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Book Review Essay

SOUTH ASIA

Race, Caste, Class, and Subalternity

Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories: Investigations from India and the USA. Edited by Gyanendra Pandey. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Subalternity and Difference: Investigations from the North and South. Edited by Gyanendra Pandey. New York: Routledge, 2011.
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In his autobiography, *Born to Rebel*, the long-time president of Morehouse College in Atlanta, Benjamin Mays, described an episode during a trip that he took to India with the YMCA in 1937:

> While at Mysore I was invited by the headmaster of an "untouchable" school in a neighboring village to speak to his students. I asked him why, since there were thirteen U.S. delegates, he had chosen me. He replied that he wanted a Negro; and when I told him that Channing Tobias was also a Negro, he answered that Tobias was too fair of complexion to do what he wanted done. "I want you." I accepted his invitation and, on leaving Mysore, went to his school where I dined with his untouchable students. After dinner, I was introduced as an untouchable who had achieved distinction. The headmaster told them that I had suffered at the hands of white men in the United States every indignity that they suffered from the various castes in India and that I was proof that they, too, could be "somebody worthwhile" despite the stigma of being members of a depressed class.
>
> At first I was horrified, puzzled, angry to be called an untouchable, but my indignation was short-lived as I realized, as never before, that I was truly an untouchable in my native land, especially in the Southern United States. In my country, I was segregated almost everywhere I went, always in the South and often in the North. I was not permitted to sleep or eat in white hotels and restaurants and was barred from worship in white churches. I had been slapped almost blind because I was black and had been driven out of a Pullman car with pistols at my back. I – just as they – through the mere accident of birth, was indeed an untouchable![1]

[1]Benjamin Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, [1971] 2003), 158.

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There is an extended history of comparison of the position of an intensely marginalized community in India, the Dalits, with an intensely marginalized community in the United States, black Americans.[2] B. R. Ambedkar, the great Dalit leader and primary author of India's post-independence Constitution, took a degree in economics at Columbia University in the United States and acquired, first-hand, knowledge of the similarities between the conditions of two communities of denigrated peoples on opposite ends of the globe.[3] Unlike the assertions of some Afro-centrists, the similarities identified by Ambedkar and Mays were not anchored in mystical claims of a shared, ancient Afro-Dalit ancestry producing a strong genetic link between the two communities.[4] The parallels drawn by Ambedkar and Mays concerned the substance of parallel lived experiences of "untouchability."

Two books edited by Distinguished Professor of History Gyanendra Pandey, at Emory University, provide an intriguing impetus to renew the examination of the comparative experiences of blacks and Dalits. Indeed, Pandey's books should prompt scholars to extend and deepen the analysis of the comparative experiences of denigrated peoples across the globe. The publication of the two volumes—*Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories: Investigations from India and the USA* and *Subalternity and Difference: Investigations from the North and South*—coincided with the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of the first issue of the journal *Subaltern Studies*. Pandey, one of the founders of the Subaltern Studies group that originally developed the journal, has been a central figure in the intellectual movement that informs the articles in the two volumes, the subaltern studies movement that arose out of postcolonial scholarship.

Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories is devoted to articles that explore the contemporary status and/or the historical conditions that produced a variety of subaltern communities in India and the United States. *Subalternity and Difference* is devoted to articles that investigate subaltern peoples across the globe, both in affluent and low-income communities.

The notion of the "subaltern" potentially is a powerful alternative to the peculiar term "minority," since the comparatively dispossessed can be a numerical majority, such as women globally or blacks in South Africa. Substantively, the subaltern is understood as any person who, due to their membership in a stigmatized group, is assigned an inferior social status or rank. But inferior status may not apply under all contexts or under all criteria.

