

RETHINKING THE SUBALTERN:
PATTERNS AND PLACES OF SUBALTERNITY
IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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In this paper my aim is to locate the places and patterns of subalternity in the new millennium, reading the subaltern location and (al)location within different epistemological spaces. The concept of subalternity has always had an imprecise, fluid definition. In Gramsci's writings, the constitution of subalternity was related to developments and transformations in the sphere of economic production. He proposed tracing the dynamics of subalternity to pre-existing social groups, whose ways of thinking, ideology and aims subalterns preserved for a time. But subaltern constitution was also relative to passive or active affiliation with dominant political formations, or to the birth of new parties of their own and of the dominant groups. In their party formations, the subalterns asserted the autonomy of their group, often within the old framework.

In the works of the Indian Subaltern Group, subalternity is positioning subjectivities within subordination in terms of "class, caste, gender, and office or in any other way" (35); i.e., ethnicity, nationality, age, culture. In Spivak's introduction to *Selected Subaltern Studies*, subalternity is "the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic" (Guha and Spivak 16). By this she means that change is no longer explained within the narratives of modes of production and theories of consciousness, but within histories of domination and exploitation, and theories of insurgency. Thus to Gramsci's definition of subalternity in political terms—subalternity being a relation between state, political and civil society—she adds the Indian Subaltern Group's contribution,

gloss over human drama, to detach “the experience from its living context...setting it up as an empty positivity outside history,” to take out sensibility—empathy, pity, grief, love—leaving nothing “except the dry bones of deixis—the ‘then’ and ‘there’ of a crime” (140).

Apocalypse Now: The Subaltern as Transnational

In contemporary political narratives the site of the subaltern is ambiguously transdisciplinary. The terms of the debate include governments, state authorities, national parties and the religious millenarianism of ethnicities. These concepts are displayed in legalistic narratives which mix Gramsci’s state, political and civil society with the language of criminality—police authority, gangs, private armies, criminals. In my readings the confused and apocalyptic nature of disciplines is located mainly within the arena of political economy and culture. The texts speak of the crisis, or of the workings of capitalism in the last fifteen years; and although very few refer to the after-effects of perestroika and glasnost, writing about the crisis of utopian thinking around the events in Eastern Europe, the crisis and demise of socialism is the hidden referent contributing to the present epistemological confusion. I will argue that the crisis of socialism cannot be disengaged from the post-colonial workings of capitalism and, consequently, from the patterns and places of subalternity in the new millennium.

One of the most accessible formulations of the crisis of capitalism is Eric Alliez and Michel Feher’s hypothesis, according to which

a genuine transformation of capitalist social relations is taking place. The regime in which the worker is subjected to capital is fading, gradually being replaced by a regime in which individuals are enslaved by, or rather, incorporated into, capital. (317)

Echoing this idea, Robert Reich quotes Tracy Kidder who maintains that “[l]abor is no longer coerced. Labor volunteer[s].” (87) European philosophers all seem to agree with a formula that points to the absorption of humans by capital. In Baudrillard’s words:

Capital doesn’t give a damn about the idea of the contract which is imputed to it—it is a monstrous unprincipled undertaking, nothing more.... Capital in fact has never been linked by a contract to the society it dominates. It is a sorcery of the social relation, it is a challenge to society and should be responded to as such. It is not a scandal to be denounced according to moral and economic rationality, but a challenge to take up according to symbolic law. (29–30)

Approaching the subject from a different field, Jan S. Adams explains the crisis in terms of what used to be the East/West confrontation. In his text he outlines how the “fundamental bases of Soviet society were violently uprooted and refashioned by the destructive yet creative forces of perestroika,” (1) and sketches the consequences of this uprooting specifically for the Caribbean area. In his opinion three basic changes in Soviet policy drastically altered the political workings of the world: demilitarization of regional conflicts, secularization (de-ideologizing) of interstate relations, and respect for the sovereignty of another nation. In this way, Russian diplomacy superseded armed solutions, stopped invoking the East/West ideology-guided confrontation, and prohibited the export of revolution (or counterrevolution). While the intellectuals localized within capitalism paid attention to the dissolution of nations and states, the Russians disengaged themselves from the idea of pan-nationalism and the idea of “workers of the world unite,” coming back to the unit nation to operate within the world political arena.

