

Subaltern Studies

Subaltern studies is a broadly influential academic movement whose goal is to refocus history on the unique role of subaltern or marginalized people in bringing about large-scale transformations in society. The implications of subaltern studies for geography are especially apparent in the group's exploration of spatialized categories of class, ancestry, and religion.

Subaltern studies began in 1982, when a collective of South Asian scholars in Britain, including Dipesh Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee, began publication of a book-length journal titled *Subaltern Studies*, edited by Ranajit Guha. Much of the collective's early work dealt with the politics of peasants who had been involved in the mass movements that ultimately led to India's independence. The journal's inauguration stemmed from a critique both of nationalist historians of India, who tended to focus on the local elites, and of orthodox Marxists, whose restriction of the concept of the working classes to industrial workers alone was, as the members of the subaltern studies collective argued, Eurocentric and badly suited to the varied economy of the Indian subcontinent.

Subaltern studies' turn away from traditional methods of historical research was signaled by ongoing debates over the definition of the term *subaltern*. Although influenced by the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, who used it to refer primarily to industrial laborers, in the work of the collective the word *subaltern* came to describe any group that is wholly left out of the elite. In this light, the collective's focus also developed in relation to long-standing populist debates in South Asia, from the nationalist writings of N. G. Ranga and L. Natarajan to the variegated Marxism of scholars like A. R. Desai.

Marxism and Subaltern Studies

In recent years, subaltern studies has often been seen as a post-Marxist movement because many of its scholars selectively combine Marxist theory with a variety of other influences. The relationships between cultural Marxism and subaltern studies were particularly close during the 1980s, with the group's focus on material analyses of subaltern political movements. As such, subaltern studies theories developed in relation to transformations in British Marxism, wherein academics such as E. P. Thompson and Eric Wolf increasingly began to focus on ordinary people as the agents of history in Europe.

However, at that time, the rifts between subaltern studies and orthodox Marxism were also most apparent. Early-subaltern studies research placed particular emphasis on the self-contained autonomy of peasants, whereas some orthodox Marxists portrayed peasants as a byproduct of the particular history of capitalism in South Asia rather than a vibrant political group. Subaltern theorists also critiqued orthodox Marxist views on historical progress, including the assertion that every nation must pass through a transition from feudalism to capitalism. They argued instead that the histories of

oppressed peoples needed to be recovered to produce a more accurate picture of major shifts.

Poststructuralism and Subaltern Studies

In the 1990s, the advent of poststructuralist theory was accompanied by a turn to discourse analysis that resonated with the collectives privileging of subaltern voices, voices that are often only minimally available in the historical record. As a result of this mutual influence, over time, subaltern studies research has focused increasingly on texts and textuality, including analyses of the ways elite leaders have defined subaltern groups. Some scholars have seen this move as evidence of greater theoretical sophistication inspired by the work of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Others, like the former subaltern studies collective member Sumit Sarkar, have seen it as a denial of human agency and therefore simply another form of subaltern disempowerment.

Critiques of Subaltern Studies

Partly due to its inception as a new school that was intentionally positioned between existing paradigms, subaltern studies has been the subject of ongoing debate. Some of the most influential critiques have come from Gayatri Spivak, who has long been associated with the collective. Spivak was one of the first to point out that not only are fewer writings available by members of subaltern groups, but the conditions were also radically constrained in those instances when subalterns did speak.

Moreover, Spivak and others criticized subaltern studies for supposing that there could ever be a single authentic subaltern consciousness; this assumption originally led to a neglect of gender and other forms of diversity within subaltern groups. She further notes that the British colonizers were the first to consider subalterns as a particular class of subordinated people. As a result, attempts to give voice to the subaltern might only reinforce the unfair distinctions between subalterns and elites. Yet Spivak famously holds open the potential for further research provided that scholars recognize that the concept of the subaltern is simply a *strategic essentialism*, a type of necessary evil used to make practical advances.

Thus, subaltern studies faces four challenges. First, textual records contain few references to subaltern voices. Second, the references that do exist were often written by those in power. Third, even where their words were recorded, subalterns were often speaking in extremely imbalanced circumstances of the type they faced throughout their lives. Fourth, the division of people into elites and subalterns is itself the result of colonial oppression. Despite such obstacles, however, subaltern studies remains a vibrant movement whose scholars continue to use creative and alternative forms of knowledge to overcome the legacies of injustice.

—Jess Bier

Further Readings

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