For example, Sikhs in India are relatively well educated and affluent and significantly overrepresented in the Indian Army, but they bear the brunt of deeply offensive "Sardar jokes" that question their intelligence, common sense, and cleanliness. There is some evidence to suggest that the average economic condition of tribals or Muslims in India may be worse than that of Dalits.[5] Whites in the United States frequently report that they are

[2]Nico Slate, "Do Revolutions Need Passports? From Gandhi to King to the Arab Spring," *Berfrois*, January 19, 2012, http://www.berfrois.com/2012/01/nico-slate-satyagraha-on-the-spot/ (accessed July 31, 2014).

[3]Daniel Immerwahr, "Caste or Colony? Indianizing Race in the United States," *Modern Intellectual History* 4, no. 2 (2007): 275–301; Daniel Immerwahr, "An Informal Memo on B. R. Ambedkar and U.S. Blacks" (unpublished manuscript, May 2008), http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/txt_immerwahr_2008.pdf (accessed July 31, 2014).

[4]For a pointed critical discussion of the latter perspective, see Vijay Prashad, "Afro-Dalits of the Earth, Unite," *African Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (2000): 189–201.

[5]Pratham Banerjee's essay in *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories* examines the representation of the tribals or Adivasis as the purveyors of the primitive and original in Indian culture like the black American peasantry were seen as the source of "authentic" black culture during the Harlem Renaissance.

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subjected to discrimination, particularly reverse discrimination under dint of affirmative action, although the best available evidence indicates that whites grossly over-report their actual exposure to discrimination while blacks grossly under-report their exposure.[6]

Christopher Krupa's article in *Subalternity and Difference* depicts the long-standing history of repression of the indigenous peoples of Ecuador, in a manner that seems to establish their subalternity unambiguously. On the other hand, in a fascinating contribution to *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories*, Colin Johnson characterizes hobos riding America's rails during the first half of the twentieth century as gay and subaltern.[7] While their lives were harsh and impoverished, there clearly was a mixture of representations of these transient men in the American imaginary. Labeled as "bums," these men also were romanticized as living an adventurous life unencumbered by everyday conventional responsibilities. Indeed, I speculate that the vast majority of Americans did not associate this homosocial community with being a homosexual community. Of course, romanticization can be a form of marginalization.

Positive stereotypes held about a group can signal racism as profoundly as negative stereotypes. For example, the widely shared American belief that "Asians are good at math" carries its own pernicious weight, as does the assumption that Latinos are uniquely "family oriented." But the basic question is this: Are Sikhs, tribals, Muslims, white Americans, the mestizos of Ecuador, gay hobos, Asians, and Latinos all subaltern peoples? How do we situate self-representation ("oppressed" white Americans) versus social representation (humiliated Sikhs) as a basis for determining who is classified as subaltern?

One of the most admirable features of the two books is that they bring scholars in the humanities and the social sciences into conversation. However, the social scientists engaged in this project have been exclusively on the *interpretive* rather than the *quantitative* side of the academic aisle. The interpretive social sciences offer thick explorations of the relationship between identity and status.

But the absence of quantification leads to complete inattention to what I view as a central indicator of subalternity—persistent *economic* disparities, particularly inequalities in wealth and income, between dominant and subordinate groups. Correspondingly, there is no exploration of the precise mechanisms in each social context that produce these gross inequalities. From my perspective, subalternity must be associated strongly with the possession of inferior *material* resources, due to one's social group being marked off for deprivation, discrimination, and stigmatization. I place emphasis on this arena because, with sufficient resources, a stigmatized social group literally may be able to buy its way around the constraints of prejudice.

And they may require *more* than equal resources to offset the effects of racism. For instance, with respect to health outcomes like hypertension and infant mortality, the standard socioeconomic status (SES) gradient that applies to whites does not apply to blacks in the United States. Higher SES does not always purchase better health outcomes for black Americans.[8] To avoid the greater incidence of illness translating into morbidity or mortality, members of the marginalized community will require sufficient resources

[6]Major G. Coleman, William Darity Jr., and Rhonda V. Sharpe, "Are Reports of Discrimination Valid? Considering the Moral Hazard Effect," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 67, no. 2 (2008): 149–75.

