the dialectic. In this they seem to me to do themselves a disservice, for, as self-professed dialecticians, they open themselves to older debates between spontaneity and consciousness or structure and history. Their actual practice, which, I will argue, is closer to deconstruction, puts these oppositions into question. A theory of change as the site of the displacement of function between sign systems—which is what they oblige me to read in them—is a theory of reading in the strongest possible general sense. The site of displacement of the function of signs is the name of reading as active transaction between past and future. This transactional reading as (the possibility of) action, even at its most dynamic, is perhaps what Antonio Gramsci meant by “elaboration,” *e-laborare*, working out.<sup>5</sup> If seen in this way, the work of the Subaltern Studies group repeatedly makes it possible for us to grasp that the concept-metaphor of the “social text” is not the

reduction of real life to the page of a book. My theoretical intervention is a modest attempt to remind us of this.

It can be advanced that their work presupposes that the entire *socius*, at least insofar as it is the object of their study, is what Nietzsche would call a *fortgesetzte Zeichenkette*—a “continuous sign-chain.” The possibility of action lies in the dynamics of the disruption of this object, the breaking and relinking of the chain. This line of argument does not set consciousness over against the *socius*, but sees consciousness as itself also constituted as and on a semiotic chain. It is thus an instrument of study which participates in the nature of the object of study. To see consciousness thus is to place the historian in a position of irreducible compromise. I believe it is because of this double bind that it is possible to unpack the aphoristic remark of Nietzsche’s that follows the image of the sign-chain with reference to this double bind: “All concepts in which an entire process is comprehended [*sich zusammenfasst*] withdraws itself from [*sich entzieht*] definition; only that which has no history is definable.”<sup>6</sup>

#### COGNITIVE FAILURE IS IRREDUCIBLE

All of the accounts of attempted discursive displacements provided by the group are accounts of failures. For the subaltern displacements, the reason for failure most often given is the much greater scope, organization, and strength of the colonial authorities. In the case of the nationalist movement for independence it is clearly pointed out that the bourgeoisie’s “interested” refusal to recognize the importance of, and to ally themselves with, a politicized peasantry accounted for the failure of the discursive displacement that operated the peasants’ politicization. Yet there is also an incipient evolutionism here which, trying perhaps to avoid a vulgar Marxist glorification of the peasant, lays the blame on “the existing level of peasant consciousness” for the fact “that peasant solidarity and peasant power were seldom sufficient or sustained enough” (3, 52; 3, 115). This contradicts the general politics of the group—which sees the elite’s hegemonic access to “consciousness” as an interpretable construct.

To examine this contradiction we must first note that discursive displacements wittingly or unwittingly operated from above are also failures. Chakrabarty, Arvind N. Das, and N. K. Chandra chart the failures of trade union socialism, functionalist entrepreneurialism, and agrarian communism to displace a semifeudal into a “modern” discourse. Chatterjee shows how Gandhi’s initial dynamic transaction with the discursive field of the Hindu religious Imaginary had to be travestied in order that his ethics of resistance could be displaced in the sign-system of bourgeois politics.<sup>7</sup> (No doubt if an “entity” like “bourgeois politics” were to be opened up to discursive analysis the same microdynamics of displacement would emerge.)

My point is, simply, that failures or partial successes in discursive-field displacement do not necessarily relate, following a progressivist scale, to the “level of consciousness” of a class.

Let us now proceed to note that what has seemingly been thoroughly successful, namely elite historiography, on the right or the left, nationalist or colonialist, is itself, by the analysis of this group, shown to be constituted by cognitive failures. Indeed, if the theory of change as the site of the displacement of a discursive field is their most pervasive argument, this comes a close second. Here too no distinction is made, quite properly in my estimation, between witting and unwitting lapses. Hardiman points at the Nationalists’ persistent (mis)cognition of discursive-field displacement on the part of the subaltern as the signature of Sanskritization (3, 214). He reads contemporary analysis such as Paul Brass’s study of factionalism for the symptoms of what Edward Said has called “orientalism” (1, 227). It is correctly suggested that the sophisticated vocabulary of much contemporary historiography *successfully* shields this cognitive *failure* and that this success-in-failure, this sanctioned ignorance, is inseparable from colonial domination. Das shows rational expectation theory, that hegemonic yet defunct (successful cognitive failure once again) mainstay neocolonialism, at work in India’s “Green Revolution To Prevent a Red One” (2, 198–99).

Within this tracking of successful cognitive failure, the most interesting maneuver is to examine the production of “evidence,” the cornerstone of the edifice of historical truth (3, 231–70), and to anatomize the mechanics of the construction of the self-consolidating Other—the insurgent and insurgency. In this part of the project, Guha seems to radicalize the historiography of colonial India through a combination of Soviet and Barthesian semiotic analysis. The discursivity (cognitive failure) of disinterested (successful and therefore true) historiography is revealed. The Muse of History and counterinsurgency are shown to be complicit (2, 1–42; *EAP*).

I am suggesting that an implicitly evolutionist or progressivist set of presuppositions measuring failure or success in terms of level of consciousness is too simple for the practice of the collective. If we look at the varieties of activity treated by them—subaltern, insurgent, nationalist, colonialist, historiographic—it is a general field of failures that we see. In fact the work of the collective is to make the distinction between success and failure indeterminate—for the most successful historical record is disclosed by them to be crosshatched by cognitive failure. Since in the case of the subaltern they are considering consciousness (however “negative”) and culture (however determining); and in the case of the elite, culture and manipulation, the subaltern is also operating in the theater of “cognition.” At any rate, where does cognition begin and end? I will consider later the possible problems with such compartmentalized views of consciousness. Here suffice it to say

that by ordinary standards of coherence, and in terms of their own methodology, the possibility of failure cannot be derived from any criterion of success unless the latter is a theoretical fiction.<sup>8</sup>

A word on “alienation,” as used by members of this group, to mean “a failure of *self*-cognition,” is in order here.

To overestimate...[the] lucidity or depth [of the subaltern consciousness] will be...ill-advised.... This characteristic expression of a negative consciousness on the insurgent's part matched its other symptom, that is, his self-alienation. He was still committed to envisaging the coming war on the Raj as the project of a will independent of himself and his own role in it as no more than instrumental.... [In their own] *parwana* [proclamation]...the authors did not recognize even their own voice, but heard only that of God [EAP, 28].

To be sure, within his progressivist narrative taxonomy Hegel describes the march of history in terms of a diminution in the self-alienation of the so-called world historical agent. Kojève and his followers in France distinguished between this Hegel, the narrator of (a) history, and the speculative Hegel who outlined a system of logic.<sup>9</sup> Unless the subject separates from itself to grasp the object there is no cognition, indeed no thinking, no judgment. Being and Absolute Idea, the first and last sections of *The Science of Logic*, two accounts of simple unalienability, are not accessible to individual or personal consciousness. From the strictly philosophical point of view, then, (a) elite historiography and (b) the bourgeois nationalist account, as well as (c) reinscription by the Subaltern Studies group, are operated by alienation—*Verfremdung* as well as *Entäußerung*. Derrida's reading of Hegel as in *Glas* would question the argument for the inalienability even of Absolute Necessity and Absolute Knowledge, but here we need not move that far. We must ask the opposite question. How shall we deal with Marx's suggestion that man must strive toward self-determination and unalienated practice and Gramsci's that “the lower classes” must “achieve self-awareness via a series of negations”?<sup>10</sup>

Formulating an answer to this question might lead to far-reaching practical effects if the risks of the irreducibility of cognitive “failure” and of “alienation” are accepted. The group's own practice can then be graphed on this grid of “failures,” with the concept of failure generalized and reinscribed as I have suggested above. This subverts the inevitable vanguardism of a theory that otherwise criticizes the vanguardism of theory. This is why I hope to align them with deconstruction: “Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without

being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work" (OG, 24).

This is the greatest gift of deconstruction: to question the authority of the investigating subject without paralyzing him, persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility.<sup>11</sup> Let us pursue the implications of this in our particular case.

