

ON THE DECLINE OF CLASS ANALYSIS IN SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES

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ABSTRACT: The decline of class analysis has been pervasive across the intellectual landscape in recent years. But South Asian studies stands out in the severity with which it has been hit by this phenomenon. It also is the field where the influence of post-structuralism has been most pronounced in the wake of Marxism's decline. This essay offers an explanation for both the decline of class analysis and the ascendance of post-structuralism in South Asian studies as practiced in the United States. I suggest that the decline of class theorizing was a predictable and natural result of the decline of working-class politics in the United States. But the severity of its decline in South Asian studies in particular was a symptom of its never having made much of a dent on the field in the first place. This left unchallenged the traditional, Indological approach, which was heavily oriented toward culturalism. This in turn made the field a hospitable ground for the entrance of post-structuralism, which, like mainstream Indology, not only eschews materialist analysis, but is largely hostile to class. South Asian studies is thus one of the few fields in which traditional scholars and younger ones are both able to agree on their hostility to class analysis. Finally, I argue that the decline of class is now visible in Indian universities too, and this is largely caused by the overwhelming influence that U.S. universities have come to exercise over Indian elite academic culture.

Introduction

There is no denying that class analysis has been in decline in South Asian studies over the past two decades, at an accelerating pace. This is not in itself surprising,

since it is symptomatic of Marxism's decline as an intellectual and political force more broadly, and the Marxist tradition has historically been the main source of class theory. What gives added urgency to the issue is the nature of the theories — and politics — that have gained prominence in its stead. On the Right, it is of course the revival of free-market ideology and, more broadly, neoliberalism as a political project. On the Left, it is the rise of post-structuralism and, in area studies particularly, postcolonial theory (the tandem is hereafter referred to as PSPC). Indeed, the proponents of PSPC have rather boldly laid claim to the mantle of radical theory in the wake of Marxism's retreat.¹ Nowhere is this more apparent than in South Asian studies.

This essay takes three components of this transformation as its focus. First, what explains the retreat of class analysis in the field? If the retreat had been only in the United States, it would not be particularly surprising, and hence of little analytical interest. But as just noted, it is a phenomenon that has swept across the continental divide, into Great Britain, and India too, where class had been the language of scholarship for decades. Second, it seeks to examine why South Asian studies has been hit especially hard by the PSPC phenomenon, as compared to some other branches of area studies — especially scholarship on Latin America and Africa. This is not to imply that these fields have been left untouched by PSPC, for they have not. But they have retained a greater space for political economy and class analysis than has the study of India. PSPC has had to coexist with political economy, whereas in South Asia scholarship — as practiced in the U.S. setting — the former has largely displaced the latter. Lastly, I examine the basis for the extraordinary influence of the Subaltern studies series in the United States since the 1990s. This phenomenon is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, the Subalterns have been pivotal in shepherding the transition into PSPC among scholars of India. Second, they have done so, in part, because of the fact that they are an intellectual current based on the Indian subcontinent. They provide to the PSPC trend a patina of authenticity, where otherwise its overwhelming focus on culture and symbols might raise hackles among scholars of a critical bent.

The focus on PSPC requires some explanation. It certainly is not the only influential intellectual current these days. Neoliberalism, or what is sometimes referred to as “free market fundamentalism,” could justifiably lay claim to real dominance in the field. I do not by any means deny that neoliberalism exercises tremendous influence among South Asianists. But I have chosen to largely ignore it in this essay for two reasons. First, its influence is largely confined to one discipline — economics — though it certainly exercises some weight in parts of politics science. In terms of sheer numbers, this means that it forms part of the working assumptions of a very large proportion of practitioners in the field, simply because of the size of the discipline itself. But with regard to the disci-

1. The lineal relation between Marxism and postcolonial theory is a major theme of Robert Young's now-standard work, *Postcolonialism: A Historical Introduction* (2001).

plinary map of South Asian studies, neoliberalism has been less successful. It remains marginal in the other key disciplines that comprise the field: history, anthropology, and cultural studies.

Second, and even more to the point, it is not very puzzling, as a matter of analysis, why neoliberalism should be influential today, and why, in particular, in economics. A doctrine that is hostile to state regulation of markets, typically regards labor unions as infringements on market freedoms, downplays the social character of wealth, and hence is opposed to redistribution — such a doctrine has great resonance in a period when labor is weak and capital strong. Further, the doctrine has been assiduously propagated by corporate-sponsored think tanks for over a quarter century now, and has constituted the lodestone for mainstream politics in the United States, across both major parties. It is no surprise at all that it should exercise some influence in academic life as well. Even less so that it becomes prominent in the economics profession, which orbits more tightly than any other discipline around the business community and the halls of political power.

That PSPC should become so prominent, however, is not nearly as obvious. The decline of class analysis, in itself, could have given rise to a variety of new fashions. Everything else being equal, one might have expected that academic culture would settle into a kind of revived and more humane liberalism, which would have been in closer approximation to the culture outside the academy. Or perhaps there might have been a revanchist turn to more conservative views, in reaction to the advances the Left had made in the 1970s. This did not happen, however. Instead, the erstwhile Marxist intelligentsia transmuted into various species of post-structuralist theory. This merits attention. What makes the slide into PSPC politically interesting, and important, is that this is a theoretical current that, while holding on to the mantle of radical critique, has evinced not only a suspicion of class theory and the Marxist tradition, but an outright hostility to it. It is perhaps the first time that a major radical current in the Western intellectual firmament has been so hostile to the entire tradition of class analysis, and by extension, class politics. So while Marxists came to expect criticisms from the Right over the past century, they have now had to contend with a well-armed phalanx attacking from the Left. Hence, it is not that the retreat from class has heralded a fading of left-wing scholarship. It is, rather, that the very meaning of Left critique is changing. Class is just being pushed out of the progressive milieu.

What is more, the displacement of class analysis will most likely deepen over time. For one thing, the very fact that the turn to PSPC theory is strongest in elite universities gives it a privileged position in the production of future scholarship — via job placement, control over journals, influence over allocation of research funds, etc. But even more important is a mundane fact about demography. In both countries, a spectacular generational bubble is working its way through the intellectual community. Most of the scholars committed to class analysis belong to the generation that came of maturity in the 1960s and '70s, and are now fairly advanced in their careers. Conversely, class is much less a concern among scholars who finished graduate studies in the 1990s and after.

Hence, the number of Marxists among the younger scholars in South Asian studies is already fleetingly small. Thus, even though things are bad, we haven't yet seen the worst. Within the next decade, as scholars who were radicalized in the 1960s wind down their careers and the baton is passed to the next generation, there is likely to be an even further drop-off in the visibility of class analysis.

Some Provisos

It may be useful to declare some provisos at the outset of the argument. First, the most obvious explanation for the rise of PSPC, and one that many in South Asian studies no doubt subscribe to, is that it is just the best theory around — it displaced class analysis and political economy because of their obvious shortcomings. I shall not try to counter this notion. In other words, this article will examine the social conditions that explain the rise of PSPC; it will not attempt a substantive assessment. It will be obvious enough that I do not subscribe to this view. I will assume that the reader will be willing to entertain the notion that the causes of PSPC prominence are at least in part institutional and social.

Second, it should be stressed that an argument dealing with trends in intellectual fashion cannot avoid relying on “stylized facts” — somewhat general descriptions that capture basic trends. Hence, for every characterization that I make about South Asian studies over the past three decades or so, it will no doubt be possible to adduce the exception, the example that seems to undermine the argument. But such strategies would undermine the very idea of cultural analysis. I will ask the reader to use some discretion in her use of counterexamples, keeping in mind the distinction between representative works and outliers.

Lastly, our main interest is in the scholarship coming out of the United States, and then from India, with an occasional glance at the British scene. The focus on the United States, as against England, would have been a highly questionable strategy for a paper on South Asian studies even a decade ago. But with every passing year, the center for India scholarship in the Atlantic world is increasingly shifting away from England — its traditional base — and into U.S. universities. This is hardly surprising, given that the phenomenal growth of the U.S. universities in the postwar era has propelled them to dominance in a large number of fields. South Asian studies is no exception. Another reason to focus on the United States is that, in addition to its sheer weight in the production of scholarship, it is where the postmodernist turn has been strongest and the retreat from class analysis the most complete.

1. Class Analysis Enters the U.S. Academy

The advance and retreat of class analysis in South Asia scholarship has been tied to the fate of class more generally in the intellectual culture. In this section, I will offer an account of the conditions that allowed for the remarkable resurgence of Marxist theory during the 1960s and '70s in the United States. These were, in some ways, the same as those operative during previous episodes of radical resurgence; but they were also, in other ways, quite unique. In particular, the central place of the university as the site for class theorizing is the crucial fact about

both the rise of Marxist theorizing in our time, as well as its demise. In what follows, I will examine how and why the university came to occupy such a central place for the development of radical theory after the 1950s. Within that, we will see how this process, while generalized across the disciplinary divide, was nonetheless uneven in its effects. In particular, while the study of the South was deeply affected by the wave of radicalization, India scholarship underwent a process quite distinct from that of other area specializations. This was to have lasting effect on its subsequent evolution.

