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Vinayak Chaturvedi, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. London and New York: Verso, 2000. 364 pp.

A curious irony attends the anthologizing moment—and that is that the collation of a sub-discipline's major works into a pedagogical canon, though usually hailed as a paradigm shift in the dust-jacket blurb, is also a way of signaling that the sub-discipline's radical trajectory has already reached its apogee, and that its interventionary period has passed. This, at least, is what was commonly said of postcolonial studies in the 1990s, as the major academic publishing houses vied with one another to anthologize postcolonialism's future transformations by reissuing its organizing documents from the past. Many of those who had trained to the discipline raised a skeptical eyebrow, and then morphed into experts in the discipline of globalization studies. Their new anthologies are just now appearing.

Vinayak Chaturvedi's Verso anthology *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* brings forward, under one attractive cover, some of the cardinal documents from one of the most exciting intellectual ventures to hit the humanities and social sciences in the latter fifth of the twentieth century. "The texts included in this volume represent a balance sheet of the Subaltern Studies project," Chaturvedi writes in his Introduction. "They provide a panoramic view of the seminal writings emerging from the key theorists of Subaltern Studies between 1982 and 1999." Few would want to argue that Chaturvedi's claim for the volume is unjust. But why *this* anthology, and why now?

The *Subaltern Studies* collections were launched in 1982 by Oxford University Press in Delhi, and every year or so, a new set of essays would appear. To a disciplinary outsider like myself, the Subaltern essays in history seemed radically specific works: Foucault and Gramsci brought to detail, resistance theory brought to ground. I read just about all of them as I proceeded through my academic training, and not the least of their many influences on my work as a student of postcolonial relations was that they made me wish I'd gone into history, and not literature studies.

Like most workers in my discipline, I knew that imperial historiography needed thorough retooling: a "history from below." And I knew that historical description which centred on colonial, or anti-colonial, or postcolonial national élites was structurally positioned to finesse the resistance/complic-

ity dialectic, and thus to empty history from its embeddedness in locality, community, and the relations of production. What I found, therefore, in the foundational documents of the Subaltern project, like Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983), was the kind of history-writing that a non-historian could really *use*. "How then are we to get in touch with the consciousness of insurgency when our access to it is barred thus by the discourse of counter-insurgency," Guha asked in that document. I read this as an historian's take on the same intellectual problematic that organizes substantial components of engagement within literary new historicism and postcolonial resistance theory. The difference was that Guha's answer was not one that my discipline would have provided. "The difficulty," Guha suggested,

is perhaps less insurmountable than it seems to be at first sight. For counter-insurgency [...] can hardly afford a discourse that is not fully and compulsively involved with the rebel and his activities. It is of course true that the reports, dispatches, minutes, judgments, 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.

This kind of commitment—to working *through* the minutiae of the colonial archive, and always with a view to reading it *otherwise*—made the aporia in the attempt seem passable: a disciplinary barrier in my area, but one that careful, informed, and articulate historical *labour* could successfully surmount.

Retrospect, of course, tells a different story. What really persuaded in the essays brought forward in the Subaltern Studies collections throughout the eighties and into the nineties was the combination of political commitment with good historical research and thoughtful, detailed analysis, and not really the methodological specifics of the Subaltern historiographic revision. The floodwaters of debate over Subaltern historiographic methodology rose with the force of deluvian judgment, islanding the individual essays in colonial history as they swept past, and eventually it was the water that one focussed on, and not the land. I found a disciplinary resonance, indeed a confirmation, in several modalities of that debate. Some of the commentary mounted from within the field of History advanced the kinds of objections we in literature studies had trained ourselves to formulate. "[It] is hard to see how

this approach can have room for any theory about experience as the medium through which resistances emerge and are crystallized or about the conditions under which the subordinate can become active agents of their own emancipation on the basis of this experience,” wrote Rosalind O’Hanlon and David Washbrook in 1992. “Our present challenge lies precisely in understanding how the underclasses we wish to study are at once constructed in conflictual ways as subjects yet also find the means through struggle to realize themselves in coherent and subjectively centred ways as agents.” And as for the several objections to the Subaltern project mounted not from within the field of History, but rather from literary postcolonial studies themselves, and from *theory*—these soon seemed to be inevitable objections, exquisitely self-congratulatory in their nuance, and entirely capable of consolidating postcolonial studies as a coherent discipline precisely at the moment that the field was experiencing its own methodological debates. Gayatri Spivak’s citation classic, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” is in the first instance a close and thoughtful dialogue with the Subaltern project and its venture towards a specific modality of post-imperial precision. It is a work of critique in the purest sense: it locates the conditions of possibility for Subaltern historiography, it explains how those conditions both enable and undermine the historiographic attempt to retrieve and translate subaltern insurgent consciousness to the position of historical subject, and it shows how Subaltern historiography thus finds itself in methodological and discursive alliance with all kinds of intellectual ventures and imaginative investments it would ostensibly disavow. Throughout the 1990s, however, Spivak’s essay was commonly read as a free-standing document—a map to the project of postcolonial critique—and not as a document organized strategically in engagement with Subaltern historiographic methodology and assumption. It became the organizing document of postcolonial critical theory, but most of its readers did not manage to attend to the historiography it was critiquing. Contingency became a property of the essay’s inner workings, not of its structural predication. As a result of this essay’s sustained history of de-contextualized reading in the discipline of postcolonial studies, Spivak has found it necessary, in a recent revision of the paper, to change the polarity of her answer to the title’s question from a performative “no” to a “yes.” It should trouble practitioners of postcolonial reason that Spivak’s change in answer is underwritten by no substantive change in her critique of Subaltern historiographic analysis, its enabling assumptions, or its discursive affiliations.

In consort, or in opposition, then, the Subaltern Studies project of Indian historiography has been at the centre of postcolonial critical studies as it has founded itself in the “West,” and the appearance of this map to the discipline,

now, in the form of an anthology, gives all of us—inside and out—a clear picture of what was entailed in, to use Gyanendra Pandey's titular phrase, "the struggle to write subaltern histories." This anthology gives its readers a brief snapshot of Subaltern historiography by reproducing Guha's 1982 manifesto "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India." It also reproduces Chapter 8 from his Partha Chatterjee's 1993 book *The Nation and its Fragments*—a wholly admirable work, but not one that most would think of as representative of the Subaltern historiographic project. The anthology then proceeds to two essays whose object is to associate Subaltern historiography with major intellectual figures in Europe: David Arnold's "Gramsci and Peasant Subalternity in India," and Rajnarayan Chandavarkar's "The Making of the Working Class: E. P. Thompson and Indian History." Next come the critiques of the project from Rosalind O'Hanlon, C. A. Bayley, and Tom Brass, a rejoinder to these critiques from Gyan Prakash, a rejoinder to Prakash's rejoinder from O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, another Prakash rebuttal, and ensuing meditations from Dipesh Chakrabarty, Sumit Sarkar, and Gyanendra Pandey. The anthology concludes with a new essay by Spivak: a "silent interview" that she conducts with herself.

This anthology is designed to promote readerly participation in the disciplinary meditations that directed Subaltern Studies away from its originating project—the recovery and representation of underclass insurgent consciousness in colonial India—towards its modified practice as a skeptical mode of historiography that more closely resembles postcolonialist critical research itself. Except for the Chatterjee and Chandavarkar essays, the anthology follows the course of a disciplinary then-to-now exercise in method. Pedagogical value abounds.

But because this anthology foregrounds the debate over Subaltern historiography, and not the astonishingly interesting essays of close and engaged historical examination that comprised the core work of the Subaltern project—Arvind Das's detailed commentary on agrarian change in Bihar between 1947 and 1978, published in *Subaltern Studies* Volume II (1983), for example, or David Arnold's magisterial analysis of bureaucratic discourse in the Madras constabulary in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Volume IV (1985), or Shahid Amin's brilliant examination of approver testimony in the case of Chauri Chaura, Volume V (1987)—the document carries with it an overwhelming sense of belatedness. Structurally, the course of reading provided by this anthology inculcates a constant awareness that the interventionary moment of the Subaltern project has already come and gone. The pervading atmosphere—despite the excellence of the individual essays—is of a desire to instruct. The anthological narrative proceeds, like

an allegory, towards achieved conclusions about the problematic of historical revision: everything is dedicated to mapping with clarity why the Subaltern project failed. A certain worthiness occupies the anthology's denouement: Spivak's meditation on the productivity of residuum, which reads: "Hopeless? Perhaps.... To look into the gap is as hopeful as it is hopeless, at least."

In his chapter on "The Two Faces of Colonialism," published in 1999 in Volume III of *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, David Washbrook meditates on what it means to view "India, 818-1860" "less from the perspective of British rule and more from those practices of Indian society." One approach, Washbrook observes, "is to see Indian society's reaction to the new colonial hegemony as dominated by resistance and reaction." But such an approach, he concludes, is not "entirely satisfactory." The rest of Washbrook excellent chapter explains why, and I am persuaded. Nevertheless, I found myself looking for something more concrete than Spivak's gap in Washbrook's acknowledgement of the Subaltern Studies historiographic project. "For many years," Washbrook continues, "the responses represented in the Great Mutiny and Civil Rebellion of 1857 were interpreted in this light. More recently, a new historiography of the 'subaltern' orders of society has highlighted similar imperatives." The chapter's final notation on Subaltern methodology appears in the ensuing footnote.

So it is that, via its eventual methodological displacement of the Subaltern studies project, British imperial historiography returns itself to the side of the angels. It goes without saying that historically detailed work continues to take place inside the disciplinary paramouncy—that is not what is sacrificed in the process of disciplinary renewal that relocates this particular mode of Indian historiography from Delhi to Oxford. What, perhaps, is sacrificed is something one feels most acutely from beyond the pale of historiography and its disciplinary protocols: a motive for undisciplined but engaged reading of scholarship committed to a small few of the great many who comprise history's endlessly undisclosed subjects. That sacrifice could have implications for how postcolonial pedagogy continues to understand its theoretical commitment to future political change.

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