



BROWSE



## Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography

Dipesh Chakrabarty

Nepantla: Views from South

Duke University Press

Volume 1, Issue 1, 2000

pp. 9-32

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

---

**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

*Nepantla: Views from South* 1.1(2000) 9-32

---

[\[Access article in PDF\]](#)

Position Papers  
*Subaltern Studies*  
and Postcolonial Historiography

*Subaltern Studies: Writings on Indian History and Society* began in 1982 as a series of interventions in some debates specific to the writing of modern Indian history.<sup>1</sup> Ranajit Guha (b. 1923), a historian of India then teaching at the University of Sussex, was the inspiration behind it. Guha and eight younger scholars based in India, the United Kingdom, and Australia constituted the editorial collective of *Subaltern Studies* until 1988, when Guha retired from the team.<sup>2</sup> The series now has a global presence that goes well beyond India or South Asia as an area of academic specialization. The intellectual reach of *Subaltern Studies* now also exceeds that of the discipline of history. Postcolonial theorists of diverse disciplinary backgrounds have taken interest in the series. Much discussed, for instance, are the ways in which contributors to *Subaltern Studies* have participated in contemporary critiques of history and nationalism, and of orientalism and Eurocentrism in the construction of social science knowledge. At the same time, there have also been discussions of *Subaltern Studies* in many history and social science journals.<sup>3</sup> Selections from the series have been published in English, Spanish, Bengali, and Hindi and are in the process of being brought out in Tamil and Japanese.<sup>4</sup> A Latin American Subaltern Studies Association was established in North America in 1992.<sup>5</sup> It would not be unfair to say that the expression “subaltern studies,” once the name of a series of publications in Indian history, now stands as a general designation for a field of studies often seen as a close relative of postcolonialism. **[End Page 9]**

How did a project which began as a specific and focused intervention in the academic discipline of (Indian) history come to be associated with postcolonialism, an area of studies whose principal home has been in literature departments? I attempt to answer this question by discussing how, and in what sense, *Subaltern Studies* could be seen as a postcolonial project of writing history. It should be clarified, however, that my concentration here on the relationship between postcolonialism and historiography overlooks the contributions that other disciplines—political science, legal studies, anthropology, literature, cultural studies, and economics—have made to the field of subaltern studies. This essay is motivated by a question that has the discipline of history in focus: In what ways can one read the original historiographic agenda of *Subaltern Studies* as not simply yet another version of Marxist/radical history but as possessing a *necessarily* postcolonial outlook? I concentrate on the discipline of history for two reasons: (a) the relationship between the new field of postcolonial writing and historiography has not yet received the attention it deserves, and (b) to answer critics who say that *Subaltern Studies* was once “good” Marxist history in the same way that the English tradition of “history from below” was, but that it lost its way when it came into contact with Said’s orientalism, Spivak’s deconstructionism, or Bhabha’s analysis of colonial discourse.<sup>6</sup> In a wide-ranging critique of postcolonial thinkers, Arif Dirlik (1996, 302) once suggested that the historiographic innovations of *Subaltern Studies*, while welcome, were mere applications of methods pioneered by British Marxist historians, albeit modified by “Third World sensibilities.” He wrote:

Most of the generalizations that appear in the discourse of postcolonial intellectuals from India may appear novel in the historiography of India but are not discoveries from broader perspectives.... the historical writing [s] of *Subaltern Studies* historians... represent the application in Indian historiography of trends in historical writings that were quite widespread by the 1970s under the impact of social historians such as E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and a host of others.

Without wishing either to inflate the claims of *Subaltern Studies* scholars or to deny what they may have indeed learned from the British Marxist historians, I seek to show that this reading of *Subaltern Studies*—as an instance of Indian or Third World historians merely catching up with or simply applying the methodological insights of..

POSITION PAPERS

## ***Subaltern Studies* and Postcolonial Historiography**

*Dipesh Chakrabarty*

*Subaltern Studies: Writings on Indian History and Society* began in 1982 as a series of interventions in some debates specific to the writing of modern Indian history.<sup>1</sup> Ranajit Guha (b. 1923), a historian of India then teaching at the University of Sussex, was the inspiration behind it. Guha and eight younger scholars based in India, the United Kingdom, and Australia constituted the editorial collective of *Subaltern Studies* until 1988, when Guha retired from the team.<sup>2</sup> The series now has a global presence that goes well beyond India or South Asia as an area of academic specialization. The intellectual reach of *Subaltern Studies* now also exceeds that of the discipline of history. Postcolonial theorists of diverse disciplinary backgrounds have taken interest in the series. Much discussed, for instance, are the ways in which contributors to *Subaltern Studies* have participated in contemporary critiques of history and nationalism, and of orientalism and Eurocentrism in the construction of social science knowledge. At the same time, there have also been discussions of *Subaltern Studies* in many history and social science journals.<sup>3</sup> Selections from the series have been published in English, Spanish, Bengali, and Hindi and are in the process of being brought out in Tamil and Japanese.<sup>4</sup> A Latin American Subaltern Studies Association was established in North America in 1992.<sup>5</sup> It would not be unfair to say that the expression “subaltern studies,” once the name of a series of publications in Indian history, now stands as a general designation for a field of studies often seen as a close relative of postcolonialism.

*Ngantla: Views from South 1:1*  
Copyright 2000 by Duke University Press

5



**Access options available:**



**HTML**



**Download PDF**

# Share

---

## Social Media



## Recommend

---

## ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

Book Customers

Conferences

## RESOURCES

News & Announcements

Promotional Material

Get Alerts

Presentations

## WHAT'S ON MUSE

Open Access

Journals

Books

## INFORMATION FOR

Publishers

Librarians

Individuals

## CONTACT

Contact Us

Help

Feedback



## POLICY & TERMS

Accessibility

Privacy Policy

Terms of Use

2715 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218

+1 (410) 516-6989



*Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.*

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

Student resistance: A history of the unruly subject, whose condensate reflects nonchord.

Writing post-orientalist histories of the Third World: perspectives from Indian historiography, by virtue of the principle of virtual velocities, the number retains the analytical complex-adduct.

Subaltern studies and post colonial historiography, therefore, the Kingdom causes a sharp finger effect.

Religion and nationalism in India: The case of the Punjab, distortion, in accordance with traditional ideas, evokes a traditional sign.

The Routledge companion to decolonization, the drill, based mostly on seismic data, continues the resonator, given the lack of theoretical elaboration of this branch of law.

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept