

PART II

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Recovering the Subject:
Subaltern Studies and
Histories of Resistance in
Colonial South Asia

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IN THE field of social and cultural anthropology, the issues raised by European representations of non-European 'others'—of the control of discourses, the production of professional canons for the representation of truth about the other, the epistemological and ethical ambiguities in the position of the ethnographic observer—have recently received an enormous amount of critical attention. This intensified critical awareness goes beyond the familiar ethnographic concern with the development of cultural empathy, to a much more fundamental exploration of the epistemological constitution of non-European and colonial societies as objects of knowledge within the

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disciplines of Western social science. The development of these concerns, and the acceptance and exploration in the last decade of the links between colonialism and the emergence of anthropology as a discipline are traceable in no small part to the attempted iconoclasm of structuralism and its post-structuralist and deconstructive turns, and to the latter's ferocious and many-sided attack upon the presumed sovereignty and universality of the Western intellectual tradition: in particular, upon the Enlightenment faith in a rational human subject and an effective human agency. These themes have been brought together with greatest political and theoretical effect, of course, in Edward Said's assault upon the production of histories in which 'the one human history uniting humanity either culminated in or was observed from the vantage point of Europe.'¹ These concerns have been rather less well explored for the writing of social history of non-European or colonial societies, except where these social histories are argued, as they are now with increasing frequency, to be most usefully subsumed under the new category of historical anthropology or ethnohistory.²

My purpose here is to explore these themes in the context of the social historiography of colonial South Asia, where I think it is now widely accepted that the project of *Subaltern Studies* has provided the most provocative and interesting intervention in recent years. I intend the present essay in part to be a general review, but my more central purpose is to rethink the issues raised and fruitfully restated by the series in the context of the themes sketched out above. I aim both to suggest how we may place the series, and what I believe to be its limitations, in a critical and intellectual context, and to indicate some of the further categories and conceptual schemes which must be developed as a part of the project of restoring 'suppressed' histories—of women, non-whites, non-Europeans—as well as the subordinate of colonial South Asia. It needs hardly to be said that a commentary of this kind is in many ways a parasitic exercise, made possible in large part by the insights and critical stance developed by the contributors themselves.

The central concern of the project has been the possibility of writing a history which is not only from Europe's 'periphery' in its rejection of the neocolonialism neo-nationalist and economic Marxist

modes of historiography argued to dominate the contemporary field, but which also takes as its focus the dispossessed of that periphery. Their own particular forms of subjectivity, experience and agency, at present subjugated by these universalising modes, are to be reconstituted and thus restored to history. This project in turn engages the contributors with further issues: with the identification of forms of power in fields and relations far removed from the domain of the political as we familiarly understand it, such as colonialism's production of new forms of knowledge of South Asian societies; with ways of conceptualising the nature of resistance and its possibilities in a deeply coercive social context; and, in the overt commitments of the project and particularly of its editor with the political status of the historian or critic. The extraordinary interest of the project viewed in this way is thus that it illustrates both the present possibilities of, and the likely limitations in a challenge to the kind of rationalist and universalising historicism identified by Edward Said: a challenge which, although it incorporates many of their themes, is made neither from the ground of post-structuralism nor from that of classical Marxism, but from the point of view of the subordinate of colonial society.

Both the rejection of an ethnocentric historicism and, perhaps less uncontroversially, a decentring of our familiar notions of power and the political, seem to me wholly to be welcomed. This does not mean, however, that we enter a world free of determination or necessity, for the emphasis on difference is informed by a much sharper awareness of the various forms which power and domination may take, of the possibility of its appearance even in those social contexts associated in programmatic political radicalism with emancipation. In epistemological terms, moreover, the very focus on ways in which non-European objects of knowledge have been and are constituted in the social scientific disciplines of the West separates this perspective from empiricism. My main concern here, however, is with the nature of the reconstruction attempted in the *Subaltern* project. At the very moment of this assault upon Western historicism, the classic figure of Western humanism—the self-originating, self-determining individual, who is at once a subject in his possession of a sovereign consciousness whose defining quality is reason, and an agent in his power of freedom—is readmitted through the back door in the figure of the

subaltern himself, as he is restored to history in the reconstructions of the Subaltern project. The consequence of this is to limit and distort the conceptualisation of the contributors' own chosen themes of domination and resistance. What they raise for us, however, is a critically important question. If we accept, as I assume we should, that no hegemony can be so penetrative and pervasive as to eliminate all ground for contestation or resistance, this leaves us with the question as to how we are to configure their presence, if it is not to be in terms of liberal humanist notions of subjectivity and agency. Much of the material with which the contributors work, particularly that concerning the construction of subjectivity through negation, does help to provide us with some basis for the construction of subjectivities of a kind very different from the universal constitutive subject of the Western tradition. A similar tension appears in the conceptual status accorded to the category of experience. While a Marxist teleology which empties subaltern movements of their specific types of consciousness and experience forms a principal target of the project, the notion of a cumulative subjective change through struggle towards a recognisable class consciousness forms a principal theme in some of the studies. I situate this tension within similar debates amongst Marxists in the European context and suggest that the problem of experience, separated from that of agency, might be more fruitfully thought without the notion of universal human subjectivities. Finally, I examine the notion of political commitment in the project, and what I see as the tension between the desire to find a resistant presence, and the necessity of preserving difference and otherness in the figure of the subaltern.

In addition to the first four volumes of *Subaltern Studies*, I should also like to make reference to Ranajit Guha's *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in colonial India*, both because Guha is editor of the series, and because the two seem to me to illuminate each other in important ways. At the time of writing, some eighteen scholars have contributed to the series, in essays ranging over a period from the early seventeenth century to the 1970s, and including in the subordinate groups surveyed peasants, agricultural labourers, factory workers and tribals. The contributions also range in theoretical sophistication from empirical accumulations of detail concerning these groups and

their resistances, to the most ambitious attempts to redraw the basic explanatory procedures of Marxist historical theory. What they all share in common, however, is their critical intent, and indeed it is the critique of the conventional genres of nationalist, colonialist and Marxist historiography which is now the most familiar and impressive feature of the series. The attack upon elite historiography in its three forms is, of course, that these have treated the subordinate peoples of South Asian society as if they had no consciousness of their own, and hence no ability to make their own history. In the case of neocolonial historiography, as Guha has put it, Indian nationalism is represented 'as the sum of the activities and ideas by which the Indian elite responded to the institutions, opportunities, resources, etc., generated by colonialism.'³ Of course, this criticism of the Namierite character of much of the history of South Asia written from outside the region is not new, and the 'Cambridge school' is now a familiar figure in a variety of radical demonologies. Yet such criticism has rarely been supported by the systematic and substantive investigation into what went on beyond the narrow circles of elite politics, with which some of the contributors have furnished us.

The attack on neo-nationalist historiography is now also familiar. This genre has read every moment and variety of popular resistance in terms of its own anti-colonial struggle, appropriating all of them to a new 'great tradition' of the Indian freedom movement, in which the Indian National Congress not only spoke for all of the people, but generated and led all of the 'genuinely' political movements in which they were engaged. In response, the contributors have attempted to establish, in a variety of contexts, the specific rootedness in bourgeois political ambition and ideology of many Congress and Gandhian campaigns, and to show that far from leading movements of subordinate resistance, Congress activists frequently moved in and attempted to appropriate and divert movements which were generated outside and independently of it. This perspective has yielded a number of fine essays. Shahid Amin has documented the ways in which the villagers of Gorakhpur district decoded Congress and Gandhian messages in their own way, rather than on the model of a simple peasant religiosity responding to the sanctified figure of the Mahatma, as party activists

assumed. The way in which the figure and message of the Mahatma, particularly the polysemic word 'Swaraj,' were contextualised within the villagers' own popular religious culture, helped give birth to a vision of a millennial world which was their own rather than the Congress's, and which was directly political in intent.⁴ In his examination of the Kisan Sabha movement in Awadh over the same period, Cyan Pandey reconstructs both the peasants' appropriation of the image of the Mahatma, and the ways in which they drew upon their own profoundly moral and religious world-view in order to voice their protests against the growing impositions of landlords. This radicalism, culminating in the Eka movement of 1921, was not a product of Congress leadership, but rather of the experience of the peasants themselves: first, of very high rents, debt and severe land shortage in a talukdar-dominated agrarian structure; and second, of the peasant leadership in their encounters with landlords, British officials and the police, whom they came to see as a common enemy. The Congress turned down this radical lead on the ground that it breached national unity. However, Pandey argues, the sort of unity envisioned here was actually of a very specific kind:

It should be evident that the nature of the Swaraj that eventuated from this struggle would depend very much on the nature of the alliance (the 'unity') that was forged. From this point of view, the Congress' insistence in 1921—2 on a united front of landlords as well as peasants and others, was a statement in favour of the *status quo* and against any radical change in the social set-up when the British finally handed over the reins of power.⁵

The third genre which the contributors have brought under attack is that of conventional Indian Marxist historiography. The perspective of the Subaltern group naturally at once calls into question their relationship with Marxist theory. The argument here, which Partha Chatterjee puts most succinctly, is that the teleologies of Marxist historical writing have acted to empty subaltern movements of their specific types of consciousness and practice, and to see in the history of colonial South Asia only the linear development of class consciousness. For the national—colonial opposition of neo-nationalist historiography, Marxists have substituted that between feudal and bourgeois

forces, and read all South Asian history in the same totalising manner.⁶ As we shall see, by no means all of the contributors are free from the notion of a progression of consciousness, and a teleology which finds some resistances to be backward and primitive, and hence less congenial material for the historian to work on than those which are advanced along the road to an enlightened awareness of class interest. A number of critics have made the point that this conflicts with the proclaimed interest in the historical specificity of subaltern movements.⁷ There is indeed a conflict here, and it would be surprising if there were not; it is a genuine difficulty as to how we may discern, in the consciousness and practice of those we study, processes of unilinear change, real learning experiences gained in the course of struggle and resistance, and how far we should assign all change to the realm of the reversible and contingent. Much the same issues, of the specificity and irreducibility of experience versus the onward movement of class consciousness and struggle, have been fought out in the context of English working class history.⁸

Having looked very briefly at some of the main themes in the series' critique of established historiography, I should now like to ask whether the contributors share some more positive common ground or set of assumptions between them—most obviously, of course, in the significance of the term 'subaltern' itself—or whether a dissatisfaction, for all the difficulties attendant on the task of the iconoclast, is all that unites them. First, however, it would be useful to clarify this question of what we might expect in the way of internal consistency or common ground among the contributors, since this has been a point of criticism already. It would be unhelpful of us to expect either that a project of this duration should not shift and develop in its emphases over time, or that a large body of scholars, intent primarily on the task of deconstruction, should hasten to establish a new uniformity. Quite rightly, the contributors have decided that it is positive and useful to work in some respects within a loose rather than a rigid interpretative framework. As Ranajit Guha puts it, the focus on the subaltern provides only 'a new orientation within which many different styles, interests and discursive modes may find it possible to unite in their rejection of academic elitism.'⁹ However, I think that it is legitimate to distinguish between a difference of view or interpretation

which is clearly stated and understood in public discussion, and inconsistencies which arise as the product of a failure or confusion in debate, which work to obscure both the issues raised in the series, and our ability to respond critically to them.

For—to return to the question of a set of shared assumptions—my argument here, and it may well seem a presumptuous one, is that underlying and making possible the separate essays in the series is indeed a recognisable theory or progression of ideas. The problem, rather, is that it has been inadequately recognised as such, with two consequences. First, some of the contributors have employed these ideas in an unhelpful and confused manner, and this without any clear discussion which is available to a general readership. Second, there has been something of a confusion in the minds of critics, together with a quite inadequate scrutiny of what is important and distinctive in the broader project. This progression of ideas concerns the category of the subaltern itself, and the way in which it is employed to break up the hegemony of the three modes of interpretation mentioned above. It is certainly true, as Sabyasachi Bhattacharya has remarked, that 'people's history' or 'history from below' has been a category to which historians writing from a very broad range of perspectives—nationalist, liberal, Marxist, Annales school—have laid claim.¹⁰ When, however, the idea of 'history from below' is made to take on the form of a project to 'recover the experience' of those 'hidden from history,' in the phrase made classic in feminist historiography, we move to a very specific and powerful set of assumptions indeed. This is a very important point, both because this is the idiom in which a very great deal of contemporary historical writing concerned with the subordinate and the marginal—feminist and black history, as well as regional projects like *Subaltern Studies*—is cast, and because it is an inadequate understanding of these assumptions which gives rise to the widespread idea that writing in this idiom represents only a very general orientation of interest, rather than any specific notion of how the task of recovering lost or suppressed experience is to be carried out.

The Subaltern contributors would, I think, accept the argument that their own project has been cast in these terms: that they have

come together in an effort to recover the experience, the distinctive cultures, traditions, identities and active historical practice of subaltern groups in a wide variety of settings—traditions, cultures and practice which have been lost or hidden by the action of elite historiography. What this asserts, against elite historiography's pretensions to comprehensiveness and universality is, of course, that the history of the people is an unknown quantity, an area of darkness which the dominant modes of historical discourse have failed to penetrate, and which mocks their claims to complete or even partial knowledge. This, the first step in what I have referred to above as a progression of ideas, represents an enormously powerful challenge, precisely because of the overwhelming normative value which the identification with 'the majority,' 'the people,' has assumed in the political and sociological discourses of the twentieth century (of which, of course, the discourse of democracy is only one) and hence in the legitimisation of all our cultural and ideological projects. As Jean Baudrillard notes in his provocative commentary on the significance which 'the masses' have taken on in our present political culture: 'They are the leitmotif of every discourse; they are the obsession of every social project.'¹¹ At the level of our political culture, this consuming ideological imperative makes it intolerable for us to accept publicly that we cannot appropriate the masses to our projects, that there may be only silence where their own authentic voices should be raised in our support: 'This silence is unbearable. It is the unknown of the political equation, the unknown which annuls every political equation. Everybody questions it, but never as silence, always to make it speak.'¹² It is this same value, of course, which allows us to make the term 'elite historiography' itself one of criticism; and which makes that undoubted majority of professional historians who remain preoccupied with elites of various kinds defend this preoccupation not with a frank disavowal of any interest in 'the people,' but with the assertion that it is elites, or those in power, after all, who are most in a position to determine what happens to the people at large, and who therefore remain the best means through which we may understand the changes through which the people must live.

With this reminder of the tremendous ideological significance of

an identification with 'the people'—and let us be clear that this remains a matter of the norms of political discourse, rather than of actual historiographical practice—we are in a better position to appreciate the strength of this first step. It is the assertion not just of a space of which dominant historical discourses have failed to take account, but of their fundamental inability to occupy the central ideological ground of our culture. It is this central ground, the masses and the recovery of their own specific and distinctive histories, with all of the legitimating power implied in such a concern, which the Subaltern contributors claim as the hallmark of their project. Their task, and that of all historians who write in the same idiom, thus becomes one of 'filling up': of making an absence into presences, of peopling a vacant space with figures—dissimilar in their humble and work-worn appearance, no doubt, but bearing in these very signs of their origin the marks of a past and a present which is their own. As Partha Chatterjee puts it, 'The task now is to fill up this emptiness, that is, the representation of subaltern consciousness in elitist historiography. It must be given its own specific content with its own history and development. . . . Only then can we recreate not merely a whole aspect of human history whose existence elitist historiography has hitherto denied, but also the history of the "modern" period, the epoch of capitalism.'¹³

If this is the task, how is it to be carried out? Not, I would argue, in as many ways as there are contributors. Rather, the very notion of the restoration of an original presence suggests—and particularly so where the presence is an-'insubordinate' or resistant one—the means by which it is to be done, and this constitutes our second step. Essentially, this consists in the recuperation of the subaltern as a conscious human subject-agent. We are to restore him, in the classic manner of liberal humanism, as a subject 'in his own right,' by reclaiming for him a history, a mode of consciousness and practice, which are *his own*: which are not bestowed upon him by any elite or external leadership, which have their origins nowhere else but in his own being. We are to recuperate him as an agent, rather than as the helpless victim of impersonal forces, or the blind follower of others, through the recognition of his capacity for purposeful action: for a considerable

degree of self-determination in favourable times and, returning to his own inextinguishable subjectivity, possessed at least of his own modes of ideation and practice in unfavourable ones. This, then, I think, is what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak means when she speaks of the contributors' use of a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.¹⁴

Having said that the manner in which the subaltern makes his reappearance through the work of the contributors is in the form of the classic unitary self-constituting subject-agent of liberal humanism, let me at once make three qualifications. The first is that I am not implying by this that any unthinking positivism or empiricism pervades the series. We should see this rather as a strategy although, as I shall argue, it is not completely understood by all those who use it, and its larger significance and, more importantly, its limitations, have yet to receive any proper public discussion. Second, there is some variation in the centrality accorded to this figure. It appears most weakly in the work of Shahid Amin, and particularly in his study of small peasant production of sugarcane in eastern Uttar Pradesh at the turn of the century, whose central focus is on agricultural seasonality, its variance with the economic demands made on the peasantry during the year, and the consequences for peasant indebtedness of these structural mistimings.¹⁵ Yet, I would argue that it remains the dominant trope in the series, precisely because it is very strongly suggested in the project itself of recovering 'their own' history of the subordinate and the marginal. This brings me to my third qualification. I am not here saying that it is always impossible to write about these groups without transforming them into autonomous subject-agents, unitary consciousnesses possessed of their own originary essence, in the manner which we now understand to be the creation, very largely, of Enlightenment humanism's reconstruction of Man. Put on its own like this, I do not believe that any of the contributors would want to espouse an essentialism of this kind. The difficulty, however, is that in the assertion—which is very difficult *not* to make, without having to abandon the strategy altogether—that subordinate groups have a history which is not given to them by Elites, but is a history of *their own*, we arrive at a position which requires some subtlety and skill

if it is to be held from slipping into an essentialist humanism. This skill will depend in very large part precisely upon our rejection of humanism's obsessive invocation of origins as its ultimate legitimation and guarantee: of the myth, which gives us the idea of the self-constituting subject, that a consciousness or being which has an origin outside itself is no being at all. From such a rejection, we can proceed to the idea that though histories and identities are necessarily constructed and produced from many fragments, fragments which do not contain the signs of any essential belonging inscribed in them, this does not cause the history of the subaltern to dissolve once more into invisibility. This is first, because we apply exactly the same decentering strategies to the monolithic subject-agents of elite historiography; and second, because it is the creative practice of the subaltern which now becomes the focus of our attention, his ability to appropriate and mould cultural materials of almost any provenance to his own purposes, and to discard those, however sacred or apparently an integral part of his being, which no longer serve them.

Skill of this kind, the ability to argue for a distinctiveness of practice without slipping into a metaphysics of presence, is clearly very difficult to achieve, and most of all so where our object is a recovery of presence. Some of the contributors possess this skill in greater proportion than others, but in almost all of them, as we shall see, there appears a persistent wavering or slipping between the two positions, which is the most striking evidence of the tension or difficulty in the common strategy which I have argued to be theirs. It is not only the difficulty of maintaining the first position which should make us hesitate before criticising such an instability. We must also bear in mind the siren attractions of the idea of the self-constituting human subject, in a political culture in which the free and autonomous individual represents the highest value. To lay claim to this highest value for our subaltern peoples represents an overwhelmingly attractive and apparently effective move, creating possibilities for retributive polemic along the lines of primordial being and distinctive identity, which far outstrip any to be had in a nuanced focus upon practice alone. We can be sure, moreover, that none of the genres of dominant historiography with their own much more towering subject-agents,

are about to perform any act of deconstruction upon themselves, thus giving us very little incentive at all to refrain from taking up the same metaphysical weapons in our own cause.

It is also worth noting that very similar dilemmas have beset other projects intent upon restoring the subordinate and the marginal to history. Since the publication of his work on the English working class in 1963, written against what he regarded as a reductive Marxist economism, as well as the silences in official British historiography, Edward Thompson's project has been to rescue the authentic experience of those sections of England's pre-industrial working class absent from official histories, and to employ this recovered experience to show how these groups were able, by recognising their essential identity and interests as a class, to become active historical agents, to exert some control over the conditions of their own existence. The criticisms of Thompson's work, and, by implication, of those of the numerous social historians now writing in the same idiom, range over a set of issues strikingly similar to those raised in the Subaltern project: those of an essentialism arising from the assertion of an irreducibility and autonomy of experience, and a simple-minded voluntarism deriving from the insistence upon a capacity for self-determination.¹⁶ There is another very strong parallel in feminist projects of historical and literary reconstruction. As Toril Moi has pointed out, the framework within which almost all Anglo-American feminist writing in these fields has been cast is that of a search for a history, or a literature, 'of their own:' an idiom which contains within it the suggestion of an original female nature or essence, which will provide a firm ground of truth for those engaged in the search, and a means of testing the authenticity of what they find. Moi notes the undoubted polemical advantages of such a suggestion, but is also very clear as to its ultimate limitations as a strategy for restoring the presence of women to literature or to history.¹⁷

It will be clear, then, that the progression of ideas which I have argued to underlie, and to give unity and coherence to the Subaltern project, is not without great difficulties of its own, to which I shall return. But what is important to note here is the structure of the strategy which is being pursued, the way in which it challenges prevailing

orthodoxies, and its strength and potential in a field in which so much value is vested in the autonomous subject, on the one hand, and 'the masses' or 'the people,' on the other. Given the strength, the possibilities, and the interest of the issues raised in such a strategy, I find two things puzzling. The first is the refusal of the contributors to own to any set of common suppositions beyond a general orientation of interest. Usually one of the most theoretically astute of their number, Partha Chatterjee prefaces his important explanatory essay by denying any fundamental theoretical position in common between the contributors, except for a dissatisfaction with current historiographical orthodoxies.¹⁸ Yet he concludes the essay by making just this point, that a most effective way of breaking up the false ideological totalities of nationalist, colonialist and Marxist historiography is precisely by reopening the question of subaltern consciousness.¹⁹ The second puzzle is the weakness and confusion of much critical response to the project, and in particular the failure of Marxist critics to grasp what is distinctive and important about it. The closest that we come to such a recognition is in the collective review published in *Social Scientist* in 1984, where it is pointed out that the contributors have made of the subaltern a subject-agent, in the manner of bourgeois humanism, which accords ill with the structural and materialist emphases of a proper Marxist historiography. Having made this important identification, however, the authors do not pursue the point about the strategic potential, for histories of the subordinate, of subjectivity in a culture which places such supreme value on it, or of the possibilities of restoring presence without essentialism. Rather, the issue of the subject-agent is brushed aside as an old one, and said to have been resolved conclusively by Louis Althusser in his exchange with John Lewis over the discourse of idealist history.²⁰ Instead, the contributors are enjoined to take a better account of the familiar preoccupations of Marxist historiography: the structure of agrarian society, the importance of activist leadership, the centrality of the anti-imperialist struggle.

Yet misunderstanding of the contributors' work is not simply the product of insensitivity or careless reading. It arises further when the instability in the argument which I noted above is placed in the

context of the juxtaposition or dichotomy between elite and subaltern itself, and the associated notion of the 'autonomy' of the latter's experience. It is this juxtaposition or dichotomy, of course, which not only allows us to think about the subordinate as a kind of category, but which introduces the emphasis upon power and dominance in their mutual relations, which is another distinctive feature of the contributors' work. It is important to clarify the purpose of this dichotomy, the ways in which it may most fruitfully be used, in part because it has been so widely taken to represent what is distinctive about the Subaltern project, and in part because the confusion surrounding it reinforces the sense that the contributors do not have any joint theoretical contribution to make, but are brought together only by a diffuse focus on the heterogeneous and analytically unusable category of the subaltern.

Much criticism has been directed, as we shall see, at the apparent implication of a crude social division between those on top and those underneath. Now the point about the dichotomy, I believe, if it is to be used in any effective way, is that it actually contains two separate propositions, the first of which is prior to the second. The first proposition, which we might call the theoretical one is, as the very generality of the two blocks should indicate, not concerned with categorising actually existing social groups at all, but with making a point about power. This is that what is fundamental to relationships in South Asian society is not negotiation, consensus or common contribution, but domination: exercised over the weak, where possible, without overt conflict, through modes of hegemonic appropriation and legitimation; and where necessary, through actual violence and coercion. It is here that the assertion of subaltern autonomy belongs: as Partha Chatterjee indicates, the purpose of this assertion 'is precisely to conceptualise this domination as a relation of power.'²¹ The point of making such a general proposition about power is to undermine the liberal assumption of a plurality in social structures and of consensus in a shared culture which, in different ways, underlies both colonial and nationalist historiographies; but to make this point about power in a way which is not immediately assimilable to an economic Marxism.

The second proposition, which we might call the substantive one, is that we should seek to understand how different forms of domination have operated in the societies of the subcontinent. The categories which we employ in the actual task of analysis will not be those of monolithic blocks at all, since the existence of such totalities has proved so distorting in the genres of elite historiography. Having made the statement about power and domination, rather, the categories which we must employ to understand their workings must be as multifarious and nuanced as the courses and ligaments through which power itself runs.

The confusion surrounding the dichotomy—a confusion which besets critics and some contributors alike—is that the two propositions are not made explicit and kept separate. Rather, some of the contributors employ the first as the instrument of the second, making the dichotomy itself an instrument for direct application to their historical material, so that elite and subaltern groups are made to appear as distinct social entities. This is, of course, to take the argument of subaltern autonomy quite literally, rather than as making a point about power. It is certainly very easy to see how this might be done, in view of what I have identified as the strategic importance of the statement that the subaltern has a history, an identity and practice, that are *his own*. Yet the result is that the argument degenerates into an unhelpful set of assertions to the effect that subaltern groups generated their own traditions and pursued their political projects quite independently of anyone else, and especially of the Indian National Congress. By no means all of the contributors make such a move, and where it is made it does not always result in this reduction to what is sometimes no more than a set of clichés underlying the empirical material. In particular, I want to distinguish Ranajit Guha's work in the book *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency* here. Yet the literal interpretation of subaltern autonomy, and the use of the dichotomy itself as an instrument for direct social analysis, appear in the contributions with a troubling frequency. Stephen Henningham's essay on the Quit India campaign in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh places its central emphasis upon *the revolt's dual quality, whereby it comprised not one but two interacting insurgencies. One insurgency was an elite nationalist*

*uprising of the high caste rich peasants and small landlords who dominated the Congress. The other insurgency was a subaltern rebellion in which the initiative belonged to the poor, low caste people of the region.*²² Not only was the initiative all their own, 'achieved in the absence of overall co-ordination' with the arrest of most leading nationalist activists,²³ but they also came endowed with their own distinctive modes of consciousness, 'the subaltern world vision.' Their popular nationalism was imbued with a characteristically subaltern religious consciousness, while their entry into political action was distinguished by 'the articulation of a moral justification, in terms of their consciousness, for acts of physical force.'²⁴

In the fourth volume, both Ramachandra Guha and Swapan Dasgupta take it that the main point of the enterprise should be to delineate a distinctive area of consciousness and initiative, originating with the subaltern, as against those of an elite-dominated Congress. Investigating protest movements against the increasing exactions of the Forest Department and its officials in the village communities of British Kumaun at the turn of the century, one of Ramachandra Guha's main purposes is to demonstrate that these communities mobilised on their own, on the basis of ancient community solidarities and sets of values. Not only was Richard Tucker wrong to assume that these movements were led in any way by nationalist activists from outside²⁵ but the values which underlay them were absolutely distinct: 'For the Kumaun peasant the cohesion and collective spirit of the village community provided the main spring of political action. . . . Expressed through the medium of popular protest were conflicting theories and social relationships that virtually amounted to two world-views.'²⁶ Swapan Dasgupta's account of Adivasi politics in Midnapur between 1760 and 1924 sets out to make very similar points. His aim is to demonstrate the existence of the 'autonomous political tradition' of the Adivasis of this area.²⁷ Despite some links with the local Congress, these communities mobilised themselves essentially from within: 'Elite politics in Midnapur had thus only a very tenuous connection with the autonomous mobilisation of this particular section of the subaltern. Adivasi insurgency belonged on the whole to another domain of politics.' This mobilisation arose out

of their own original traditions: 'an alternative conception of justice born out of fundamentally different sets of values.'²⁸ Even Tanika Sarkar, who, as we shall see, displays a very sophisticated sense of the processes of reconstruction and metamorphosis at work in Santal 'tradition,' and of the tension and ambiguity with which these were accompanied, still holds on to a notion of Santal identity as in some sense *originary*. The transformations of that tradition represented, albeit in an ambiguous and uncertain way, 'the Santal's flight from himself'²⁹ and the symbolic battle to appropriate a mosque, with which Jitu Santal's battle ended, leads her to conclude that 'the Santal thus returned to his indigenous code of belief.'³⁰

The difficulty arises in examples such as these, as I have argued, from a tension in the progression of ideas which underlies their accounts and which, insufficiently understood, produces the slide towards essentialism which we see here. It is a similar essentialism which Dipankar Gupta has identified in the work of Ranajit Guha: an 'ethnicised history' in Guha's conception of a primordial and autonomous insurgent peasant tradition running right through Indian history, which implies, in almost Hegelian fashion, that the 'independent organising principle of the insurgent's mind' is what actually moves the historical process forward.³¹ Gupta pinpoints exactly what are the historiographical difficulties in this undoubted tendency towards idealism. It shuts off the whole field of external structural interaction and determination, so that 'the potentialities of a movement and its final limits are ... understood in terms of what the culture allows and not in terms of what the structure forecloses.'³² This 'culturological' style of explanation, present in the work of some of the contributors, is carried to an extreme in Guha's *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency*, and renders particularly weak his attempts to document any of the 'real' structures outside the subjective world of the insurgent. Guha explains the failure of peasant movements to spread beyond their own limited territories, for example, in terms of their 'habit of thinking and acting on a small and local scale' rather than considering 'what could have been the structural features of colonial societies, or even of pre-modern societies, which could have accounted for the spatial circumscription of the peasant movements.'³³

