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HOW RANAJIT GUHA CAME TO LATIN AMERICAN SUBALTERN STUDIES

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I became interested in Subaltern Studies in the late 1980s, not long after the volumes began to appear, and began lobbying our university library to purchase them in 1987. The task turned out to be an immense hassle, because even though the volumes were being produced under the Oxford University Press imprint, they were assembled and printed in Delhi. At the time, Oxford University Press (New York) had less than perfect connections with their Delhi office. Eight months was the time it would take to order a Subaltern Studies volume from Delhi, and at that speed they had to be sending the books by elephant to Bombay, and then by dhow to Aden, and possibly by trireme to Gibraltar, and by glass bottle to New York via the Florida Gulf Stream.

However, once I got them I was delighted to read these early volumes—I found the theoretical sophistication about reading historical texts fascinating. Here, for the first time, I was reading historians who questioned the transparency of the archives—the still widely held belief that simple and often naïve readings of documentary sources could somehow produce the truth.

There was, and still is, nothing natural about reading. We learn it in schools, where we are taught what and how to read, how to summarize, and above all how to judge. Teachers drill these techniques into our heads, so that by the time academically successful students reach college or university, they have successfully assimilated all the cultural criteria for reading.

At no point are students of history taught about historical or cultural differences in writing styles. They are not taught about sixteenth or eighteenth-century salutation styles in epistolary genres, and are unprepared to

understand the clues provided by the opening and closing lines of a letter. Nor are they instructed that a topic sentence in French does not appear where a topic sentence belongs in English, that the introductory paragraph or chapter necessary in English writing remains regarded as a sign of intellectual immaturity in Dutch writings, etc. As a result, students bring their contemporary prejudices into their reading of primary sources, and take out exactly as much as they have taken in. Teachers compound the problem by allowing writing about the documents in twentieth-century language familiar to them—thereby transforming the historical text into a culturally transparent artifact peculiar to their own culture and period.

This super-imposed cultural transparency of explanation cloaks an unexamined projection of contemporary political and cultural issues into the past. Perhaps one of the best examples (for US readers) is the phrase "race relations." As Julie Novock has recently discovered, the phrase "race relations" first appeared in 1900 in a privately printed U.S. pamphlet on labor laws. It became widely deployed to analyze a broad variety of social injustices characterizing US politics during the twentieth century. But what can we make of books such as Charles Boxer's *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1415-1825)*? Are we trying to excuse our conduct by claiming that others discriminated as well—or that we are not to blame for our contemporary problems because people in the past handed us these problems? In short, what are the agendas, implications, and assumptions behind such use of anachronistic terminology?

For me, the most appealing dimension of the Subaltern Studies group rested in its willingness to confront potentially troubling issues of reading historical texts. How do you understand what you read? How do you explain it, and why?

In the spring of 1989 my husband was invited to be a visitor to the Humanities Research Centre at Australian National University in Canberra for their winter term, which began at the end of June. I was very pleased because I knew that Ranajit Guha, the intellectual founder of the Subaltern Studies movement, was at that time a Research Associate with the School of Asian and Pacific Studies at Australian National University. I wrote to him in advance of our arrival, and made arrangements to meet and talk with him during our stay in Canberra.

We arrived, trailed by our three-year old daughter and her suitcase full of possessions she declared indispensable for life in Australia. Other interesting people in Canberra at the time included Derek Freeman (of the

now infamous Mead-Freeman debate). Freeman met us at the door to his home, but ordered us to remain in his entryway while he interviewed our daughter out of earshot on his lawn before letting us sit down. (Our limited parenting skills obviously passed his test, for he continued to send us Australian toys until the year he died.)