[7]Heretofore, I was completely unaware of the meaning of the folk song "Big Rock Candy Mountain."

[8]Jay Pearson, "Can't Buy Me Whiteness: New Lessons from the Titanic on Race, Ethnicity, and Health," *Du Bois Review* 5, no. 1 (2008): 27–48; Arline T. Geronimus, "Jedi Public Health: Leveraging Contingencies of Social Identity to Grasp and Eliminate Racial Health Inequality," in

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to purchase high-quality health and medical care and reduced exposure to racialized stress.

Another underdeveloped dimension of the two books is the absence of attention to the international transmission of information about practices of resistance by subaltern people. The impact of the civil rights movement and the black power movement, even if translated somewhat idiosyncratically elsewhere, has been profound for a number of movements of subaltern people. These include the rise of the Dalit Panther organization in the 1970s in the Indian state of Maharashthra and even a black power uprising in a predominantly black country, Trinidad and Tobago, in 1970.[9]

The events in Trinidad and Tobago point toward a more general conclusion: the presence of leaders who look like the subjugated population is no assurance their subjugation will end. Witness contemporary South Africa or, for that matter, the United States under a black president. Blacks in South Africa originally were subjected to conquest and extreme subordination via apartheid; their subordinate status continues although apartheid has ended. Blacks in the United State originally were subjected to slavery and subordination via Jim Crow; their subordinate status continues although legal segregation has ended.

On the other hand, one of the themes that is treated exceptionally well in both volumes is the class and gender heterogeneity of subaltern peoples and, in particular, the contradictory and complicated position of the subaltern middle class, the better-positioned members of the subordinated community. *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories* includes the editor's excellent essay "Can There Be a Subaltern Middle Class?" (the answer is, of course, yes), which was first published in *Public Culture* in 2009.[10] Pandey explicitly charts a comparison between the black and Dalit middle classes in the United States and India respectively, examining a number of phenomena generally associated with the relative affluence of the marginalized: "passing," pressure to retain legitimacy by speaking in universals rather than in race- or caste-specific particularisms, pressure to use one's own relative success as an indicator that others from your group fall behind only because of their personal inadequacies (see Jonathan Prude's afterword in *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories*), and the perpetual tightrope walk between rejecting and embracing the status quo as one of its beneficiaries.

Also in *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories*, Earl Lewis looks in depth at the historical position of a specific segment of the black middle class, schoolteachers, and, again, their overlapping roles as agents of conformity and disruption. In *Subalternity and Difference*, Pandey recounts "Viola's Story," a close reading of Viola Andrews's autobiographical writings that examine the aspirations and obstacles facing an "everyday" black woman in Georgia, who determinedly pursued upward mobility to improve her own life and the lives of her family.

Further in *Subalternity and Difference*, the articles by Dilip Das and by Ruth Vanita examine the particular scope of oppression faced by women who are members of

Mapping "Race": Critical Approaches to Health Disparities Research, eds. Laura Gómez and Nancy López (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 163–78.

[9]Jayahsree Gokhale-Turner, "The Dalit Panthers and the Radicalisation of the Untouchables," *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 17, no. 1 (1979): 77–93; Paul Sutton, "Black Power in Trinidad and Tobago: the 'Crisis' of 1970," *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 24, no. 2 (1983): 115–32.

[10]Gyanendra Pandey, "Can There Be a Subaltern Middle Class? Notes on African American and *Dalit* History," *Public Culture* 21, no. 2 (2009): 321–42.

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subaltern communities, victimization sometimes brought by the men from their own community but more often by both men and women who are outside of their community. In *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories*, Ruby Lal reexamines "the women's question" in colonial India from a lens that suggests that women collectively constitute a subaltern group. And perhaps there is no deeper truth than the fact that the subalternity of women has the longest human history on Earth.