The group, as we have seen, tracks failures in attempts to displace discursive fields. A deconstructive approach would bring into focus the fact that they are themselves engaged in an attempt at displacing discursive fields, that they themselves "fail" (in the general sense) for reasons as "historical" as those they adduce for the heterogeneous agents they study; and it would attempt to forge a practice that would take this into account. Otherwise, if they were to refuse to acknowledge the implications of their own line of work because that would be politically incorrect, they would, willy-nilly, "insidiously objectify" the subaltern (2, 262), control him through knowledge even as they restore versions of causality and self-determination to him (2, 30), become complicit, in their desire for totality (and therefore totalization) (3, 317), with a "law [that] assign[s] a[n] undifferentiated [proper] name" (EAP, 159) to "the subaltern as such."

#### SUBALTERN STUDIES AND THE EUROPEAN CRITIQUE OF HUMANISM

A "religious idiom gave the hillmen [of the Eastern Ghats] a framework, within which to conceptualize their predicament and to seek solutions to it" (I, 140–41). The idiom of recent European theories of interpretation seems to offer this collective a similar framework. As they work their displacement, they are, as I suggest above, expanding the semantic range of "reading" and "text," words that are, incidentally, not prominent in their vocabulary. This is a bold transaction and can be compared favorably to some similar attempts made by historians in the United States.<sup>12</sup> It is appropriately marked by attempts to find local parallels, as in the concept of *atideśa* in Guha's work, and to insert the local into the general, as in the pervasive invocation of English, French, German, and occasionally Italian insurgency in Guha's book on peasant insurgency, and in the invocation of the anthropology of Africa in Partha Chatterjee's work on modes of power.

It is the force of a crisis that operates functional displacements in discursive fields. In my reading of the volumes of *Subaltern Studies*, this critical force or bringing-to-crisis can be located in the energy of the questioning of humanism in the post-Nietzschean sector of Western European structuralism, for our group Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and a certain Lévi-Strauss. These structuralists question humanism by exposing its hero—the sovereign subject as author, the subject of authority, legitimacy, and power. There is an affinity between the imperialist subject and the

subject of humanism. Yet the crisis of anti-humanism—*like all crises*—does not move our collective “fully.” The rupture shows itself to be also a repetition. The collective falls back upon notions of consciousness-as-agent, totality, and culturalism that are discontinuous with the critique of humanism. They seem unaware of the historico-political provenance of their various Western “collaborators.” Vygotsky and Lotman, Victor Turner and Lévi-Strauss, Evans-Prichard and Hindess and Hirst can, for them, fuel the same fire as Foucault and Barthes. Since one cannot accuse this group of the eclecticism of the supermarket consumer, one must see in their practice a repetition of as well as a rupture from the colonial predicament: the transactional quality of interconflicting metropolitan sources often eludes the (post)colonial intellectual.

I remind the reader that, in my view, such “cognitive failures” are irreducible. As I comment on the place of “consciousness” in the work of Subaltern Studies, it is therefore not my intent to suggest a formula for correct cognitive moves.

#### THE PROBLEM OF SUBALTERN CONSCIOUSNESS

I have been trying to read the work of the group against the grain of their theoretical self-representation. Their figuration of peasant or subaltern consciousness makes such a reading particularly productive.

To investigate, discover, and establish a subaltern or peasant consciousness seems at first to be a positivistic project—a project which assumes that, if properly prosecuted, it will lead to firm ground, to some *thing* that can be disclosed. This is all the more significant in the case of recovering a consciousness because, within the post-Enlightenment tradition that the collective participates in as interventionist historians, consciousness is *the* ground that makes all disclosures possible.

And, indeed, the group is susceptible to this interpretation. There *is* a certain univocal reflection or signification-theory presupposed here by which “peasant action in famine as in rebellion” is taken to “reflect...a single underlying consciousness” (3, 112); and “solidarity” is seen as a “signifier of consciousness,” where signification is representation, figuration, appropriation (stringent delimitation within a unique and self-adequate outline), and imprinting (*EAP*, 169).

Yet even as “consciousness” is thus entertained as an indivisible self-proximate signified or ground, there is a force at work here which would contradict such metaphysics. For consciousness here is not consciousness-in-general, but a historicized political species thereof, subaltern consciousness. In a passage where “transcendental” is used as “transcending, because informing a hegemonic narrative” rather than in a strictly philosophical sense, Guha puts this admirably: “Once a peasant rebellion has been assim-

ilated to the career of the Raj, the Nation or the people [the hegemonic narratives], it becomes easy for the historian to abdicate the responsibility he has of exploring and describing the consciousness specific to that rebellion and be content to ascribe to it a transcendental consciousness...representing them merely as instruments of some other will” (2, 38).

Because of this bestowal of a historical specificity to consciousness in the narrow sense, even as it implicitly operates as a metaphysical methodological presupposition in the general sense, there is always a counterpointing suggestion in the work of the group that subaltern consciousness is subject to the cathexis of the elite, that it is never fully recoverable, that it is always askew from its received signifiers, indeed that it is effaced even as it is disclosed, that it is irreducibly discursive. It is, for example, chiefly a matter of “negative consciousness” in the more theoretical of these essays. Although “negative consciousness” is conceived of here as a historical stage peculiar to the subaltern, there is no logical reason why, given that the argument is inevitably historicized, this “negative,” rather than the grounding positive view of the consciousness, should not be generalized as the group’s methodological presupposition. One view of “negative consciousness,” for instance, sees it as the consciousness not of the being of the subaltern, but of that of the oppressors (*EAP*, chap. 2; 3, 183). Here, in vague Hegelian limnings, it is the anti-humanist and anti-positivist position that it is always the desire for/of (the power of the Other) that produces an image of the self. If this is generalized, as in my reading of the “cognitive failure” argument, it is the subaltern who provides the model for a general theory of consciousness. And yet, since the “subaltern” cannot appear without the thought of the “elite,” the generalization is by definition incomplete—in philosophical language “nonoriginary,” or, in an earlier version of “*unursprünglich*,” nonprimordial. This “instituted trace at the origin” is a representation of the deconstructive critique of simple origins. Of the practical consequences of recognizing the traces of this strategy in the work of the group I will speak below.

Another note in the counterpoint deconstructing the metaphysics of consciousness in these texts is provided by the reiterated fact that it is only the texts of counterinsurgency or elite documentation that give us the news of the consciousness of the subaltern. “The peasants’ view of the struggle will probably never be recovered, and whatever we say about it at this stage must be very tentative” (1, 50); “Given the problems of documenting the consciousness of the jute mill workers, their will to resist and question the authority of their employers can be read only in terms of the sense of crisis it produced among the people in authority” (3, 121); “It should be possible to read the presence of a rebel consciousness as a necessary and pervasive element within that body of evidence” (*EAP*, 15). To be sure, it

is the vocabulary of “this stage,” “will to resist,” and “presence.” Yet the language seems also to be straining to acknowledge that the subaltern’s view, will, presence, can be no more than a theoretical fiction to entitle the project of reading. It cannot be recovered; “it will probably never be recovered.” If I shifted to the slightly esoteric register of the language of French poststructuralism, I could put it thus: “Thought [here the thought of subaltern consciousness] is here for me a perfectly neutral name, the blank part of the text, the necessarily indeterminate index of a future epoch of difference.”<sup>13</sup>

Once again, in the work of this group, what had seemed the historical predicament of the colonial subaltern can be made to become the allegory of the predicament of all thought, all deliberative consciousness, though the elite profess otherwise. This might seem preposterous at first glance. A double take is in order. I will propose it in closing this section of my paper.

The definitive accessibility of subaltern consciousness is counterpointed also by situating it in the place of a difference rather than an identity: “The terms ‘people’ and ‘subaltern classes’ have been used as synonymous throughout this [introductory] note [to 1]. The social groups and elements included in this category represent the *demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the ‘elite’*” (1, 83; italics author’s). I refer the reader to an essay where I have commented extensively on the specific counterpointing here: between the ostensible language of quantification—*demographic* difference—which is positivistic, and the discourse of a definitive difference—*demographic difference*—which opens the door to deconstructive gestures.<sup>14</sup>

I am progressively inclined, then, to read the retrieval of subaltern consciousness as the charting of what in poststructuralist language would be called the subaltern subject-effect.<sup>15</sup> A subject-effect can be briefly plotted as follows: that which seems to operate as a subject may be part of an immense discontinuous network (“text” in the general sense) of strands that may be termed politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language, and so on. (Each of these strands, if they are isolated, can also be seen as woven of many strands.) Different knottings and configurations of these strands, determined by heterogeneous determinations which are themselves dependent upon myriad circumstances, produce the effect of an operating subject. Yet the continuist and homogenist deliberative consciousness symptomatically requires a continuous and homogeneous cause for this effect and thus posits a sovereign and determining subject. This latter is, then, the effect of an effect, and its positing a metalepsis, or the substitution of an effect for a cause. Thus do the texts of counterinsurgency locate, in the following description, a “will” as the sovereign cause when it is no more than an effect of the subaltern subject-effect, itself produced by

the particular conjunctures called forth by the crises meticulously described in the various *Subaltern Studies*:

It is of course true that the reports, despatches, minutes, judgements, laws, letters, etc. in which policemen, soldiers, bureaucrats, landlords, usurers and others hostile to insurgency register their sentiments, amount to a representation of their will. But these documents do not get their content from that will alone, for the latter is predicated on another will—that of the insurgent. It should be possible therefore to read the presence of a rebel consciousness as a necessary and pervasive element within that body of evidence [*EAP*, 15].

Reading the work of *Subaltern Studies* from within but against the grain, I would suggest that elements in their text would warrant a reading of the project to retrieve the subaltern consciousness as the attempt to undo a massive historiographic metalepsis and “situate” the effect of the subject as subaltern. I would read it, then, as a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest. This would put them in line with the Marx who locates fetishization, the ideological determination of the “concrete,” and spins the narrative of the development of the money-form; with the Nietzsche who offers us genealogy in place of historiography, the Foucault who plots the construction of a “counter-memory,” the Barthes of semiotics, and the Derrida of “affirmative deconstruction.” This would allow them to use the critical force of anti-humanism, in other words, even as they share its constitutive paradox: that the essentializing moment, the object of their criticism, is irreducible.

The strategy becomes most useful when “consciousness” is being used in the narrow sense, as self-consciousness. When “consciousness” is being used in that way, Marx’s notion of unalienated practice or Gramsci’s notion of an “ideologically *coherent*,” “spontaneous philosophy of the multitude” are plausible and powerful.<sup>16</sup> For class-consciousness does not engage the ground level of consciousness—consciousness in general. “Class” is not, after all, an inalienable description of a human reality. Class-consciousness on the *descriptive* level is itself a strategic and artificial rallying awareness which, on the *transformative* level, seeks to destroy the mechanics which come to construct the outlines of the very class of which a collective consciousness has been situationally developed. “Any member of the insurgent community”—Guha spends an entire chapter showing how that collective consciousness of community develops—“who chooses to continue in such subalternity is regarded as hostile towards the inversive process initiated by the struggle and hence as being on the enemy’s side” (*EAP*, 202). The task of the “consciousness” of class or collectivity within a social field of

exploitation and domination is thus necessarily self-alienating. The tradition of the English translations of Marx often obliterates this. Consider, for example, the following well-known passage from the *Communist Manifesto*: “If the proletariat in struggle [*im Kampfe*] against the bourgeoisie is compelled to unite itself in a class [*sich notwendig zum Klasse vereint*], and, by means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, it thus sweeps away the conditions of class oppositions [*Klassengegensatz*] and of classes generally, and abolishes its own lordship [*Herrschaft*] as a class.”<sup>17</sup> The phrases translated as “sweeps away,” “sweeps away,” and “abolishes” are, in Marx’s text, “aufhebt.” “Aufheben” has a twofold meaning in the language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain, and equally it also means to cause to cease, to put an end to.... The two definitions of ‘Aufheben’ which we have given can be quoted as two dictionary *meanings* of this word.”<sup>18</sup> In this spirit of “maintain *and* cause to cease,” we would rewrite “inversive” in the passage from *EAP* as “displacing.”

It is within the framework of a strategic interest in the self-alienating displacing move of and by a consciousness of collectivity, then, that self-determination and an unalienated self-consciousness can be broached. In the definitions of “consciousness” offered by the Subaltern Studies group there are plenty of indications that they are in fact concerned with consciousness not in the general, but in this crucial narrow sense.

Subaltern consciousness as self-consciousness of a sort is what inhabits “the whole area of independent thought and conjecture and speculation...on the part of the peasant” (1, 188), what offers the “clear proof of a distinctly independent interpretation of [Gandhi’s] message” (3, 7), what animates the parley[s] among...the principal [insurgents] seriously to weigh the pros and cons of any recourse to arms” (2, 1), indeed what underwrites all invocations of the will of the subaltern.

Subaltern consciousness as emergent collective consciousness is one of the main themes of these books. Among the many examples that can be found, I will cite two: “what is indubitably represented in these extracts from Abdul Majid [a weaver]’s diary is a consciousness of the ‘collective’—the community. Yet this consciousness of community was an ambiguous one, straddling as it did the religious fraternity, class *qasba*, and mohalla” (3, 269). “[The tribe’s] consciousness of itself as a body of insurgents was thus indistinguishable from its recognition of its ethnic self” (*EAP*, 286). The group places this theory of the emergent collective subaltern consciousness squarely in the context of that tendency within Western Marxism which would refuse class-consciousness to the precapitalist subaltern, especially in the theaters of Imperialism. Their gesture thus confronts E. J. Hobsbawm’s notion of the “pre-political” as much as

functionalist arguments from “reciprocity and moral economy” between “agrarian labourers” and “peasant proprietors,” which are “an attempt to deny the relevance of class identities and class conflict to agrarian relations in Asia until a very recent date” (3, 78). Chakrabarty’s analysis of how historically unsound it is simply to reverse the gesture and try to impose a Marxian *working*-class consciousness upon the urban proletariat in a colonial context and, by implication, as Guha shows, upon the rural subaltern, takes its place within this confrontation.

For readers who notice the points of contact between the Subaltern Studies group and critics of humanism such as Barthes and Foucault, confusion arises because of the use of the word “consciousness,” unavoidably a postphenomenological and postpsychoanalytic issue with such writers. I am not trying to clear the confusion by revealing through analysis that the Subaltern Studies group is not entertaining “consciousness” within that configuration at all, but is rather working exclusively with the second-level collective consciousness to be encountered in Marx and the classical Marxist tradition. I am suggesting, rather, that although the group does not wittingly engage with the poststructuralist understanding of “consciousness,” our own transactional reading of them is enhanced if we see them as *strategically* adhering to the essentialist notion of consciousness, that would fall prey to an anti-humanist critique, within a historiographic practice that draws many of its strengths from that very critique.

#### HISTORIOGRAPHY AS STRATEGY

Can a strategy be unwitting? Of course not fully so. Consider, however, statements such as the following: “[a] discrepancy...is necessarily there at certain stages of the class struggle between the level of its objective articulation and that of the consciousness of its subjects”; or, “with all their practical involvement in a rebellion the masses could still be tricked by a false consciousness into trusting the magical faculties of warrior heroes...”; or yet, “the peasant rebel of colonial India could do so [learn his very first lesson in power] only by translating it backwards into the semi-feudal language of politics to which he was born” (*EAP*, 173, 270, 76). A theory which allows a partial lack of fit in the fabrication of any strategy cannot consider itself immune from its own system. It must remain caught within the possibility of that predicament in its own case. If in translating bits and pieces of discourse theory and the critique of humanism back into an essentialist historiography the historian of subalternity aligns himself to the pattern of conduct of the subaltern himself, it is only a progressivist view that diagnoses the subaltern as necessarily inferior, that will see such an alignment to be without interventionist value. Indeed it is in their very insistence upon the subaltern as the subject of history that the group acts out such a

translating back, an interventionist strategy that is only partially unwitting.

If it were embraced as a strategy, then the emphasis upon the “sovereignty,...consistency and...logic” of “rebel consciousness” (EAP, 13) could be seen as “affirmative deconstruction”: knowing that such an emphasis is theoretically nonviable, the historian then breaks his theory in a scrupulously delineated “political interest.”<sup>19</sup> If, on the other hand, the restoration of the subaltern’s subject-position in history is seen by the historian as the establishment of an inalienable and final truth of things, then any emphasis on sovereignty, consistency, and logic will, as I have suggested above, inevitably objectify the subaltern and be caught in the game of knowledge as power. Even if the discursivity of history is seen as a *fortgesetzte Zeichenkette*, a restorative genealogy cannot be undertaken without the strategic blindness that will entangle the genealogist in the chain. Seeing this, Foucault in 1971 recommended the “historical sense,” much like a newscaster’s persistently revised daily bulletin, in the place of the arrogance of a successful genealogy.<sup>20</sup> It is in this spirit that I read *Subaltern Studies* against its grain and suggest that its own subalternity in claiming a *positive* subject-position for the subaltern might be reinscribed as a strategy for our times.

What good does such a reinscription do? It acknowledges that the arena of the subaltern’s persistent emergence into hegemony must always and by definition remain heterogeneous to the efforts of the disciplinary historian. The historian must persist in *his* efforts in this awareness that the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic. It is a hard lesson to learn, but not to learn it is merely to nominate elegant solutions to be correct theoretical practice. When has history ever contradicted that practice norms theory, as subaltern practice norms official historiography in this case? If that assumption, rather than the dissonant thesis of the subaltern’s infanthood, were to inhabit *Subaltern Studies*, then their project would be proper to itself in recognizing that it can never be proper to “subaltern consciousness”; that it can never be continuous with the subaltern’s situational and uneven entry into political (not merely disciplinary, as in the case of the collective) hegemony as the content of an after-the-fact description. This is the always asymmetrical relationship between the interpretation and transformation of the world which Marx marks in the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. There the contrast is between the words *haben interpretiert* (present participle—a completed action—of *interpretieren*—the Romance verb which emphasizes the establishment of a meaning that is commensurate with a phenomenon through the metaphor of the fair exchange of prices) and *zu verändern* (infinitive—always open to the future—of the German verb which “means” strictly speaking, “to make other”). The latter expression matches *haben interpretiert* neither in its Latinate philosophical weight nor in its signification of propriety and com-

pletion, as *transformieren* would have done. Although not an unusual word, it is not the most common word for “change” in German—*verwandeln*. In the open-ended “making-other”—*Veränderung*—of the properly self-identical—adequately *interpretiert*—lies an allegory of the theorist’s relationship to his subject-matter. (There is no room here to comment on the richness of “es kommt darauf an,” the syntactical phrase that joins the two parts of the Eleventh Thesis.) It is not only “*bad*” theory but *all* theory that is susceptible to this open-endedness.

Theoretical descriptions cannot produce universals. They can only ever produce provisional generalizations, even as the theorist realizes the crucial importance of their persistent production. Otherwise, because they desire perhaps to claim some unspecified direct hand in subaltern practice, the conclusions to the essays become abrupt, inconclusive, sometimes a series of postponements of some empirical project. One striking example of this foreclosed desire is where Das, in an otherwise brilliant essay, repudiates *formalization* as thwarting for practice, even as he deplores the lack of sufficient *generalization* that might have allowed subaltern practice to flourish (2, 227).

Louis Althusser spoke of the limit of disciplinary theoretical production in the following way: “[A] new practice of philosophy can transform philosophy. And in addition it can in its way *help* [*aider à sa mesure*] in the transformation of the world. Help only....”<sup>21</sup> In his trivializing critique of Althusser, E. P. Thompson privileges the British style of history teaching as against the French style of philosophy teaching.<sup>22</sup> Whatever position we take in the ancient quarrel between history and philosophy, it is incumbent upon us to realize that as *disciplines* they must both remain heterogeneous to, and discontinuous with, subaltern social practice. To acknowledge this is not to give way to functionalist abdication. It is a curious fact of Michel Foucault’s career that, in a certain phase of his influential last period, he performed something like an abdication: he refused to “represent” (as if such a refusal were possible), and privileged the oppressed subject, who could seemingly speak for himself.<sup>23</sup> The Subaltern Studies group, methodical trackers of representation, cannot follow that route. Barthes, after he “situated” semiology, turned in large measure to autobiography and a celebration of the fragment. Not only because of their devotion to semiotics, but also because they are trying to assemble a historical *biography* of those whose active lives are only disclosed by a deliberately fragmentary record produced elsewhere, the Subaltern Studies group cannot follow Barthes here. They must remain committed to the subaltern as the subject of his history. As they choose this strategy, they reveal the limits of the critique of humanism as produced in the West.

The radical intellectual in the West is either caught in a deliberate choice

of subalternity, granting to the oppressed either that very expressive subjectivity which s/he criticizes or, instead, a total unrepresentability. The logical negation of this position is produced by the discourse of postmodernism, where the “mass is only the mass because its social energy has already frozen. It is a cold reservoir, capable of absorbing and neutralizing any hot energy. It resembles those half-dead systems into which more energy is injected than is withdrawn, those paid-out deposits exorbitantly maintained in a state of artificial exploitation.” This negation leads to an emptying of the subject-position: “Not to arrive at the point where no one longer says I, but at the point where it’s no longer of any importance whether one says I or not.”<sup>24</sup> Although some of these Western intellectuals express genuine concern about the ravages of contemporary neocolonialism in their own nation-states, they are not knowledgeable in the history of imperialism, in the epistemic violence that constituted/effaced a subject that was obliged to cathect (occupy in response to a desire) the space of the Imperialists’ self-consolidating other. It is almost as if the force generated by their crisis is separated from its appropriate field by a sanctioned ignorance of that history.

It is my contention that, if the Subaltern Studies group saw their own work of subject-restoration as crucially strategic, they would not miss this symptomatic blank in contemporary Western anti-humanism. In his innovative essay on modes of power, Partha Chatterjee quotes Foucault on the eighteenth century and writes:

Foucault has sought to demonstrate the complexities of this novel regime of power in his studies of the history of mental illness, of clinical practice, of the prison, of sexuality and of the rise of the human sciences. When one looks at the regimes of power in the so-called backward countries of the world today, not only does the dominance of the characteristically “modern” modes of exercise of power seem limited and qualified by the persistence of older modes, but by the fact of their combination in a particular state and formation, it seems to open up at the same time an entirely new range of possibilities for the ruling classes to exercise their domination. [3, 348–9].

I have written earlier that the force of crisis is not systematically emphasized in the work of the group. The Foucauldian example being considered here, for instance, can be seen as marking a crisis *within* European consciousness. A few months before I had read Chatterjee’s essay, I wrote a few sentences uncannily similar in sentiment on the very same passage in Foucault. I write, of course, within a workplace engaged in the ideological production of neocolonialism even through the influence of such

thinkers as Foucault. It is not therefore necessarily a mark of extraordinary acumen that what I am calling the crisis in European consciousness is much more strongly marked in my paragraph, which I take the liberty of quoting here. My contention below is that the relationship between First World, anti-humanist post-Marxism and the history of imperialism is not merely a question of “enlarging the range of possibilities,” as Chatterjee soberly suggests above.