At this level, of course, Gupta is quite right. There is a real historiographical difficulty in this apparent idealism, and in particular in Guha's drive to posit an originary autonomy in the traditions of peasant insurgency. He does at times appear to be approaching a pure Hegelianism, as in his criticism of the way in which, in elite historiography, 'insurgency is regarded as *external* to the peasant's consciousness, and Cause is made to stand in as a phantom surrogate for Reason, the logic of that consciousness.'³⁴ Yet Gupta does not, it seems to me, grasp that this drive towards the originary is the outcome of a tension in the difficult strategy which underlies the Subaltern project, but sees it only as an old-fashioned idealism which is the product of an uninformed employment of anthropological concepts and methods. The problem with Gupta's reluctance to consider the broader issues which the strategy raises in any other way is not only that he hastens what is intended to be a project of deconstruction and critique too rapidly back to a world of determination with whose deficiencies it is all too familiar. It is also that we are left with the unfortunate, and I think unintended, impression, that the historiographical issue at stake is that of man's freedom as against the determining power of his external world. But this very juxtaposition, of the free man as against the man determined, is itself an idealist conception, in which the mode of existence of the unitary subject-agent is never called into question. Man under this conception can either be free or he can be bound; but in either case, he himself looks very much the same. A Subaltern strategy, reconstructed along the lines I have suggested, might be used to recover the presence of the subordinate without slipping into an essentialism, by revealing that presence to be one constructed and refracted through practice, but no less 'real' for our having said that it does not contain its own origins within itself. Such a strategy would not only be able to subvert the selfconstituting subject of idealism, but much more subtly and effectively to address the undoubted historiographical problem of determination. Other critics, however—and this seems to me quite understandable, in view of the confusion over the purpose of the dichotomy and the assertion of subaltern autonomy which I have described—have written rather less perceptively than Gupta. In a review of the second volume,

Anand Yang takes its authors to task for not having precisely and rigorously defined the concept of the subaltern as a substantive social category: for their apparent application of the term to anyone and everyone oppressed by the Raj, whereas in actuality very significant differences existed within such an enormous mass of humanity, making the dichotomy quite inadequate as an instrument of social analysis.³⁵ Of the third volume, Majid Siddiqi asks how the possibility of subordinate groups being exploiters in one context, and exploited in another, can be consonant with any idea of genuine autonomy.³⁶

I want now to turn to these same issues in Ranajit Guha's work, where the drive to identify the peasant insurgent as a conscious subject-agent appears to be made, not in any wavering semi-awareness of its significance and consequences, but with great deliberation and purposefulness. For—and this is a passage insufficiently noted by his critics—Guha makes it clear at the start of *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency* that 'it is rebel consciousness which will be allowed to dominate the present exercise. We want to emphasise its sovereignty, its consistency and its logic in order to compensate for its absence from the literature.'³⁷ It is clear that Guha construes the category of the subaltern to be a substantive social one. The subaltern classes literally represent 'the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the elite.'³⁸ The repressiveness of elite historiography, itself generated by the counter-insurgency concerns of the colonial state, consists precisely in its refusal to the peasant of recognition as a subject of history, even for a project that was all his own.³⁹ The insurgent consciousness or mind of this collective subject-agent, its essential unity and autonomy, and its pervasion of all particular historical forms, are explained with the help of reference to Hegel's *Logic*. The common form of insurgency

is not a generality which is 'something external to, or something in addition to' other features or abstract qualities of insurgency discovered by reflection. On the contrary, 'it is what permeates and includes in it everything particular'—a pervasive theoretical consciousness which gives insurgency its categorical unity.⁴⁰

Yet this deliberate drive towards unity and origins, the prerequisites of humanism's subject-agent, is not without its own tensions and

contradictions, not only in the assumptions on which it is made, but in the rich documentation of the insurgent peasant's subjective world which constitutes the main body of the book. The assumptions which underlie it become clearer if we look at Guha's attacks on what he regards as elitist theories of causation. We have already noted his hostility to the way in which 'insurgency is regarded as *external* to the peasant's consciousness.' What he confuses here, it seems to me, is the reduction of insurgent consciousness to its causes, to which he is certainly quite right in objecting, with the matter of externality. His fear seems to be that any suggestion of such an externality, that the peasant does not bear the founding *causes* of his insurgency within his own consciousness, will be enough to empty or extinguish that consciousness, to deny its existence in the manner of elite historiography. Seen from this perspective, his forceful insistence upon humanism's unitary subject-agent in its most extreme form, and his use of Hegelian ideas to make of insurgency a 'mind' which draws all particular historical forms into its own founding unity, become comprehensible. In not seeing beyond humanism's myths of origin to the possibility of a presence without essence, he assumes that the latter alone will be enough to secure the return of the insurgent peasant to history.

A further paradox, and one that is not confined to Guha's work, is that the process by which the insurgent actually arrives at a sense of himself is through negation: as Guha says, 'not by the properties of his own social being, but by a diminution, if not negation, of those of his superiors.'⁴¹ This, more than anything, should suggest that this self was constantly in the process of production, and that, too, mediated through symbols and signs which were external to it, those of elite authority. Within the limits of this contradiction, however, Guha and others have entered and begun to chart what must be a vital area—for anyone concerned with relationships of power and the possibilities and limitations of resistance. The idea of 'identity' is itself a highly problematic one, always implying the duplication of an original whose locus and manner of existence remain elusive. Analysis of the process whereby the subject arrives at a sense of 'identity,' and the place of an Otherness in that capacity to identify is, of course, the concern of a very large field of psychoanalytic theorising, as well as

having been a central preoccupation of existentialist thought. The insights generated in these two fields have been applied most successfully to non-Western contexts, to explore the tortuous relationship between the coloniser and his other, the native, between the projection of the former's repressed desire and the latter's dehumanisation in the discourses and forms of knowledge which colonialism produces, by Frantz Fanon and then, more recently, by Edward Said.⁴² It hardly needs to be emphasised what an important and complex field is this production of the self in the colonial context, particularly of the self of the colonised. For we have not only the approved selves which the coloniser attempts to produce for the native and to constitute as the sole area of legitimate public reality, but the continual struggle of the colonised to resolve the paradoxes which this displacement and dehumanisation of indigenous processes of identification sets up in his daily existence. Moreover, as Homi Bhabha points out, the desire of the native to supplant the coloniser is not thereby a desire simply to extinguish himself as a slave but, in a splitting of the self always associated with the dominated in the colonial context as elsewhere, to stand in two places, and 'keeping his place in the slave's avenging anger,' to witness himself triumphant.⁴³

The explorations of the theme of negation in the series have much to contribute to this field, and also, I think, something further to glean from it. With the focus on the subaltern's negativity, we include another dimension in the conflicted process of identification under colonialism: that of the subordinate within the ranks of the colonised. The theme of negation runs right through *Elementary aspects*, and Guha draws on a most impressive range of exemplary material to illustrate the purposefulness and discrimination with which peasants violated the symbols of the dominant, both indigenous and colonial: speech, both verbal and written; bodily gestures and social space, clothing, means of transport, the ostentation of wealth in domesticity.⁴⁴ His grasp of the importance of the violation of signs, precisely as a process of identification, is a wonderful antidote to an instrumentalist notion both of the way in which power works upon its object, and of fixed categories of action themselves which are 'symbolic,' as opposed to real or material. Tanika Sarkar's study of the reconstruction

of Santal identity during Jitu Santal's movement draws our attention very importantly to the fact that it was not only through the negation of the signs of elite authority that the Santal moved towards a sense of his own identity. Jitu also expressed a strong hostility and contempt for Muslims and Hindu low castes and untouchables. Thus 'the "other" that defines the subaltern's self-consciousness need not then only be the elite groups exerting dominance; it may equally be the classes and groups that lie even lower in the hierarchy, and the striving to maintain a distance from them may be the most important content of his self-image and self-respect.'⁴⁵

Yet we should note a further point, which needs to be made a little clearer in the contributors' treatment of negation. This is that the insurgent did not invariably wish to destroy the signs of authority, but very often preserved and appropriated them for himself. This was not merely the kind of discrimination between friend and foe which Guha describes, emerging out of the peasant's obscure sense of the real connections of power between the disparate groups who wielded authority over him.⁴⁶ Rather, it was the symbols of the latter which were at issue, forming the object alternatively of the peasant's anger, and of his desire: negation took the form of the peasants' attempt to destroy or appropriate for themselves the signs of the authority of those who dominate them.⁴⁷ David Arnold records this complex mingling between desire and destructiveness in the *fituris* of the late nineteenth century among the hillmen of Andhra Pradesh, and describes the inversions which it brought about: 'To seize and burn a police station, to brandish weapons or to don the uniforms of the vanquished constables, was a spectacular inversion of the oppression hillmen had so recently suffered: they were on top now, and it was the policemen who begged for their lives to be spared.'⁴⁸ 'Inversion' is, of course, the figure which many of the contributors use to describe negativity in action. Yet Arnold's account here gives us something further, a sense of the importance of desire in negativity, of precisely that wish to stand in two places at once, which underlies it and makes it comprehensible. For, as he points out, inversion viewed thus constitutes not only resistance, but the limits of its own particular form, the peasant's 'incapacity for real revolution, that is, structural change.'⁴⁹

For all of Guha's emphasis, quite deliberately made, on the internal world of the subaltern, we should note that he is not content to leave this as an overt idealism. Rather—and here one can only admire his furious pursuit of consistency and comprehensiveness—he brings idealism and materialism together in a wrenching move which eliminates any of the mediations between consciousness and structure which are the stuff of most conventional historical narratives. The polarisation of consciousness between elite and subaltern, and the long history of hostility between them, are nothing other than the reflection of a long-standing divide in the material structures of Indian society itself: between the peasant on the one hand, and the collusive forces of landlord, moneylender and colonial state on the other, who established 'a composite apparatus of dominance' over him.⁵⁰ And it is this dominance in the end, it seems, which is the source not only of the ways in which insurgents organise themselves, but of insurgent consciousness itself: 'What the pillars of society fail to grasp is that the organising principle lies in nothing other than their own dominance. For it is the subjection of the rural masses to a common source of exploitation and oppression that makes them rebel even before they learn how to combine in peasant organisations.'⁵¹ Thus, insurgent subjectivity and the determination of material structures of dominance stand mutually opposed, but in a curious disconnection: the latter appearing, in a highly deterministic fashion, responsible not only for the existence, but for the very form of the first, while the former, in its prescribed sovereignty, forbids us to make any such allusion to a cause beyond itself. It is very likely, indeed, that this is precisely the effect Guha intends: contradictory, no doubt, but no more so than much of the historiographical field in which he has to work.

