Pensée 2: Doing Subaltern Studies in Ottoman History

DONALD QUATAERT
History Department, Binghamton University, State University of New York, Binghamton, N.Y.; e-mail: dquataer@binghamton.edu
doi:10.1017/S0020743808080975

As explained by one of its founders, subaltern studies seeks to counteract histories written by elites, about elites, and for elites that ignore the majority of society.[1] Through this examination, the urban poor, workers, and peasants of India, the original focus of attention, are agents in the formation of their subaltern consciousness: the "agency of change is located in the insurgent or the 'subaltern.'"[2]

Although subaltern studies focuses on South Asia, its historical discourse has resulted in the term *subaltern* generally referring to groups of inferior rank in other areas of the world, as other historians seek to locate and reestablish the agency of these groups. Subaltern equals the people who exist "*on their own*, that is, *independently of the elite*."[3] As will be explored here, however, the problem with such a definition of subaltern is that it imagines the existence of two totally separate political realms, one belonging to the elite and the other to the subaltern.

There is considerable debate within subaltern studies about the new directions the field should take. Further, some scholars have argued that subaltern studies has run its course or may not be a terribly useful rubric after all. Among Ottoman historians, these lively discussions resonate more loudly in some subfields than others. Historians of the Anatolian portions of the Ottoman Empire, unlike many studying the Arab provinces, are nearly silent on the issue of subalterns and their place in the making of history.[4] The vast gap between the relative enthusiasm for subaltern studies among Ottoman scholars of the Arab provinces and those of the Anatolian regions is truly striking. A partial explanation for this state of affairs rests with the centrality of the Turkish state in the minds of many scholars writing in the United States and Turkey. In addition, there is a rich tradition of state-centered historical writing during the reign of the Ottoman Empire, when imperial chronicles detail the lives of sultans and other state elites while ignoring the rest of society. Cold War fears about workers and claims of Soviet connections also help explain this conspicuous lack of interest in subaltern studies. The depth and richness of the Ottoman archives in Istanbul also attracted students who too often replicated the official orientation of these state-centered documents.

Here, I focus only on workers and peasants and not on hierarchies within those categories or on other subalterns, such as women of the upper classes, who often were subordinate to males in that same group. There are many varied sources available for close inquiries into the lives of Ottoman workers and peasants, who are the fabric of Ottoman subaltern research. Collections of worker-focused state documents rest in a number of locations in the Ottoman

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743808080975 Published online by Cambridge University Press

provinces, not in the central state archives in Istanbul. Take as an example my recent book based on official Ottoman records that survived in the coal-mining center of Zonguldak on the Black Sea coast. These accounts—often eyewitness reports of mining accidents and detailing the name, age, marital status, and occupation of each accident victim and witness—open up possibilities of subaltern history that, until my serendipitous encounter with these materials, I thought could not be gleaned from official documents. Historians should track the locations of other industrial establishments—factories, railroad facilities, the tobacco monopoly—and determine if their records rest in now forgotten provincial locales. Surely the coal-mining records cannot be the sole surviving trove of worker-related documents.

In addition, consider the value of surviving private archives of Ottoman industrial or commercial entrepreneurs, as well as guild records and family papers. Our colleagues in Greece have been actively assembling such materials, including the personal archives of a powerful Ottoman Greek entrepreneur with high-court connections who had built an impressive empire that included commercial fleets, spas, vast olive orchards and presses, and coal mines. These are not only business archives but also recordings of wages and working conditions. Similar private collections recently have emerged in Nablus and in Damascus, and these sampled holdings are a teasing fragment of workers' and peasants' lives and of what lies in store for those willing to look beyond official collections. Taking this step, however, often will mean encountering Greek, Armenian, and other languages less well known in Ottomanist circles.

When using sources that give us access to subalterns, we need to be sensitive to the impact of popular pressures on state decision making—that is, let us be less willing and eager to give exclusive credit to state agents for the legal, political, or social changes occurring. After all, approaching subalterns' actions from the state's perspective is no real improvement on the emphasis once given to the agency of European diplomats or merchants for Ottoman modernization. The zone where the subaltern interacts with state forces seems an especially fruitful place to explore subaltern agency. Government commissions that formulated the Land Law of 1858, for example, should not be understood only as agents of change from above, but also as bodies responding to pressures from below that gave shape and direction to laws reflecting popular needs. To consider another example, why did administrative councils come into existence during the early 19th century? Were these only the results of policymakers' actions or the products of activism among local elites driven to action by local peasants or workers? These causal interactions are commonplace assumptions in subaltern studies. Although we can agree that the state held the monopoly on the means of violence, let us not grant it omnipotence.

NOTES

Author's Note: My thanks to the graduate students of the "History from Below" seminar, fall 2007, Binghamton University, State University of New York.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743808080975 Published online by Cambridge University Press

[1]Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[2]Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Deconstructing Historiography," in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (London: Routledge, 1996), 205.

[3]Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, ed. Vinayak Chaturvedi (London: Verso, 2000), 2.

[4]I exclude from this discussion the Balkan provinces, where Marxist historiography during the Soviet era perforce centered on workers and peasants.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743808080975 Published online by Cambridge University Press