Although Foucault is a brilliant thinker of power-in-spacing, the awareness of the topographic reinscription of imperialism does not inform his presuppositions. He is taken in by the restricted version of the West produced by that reinscription and thus helps to consolidate its effects. Notice, for example, the omission of the fact, in the following passage, that the new mechanism of power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (the extraction of surplus-value without extraeconomic coercion is its Marxist description) is secured *by means of* territorial imperialism—the Earth and its products—“elsewhere.” The representation of sovereignty is crucial in those theatres: “In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we have the production of an important phenomenon, the emergence, or rather the invention, of a new mechanism of power possessed of highly specific procedural techniques...which is also, I believe, absolutely incompatible with the relations of sovereignty....” I am suggesting that to buy a self-contained version of the West is symptomatically to ignore its production by the spacing-timing of the imperialist project. Sometimes it seems as if the very brilliance of Foucault’s analysis of the centuries of European imperialism produces a miniature version of that heterogeneous phenomenon: management of space—but by doctors, development of administrations—but in asylums, considerations of the periphery—but in terms of the insane, prisoners, and children. The clinic, the asylum, the prison, the university, seem screen-allegories that foreclose a reading of the broader narratives of imperialism.<sup>25</sup>

Thus the discourse of the unified consciousness of the subaltern *must* inhabit the strategy of these historians, even as the discourse of the microlitized or “situated” subject must mark that of anti-humanists on the other side of the international division of labor. The two following remarks by Ranajit Guha and Louis Althusser can then be seen as marking not a contradiction, but the fracture of a discontinuity of philosophic levels, *as well as* a strategic asymmetry: “Yet we propose,” writes Guha in the eighties, “to focus on this consciousness as our central theme, because it is not possible to make sense of the experience of insurgency merely as a history of events without a subject” (4, 11). Precisely, “it is not possible.” And Althusser, writing in 1967:

Undeniably, for it has passed into his works, and *Capital* demonstrates it, Marx owes to Hegel the decisive philosophical category of process. He owes him yet more, that Feuerbach himself did not suspect. He owes him the concept of the process *without subject*.... The origin, indispensable to the teleological nature of the process...must be *denied* from the start, so that the process of alienation may be a process without subject.... Hegel's logic is of the affirmed-denied Origin: first form of a concept that Derrida has introduced into philosophical reflection, the *erasure*.<sup>26</sup>

As Chakrabarty has rightly stated, "Marx thought that the logic of capital could be best deciphered only in a society where 'the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice'" (2, 263). The first lesson of ideology is that a "popular prejudice" mistakes itself for "human nature," the original mother tongue of history. Marxist historiography can be caught within the mother tongue of history and a culture that had graduated to bourgeois individualism. As groups such as the Subaltern Studies collective attempt to open up the texts of Marx beyond his European provenance, beyond a homogeneous internationalism, to the persistent recognition of heterogeneity, the very goal of "forget[ting] his original [or 'rooted']—*die ihm angestammte Sprache*] language while using the new one" must be reinscribed.<sup>27</sup> A repeated acknowledgment of the complicity of the new and the "original" is now on the agenda. I have tried to indicate this by deconstructing the opposition between the collective and their object of investigation—the subaltern—on the one hand; and by deconstructing the seeming continuity between them and their anti-humanist models on the other. From this point of view, it would be interesting if, instead of finding their only internationalism in European *history* and African *anthropology* (an interesting disciplinary breakdown), they were also to find their lines of contact, let us say, with the *political economy* of the independent peasant movement in Mexico.<sup>28</sup>

You can only read against the grain if misfits in the text signal the way. (These are sometimes called "moments of transgression.") I should like to bring the body of my argument to a close by discussing two such moments in the work of this group. First, the discussion of rumor; and, second, the place of woman in their argument.

## RUMOR

The most extensive discussion of rumors, to be found in Guha's *Peasant Insurgency* is not, strictly speaking, part of the work of the group. I think I am correct, however, in maintaining that Guha's pages make explicit an implicit set of assumptions about the nature and role of subaltern means of communication, such as rumor, in the mobilization of insurgency,

present in the work of the entire group. Guha's discussion also points up the contradiction inherent in their general practice, which leans toward poststructuralism, and their espousal of the early semiological Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, Greimas, and taxonomic Soviet structuralists such as Vygotsky, Lotman, and Propp.

Steven Ungar plots Barthes's trajectory from semiology through semio-clasty to semiotropy in *Roland Barthes: the Professor of Desire*.<sup>29</sup> Any use of the Barthes of the first period would have to refute, however briefly, Barthes's own refutation and rejection of his early positions.

One of the enterprises made problematic by the critique of the subject of knowledge identified with poststructuralist anti-humanism is the desire to produce exhaustive taxonomies, "to assign names by a metalinguistic operation" (2, 10). I have already discussed this issue lengthily in another part of my essay. All of the figures listed above would be susceptible to this charge. Here I want to point at their common phonocentrism, the conviction that speech is a direct and immediate representation of voice-consciousness, and writing an indirect transcript of speech. Or, as Guha quotes Vygotsky, "The speed of oral speech is unfavourable to a complicated process of formulation—it does not leave time for deliberation and choice. Dialogue implies immediate unpremeditated utterance" (*EAP*, 261).

By this reckoning the history of writing is coincident with the inauguration and development of exploitation. Now there is no reason to question this well-documented story of what one might call writing in the "narrow" or "restricted" sense. However, over against this restricted model of writing one must not set up a model of speech to which is assigned a total self-identity based on a psychological model so crude as to imply that the space of "premeditation" is confined to the deliberative consciousness, and on empirical "evidence" so impressionistic as "the speed of oral speech."

By contrast, poststructuralist theories of consciousness and language suggest that all possibility of expression, spoken or written, shares a common distancing from a self so that meaning can arise—not only meaning for others but also the meaning of the self to the self. I have advanced this idea in my discussion of "alienation." These theories suggest further that the "self" is itself always production rather than ground, an idea I have broached in my discussion of the "subject-effect." If writing is seen in terms of its historical predication, the production of our sense of self as ground would seem to be structured like writing:

[T]he essential predicates in a minimal determination of the classical concept of writing...[are that a] written sign...is...a mark that remains [*reste*]...[that] carries with it a force that breaks with its context,...[and that] this force of rupture is tied to the spacing...which separates it from other elements of the

internal contextual chain.... Are these three predicates, along with the entire system they entail, limited, as is so often believed, strictly to “written” communication, in the narrow sense of the word? Are they not also to be found in all language, for example in spoken language, and ultimately in the totality of “experience,” insofar as it is inseparable from this field of the mark, which is to say, from the network of effacement and of difference, of units of iterability, which are separable from their internal and external context and also from themselves, inasmuch as the very iterability which constitutes their identity does not permit them ever to be a unit of self-identity?<sup>30</sup>

For the burden of the extended consideration of how the exigencies of theory forbid an ideological manipulation of *naïve* psychologism and empiricism, we should turn to Derrida’s “Signature Event Context,” from where the long passage above is taken. Here suffice it to say that this line of thinking can be made consonant with the argument that the abstract determines the “concrete.”<sup>31</sup> That argument is not about chronological but logical priority. And it is a pity that, thanks to Engels’s noble efforts to make Marx accessible, “determination” in it is most often reduced to “causality.” I cannot belabor this historical situation here. Suffice it further to say that by this line of argument it would not only appear that to “describe speech as the immediate expression of the self” marks the site of a desire that is obliged to overlook the complexity of the production of (a) sense(s) of self. One would, by this, also have to acknowledge that no speech, no “natural language” (an unwitting oxymoron), not even a “language” of gesture, can signify, indicate, or express without the mediation of a pre-existing code. One would further begin to suspect that the most authoritative and potentially exploitative manifestations of writing in the narrow sense—the codes of law—operate on an implicit phonocentrism, the presupposition that speech is the immediate expression of the self.

I would submit that it is more appropriate to think of the power of rumor in the subaltern context as deriving from its participation in the structure of illegitimate writing, rather than in the authoritative writing of the law—itsself sanctioned by the phonocentric model of the spirit of the law. “Writing, the outlaw, the lost son. It must be recalled here that Plato always associates speech and law, *logos* and *nomos*. Laws speak. In the personification of *Crito*, they speak to Socrates directly.”<sup>32</sup>

Let us now consider the point in *Peasant Insurgency* where the analysis of rumor is performed (*EAP*, 259–64; these pages are cited in 3, 112, n. 157). Let us also remember that the mind-set of the peasants is as much affected by the phonocentrism of a tradition where *śruti*—that which is heard—has the greatest authority, as is the mind-set of the historian by the

phonocentrism of Western linguistics. Once again, it is a question of complicity rather than the distance of knowledge.

If, then, “rumor is spoken utterance *par excellence*” (EAP, 256), it must be seen that its “functional immediacy” is its nonbelonging to any *one* voice-consciousness. This is supposed to be the signal characteristic of writing. Any reader can “fill” it with her “consciousness.” Rumor evokes comradeship because it belongs to every “reader” or “transmitter.” No one is its origin or source. Thus rumor is not error but primordially (originally) errant, always in circulation with no assignable source. This illegitimacy makes it accessible to insurgency. Its “absolute” (we would say “indefinite,” since “fictive source[s] may be assigned to it”) “transitivity,” collapsed at origin and end (a clear picture of writing), can be described as the received model of *speech* in the narrow sense (“the collaterality of word and deed issuing from a common will”) only under the influence of phonocentrism. In fact the author himself comes closer to the case about fifteen pages later, when he notices the open verblivity of rumor being restricted by the insurgents—who are also under the influence of phonocentrism—by an apocalyptic horizon. Subaltern, elite authority, and critic of historiography become complicit here. Yet the description of rumor in its “distinctive features [of] anonymity and transitivity” (EAP, 260) signal a contradiction that allows us to read the text of *Subaltern Studies* against its grain.

The odd coupling of Soviet structuralism and French anti-humanism sometimes produces a misleading effect. For example, the applicability to rumor of Barthes’s suggestion that ascription of an author closes up *writing* should alert us to rumor’s writing-like (*scriptible*) character rather than oblige us to displace Barthes’s remark to speech via Vygotsky. Dialogue, Vygotsky’s example, is the privileged example of the so-called communication of direct verblivity, of two immediately self-present sources or “authors.” Dialogue is supposed to be “unpremeditated” (although theories of subject-effect or the abstract determination of the concrete would find this a dubious claim). Rumor is a relay of something always assumed to be preexistent. In fact the mistake of the colonial authorities was to take rumor for speech, to impose the requirements of speech in the narrow sense upon something that draws its strength from participation in writing in the general sense.

The Subaltern Studies group has here led us to a theme of great richness. The crosshatching of the revolutionary nonpossessive possibilities in the structure of writing in general and its control by subaltern phonocentrism give us access to the micrology or minute-scale functioning of the subaltern’s philosophical world. The matter of the “blank paper falling from heaven” or the use of apparently “random” material “to...convey...the Thakur’s own command in writing” (EAP, 248–49), for instance, can

provide us a most complex text for the use of the structure of writing in the fable of “insurgent consciousness.” The matter of the role of “the reading aloud of newspapers” in the construction of Gandhi as a signifier is perhaps too quickly put to rest as a reliance on “spoken language,” when, through such an act, “a story acquires its authentication from its motif and the name of its place of origin rather than the authority of the correspondent” (3, 48–49). I have dwelt on this point so long that it might now suffice to say no more than that the newspaper is exploitative writing in the narrow sense, “spoken language” is a phonocentric concept where authority is supposed to spring directly from the voice-consciousness of the self-present speaker, and the reading out of someone else’s text as “an actor does on the stage” is a setting-in-motion of writing in the general sense. To find corroboration of this, one can see the contrast made between speaker and rhetor in the Western tradition from the Platonic Socrates through Hobbes and Rousseau to J. L. Austin.<sup>33</sup> When newspapers start reporting rumors (3, 88), the range of speculative possibilities becomes even more seductive. The investigator seems herself beckoned by the circuit of “absolute transitivity.”

Without yielding to that seduction, the following question can be asked: what is the use of noticing this misfit between the suggested structure of writing in general and the declared interest in phonocentrism? What is the use of pointing out that a common phonocentrism binds subaltern, elite authority, and disciplinary-critical historian together, and only a reading against the grain discloses the espousal of illegitimacy by the first and the third? Or, to quote Terry Eagleton:

Marx is a metaphysician, and so is Schopenhauer, and so is Ronald Reagan. Has anything been gained by this manoeuvre? If it is true, is it informative? What is ideologically at stake in such homogenizing? What differences does it exist to suppress? Would it make Reagan feel uncomfortable or depressed? If what is in question for deconstructionism is metaphysical discourse, and if this is all-pervasive, then there is a sense in which in reading against the grain we are subverting everything and nothing.<sup>34</sup>

Not all ways of understanding the world and acting upon it are *equally* metaphysical or phonocentric. If, on the other hand, there *is* something shared by elite (Reagan), colonial authority, subaltern, and mediator (Eagleton/Subaltern Studies) that we would rather not acknowledge, any elegant solution devised by means of such a refusal would merely mark a site of desire. It is best to attempt to forge a practice that can bear the weight of that acknowledgment. And, using the buried operation of the structure of writing as a lever, the strategic reader can reveal the asymmetry between

the three groups above. Yet, since a “reading against the grain” must forever remain strategic, it can never claim to have established the authoritative truth of a text, it must forever remain dependent upon practical exigencies, never legitimately lead to a theoretical orthodoxy. In the case of the Subaltern Studies group, it would get the group off the dangerous hook of claiming to establish the truth-knowledge of the subaltern and his consciousness.

## WOMAN

The group is scrupulous in its consideration toward women. They record moments when men and women are joined in struggle (1, 178; *EAP*, 130), and moments when their conditions of work or education suffer from gender or class discrimination (2, 71, 241, 243, 257, 275). But I think they overlook how important the concept-metaphor woman is to the functioning of their discourse. This consideration will bring to an end the body of my argument.

In a certain reading, the figure of woman is pervasively instrumental in the shifting of the function of discursive systems, as in insurgent mobilization. Questions of the mechanics of this instrumentality are seldom raised by our group. “Femininity” is as important a discursive field for the predominantly male insurgents as “religion.” When cow-protection becomes a volatile signified in the reinscription of the social position of various kinds of subaltern, semisubaltern, and indigenous elite groups, the cow is turned into a female figure of one kind or another. Considering that in the British nineteenth century the female access to “possessive individualism” was one of the most important social forces, what does it mean to imply that “femininity” has the same discursive sense and force for all the heterogeneous groups meticulously documented by Gyanendra Pandey? Analogous research into the figure of the “worker” is performed by Chakrabarty. No such luck for the “female.”

On the most “ancient and indigenous” religious level, a level that “perhaps gave the [rebellious hillmen] an extra potency [sic] in times of collective distress and outside oppression” (1, 98), all the deities are man-eating goddesses. As this preinsurgent level of collectivity begins to graduate into revolt, the sacrifices continue to be made to goddesses rather than gods. And, even as this level of subaltern-led revolt is contrasted to the “elite struggles of the earlier period” (1, 124), we notice that in that earlier period the struggles began on two occasions because men would not accept female leadership:

With the deposition in 1836 of Ananta Bhupati, the 17th Zamindar of Golgonda, the Collector of Vishakhapatnam installed Jamma Devamma,

widow of the 15th Zamindar, in his place. This was an affront to the *muttadars* and *mokhasadars* of Gudem who were not consulted...and who protested that they had never before been ruled by a woman.... In Rampa, the death of the Mansabdar Ram Bhupati Dev in March 1835 was followed by a revolt of *muttadars* against the daughter who had been appointed as the successor [I, 102].