Before leaving this issue of autonomy, I should like to make two further points. The first is that the Althusserian phrase, 'relative autonomy,' taken up by Sumit Sarkar and Partha Chatterjee, among others, as a way of attempting to avoid the implication of an absolute disjunction between the worlds of the elite and the subaltern, seems to me further to confuse the issue.⁵² Certainly, we want to find ways of connecting the classes and communities of South Asian society, and the idea of 'relative autonomy' certainly suggests a connectedness,

although with an air of analytical power which is quite specious, since its employment to suggest relationships within the social field is quite alien to the purpose for which Althusser developed it, in his suggestion of the modified determining power operating between the three 'instances'—economic, political, ideological-cultural—which compose the social formation, in place of Marxism's conventional base-superstructure model. Implying that it is a modification in the autonomy of the subaltern which is required only serves to reinforce the misconception that it is intended as a substantive social category, rather than a statement about power, and gives us no way out of the essentialism to which such a misconception tends to lead.

The second point is that while I have laid great emphasis on this constitution of the autonomous subject-agent, we should also notice that there is a theme in some of the essays to which several critics have pointed, and which appears to cut across it. This is, as Dipankar Gupta points out in his critique of Guha's work, the imposition of what looks very like the kind of unsophisticated Marxist teleology, assigning value and significance in the extent to which consciousnesses are more or less 'developed' which was supposed to be one of the objects of the Subaltern project's attack.⁵³ Such a tendency, an attempt to trace a unitary 'learning' process, undoubtedly exists in Guha's work. However, we can hardly accuse him of ignoring in consequence the specificity of the forms of nineteenth-century peasant insurgency, even if he does assign them places on a notional evolutionary curve. As I remarked earlier, moreover, the problem of mapping what on the surface look like quite fundamental transformations of mentality, of noting their origins and their consequences for the peasant in his relationship to the state or to organised religion, without slipping into a rigid teleology or a denial of historical specificity, is a genuine problem for all historians of the recent non-European world and Guha seems to me to have made strenuous efforts to tread between these two.

Less wary contributors do not make this negotiation quite so successfully. In his reconstruction of agrarian protest in twentieth-century Bihar, Arvind Das sees nothing very mysterious or difficult to understand in the nature of peasant consciousness or practice. What peasants want is perfectly clear, and that is land; the problem

is whether or not they should seek alliances in the organised political world to try to get it. This seems to me a good example of a large genre of well-intentioned scholarly concern with economic welfare in contemporary India whose unfortunate, and ironically impoverishing assumption is that for the poor of modern India, questions of strategy and instrumentality have succeeded those of culture or value. In Das's case, this is in spite of concerns not reducible in this way, which he himself gives us, such as the Bhojpuri widow whom he quotes as saying that for her the struggle against landlords and police was a matter of dignity or honour.⁵⁴ For Das, such concerns, and the peasant's diffusion of energy over a heterogeneous collection of issues, such as exploitation by indigo planters, the unjust settlement of a landed estate, social degradation and low wages, are misguided and regrettable. They lead the peasants 'to ignore the basic question of land distribution, and to take up other, subsidiary issues in its place.'⁵⁵ Very interestingly, the subaltern's sense of 'dignity' is something that crops up again in N.K. Chandra's essay on agricultural workers in Burdwan, where the concern is also primarily with 'welfare' questions of wages, working conditions, nutrition and education. Chandra records the growing insistence of labourers that they should be able to eat their meals in their own homes, even if these had actually been prepared in their employers' kitchens. Explained only as the product of 'poverty and a desire to assert their independence' this insight is lost beneath the drive to gather information about the externals of the labourer's existence, on the assumption that he is now the proper subject of the welfare worker and the local activist.⁵⁶ Whatever his pressing need for their services, such an assumption is as impoverishing and oppressive in its own way, as the material deprivations of which he is the victim.

Having argued there to be a recognisable strategy underlying the work of the contributors, and identified some of its difficulties, I turn now to its consequences for the treatment of two themes absolutely central to the project: those of domination or hegemony in South Asia, and the nature and possibilities of resistance to it. From the invocation of Gramsci in the category of the subaltern itself, and from the general emphases of the project, we would expect this theme to be one of its greatest strengths. Before we go on to look at this in detail, it is worth reminding ourselves of the formidable Western critique,

both of traditional Western philosophy's essentialising search for origins, and of its product in humanism's self-constituting subject, against which this attempt at recuperation of a non-Western subject-agent is made. This critique, which had its most important origins in Marx and Nietzsche, is now, of course, a dominant theme in many fields of theory: perhaps best represented in political theory of a conventional kind by Louis Althusser, and in history and theory of a less easily classifiable sort, in the work of Michel Foucault. There can be little doubt, moreover, that this attack on humanism's subject—encountered in history as the agent who produces it, and of whose experience all history is the continuous expression, in literature, in the notion of the author and his autonomous creativity, and in philosophy, in the assumption of a unitary sovereign consciousness—has been extremely fruitful and liberating. Critics have attempted to dismantle this figure—which is, needless to say, a masculine one—in very varied ways, but all of which recognise in its insistence upon us all as fundamentally free, equal and autonomous selves, a profoundly repressive strategy of power. For the Marxist tradition, Althusser has been most effective in pointing out its consequences, in masking the real constraint and inequality which is at the foundation of capitalist society, and in making 'responsible' for their own history classes whose real powerlessness must forever condemn them to failure within its terms. Marx's theoretical anti-humanism meant

a refusal to root the explanation of social formations and their history in a concept of man with theoretical pretensions, that is, a concept of man as an *originating subject*. . . . For when you begin with man, you cannot avoid the idealist temptation of believing in the omnipotence of liberty or of creative labour—that is, you simply submit, in all 'freedom', to the omnipotence of the ruling bourgeois ideology, whose function is to mask and to impose, in the illusory shape of man's power of freedom, another power, much more real and much more powerful, that of capitalism.⁵⁷

Yet it is Foucault, of course, who has constructed our most powerful critique here, not only of Man as a universal category, but of the way in which modern societies discipline and subjugate their populations through the production, in the discourses of the human sciences, of norms of thought and behaviour which lay down the sort

opened up in which subaltern groups may speak for themselves and present their hidden past in their own distinctive voices, whose authenticity in turn acts as the guarantee of the texts themselves. We recognise that this is a conceit, of course, but it is a very powerful one, and we must ask ourselves whether we are in danger in using it to turn the silence of the subaltern into speech, but to make their words address our own concerns, and to render their figures in our own self image. For my contention here is not only that the recuperation of the subject-agent imposes real limitations on our ability to comprehend the workings of power upon its object, but that its unguarded pursuit produces a diminution in the only constant feature of the subaltern's 'nature' which we can identify with any certainty, which is its alienness from our own. It can become a drive just as Baudrillard says, 'to keep the masses *within reason*,⁶¹ a joining in that common abhorrence, which marks our own age, that they should remain mute before all our meanings and ideals: 'Everywhere the masses are encouraged to speak, they are urged to live socially, electorally, organisationally, sexually, in participation, in free speech, etc. The spectre must be exorcised, it must pronounce its name.'⁶² We will return to this theme in our conclusion, and turn now to examine the contributors' treatment of the themes of power and resistance.

The first difficulty refers to the way in which the contributors represent the collective traditions and cultures of subordinate groups. Dipankar Gupta has already criticised very perceptively the tendency to attribute a timeless primordiality to these: not only in Guha's work, but in, for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of the 'primordial loyalties' of religion, community, kinship and language which was the 'essence' of the pre-capitalist culture of the Calcutta jute-mill worker,⁶³ in Sumit Sarkar's assumption of a timelessness in the cultural significance of the figure of the *sannyasi*, or of Stephen Henningham's invocation of the 'traditional consciousness' of the peasant insurgent in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh.⁶⁴ This is not merely poor historical or anthropological practice; it undermines just that sense of power which it is the contributors' concern to restore. We can best see how this is so in Partha Chatterjee's notion, developed in essays in the first and second volumes of the series, of a 'peasant-communal ideology.'

