

Unit 1

The term “subaltern” in this context is an allusion to the work of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). The term’s semantic range has evolved from its first usage by Ranajit Guha, following Gramsci, to refer solely to peasants who had not been integrated into the industrial capitalist system. It now refers to any person or group of inferior rank or station, whether because of race, class, gender, sexual Orientation, ethnicity, or religion.

The SSG arose in the 1980s, influenced by the scholarship of Eric Stokes and Ranajit Guha, to attempt to formulate a new narrative of the history of India and South Asia. The group started at the University of Sussex and then continued and traveled, mainly through Guha’s students. [4] This narrative strategy most clearly inspired by the writings of Gramsci was explicated in the writings of their “mentor” Ranajit Guha, most clearly in his “manifesto” in *Subaltern Studies I* and also in his classic monograph *The Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*. Although they are, in a sense, on the left, they are very critical of the traditional Marxist narrative of Indian history, in which semi feudal India was colonized by the British, became politicized, and earned its independence. In particular, they are critical of the focus of this narrative on the political consciousness of elites, who in turn inspire the masses to resistance and rebellion against the British.

One of the group’s early contributors, Sumit Sarkar, later began to critique it. He entitled one of his essays “Decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*”, criticizing the turn to Foucauldian studies of power-knowledge that left behind many of the empiricist and Marxist efforts of the first two volumes of *Subaltern Studies*. He writes that the socialist inspiration behind the early volumes led to a greater impact in India itself, while the later volumes’ focus on western discourse reified the subaltern-colonizer divide and then rose in prominence mainly in western academia. 5 Even Gayatri Spivak, one of the most prominent names associated with the movement, has called herself a critic of “metropolitan post-colonialism”.

Indian sociologist Vivek Chibber has criticized the premise of *Subaltern Studies* for its obfuscation of class struggle and class formation in its analysis, and accused it of excising class exploitation from the story of the oppression of the subaltern.¹⁷¹ His critique, explained in his book *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, is focused on the works of two Indian scholars: Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty. According to Chibber, subaltern scholars tend to recreate the Orient as a place where cultural differences negate analyses based on western experience.

Antonio Gramsci was born in 1891, in the small town of Ales in Sardinia. His father came originally from Naples and had been intended to be a lawyer. But the death of his own father, a colonel in the Carabinieri, meant that he had to abandon his studies; he found a job as registrar in the small Sardinian town of Ghilarza. There he met Gramsci’s mother, who was the daughter of a local inspector of taxes and had the rare attainment, in an area of 90 per cent illiteracy, of being able to read and write. Any ambitions the couple might have had for their children were rudely dashed, however, in 1897 when the father was suspended from his job, without pay, on suspicion of peculation. The following year he was put under arrest and in 1900 he was sentenced to nearly six years imprisonment. To what extent he was

guilty of the charges, which were undoubtedly motivated by his opposition to the political party in power locally, is not very important; corruption is anyway endemic in that type of society. The essential fact is that from 1898 to 1904, when her husband was released from prison and found a new-albeit inferior-job, Gramsci's mother was forced to bring up her seven children, alone, with no source of income other than her meagre earnings as a seamstress and the proceeds from the sale of a small plot of land, in conditions of dire poverty.

In 1898 Antonio started school at Ghilarza, but his education was interrupted for a couple of years at the end of his elementary schooling since none of his brothers was earning and he had to go out to work. His father's release enabled him to return to school, in the neighbouring town of Santulussurgiu. It was an appallingly bad school, but nevertheless, by dint of application and the help afforded by his literate home background, he managed in 1908 to pass the examination to enter the senior liceo in Cagliari.

When in Cagliari he lodged with his elder brother Gennaro, now a white-collar worker and recently returned from military service in Turin. Gennaro, whose experience on the mainland had turned him into a socialist militant, helped to introduce Antonio to politics, and from 1906 used to send socialist pamphlets back to his younger brother at home. An equally formative influence was provided by the wave of social protest that swept Sardinia in the same year, and was brutally repressed by troops from the mainland. The form taken by the repression, both military and legal, gave a great impetus to the cause of Sardinian nationalism, and it was to this cause that Gramsci first adhered. Experience of the working-class movement in Turin was to lead Gramsci to abandon his attachment to nationalism as such, but he never lost the concern, imparted to him in these early years, with peasant problems and the complex dialectic of class and regional factors. A unique surviving essay from his schooldays at Cagliari shows him, too, already progressing from a Sardinian to an internationalist and anti-colonialist

Intellectual Formation

It was during his years at Turin University that Gramsci first came into serious contact with the intellectual world of his time. The deficiencies of liberal Italy had created a certain vogue for socialist ideas even in bourgeois circles, and many of the professors at the University had links with the socialist movement. Foremost among these were Umberto Cosmo, a literary historian and Dante scholar, with whom Gramsci became friends and whom he subsequently was to criticise for his bourgeois style of attachment to the workers' movement, and Annibale Pastore, whose lectures on Marxism Gramsci attended. Here he was introduced to the particular brand of Hegelianised "philosophy of praxis".