Ranajit was an entirely different person. Unlike many academics, he had been a left-wing political activist for his first twenty years, turning to academics after wearying of constant political danger. Given his leadership skills, he recruited a small number of South Asian scholars to the University of Sussex (England) where he obtained a teaching post. Dissatisfied with the portrayal of Indian history in the British academic history departments of the time, and with the none-too-subtle disdain with which prominent left-wing British historians such as E. P. Thompson treated him and wrote about the history of India, he resolved to embark upon a program of rethinking India's relationship to Britain. And to do that he began editing the series called *Subaltern Studies*. When we met in the winter (June) of 1989, he talked about *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, which he considered his best work to date. When I read the book for the first time in the library of the Australian National University, I was enthralled. Here was a man who had spent twenty years of his life politically organizing rural India, writing about the way British officials of his century (and before) had written about peasant rebellions in areas of the world in which he himself had worked. Here was the complete panoply of an insider's understandings—how drums transmitted information—who was traveling among the regions—how easy or difficult that was—all from the era immediately after the British withdrawal from India. To use the immediate post-withdrawal knowledge of political organizing to understand the earlier period seemed eminently reasonable, and very exciting. British colonial texts could not be assumed to transparently communicate the activities of natives. Regardless of whether all of his insights were correct, here at least was someone problematizing the act of reading.

Not long after arriving in Canberra, I met Ranajit one day for coffee and he pulled out a white book that had just arrived in the post. Look at what has showed up, he said, showing me the book. It was the edited *Selected Subaltern Studies* bearing his name after Gayatri Spivak's on the cover. This is the first I have heard of this volume, he said, astonished that a book would appear with his name on the cover without his consent.

That first inauspicious foray by Gayatri Spivak in fact signaled what was to become the reception of Subaltern Studies in the United States. Far from a former activist's re-interpreting the texts of the former rulers of India, subaltern studies became adopted in literary circles which both at the time and since have been far more willing to think critically about reading. Furthermore, the slim volume's publication coincided with the South Asian literary world's rethinking of the colonial project—a task apparent in the works of, most notably, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha.

Thus when John Beverley and Ileana Rodríguez wrote me in 1993 to say that they were interested in a Latin American Subaltern Studies group, I was more than willing to join. I had never met either one of them, but they had read an article I had done for the *Latin American Research Review* on colonial and postcolonial discourses, and had rightly thought that I would be interested in the project.

I met Ileana Rodríguez, Michael Clark, and John Beverley for the first time at the organizational meeting of the Latin American Subaltern Studies group in Washington, D.C. What I found was a largely congenial group, with whom I shared more than I had anticipated. Beyond our mutual admiration of the Subaltern Studies collective, most of us had been active in Latin American politics prior to becoming academics. Ileana had been the most courageous of all, giving up a tenured academic position in the United States to become Vice-Minister of Culture in Nicaragua during the Sandinista government. After the Sandinistas were voted out of office she returned to the United States where she, remarkably, was able to re-establish herself in Latin American literary circles. Javier Sanjinés, then teaching literature at Maryland, had been active in developing the political use of what we now call "talk radio" in his native Bolivia.

There we were, a group of academics who knew a lot about politics on the ground in various Latin American countries, and who wanted to think about the different ways in which literature from and about Latin America should be taught and understood—especially from within the United States. And there too was the basis of the connection with Ranajit. Like us, Ranajit had been involved in politics before his academic experience, and had brought both his political and his academic experiences to the writing of history.

In the mid 1990s, Latin American Subaltern Studies was an intellectually exciting and dynamic community whose members grew to include many of the best-known names in the literary field. Walter Mignolo, José

Rabasa, Sara Castro-Klaren all came to participate, expanding the range of literary scholars whose work I respected, and whose intellectual projects I came to understand sympathetically.

And as for why Latin American Subaltern Studies never had quite the same impact in history that it did in anthropology? I think the question is equally well asked of its South Asian inspiration. Why is and was Subaltern Studies far more successful in U.S. literary circles than it ever was in historical ones? For that answer, I think you would need to address a broader cultural and historical question, one that goes beyond the boundaries of this issue of *Dispositio/n*.

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