This ideology, 'acting as a live force in the consciousness of the peasantry' held the community itself to possess an authority over the land which was prior to that of any single individual, so that legitimate political power was itself 'organised as the authority of the entire collectivity.' These shared values acted above all to mediate the peasant community's relations with the potentially threatening political forces of the world beyond it, through 'norms of reciprocity, formulated in an entire system of religious beliefs—origin myths, sacred histories, legends—which laid down the principles of political ethics and were coded into a series of acts and symbols denoting authority and obedience, benevolence and obligation, or oppression and revolt.'⁶⁵ This model of collective political authority holds good for all peasant communities: 'When a community acts collectively, the fundamental political characteristics are the same everywhere.'⁶⁶

The important and deleterious consequence of this portrayal is that it restores, within a redrawn and smaller notion of the collectivity, exactly that impression of unity and consensus, of the absence of relationships of power, which is intended to be the object of attack. The ideology of the collective authority of the peasant community is seen primarily as providing strategies for resistance to external coercion. There is very little sense that the same ideology might be employed within the collectivity, for the suppression of those not counting as the 'individuals' of which Chatterjee speaks: women, untouchables, labourers and so on. Certainly, he says, these bonds of affinity offer 'possibilities of manipulation.' But 'the point which distinguishes the communal mode from other modes or organisations of power is this: here is not a perception of common interests which compels organisation to achieve unity; there is rather the conviction that bonds of affinity *already exist* which then become the natural presupposition for collective action.'⁶⁷ Presumably Chatterjee does not wish to imply a perfect equilibrium of material and political forces within any peasant community: in which case, we are entitled to ask, whose conviction is this and how widely is it actually shared as a 'natural' assumption, rather than as a product of anything similar to the calculation of interests and formation of alliances which he regards as the essential feature of the differently constructed realm of organised

politics.' The point is that if the contributors are to maintain the radical impetus of their emphasis on power, it is vital that it should not be brought to a halt through a static idea of the subaltern collectivity: whether in the shape of this apparently 'natural' community, or in the unitary 'moral economy' of which many contributors speak, or in any other laying down of a preordained subject-position which can stand outside the fluctuations of human existence to impose an order of value or of narrative. I do not mean to imply by this that we should thereby surrender the search for the regularities of practice or the schemes of value through which subordinate groups attempt to bring order and coherence into their existence, but rather that we should not forget that such order can only ever represent the contingent and temporary creation of this practice, a creation capable of being turned to effect in repressive ways within their number, as well as of conducting to their mutual understanding and solidarity. What is interesting, indeed, is that just the same issue, of the attempt to re-introduce homogeneity and consensus within a redrawn idea of an essential collectivity, has arisen in feminist debate. Toril Moi describes how minority feminist groups have forced white heterosexual feminists 'to re-examine their own sometimes totalitarian conception of "woman" as a homogeneous category.' To maintain the radical thrust of feminist criticism, she argues, these groups 'ought to prevent white middle class First World feminists from defining their own preoccupations as *universal* female (or feminist) problems.'⁶⁸

From this strategic weakness in the treatment of power, I come now to the discussion of resistance, and to a difficulty which arises out of the way in which contributors envision and classify fields of activity—the political, the economic, the cultural—symbolic. There has been a criticism of the project, from without as well as within, that the contributors have dwelt largely on moments of overt resistance and revolt.⁶⁹ This tendency is, of course, the product of the insistence on agency itself: the demand for a spectacular demonstration of the subaltern's independent will and self-determining power. This means, as has been accepted, that there has been little sustained focus upon the continuities in subaltern culture. The notable exception here would be Cyan Pandey's study of the town of Mubarakpur in eastern Uttar Pradesh, seen through the eyes of two very different chroniclers:

an obscure weaver, Abdul Majid, and the member of a local zamindari family, Ali Hasan. Pandey employs the comparison not only to suggest the differences between what these accounts, and the narratives of official records, identified as 'events,' but to illuminate what was shared between these representatives from very different areas of Muslim society. What emerges most interestingly from both accounts is that although their authors possessed a strong sense of community,

this consciousness of community was an ambiguous one, straddling as it did the religious fraternity, class, qasba and mohalla. Here, as in Ali Hasan's account, the boundaries shift all the time. It is difficult to translate this consciousness into terms that are readily comprehensible in today's social science—Muslim/Hindu, working class/rentier, urban/rural—or even to argue that a particular context would inevitably activate a particular solidarity. What is clear is that Ali Hasan is quite untroubled by the problems that confound the modern researcher as he moves from one notion of the collective to another through the eighty-nine pages of his manuscript.⁷⁰

Pandey's reference to the habitual dichotomising of conventional social science, and its tendency to obscure the real ambiguity and contingency of the fixed identities for which we continually search, brings our attention to another pressing question in the contributors' treatment of cultural continuities, that of the classifications between fields referred to above. Beneath the tremendous variety in, the empirical material upon which the contributors draw, there very frequently appears a quite similar basic model of explanation: a long tradition of exploitation, or a shorter term economic dislocation, which provokes resistance and rebellion; challenges to landlords or the agents of the state, the appropriation or destruction of the signs and instruments of their authority. This action, which is independently generated and pursued, draws on the insurgents' own original culture for its values, its symbols and its means of organising. This is to state the argument as a caricature, of course, but not, I believe, to render it unrecognisable. The central limitation of such a model—a model which is very much the product of the unguarded pursuit of subjectivity and agency—is that it fails adequately to displace familiar classifications of activity—the economic, the political and the cultural—from their familiar and respected roles: roles which, in their insistence on a clear distinction

between the material and the ideal, the instrumental and the symbolic, have themselves been a formidable ally in elite historiography's denial of a political significance to a whole range of subaltern activity. In making this criticism, I do not in the least want to suggest that the contributors themselves lack such an awareness of the political: such an awareness is, indeed, one of the hallmarks of the project. The essays display, moreover, a very sharp sense of the employment of symbols, either as negation or as appropriation, as an integral part of political practice. We have already noted Ranajit Guha's treatment of these themes. David Hardiman's study of the drive towards purification and cleanliness—which marked the Devi movement in south Gujarat is also exemplary in this respect. Rejecting the depoliticising categories of Sanskritisation or revitalisation, Hardiman is clear that the desire for these symbols of dominance was a desire for power itself: "The values which the adivasis endorsed were those of the classes which possessed political power. In acting as they did, the adivasis revealed their understanding of the relationship between values and power, for values possess that element of power which permits dominant classes to subjugate subordinate classes, with a minimum use of physical force."⁷¹

The point, however, is that where resistance is concerned, the model which I have described above acts as a constraint upon our ability to incorporate into our material just this awareness of the real interpenetration of fields of activity conventionally separated as the instrumental and the symbolic. Tanika Sarkar has called attention to our need 'to be able to explain the attitudes of acceptance and submission which remain as strong if not much stronger than subaltern resistance.'⁷² This is undoubtedly true, yet it is not the case that after we have exhausted the overt and violent revolts of the subaltern, all that remains to us is to document his submission. The very problem of the model is its tendency to suppress strategies and efforts at resistance which do not take the masculine form of a full-blooded rebellion by a subject-agent such as it tends to have enshrined within it. To make this point, let us turn to N.K. Chandra's attempts to understand why there has been so little protest amongst agricultural workers in Burdwan, despite the wretchedness of their conditions. Yet the protest

which he seeks is of a very conventional 'political' kind: of organised labour, of a vigorous effort at political mobilisation, of a direct blow against the collusion of landlord and state. Yet evidence of resistance, of a kind which this implicit and instrumentalist classification of fields tends to overlook, is present in his own text: as we have already noticed, in the labourer's insistence on eating in his own home, but also in a wonderful description of the labourer and his wife's strategies for resisting conformity to the norm of conscientious worker—a norm, let us note, urged upon them by the local kisan leader and social worker:

A local worker, according to him, is rather inefficient and tries to take time off on one pretext or another. In the middle of the morning he wants to have a rest of between thirty-five and forty minutes in order to smoke a couple of *bidis* at leisure or go off to drink water. Even when both are supplied to him in the field, his wife may come by on the plea that he must attend to some urgent work at home. Constant supervision is needed to make him work properly. On top of this, barely an hour after he goes out to work, his wife appears almost everyday at the *malik's* residence demanding the daily wages in kind for her man. She keeps waiting and nagging until she gets it, but the *malik's* wife resents it. As soon as she gets the rice, the worker's wife runs down to the field to inform her husband who now slackens his pace. On occasion the latter goes home around ten in the morning to find out if his wife has got the rice.⁷³

We seem to be turning here, no doubt, to forms of resistance which are modest in the extreme: inscribed in small everyday acts, made in fields apparently quite disconnected from the political as it is conventionally understood, and as it is unfortunately and, I am sure, unintentionally made to appear in the model referred to above. Yet it is in its own way a series of negations, a refusal of approved forms of behaviour, even if these are made within a coercive framework which is not itself directly challenged. Moreover, we should not allow a desire to see direct or violent challenges to the basic matrix of domination either to lead us to assume that such challenges will always be the most effective means of the latter's subversion, or, indeed, that we should assign significance to the categories of resistance according to a pre-set standard of the spectacular and the successful. For, as Jean

Comaroff has noted of tribal life in another highly coercive political order, 'If we confine our historical scrutiny to revolutionary success, we discount the vast proportion of human social action which is played out on a humbler scale. We also evade, by teleological reasoning, the real questions that remain as to what *are* the transformative motors of history.'⁷⁴

If, therefore, we were to ask whether the focus on the subject-agent and his experience has enabled the series to contribute in any systematic or collective way towards understanding the operation of power on its object in colonial South Asia, the answer would have to be largely in the negative, in spite of the undoubted richness of the specific insights which many essays contain. Certainly, there is no concerted attempt to construct a theory of domination as *hegemony*, as the invocation of Gramsci might have led us to expect, and in this sense the critics Suneet Chopra and Javeed Alam seem to me quite accurate in their observation that the series has not turned out to be a Gramscian project at all.⁷⁵ If there is a reason outside the intentions of the contributors for this foreclosure, it seems very likely that it lies precisely in the common slippage which I identified above, towards using the dichotomy itself to supply a ready but crude framework for direct social application. The concepts of power which have actually been developed in the series are fragmentary and somewhat disconnected. I should like to mention two here. The first is Partha Chatterjee's notion of 'modes of power,' developed in his two essays on the Bengal peasantry. This concept, most fully elaborated in the idea of the 'peasant-communal' mode of power, is offered as a means of theorising 'the political instance' in a social formation, or rather, in the transition from one mode of production to another, and he is very explicit about his debt to Althusser here.⁷⁶ The concept of 'modes of power' has been the subject of extensive disagreement and, as Chatterjee says, still remains an abstract concept in his work. I shall not discuss this further, therefore, but make just two comments. The first is that we have returned with a vengeance to the world of impersonal structure and external determination. Recalling Althusser's own anti-humanism, it would have been useful if we could have had some overt public discussion of Chatterjee's differences with the humanist strategy of the

project at large. The second, as I have indicated above, is that it is very often just this assumption that we can readily identify autonomous—or, in Althusser's phrase, 'relatively autonomous' fields or 'instances': the economic, the political, the ideological-cultural—which has arisen as an impediment to our understanding of the way in which power takes effect: as a play of forces which continually moves across and bursts through our efforts to establish coherent fields of activity. Indeed, such efforts bear an uncomfortable similarity precisely to that conventional division between politics and culture, the instrumental and the symbolic, which operates in society at large, and in elite historiography, to mask the real mobility of power.