The term "philosophy of praxis", best known today in connection with Gramsci's Prison Notebooks, in which it is used partly for its own sake and partly as a euphemism to deceive the censor, was introduced into Italy by Antonio Labriola, the only Italian theoretical Marxist of any consequence before the first world war. Labriola, who died in 1904, was a philosopher and historian who had come round to Marxism and to participation in the socialist movement fairly late in life, bringing with him distinct traces of a Hegelian intellectual formation. He saw the essence of Marxism in the unique nexus it established between theoretical and practical activity, and maintained the unity of philosophy and history; he

distinguished himself from the Hegelian school mainly by his insistence on the primacy of concrete relations over consciousness. Labriola's ideas, particularly on the interpretation of history, were extremely influential, but mainly in intellectual circles and often in a distorted form which accentuated their latent idealism at the expense of their materialist base. The phrase "philosophy of praxis" in particular entered into the parlance of a specifically anti-materialist tendency of which the major exponents were Rodolfo Mondolfo and, in a marginal way, Giovanni Gentile.

The war and fascism provided a brutal litmus test for many progressive and avant-garde intellectuals and artists beside Croce. Among those who supported or were at least complicit with the regime were D'Annunzio, Pirandello, Marinetti the futurist poet, together with most of his acolytes, the meridionalist Prezzolini, former editor of *La Voce*, Mario Missiroli and countless others. Many of these had been important figures in Gramsci's cultural formation, at a time when they had held advanced positions in the world of Italian culture and before Gramsci's own Marxism had matured and taken its definitive form. Not only Gramsci but the whole Ordine Nuovo group of Communists in Turin had been influenced by the cultural ferment of the prewar years and it is a sign of the complexity and confusion of the Italian situation that a group such as the Futurists, for example, whose Russian equivalents, led by Mayakovsky, had played a leading role in the formation of the Soviet avant-garde, should in Italy have degenerated into the barrel-organs of fascism. Be that as it may the whole question of the Italian intellectuals, their provincialism, their cosmopolitanism, their role in the power structure of Church and State, particularly in the South, was to become a major subject of Gramsci's reflection in prison. His critique is never sectarian. It starts from a realistic assessment of the objective weakness of the Italian intelligentsia with a view to recuperating those ideas and those forces which could contribute to the formation of a "national-popular" consciousness in association with the rising power of the Proletariat. Even Crocean idealism, despite its evident anti-popular bias, is not totally dismissed, and those features of it which had positively impressed Gramsci in his youth are brought out and used, even, as an aid to the criticism of orthodox Marxism itself.

Lucien Febvre first used the phrase "histoire vue d'en bas et non d'en haut" (history seen from below and not from above) in 1932 when praising Albert Mathiez for seeking to tell the "histoire des masses et non de vedettes" (history of the masses and not of starlets).[3] It was also used in the title of A. L. Morton's 1938 book, *A People's History of England*.^[4] Yet it was E. P. Thompson's essay *History from Below* in *The Times Literary Supplement* (1966) which brought the phrase to the forefront of historiography from the 1970s.⁵ It was popularized among non-historians by Howard Zinn's 1980 book, *A People's History of the United States*.

A people's history is the history as the story of mass movements and of the outsiders. Individuals not included in the past in other type of writing about history are part of history-from-below theory's primary focus, which includes the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the poor, the nonconformists, the subaltern and the otherwise forgotten people. This theory also usually focuses on events occurring in the fullness of time, or when an overwhelming wave of smaller events cause certain developments to occur. This revisionist approach to writing history is in direct opposition to methods which tend to emphasize single great figures in history, referred to as the Great Man theory, it argues that the driving factor of history is the daily life of ordinary people, their social status and profession. These are the

factors that “push and pull” on opinions and allow for trends to develop, as opposed to great people introducing ideas or initiating events.

In his book *A People’s History of the United States*, Howard Zinn wrote: “The history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interest (sometimes exploding, most often repressed) between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex. And in such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people, as Albert Camus suggested, not to be on the side of the executioners.”

Both the exponents and critics have pointed towards several problems involved in the practice of History from Below. The most important problem relates to the nature and availability of sources. Most of the records left by the past describe the lives and deeds of the ruling and dominant groups. Even those records which relate to the lives and activities of ordinary people were created by the dominating classes or by those who were associated with them. This was done mostly for administrative purposes. The records about the subordinate groups are more numerous for the periods when they were resisting or rebelling against the authorities. Before the late 18th century in Europe access to such sources is restricted. For other parts of the world, particularly the Third World countries, the availability of such records is even more difficult. Moreover, as most of these records were created by and for the members of the dominant groups, they suffer from hyperbole, neglect and misrepresentation. For example, the police records revealing the subversive activities among the masses are often exaggerated. Similarly, they completely ignore those areas in the life of people which were not in administrative interest.

The problem is compounded because the masses have generally not left much records of their own. Popular culture is generally preserved through the oral medium and not through written medium. The oral tradition, as Hobsbawm remarks, “is a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts. The point is that memory is not so much a recording as a selective mechanism, and the selection is, within limits, constantly changing’. The paucity of written sources left by the ordinary people is a great hindrance in writing about their feelings and ideas.

At another level, there are problems related to conceptualisation also. Although *** practitioners of History from Below claim to write about people, the term ‘people’ is used with different, sometimes conflicting, meanings. Raphael San tha one version of people’s history – radical-democratic or Marxist – the people are constituted by relations of exploitation, in another (that of the folklorists) by cultural antinomies, in a third by political rule’. The problem is further complicated by excluding certain groups from the category of people, while considering some as more people than others. In one version it is the proletariat which constitute the real people, in another it is peasantry. Herder, the German Romantic scholar, did not include the urban masses in the category of people’. For him and his followers, the people were the peasants who lived close to nature and were innocent. The term sometimes also adopts racist connotations in which people speaking other languages or following different faiths are not

counted among the real people. At the left radical level, the exclusion takes another form. Peter Burke, while praising the histories written by British Marxist historians.