It is evident that both capitalism and socialism, for different reasons— isolationism/surplus value dynamics—outgrew their political-organizational forms, but as a consequence, the organizing principles of consciousness, law and order, finances, etc., became disfunctional. The terms of the debate discussing hegemonies and hierarchies are security, defense, wars, killings, markets, identity, subalternity. Since nation can no longer be the defining principle, labor, markets, and culture are being proposed as central. That a vague geographic terminology, coupled with the language of deconstruction, constitutes the principal sign-system making up the new lingua franca of several fields is symptomatic of this epistemological distress.

Within post-modernity, the subaltern is already located within acronyms such as the PBRs (Public Borrowing Requirement Sector), the IFS (Institute for Fiscal Studies), GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), the WB (World Bank), the IMF (International Monetary Fund). The place of the subaltern is determined by privatization, subjected to the cyclical effects of recession and inflation, the role of the public sector and public spending—Gramsci’s intersection of political and civil society. The place of the subaltern is then at the center of the “growth effect.” Or he/she is being written in the language of legislature.

Hegemonic nations are very frightened that as national ideas and goals gradually disappear, parochial aims—regional, ethnic, religious, i.e., subaltern dynamics à la Guha—take their place. Violence and agents provocateurs rule the land, and are no longer considered law-breakers but heroes fighting an unjust state. Riots are customized. National parties fall and sectarian militancy arises. This is what General Colin Powell calls “the unknown.”

What is certain is that analysis worries about the borders and limits of this new disarray, viewed mainly through the eyes of the “freedom-of-trade effect.” For the flow of commodities implies the flow of people, and if nations and

like myself, reflect upon the homogenization process of displacement, migration, and unemployment. But in no way do we disregard the incidence of culture in the constitution and debate of what Javier Sanjinés has termed the liminal areas of the formal and informal economies.

Avant garde cultural critics (Beverley, George Yúdice, Nelly Richard, Beatriz Sarlo) have already acknowledged that “Culture” and “cultural artifacts” have proven insufficient to analyze the present conditions of “culture” within the post-colonial world. The fact that most cultural critics have gone into mass media, film, performing arts, the research centers, the tourist attractions, academic meetings and symposia, curricula and the legislature, and subaltern studies is an indication that the “subject” is de/centered and dis/cerned (Paul Smith). Just as the legal prose designs a de-centered subject somewhat discrepant with the subject of lyricism, so it also underscores other aspects of cultural production. Here I have been defining culture as the place of tensions and struggles where economics replaces history, and cultural studies, sociology.

Although the social sciences have dedicated themselves to articulating a concept of the subaltern, it is not difficult to find subalternity in high culture. My most recent study on the de(con)struction of the revolutionary nation-state considers the cultural constitution of the people as masses, bases, troops, guerrillas, peasantry, and women, and demonstrates subalternity as a locus that can be filled by anyone (Rodríguez, forthcoming; Smith). Central American revolutionary literatures display confusion. Since concepts are undefined, the different nouns that sometimes stand for concepts can fill the space. In this space women/masses/nation can be interchangeable referents for each other. In Che Guevara we can find that the campesino is constructed first as a distinction between peasant and Indian, peasant and Bolivian, peasant and laborer, peasant and mountain man, and most relevant, between peasant and guerrilla—Gramsci’s intersections where subalterns assert their autonomy, often within the old framework. In Sergio Ramírez’s work, the subaltern is an unknown “little man.” In Miguel Angel Asturias, an Indian. In Manlio Argueta, “peasantry.” In Claribel Alegría, “insurgent woman.” In Mario Roberto Morales, Tomás Borge, and Omar Cabezas, “guerrilla.” Describing the same confusion on the other side of the divide, Henry Kissinger asserts:

Not every anti-Communist is a democrat; not every democrat is anti-imperialist.... The president of the successor regimes [of the former Soviet Union], including Boris Yeltsin, are all former Communist cadres.... Calling these former apparatchiks governing by decree “democratic” is a courtesy and a hope, not a description of reality.... The so-called new despots, if they change the system at all, are likely to pursue perestroika without glasnost—in that sense they will be closer to Franco’s Spain or Pinochet’s Chile than to Stalinism. (Kissinger: *Washington Post*, March 31, 1992).

Thus Duras writes a disclaimer on the intense sensual exchange she is interested in plotting, after it has half-run its course, and pleasure has already equalized the terms of the exchange locating wealthy male *ethnie* and impoverished female *ethnie* on the same plane. Whiteness and wealth level the contradictions of the exchange between gender, age, poverty and *ethnie*—Chinese and white—locating the subaltern and justice once more within the cathexis of the elite. Restoring ethnicity and age as conditions of subalternity within the film is not equal to establishing them as inalienable and final truths. On the contrary, Duras's disclaimer avoids reifying the relationship, entrapping *ethnie* and age in the game of knowledge as power. The film therefore does not establish an authoritative truth.