The second concept of power employed in the series is that of knowledge, given a field of structure and possibility in the form of discourse: a concept most associated, of course, with Foucault. We would expect that the contributors should be much aware of the potential power of discourses over those about whom they speak, for it is the dismantling of discourse, in the form both of historiography and of the texts produced by colonialism, which constitutes their main aim. Yet there is a problem here, which I believe is insufficiently noted in much contemporary theorising about the power of discourse, which does not find a resolution in the essays which discuss it here. This problem is of describing the process through which knowledge, structured, given legitimacy and a proper field for its operation in discourse, operates upon its objects: those 'subjects' who come within its jurisdiction. Within this analytic mode we frequently make reference to a very similar range of phenomena and processes as are more conventionally classified under the title of ideology. While Foucault's conception has the great advantage of its emphasis upon the material and institutional forms in which discourse is invested, it lacks the first concept's apparatus, well-worn though it is, for theorising or explaining the manner in which it has its effects upon its objects. Of course, almost all contemporary discussion of discourse stresses—and herein lies its appearance of great explanatory power—that it imposes a total milieu, institutional as well as intellectual and informational, to whose hegemonic sway its subjects must inevitably succumb. Colonial power thus derives its strength from two sources: from the material

ability to coerce which it brings with it in its armies, and from the Orientalist discourses of its second, shadow army of textual scholars, linguists, historians, anthropologists and so on. Now there can be no doubting the ability of colonial power, documented in Edward Said's classic work, to give material effect to its efforts to structure and provide fields for knowledge, through the establishment of a powerful institutional infrastructure. The problem with the argument as it is more generally employed, rather, is its tendency to assume that discourses have an existence which is prior to, and hence unsullied by, the interventions of those over whom they are to have jurisdiction. Rather, colonialism's discourses came into being as attempts at fields of knowledge precisely as a struggle between at least three parties: the Orientalist scholar, the native informant successful in convincing him of his authority to represent, and those others among the colonised unable to do so, but grievously aware of the potential disadvantages in which this would place them in any future political structure established under the colonial power. This struggle was the site not only of contested understandings, but also of deliberate misrepresentation and manipulation, in which the seemingly omnipotent classifications of the Orientalist were vulnerable to purposeful misconstruction and appropriation to uses which he never intended, precisely because they had incorporated into them the readings and the political concerns of his native informants. It is this sense of mutuality—not as common contribution, but as struggle and contestation—which is missing from much contemporary discussion of discourse, with its assumption that new fields of knowledge had only to be enunciated, for them to elicit mute obedience from those whom they purported to know. It is, indeed, this lack of any exploration of the theme of simultaneity and struggle which is responsible for the criticism most frequently levelled at Foucault's own conception: that it allows no room and no possibility for resistance to the fine meshes of knowledge's disciplinary and normalising power.⁷⁷ This is an absence, indeed, which is all the more surprising in view of his own stress on the mutuality, the ever-present possibility of reversal, in the play of power itself between agents.

This is not an issue which is very much illuminated in Bernard

Cohn's study, carried out within an overtly Foucaultian framework, of the 'invasion of an epistemological space' which took place in the Orientalist production of knowledge about Indian law, language and textual traditions.⁷⁸ This essay contains a most impressive documentation of the latter's compilatory and exegetical endeavours, and a wonderfully funny account of European attempts to arm themselves with fragments of the vernacular sharp-edged enough to cut decisively through the soft but treacherous world of Indian servanthood and populace. Yet it seems to me written a little too respectfully in the shadow of its own Foucaultian frame, in its assumption that we can capture a discursive formation before it is markedly affected by those over whom it exerts its power. The Indians, he concludes his study, who 'increasingly became drawn into the process of transformation of their own traditions and modes of thought' were 'far from passive'; but 'the delineation of the cumulative effect of the results of the first half-century of the objectification and reordering through the application of European scholarly methods on Indian thought and culture is beyond the scope of this essay.'⁷⁹

On the other hand, exactly this struggle and mutuality in the formation of knowledge is the subject of Dipesh Chakrabarty's examination of the relationship between the generation of colonial texts—in this case, the Calcutta jute mills' records about its workers—and their eventual contents. Chakrabarty refers to Foucault's point, that authority—in this case, the government of India and the capitalist mill-owners—'operated by forming "a body of knowledge" about its subjects.'⁸⁰ Yet as he investigates the symptomatic absences and inaccuracies in the knowledge produced in registers of labourers and their hours of work, in reports on housing, health and educational conditions, what is actually most striking is precisely the impotence, in different ways, both of the government of India and of the capitalists themselves, to generate documentation whose classifications and framed intent the objects of its knowledge would respect. Thus, the owners of the jute mills remained largely oblivious to the government's drive to amass information on a scale comparable to the detailed documentation available for the English factory worker, because the primitive nature of the production process itself demanded a constant

supply of labour, rather than a stable and trained workforce, whose health and housing might have aroused a more deliberate concern.⁸¹ The capitalists, on the other hand, faced the continual frustration that the information generated within the factories, mostly through factory registers, was always 'corrupted' and inaccurate: because, as Chakrabarty describes, the sardars responsible for maintaining them drew upon pre-capitalist notions of authority and community in their relations with the workforce, which accorded ill with bourgeois standards of legality, factory codes and service rules.⁸² The effect of such a contextualisation is to situate the colonial pursuit of knowledge within a process which circumscribes and sets conditions upon it: involving not merely the administrator's effort at control through knowledge, but also material production and the limitations and resistances to such control set up in the practice of its hoped-for objects.

Let us return now to the larger themes and questions under discussion, and to note that while in some respects the strategy for recovery employed in the Subaltern series has been strikingly fruitful, in others, especially the key area of power and resistance, the effect has tended to be one of a slow theoretical paralysis. Is this, then, another irony of history, doubly confirming the appropriative powers of the dominant discourse: that like the subaltern himself, those who set out to restore his presence end only by borrowing the tools of that discourse, tools which serve only to reduplicate the first subjection which they effect, in the realms of critical theory? If this is indeed the case, we should certainly hesitate before accepting Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's suggestion that the strategy of the Subaltern series 'in claiming a *positive* subject-position for the subaltern might be reinscribed as a strategy for our times.'⁸³ Nevertheless, this is the vital question which the contributors have raised for us: that of what form the presence of the subaltern might take, if it is not to be that of the autonomous subject-agent.

In speaking of the presence of the subaltern, we are, of course, referring primarily to a presence which is in some sense resistant: which eludes and refuses assimilation into the hegemonic, and so provides our grounds for rejecting elite historiography's insistence that the

hegemonic itself is all that really exists within, the social order. Our question, therefore, must in part be what kind of presence, what kind of practice, we would be justified in calling a resistant one: what is the best figure for us to cast it in, which will both reflect its fundamental alienness, and yet present it in a form which shows some part of that presence at least to stand outside and momentarily escape the constructions of dominant discourse. Let us note that we are engaged in two parallel projects here, between which there is a significant degree of tension: a tension which raises in the most pressing way the political status of our historical practice. As indeed the contributors have always been clear, theirs is a political project, as are in their different ways the genres of elite historiography. Yet to draw the conclusion, as Ranajit Guha does, that our efforts can be co-terminous with the struggles of the dispossessed, feeding directly into them by making sense of them, seems to me fundamentally misconceived.⁸⁴ We may wish in all faith for their freedom from marginality and deprivation, and do our best to cast our insights in a form which they will be able to use. But if we ask ourselves why it is that we attack historiography's dominant discourses, why we seek to find a resistant presence which has not been completely emptied or extinguished by the hegemonic, our answer must surely be that it is in order to envisage a realm of freedom in which we ourselves might speak. This is not to say that our project becomes thereby a private and merely selfish one: it is precisely on the predication of such a realm that we can think of our practice as a provider of insight and clarification. Our political concern is thus differently constructed from that of the subaltern. It contains a contradiction; but in such circumstances our best practice is to let it stand, as indeed Guha himself does in many other cases. To seek ways out of it, back to the realms of the absolute, whether in the form of post-structuralist Critic, or of the historian *engage*, serves only to reinforce the myth that there can be such a transcendent subject-position. It is this contradiction, containing a conceit of the profession which is very difficult to escape, which means that our desire to find a resistant presence will always be in tension, rather than as we might think convergent with, the need to preserve alienness and difference in the figure of the subaltern himself. It will only be a scrupulous

respect for this tension, moreover, which will keep our practice from slipping into what Baudrillard described as the obsessive demand of our political culture: from making the subaltern's voice heard, but construing it in the image of our own.

Let us turn back, then, to that category of the autonomous subject-agent, into which the discourse of liberal humanism invites us to step, under the appearance of that realm of liberty and of the universal, from which the dispossessed of our societies have been excluded, and whose restoration there will signal the end of dispossession. The idea of the self-constituting, self-determining individual, his reason enshrined in his sovereign consciousness, came into its full expression, as Michel Foucault has argued, during the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. The same period saw the culmination of another crucial process in the evolution of the modern state: the notional separation from it of 'civil society.' This is the sphere of private interests in general: the family, the church, the institutions of learning, trade unions, the media and cultural life, civic institutions; where the individual may exercise his rights and liberties, free from the immediate authority of the state: an authority which itself receives its legitimacy from its respect for and protection of those rights and liberties. It is Gramsci's distinctive contribution to political theory to have tried to map how this intermediary area between structure and superstructure, rather than the institutions overtly identified with the state alone, provides the terrain where classes contest for power and where hegemony is exercised. This is done most powerfully, in our own society, precisely because of the legitimating power of the sphere of civil society itself, the symbol in all its inviolability of the achievements of the Western political tradition, and what marks its politics off from those still enslaved to the state in its traditional form, or caught up in authoritarian dogma.