In terms of social semiosis, what is the difference between man-eating goddesses, objects of reverence and generators of solidarity on the one hand, and secular daughters and widows, unacceptable as leaders, on the other? On the occasion of the “culture of sugarcane” in Eastern UP, Shahid Amin speaks of the deliberate noncoincidence created between the natural inscription (script as used when referring to a play) of the harvest calendar and the artificial inscription of the circuit of colonial monopoly capital. It is of course of great interest to wonder in what ways the composition of the peasantry and landowners would have developed had the two been allowed to coincide. Yet I think it should also be noticed that it is dowry that is the invariably mentioned *social* demand that allowed the demands of nature to devastate the peasant via the demands of empire. Should one trouble about the constitution of the subaltern as (sexed) subject when the exploitation of sexual difference seems to have so crucial a role on so many fronts? Should one notice that the proverb on 1, 53 is sung by a young daughter who will deny her lover’s demands in order to preserve her father’s fields? Should one notice this metaphoric division of sexuality (in the woman’s case, sex is of course identical with selfhood or consciousness) as property to be passed on or not from father to lover? Indeed, in a collective where so much attention is rightly paid to the subjectivity or subject-positioning of the subaltern, it should be surprising to encounter such indifference to the subjectivity, not to mention the indispensable presence, of the woman as crucial instrument. These four sentences should illustrate my argument:

It was not uncommon for a “superior” Patidar to spend his dowry money and return his wife to her father so that he could marry for a new dowry. Amongst Patidars, it was considered very shameful to have to take back a daughter [!] ...*Gols* were formed to prevent ruinous hypergamous marriages with “superior” Patidar lineages.... Here, therefore, we discover a strong form of subaltern organization within the Patidar caste which provided a check on the power of the Patidar elite.... Even Mahatma Gandhi was unable to break the solidarity of the Patidar *gol* of twenty-one villages.

I do not see how the crucial instrumentality of woman as symbolic object of exchange can be overlooked here. Yet the conclusion is: “the solidarity of

the *Gols* was a form of *class* solidarity” (1, 202, 203, 207). As in the case of the insurgent under colonial power, the condition of the woman gets “bettered” as a byproduct, but what’s the difference? Male subaltern and historian are here united in the common assumption that the procreative sex is a species apart, scarcely if at all to be considered a part of civil society.

These are not unimportant questions in the context of contemporary India. Just as the *ulgulan* of 1899–1901 dehegemonized millenarian Christianity in the Indian context, so also did the Adivasis seem to have tapped the emergent possibilities of a goddess-centered religion in the Devi movement of 1922–23, a movement that actively contested the reinscription of land into private property.<sup>35</sup> In the current Indian context, neither religion nor femininity shows emergent potential of this kind.

I have left till last the two broad areas where the instrumentality of woman seems most striking: notions of territoriality and of the communal mode of power.

#### CONCEPT-METAPHORS OF TERRITORIALITY AND OF WOMAN

The concept of territoriality is implicit in most of the essays of the three volumes of *Subaltern Studies*. Here again the explicit theoretical statement is to be found in Guha’s *Peasant Insurgency*. Territoriality is the combined “pull of the primordial ties of kinship, community” which is part “of the actual mechanics of...autonomous mobilization” (*EAP*, 118). On the simplest possible level, it is evident that notions of kinship are anchored and consolidated by the exchange of women. This consolidation, according to Guha, cuts across the religious division of Hindu and Muslim. “In Tamil Nadu...with all four [subdivisions of the Muslim community,] endogamy helps to reinforce their separate identities in both kinship and territorial terms” (*EAP*, 299). In “Allahabad...the Mewati...effect[ed] a massive mobilization of their close knit exogamous villages” (*EAP*, 316). In all these examples woman is the neglected syntagm of the semiosis of subalternity or insurgency.

Throughout these pages it has been my purpose to show the complicity between subject and object of investigation—the Subaltern Studies group and subalternity. Here too, the historians’ tendency, not to ignore, but to rename the semiosis of sexual difference “class” or “caste-solidarity” (*EAP*, 316) bears something like a relationship with the peasants’ general attempt to undo the distinction between consanguinity and co-residence. Here, as in the case of the brutal marriage customs of the Patidars, the historian mentions, but does not pause to reflect upon, the significance of the simple exclusion of the subaltern as female (sexed) subject: “In each of these [rebel villages] nearly all the population, *barring females acquired by marriage*, claimed descent from a common patrilineage, consanguinal or mythical,

and regarded themselves as members of the same clan or gotra. This belief in a shared ancestry made the village assert itself positively by acting as a solidarity unit and negatively by operating an elaborate code of discrimination against aliens" (*EAP*, 314; italics mine).

Although it was unemphatically and trivially accepted by everyone that it was the woman, without proper identity, who operated this consanguinal or mythic patrilineage; and although, in the historian's estimation, "these village-based primordial ties were the principal means of rebel mobilization, mauza by mauza, throughout northern and central India in 1857" (*EAP*, 315), it seems that we may not stop to investigate the subject-deprivation of the female in the operation of this mobilization and this solidarity. It seems to me that, if the question of female subaltern consciousness, whose instrumentality is so often seen to be crucial, is a red herring, the question of subaltern consciousness as such must be judged a red herring as well.

"Territoriality acted to no small extent in putting the brakes on resistance against the Raj" (*EAP*, 331). What was needed for this resistance was a concept of "nation." Today, after the computerization of global economics, concepts of nationhood are themselves becoming problematic in specific ways.

The mode of integration of underdeveloped countries into the international economy has shifted from a base relying exclusively on the exploitation of primary resources and labor to one in which manufactures have gained preponderance. This movement has paralleled the proliferation of export-processing zones (EPZs) throughout the world. More than a uniformly defined or geographically delimited concept, the export-processing zone provides a series of incentives and loosened restrictions for multinational corporations by developing countries in their effort to attract foreign investment in export oriented manufacturing. This has given rise to new ideas about development which *often question preexisting notions of national sovereignty*.<sup>36</sup>

If the peasant insurgent was the victim and the unsung hero of the first wave of resistance against territorial imperialism in India, it is well known that, for reasons of collusion between pre-existing structures of patriarchy and transnational capitalism, it is the urban subproletarian female who is the paradigmatic subject of the current configuration of the International Division of Labor.<sup>37</sup> As we investigate the pattern of resistance among these "permanent casual"-s, questions of the subject-constitution of the subaltern female gain a certain importance.

## THE COMMUNAL MODE OF POWER AND THE CONCEPT OF WOMAN

Although Partha Chatterjee's concept of the communal mode of power is not as pervasively implicit in all the work of the group, it is an important sustaining argument for the enterprise of Subaltern Studies. Here the importance of communal power structures, based largely on kin and clan, are shown to embrace far-flung parts of the precapitalist world. And, once again, the crucial syntagmatic and micrologically prior defining importance of sexual difference in the deployment of such power is foreclosed so that sexuality is seen only as one element among the many that drive this "social organization of production" (2, 322). The making-visible of the figure of woman is perhaps not a task that the group should fairly be asked to perform. It seems to this reader, however, that a feminist historian of the subaltern must raise the question of woman as a structural rather than marginal issue in each of the many different types and cultures that Chatterjee invokes in "More on Modes of Power and the Peasantry."

If in the explanation of territoriality I notice a tension between consanguinal and spatial accounts shared by subaltern and historian alike, in the case of "the communal mode of power" we are shown a clash between explanations from kinship and "political" perceptions. This is a version of the same battle—the apparent gender-neutralizing of the world finally explained through reason, domestic society sublated and subsumed in the civil.

The clash between kinship and politics is one of Chatterjee's main points. What role does the figure of woman play here? In the dispersal of this field of power, the sexual division of labor is progressively defined from above as power-sharing. That story is the underside of the taxonomy of power that Chatterjee unfolds.

Thus there might be other ways of accounting for the suggestion that "the structure of communal authority must be located primarily in ideology." Our account would notice the specifically patriarchal structures producing the discursive field of the unity of the "community as a whole." "It is the community as a whole which is the source of all authority, no one is a permanent repository of delegated powers" (2, 341). If the narrative of "the institutionalization of communal authority" (2, 323) is read with this in mind, the taxonomy of modes of power can be made to interact with the history of sexuality.