Finally, in the film *The Toy* with Richard Pryor and Jackie Gleason (1982), male blackness is given value by transforming its image into a wealthy boy's toy. Black male adults and very wealthy children of white executives are paired. The exchange between white child and black adult is predicated on the basis of an old topic, black nurturing, which accrues value by being tagged to the workings of the modern corporate world. Yet, after defining friendship, parenting and social solidarity as what blacks give to whites, the black adult/white child alliance threatens to disrupt the social order. They plot an insurgency whose aim is to show the "real" workings of the corporate world. Jackie Gleason is then made to speak the corporate line defining reality: "I am reality," he states. And very much like the situation in "Chandra's Death," he asserts he can turn legality against them, making all the witnesses reverse their depositions. Thus "virtual reality" supersedes "reality" and is in charge of producing "the reality effect," which within the parameters of the film is the meaning of "I am reality."

In these instances—in Duras covertly, in Chauvet overtly, and in Naipaul ambiguously—art and beauty, or the self-referential function of high culture, sublimates all other tensions and conflicts created by subordination, and the message is held hostage to the beauty of words, the entertaining payoff of media, and the consistency of the structures of genre. In the film, the endeavors of the human agent are held prisoners of farce, farce substituting for drama as a vehicle to plot the socius. In sum, subalternity is represented as a play of ethnicities, gender, age, talent, and insurgencies. The relationships between these terms are all narrated as failures, but what is in question is not subaltern consciousness, but the cathexis effected by culture and business, or, in other words, the fact that subalternity is being filtered through the consciousness of the elite and therefore is not fully recoverable. Hence negative consciousness as peculiar to the subaltern at this historical stage. The subaltern must achieve self-awareness via a series of negations. Negative consciousness is that which negates itself by negating the others in self.

In my study of women's representations of nation, gender, and ethnicity in times of transition, I found that the pre-texting of people to serve national agendas—that is, love and patriotism in the narratives of construction or destruction of nations—obscures the tendencies of Western nationalism à la Chatterjee (Rodríguez 1994). The instrumentalization of nature for the sake of industry and government that the novel of the land plotted at the beginning of the century—*Doña Bárbara*, *La Vorágine*—obstructs the subaltern patterns of criollo, creole, and mulatto aims and pacts. The glossing over of tendencies within genres seen in the tensions of plotting subalternity as mulatta and mestiza women within Romantic narratives—*Cecilia Valdés* or *Dance on the Volcano*—makes difficult the naming of cultural production in non-Western histories of literature. The women of nacre and porcelain constituted by Modernism misconstrue and privilege white ethnicities over others, introducing the Victorian English national canon of beauty as a power paradigm into the creole/native/national/modernizing/ethnic loaded text. The veiling or masking of dialogic exchanges between people, say indigenous Indians/ indigenous Creoles of the Indigenist novel or the English/indigenous dialogues of the realist novel in the Caribbean, sublimate local ethnic agendas. And more recently, we can argue, the disturbing aspect of entertainment that high culture pursues in its merging with the media—novels becoming films competing for markets and for publics—compels one to look for the misrepresentation of the subaltern in cultural spaces.

I wonder if, in the absence of national interest and national agendas and national groups, and in the presence of a homogeneous process of subalternization, point of view is drastically curtailed. These absences de facto undermine political as well as ideological analysis.

Epilogue

In explaining the “Eastern nations,” to borrow Chatterjee’s metaphor, there is still a convergence between the political and the economic discourse. To understand them, there is always the question of settling accounts and balancing power, and therefore the question of “transitional governments or transitional authorities,” “neutral political environments,” “free and fair general elections,” “human rights,” “egregious corruption,” “coalition governments,” the role of “multilateral and non-governmental agencies,” and “outside” regulations, the vigilance of “outsiders” and ethnic agendas. This terminology can be used to narrate Cambodia, Nicaragua, Somalia, or Cuba; that is, a group of territorialities where “indigenous” interests have not come to agree amongst themselves, where old oligarchies, “creole nobilities,” modernizing groups of so-called “national bourgeoisie,” and even twentieth-century institutionalized protagonists such as rebels, revolutionaries, populists, trade union representatives and guerrillas, must

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