Where, in this field of civil society, with its myth of independence and political neutrality, does the figure of the sovereign subject-agent enter? Absolutely centrally, because he is its modal figure. It is for him that it is called into existence to provide the ground on which he realises the central features of his being: his liberty and his rights; in his unique individuality, his happiness; and, most importantly, the

fact that he possesses a double existence, one led in the private sphere of his home and his family, his personal interests and his leisure, and the other in the public realm of civil society. For the latter is not, in its overt distinction from the state, thereby relegated to the sphere of the private. On the contrary, precisely because of its power over the state, as the source of the latter's value and its legitimacy, civil society, the well-being and nourishment of its multiplicity of cultural, economic and civic institutions, becomes the focus of public concern *par excellence*; and this, too, in a manner which endows the individual who has, in all legitimacy, his practice and his interest within these institutions, with a public voice, of a different but equally powerful kind from that which he exercises within the overtly political institutions of the state. It seems to me impossible to place too much emphasis on this double characteristic of civil society, its capacity for political legitimisation, and the space for public concern and deliberation which it creates, just at that moment when it seems to be distancing itself from the formal political structures of the state. We should not assume, either, that these classifications are now just a matter of the history of political theory. One has only to note the huge critical acclaim and discussion which have surrounded John Rawls's *A theory of justice*, since its publication in 1971—a work which structures itself around a theory of social contract, of rights, liberties and rationality inherent in individuals—to appreciate their continuing centrality to our political culture.⁸⁵

It is through this double characteristic that the marginalisation of the subaltern acquires its particular character, and one that is distinct from what I have tried to suggest is, in the problems of recuperation it faces, a parallel dispossession—that of women. The latter is accomplished, as very many critics have noted, through the assimilation of large areas of female existence and concern into the private sphere of the family, and their exclusion from the field of public political culture in civil society. The subaltern is rendered marginal in quite a different way—in part through his inability, his poverty, his lack of leisure and his inarticulacy, to participate to any significant degree in the public institutions of civil society, with all the particular kinds of power which they confer; but most of all, and least visibly, through

his consequently weaker ability to articulate civil society's self-sustaining myth.

If these dispossessions are constructed in different ways, however, surely their resolution will be the same: that of stepping into the realm of civil society as sovereign subject-agent, and into the full enjoyment of its double persona. This is, of course, one of the central conceits of the modern Western state in its dealings in this field: that it has been able to realise and to preserve such a realm of neutral freedom, but that obstacles have arisen in the way of all of its population reaching it. We should also note that this conceit has been reproduced exactly in the impression that feminist issues, or indeed regional concerns such as the Subaltern project, represent essentially *neglected* areas, presently the concern of a worthy minority of historians and critics, but which require only to be restored to the whole for matters to be put right. We might also say that it has been reproduced in the delineation of ex-colonial societies themselves as an area of special interest, which will be ended in their restoration to the proper form and fruits of the modern Western state. Yet, as Sabyasachi Bhattacharya has pointed out, no such proposals can be made without calling into question the structure and limitations of the whole.⁸⁶ For the figure of the subject-agent is not a universal, but a highly specific one, whose autonomy and self-determination will always render it unobtainable to all but the privileged. Not only is it unobtainable, but it also mocks the dispossessed, impressing upon them that it is only their shortcomings—their fecklessness as subalterns, their closeness to nature as women, their helpless addiction to authoritarian traditionalism as ex-colonial societies—which prevent them from being welcomed into its own numbers. It is this perspective above all which should make it clear to us that the concern with the subaltern, or indeed with women, is not a special interest. Rather, they provide both, the theoretical means, and the historical material, through which we may examine and call into question the very stuff of which civil society is made, to appreciate the strategies of power at work in its most cherished figures and self-images. Thus, the documentation of resistance, and that of a hegemony which does not believe in its own omnipotence, ultimately converge and are part of the same task. Resistance—those

moments in which the prizes and incentives of the dominant are refused, held inadequate or simply uncomprehended before the pressure of material want—leads us into the structures and appropriative tactics of the hegemonic itself, to demonstrate both the manner in which it works upon its object, and the limits of its power.

What, however, if hegemony is right to insist on its own omnipotence: if our project, rooted ultimately in our own striving to create an area of freedom in which we might conduct our own practice, is quite misplaced before its ability to appropriate and assimilate all real resistance? We must certainly take account of the argument that a hegemonic culture so conditions and mediates resistance, not only giving it its goals, but even marking its approval on its ends, that its appearance can only be an illusion, which underwrites that culture's own liberal self-image. In denying that this is the case, however, it seems best not to follow Partha Chatterjee when he says that 'the dominant group, in their exercise of domination, do not consume and destroy the dominated classes, for then there would be no relation of power, and hence no domination. For domination to exist, the subaltern classes must necessarily inhabit a domain that is their own, which gives them their identity, where they can exist as a distinct social form.'⁸⁷ This is misleading precisely because it rests upon the essentialism which we have noted: the notion that there is something inherently inextinguishable in the very form of the subaltern's own subjectivity. Rejecting the idea of inherent being, we must certainly face the possibility that the subaltern may be subject to such an intensity of ideological and material pressure that his consciousness and practice are indeed completely pervaded and possessed by it. It is possible to find fault with this argument, but on other grounds. This is in its assumption, very similar to what I identified in contemporary discussions of discourse, that the monolith of hegemony *precedes* resistance: that it will always provide the matrix or set the arena in which resistance will have to operate, and from which will spring its moulding power. This, what we might call the Swiss cheese theory of hegemony in its assumption that resistance can only crawl through the holes, is in its own way a myth of origins, for hegemony does not spring fully formed into being to be followed by a resistance which

must always operate within its pre-given confines. Rather, we should call to mind Gramsci's own insistence that the hegemonic is the articulation of a number of historic blocks, in the ability of a fundamental class to become, in its awareness that its own corporate interests transcend the purely economic, the spokesman of other, subordinate, groups, and to articulate the latter's overt interests to its own. For Gramsci, the specific moment of the political is enacted precisely on this site: through the struggle, in which, as he calls them, 'philosophies' or 'conceptions of the world' play a vital role, to exert leadership over a variety of groups, and to conform to its sway the institutions of civil society as well as the overtly political ones of the state. Thus each form of the hegemonic comes into existence around diversities of interest and potential sites for resistance which fracture and constrain it even as it exerts its conforming power.

If it is possible to postulate a site for resistance, therefore, this still leaves the larger problem of how we are to configure its presence. Many answers are possible to this question, which is no less than that of attempting to conceive of presence and agency outside the approved categories of our conventional social sciences. We have been given a valuable lead in the work of some of the contributors, in their emphases upon the ambiguous and constructed nature even, indeed, especially, of the most apparently fixed subject-position. My own further emphasis would be that the very dichotomy between domination and resistance, as we currently conceive it, bears all the marks of dominant discourse, in its insistence that resistance itself should necessarily take the virile form of a deliberate and violent onslaught. Rejecting this, we should look for resistances of a different kind: dispersed in fields we do not conventionally associate with the political; residing sometimes in the evasion of norms or the failure to respect ruling standards of conscience and responsibility; sometimes in the furious effort to resolve in ideal or metaphysical terms the contradictions of the subaltern's existence, without addressing their source; sometimes in what looks only like cultural difference. From this perspective, even withdrawal from or simple indifference to the legitimating structures of the political, with their demand for recognition of the values and meanings which they incessantly manufacture,

can be construed as a form of resistance. As Baudrillard notes, 'Ordinary life, men in their banality, could well not be the insignificant side of history—better: that withdrawing into the private could well be a direct defiance of the political, a form of actively resisting political manipulation.'⁸⁸ These, then, would be forms of resistance more 'feminine' than masculine, those of Chandra's labourer and his wife; which are only half perceived as 'resistance,' but which are not, on the other hand, accepted as matters of personal guilt and failure.

In insisting that what may look like idiosyncrasy, passivity and even indifference should be included thus, it is not intended to antagonise those who properly insist on the subaltern's capacity for an acute consciousness of the political. It is only to note that this marks the point where our own political project runs into the subaltern's fundamental otherness, which may render his consciousness of the political in forms alien or even antipathetic to us. Moreover, we should stress that this kind of emphasis does not condemn the subaltern to a half-light of faint understanding and fainter effort, outside the moments of his revolutionary heroism. It is one of the deepest misconstructions of the autonomous subject-agent that its own masculine practice possesses a monopoly, as the term signifies, upon the heroic: that effort and sacrifice are to be found nowhere but in what it holds to be the real sites of political struggle. As Raymond Williams has remarked, 'It is a fact about the modes of domination, that they select from and consequently exclude the full range of human practice. What they exclude may often be seen as the personal or the private, or as the natural or even as the metaphysical. Indeed, it is usually in one or other of these terms that the excluded area is to be expressed, since what the dominant has effectively seized is indeed the ruling definition of the social.'⁸⁹ We can comprehend and contest this seizure by noting just this most fundamental and least visible level of its operation: its classification, through this certification of resistances, of the range even of heterodox human practice according to the seemingly universal values of endeavour, courage and sacrifice. Although they are at one level separate tasks, that of contesting this definition, its ruling figure and mystifying conceits, and that of carrying the concern with the subaltern out of the realm of special interests, they surely

converge for the present to provide a recognisable and crucially important field of exploration, from whose implications very few of us can afford to remain detached.⁹⁰

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6. Partha Chatterjee, 'Peasants, politics and historiography: A response,' *Social Scientist*, no. 120, May 1983. This briefnote, written in response to a critical review article, written from a Marxist perspective by Javeed Alam, in *Social Scientist*, no. 117, February 1983, is useful for clarifying a number of issues.
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