Chatterjee quotes Victor Turner, who suggests that the resurgence of communal modes of power often generates ways to fight feudal structures: "resistance or revolt often takes on the form of...*communitas*" (2, 339). This is particularly provocative in the case of the dehegemonization of monarchy. In this fast-paced fable of the progress of modes of power, it can be seen that the idea of one kind of a king may have supplemented a built-

in gap in the ideology of community as a whole: “a new kind of chief whom Tacitus calls ‘king’ (*rex*) who was elected from within a ‘royal clan’” (2, 323). The figure of the exchanged woman still produces the cohesive unity of a “clan,” even as what emerges is a “king.” And thus, when the insurgent *community* invokes monarch against *feudal* authority, the explanation that they are recathecting or refilling the king with the old patriarchal ideology of consanguinity, never far from the metaphor of the King as Father, seems even less surprising (3, 344).

My point is, of course, that through all of these heterogeneous examples of territoriality and the communal mode of power, the figure of the woman, moving from clan to clan and family to family as daughter/sister and wife/mother, syntaxes patriarchal continuity even as she is herself drained of proper identity. In this particular area, the continuity of community or history, for subaltern and historian alike, is produced on (I intend the copulative metaphor—philosophically and sexually) the dissimulation of her discontinuity, on the repeated emptying of her meaning as instrument.

If I seem to be intransigent here, perhaps the distance traveled between high structuralism and current anti-humanism can best be measured by two celebrated passages by two famous men. First the Olympian dismissal, ignoring the role of representation in subject-constitution:

These results can be achieved only on one condition: considering marriage regulations and kinship systems as a kind of language.... That the “message” [*message*] should be constituted by the *women of the group*, which are circulated between class, lineages, or families, in place of the *words of the group*, which are *circulated* between individuals, does not at all change the identity of the phenomenon considered in the two cases... This ambiguity [between values and signs] is clearly manifested in the critique sometimes addressed to the *Elementary Structures of Kinship* as an “anti-feminist” book by some, because women are there treated as objects.... [But] words do not speak, while women do. The latter are signs and producers of signs; as such, they cannot be reduced to the status of symbols or tokens.<sup>38</sup>

And, second, the recognition of a limit:

The significations or conceptual values which apparently form the stakes or means of all Nietzschean analyses on sexual difference, on the “unceasing war between the sexes,” on the “mortal hatred of the sexes” and “love,” eroticism, etc., are all on the vector of what might be called the process of *appropriation* (appropriation, expropriation, taking, taking possession, gift and exchange, mastery, servitude, etc.). Through numerous analyses, that I cannot follow here, it appears, by the law already formalized, that some-

times the woman is woman by giving, *giving herself*, while the man takes, possesses, takes possession, and sometimes by contrast the woman by giving herself, gives-herself-as, and thus simulates and assures for herself possessive mastery.... As a sexual operation appropriation is more powerful, because undecidable, than the question *ti esti* [what is it], than the question of the veil of truth or the meaning of Being. All the more—and this argument is neither secondary nor supplementary—because the process of appropriation organizes the totality of the process of language and symbolic exchange in general, including, therefore, all ontological statements [*énoncés*].<sup>39</sup>

I quote these passages, by Lévi-Strauss and Derrida, and separated by twenty years, as a sign of the times. But I need not add that, in the latter case, the question of being and the ontological statement would relate to the phenomenality of subaltern consciousness itself.

#### ENVOI

In these pages, I have repeatedly emphasized the complicity between subject and object of investigation. My role in this essay, as subject of investigation, has been entirely parasitical, since my only object has been the *Subaltern Studies* themselves. Yet I am part of their object as well. Situated within the current academic theater of cultural imperialism, with a certain *carte d'entrée* into the elite theoretical *ateliers* in France, I bring news of power lines within the palace. Nothing can function without us, yet the part is at least historically ironic.

What of the poststructuralist suggestion that *all* work is parasitical, slightly to the side of that which one wishes adequately to cover, that critic (historian) and text (subaltern) are always “beside themselves”? The chain of complicity does not halt at the closure of an essay.

#### NOTES

1. Ranajit Guha, ed. *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 351. The three volumes of *Subaltern Studies* are hereafter cited in my text as 1, 2, and 3, with page references following.
2. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 8.
3. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 289. All translations modified when deemed necessary.
4. 1, 83, 86, 186; 2, 65, 115; 3, 21, 71. Also Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press,

- 1983), pp. 88, 226, 30, 318; hereafter cited in my text as *EAP*, with page reference following.
5. See Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 170–72 for a discussion of “elaboration” in Gramsci.
  6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter J. Kauffmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), pp. 77. 80.
  7. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Conditions for Knowledge of Working-Class Conditions: Employers, Government and the Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1890–1940,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, pp. 179–230, Arvind N. Das, “Agrarian Change from Above and Below: Bihar, 1947–78,” and N. K. Chandra, “Agricultural Workers in Burdwan,” both in *Subaltern Studies II*. I am using the word “Imaginary” loosely in the sense given to it by Jacques Lacan. For a short definition, see Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. David Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 210.
  8. As always my preferred example of a theoretical fiction remains the primary process in Freud; see *Works*, vol. 5, pp. 598f.
  9. For an excellent discussion of this, see Judith Butler, “Geist ist Zeit: French Interpretations of Hegel’s Absolute,” *Berkshire Review* 20 (Summer, 1985), pp. 66–80; an extended form of Butler’s arguments can be found in *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).
  10. Gramsci, cited in *EAP*, 28.
  11. Since the historian is gender-specific in the work of the collective (see pp. 33–43), I have consistently used “he.”
  12. The most important example of this is Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983) and *History and Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).
  13. OG, 93. Since my intention here is simply to offer a moment of transcoding, I have not undertaken to “explain” the Derridean passage.
  14. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”
  15. The most, perhaps too, spectacular deployment of the argument is in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.
  16. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 421.
  17. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *Selected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1951), p. 51.
  18. George Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Humanities Press, 1976), p. 107.
  19. This concept-metaphor of “interest” is orchestrated by Derrida in *Spurs*,

- trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) with notions of “affirmative deconstructions,” which would acknowledge that no example of deconstruction can match its discourse.
20. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 156, 154.
  21. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, p. 68.
  22. I discuss the mechanics of Thompson’s critique briefly in “Explanation and Culture”; see chapter 2 above.
  23. An exemplary statement is found in “Intellectuals and Power,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*.
  24. Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities or the End of the Social and Other Essays*, trans. Paul Foss, et al. (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 26; and Deleuze and Guattari, *On the Line*, trans. John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 1.
  25. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” pp. 290–91; early version.
  26. Althusser, “Sur le rapport de Marx à Hegel,” in *Hegel et la pensée moderne*, ed. Jacques d’Hondt (Paris: Presses universitaires, 1970), pp. 108–09.
  27. Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *Surveys from Exile*, ed. David Fernbach (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 147.
  28. For historical work that would relate to the contemporary struggle, see John Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1969).
  29. Steven Ungar, *Roland Barthes: the Professor of Desire* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1983).
  30. Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” trans. Bass, pp. 317–18; translation modified.
  31. For another contemporary transformation of this notion see Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, trans. Harry Cleaver et al. (South Hadley: Begin and Garvey, 1984), pp. 41–58.
  32. Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 146.
  33. Hobbes’s discussion of authority in the *Leviathan* and Kant’s discussion of the genius in *The Critique of Judgment* are two of the many *loci classici*. There are lengthy discussions of this thematic—as found in the Platonic Socrates, in Rousseau, and in J. L. Austin—in Derrida’s “Plato’s Pharmacy,” *Of Grammatology*, and “Signature Event Context,” respectively.
  34. Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso Press, 1981), p. 140.
  35. See Hardiman, “Adivasi Assertion in South Gujarat: The Devi Movement of 1922–3,” in 3.
  36. June Nash and María Patricia Fernández-Kelly, eds., *Women, Men, and the*

*International Division of Labor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. viii.

37. I have discussed this issue with reference to its further development in the Post-Soviet world in the “Afterword” to Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps*; see below, chapter 10.
38. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 60.
39. Derrida, *Spurs*, pp. 109–11.