There also is a compelling case study of the "straddler," a person who has a foot in both the dominant and subordinate communities. A paradigmatic example is provided by Joseph Crespino's examination of the life story of Essie Mae Washington-Williams, the daughter of arch-segregationist Senator Strom Thurmond with Carrie Butler, a fifteen-year-old black girl who worked as a domestic in Thurmond's home at the time when their daughter was conceived. Thurmond was seven years Butler's senior. The puzzle Crespino examines is why did Washington-Williams wait until after Thurmond's death to reveal her paternity? Why was she so loyal to the race-baiting Thurmond that she maintained her silence until her revelation could have no effect on his political career?

Answers can be found if one reads Jack Bass and Marilyn Thompson's authoritative biography of Thurmond.[11] They identify a complex mixture of financial support, including Thurmond paying for her college education at South Carolina State, that *de facto* purchased Washington-Williams's silence and, oddly enough, an apparent affection that seemed to be shared between father and daughter. Bass and Thompson report:

> White-owned newspapers ignored [the stories about miscegenation in the Thurmond clan], but they circulated widely among South Carolina blacks, who also heard tales in their communities of Thurmond having a "daughter" at South Carolina State College.
>
> Thurmond's decision to lead the Dixiecrat party rebellion [in 1948] was making him a loathed figure among South Carolina's civil rights community and even among some of Essie's fellow students. Julius Williams and other black law students at SC State tracked the progress of civil rights cases and the vitriolic reactions of white political figures in the state.
>
> Thurmond's Dixiecrat campaign led to the only political conversation Essie ever remembered having with her father. At the prodding of fellow students, she asked him once how he could run on a segregationist ticket when the two of them had the relationship they had. She recalled, "He said, 'Oh, that has nothing to do with us. I have to represent the views of the voters.' I said, 'Maybe you do something about it.' He changed the subject, and I could tell he didn't really want to talk about it."
>
> She accepted what he said as the reality that then existed and never again discussed political issues with him. . . .[12]

What choice do straddlers make? Which side will they join? When will they choose to align themselves with the dominant group, and when will they choose insubordination and allegiance with the subaltern? Amilcar Cabral charged that in the revolutionary

[11]Jack Bass and Marilyn W. Thompson, *Strom: The Complicated Personal and Political Life of Strom Thurmond* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005).
[12]Ibid., 118.

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moment, the straddlers (read here the "mulatto," the "subaltern middle class") would have to make a definite choice.[13] The choice that would support the revolution would be to commit "suicide as a class."

But the straddlers are not the only potential defectors from subaltern movements of resistance. In black American argot, all defectors are referred to as "Uncle Toms."

The insubordinate subalterns are required to be courageous to avoid "Tomming." They must resist the temptation to "sell out," and they must overcome fears for personal safety and loss of livelihood to pursue the aims of collective improvement for future generations. This is the deep burden borne by the subaltern—perpetually having to weigh the severity of the costs of "doing the right thing."

Besides division within a subaltern community, there can be conflicts across multiple subaltern populations. In Pandey's introduction to *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories*, he refers to the concept of "subaltern citizens." Mary Oden's essay in the same volume examines "subaltern immigrants" who, in a legal sense, are subaltern "non-citizens." The subaltern citizen lacks full citizenship rights; even if those rights exist on paper, they are not enforced. The subaltern non-citizen, the undocumented immigrant, is not eligible for the rights of citizenship. Should the struggle be joined (and completed) for rights for undocumented immigrants before rights are established for subaltern citizens? Or is there an avenue to unify their apparently competing struggles under a single agenda?

We long have needed a comprehensive theory of subaltern resistance that can inform practice. On the path toward achieving that goal, we require a rich understanding of the circumstances confronting subaltern peoples. The two volumes edited by Pandey afford a useful road map toward gaining that understanding. But more than thirty years beyond the first issue of *Subaltern Studies*, the project remains fresh and no less daunting.

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[13]Amilcar Cabral, "The Weapon of Theory," address delivered to the first Tricontinental Congress Conference of the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, Havana, Cuba, January 1966, http://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/cabral/1966/weapon-theory.htm (accessed July 31, 2014).

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