Marxism's decline in U.S. academic discourse is unmistakable. But even more remarkable is that it should ever have had any such influence at all. In the twentieth century, there were two periods of massive radicalization and mass mobilizing in the Western world — the decade and a half after World War I and the mythologized “sixties.” Each one gave rise to a commensurably deep radicalization in intellectual life, leading to foundational work in Marxist theory, and in radical analysis more generally. What differentiates the two, however, is that much of the theorizing that was done in the earlier period took place in sites outside the university — Lenin, Gramsci, Trotsky, Luxemburg, and the legions of theorists associated with the artistic and cultural movement in the 1920s were all located in Party circles. Even if they had academic jobs, the momentum behind their work came, directly or indirectly, from organized politics. In the United States, even though some inroads were made into the university during the Popular Front period, they were limited.² Left theorizing still got most of its energy from sources close to organized politics. One only has to peruse the main academic journals of various disciplines from the time to see that Marxist theory remained quite marginal to mainstream academic life.

The reason for this is not hard to fathom. Universities were, through the interwar period, steadfastly elite institutions. In 1920, around 0.5 percent of the U.S. population attended college, a figure that increased rapidly, but only to reach a miniscule 1.19 percent in 1946, one year after World War II.³ While the number of colleges and universities grew fairly steadily through the interwar years, the increase basically kept pace with population growth, there being no great explosion in institution-building till a few decades later. In the entire period of the Second and Third Internationals — the highpoint of the socialist movement in the advanced capitalist countries — higher education in the United States remained largely closed to working people. A second reason, the importance of which would become clearer later, was that political organizations of the Left in these years were still viable and a source of attraction to intellectuals, even in the United States. The Communist Party in the 1920s and '30s was not only growing, but became something of a center of gravity for intellectuals, especially during the Popular Front years.⁴ So too with smaller Far Left groupings like the Socialist Party and, later, the Socialist Workers Party, which, though small,

2. Cohen 1993; Wald 1987.

3. *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1949*, Table 142.

4. Denning 1996.

produced a vibrant internal culture of debate.⁵ Hence, while academia remained remote and distant from radical currents, the traditional sites for left-wing theorizing were still a viable option, and exerted great force in setting the agenda for intellectual work.

By the end of World War II, things were already beginning to change. As Perry Anderson has argued, the development of Marxist theory in the postwar world was different from that of the interwar years, in that the site for theorizing was already shifting from Left organizations to the university.⁶ Two points ought to be made in this regard. First, even while it is true that Marxists were folded into the university, it is also the case that within this setting they remained a quite marginal force until the middle of the 1960s. With a very few notable exceptions, Marxists were relegated to the margins of debate. They were productive and active, no doubt, but their circle of influence remained quite small. Second, while Marxists did find a haven in academic settings, they were more successful in doing so in Europe than in the United States. In the United States, the 1950s were a historic low point in the visibility of Marxism. It is said, famously, that in that decade, when Paul Baran landed an appointment in the Stanford economics department, he was the only Marxist economist in a major U.S. university. While this may not be technically true, it captures the sense of the times, in the aftermath of McCarthyism, when a whole stratum of Left intellectuals was either pushed out of academic jobs, denied entry, or cowed into silence. The turn to academia after the war was thus real, but it did not by any means insert class analysis as an influential current in Western academic life.

The upsurge of the 1960s turned things around. The mass movements around imperialism, gender, civil rights, and the brief but quite massive labor upsurge, all served to revitalize the Left. But this revival of fortunes did not repeat the experience of the earlier episode around World War I. For one thing, as is well known, the turn to the Left came in large measure from outside the official Communist movement — indeed, it was because of its critiques of the politics of the established parties, and in particular of Stalinism, that this generation came to be known as the New Left. There was some revival in the fortunes of the official Communist parties, no doubt, but by and large, these organizations were as bewildered by the mass mobilizations as were more elite groups. But while the New Left criticized and rejected the conservatism of the official Communist parties, this did not lead to the formation of a new generation of revolutionary organizations, as it had after World War I. Small groupings, largely on the fringe of political life, did spring up for a short period, but few survived the 1970s and fewer still secured any kind of mass base.

The sheer scale and duration of the new movements could not but affect the broader culture. Establishing the lifespan of a mass movement is always difficult, but we can say with confidence that the “sixties” ran into the several years of the following decade. But it was not just the scale of the mobilization that af-

5. See Isserman 1994; Drucker 1994.

6. Anderson 1976, Chap. 2.

fected intellectual production. Left to its own, this upsurge may have been successfully repelled by the academy much as the one a half-century prior. But this time, the movements coincided with the second salient fact about this episode, which created a distinct identity and trajectory — namely, that these were also the years of the most massive enlargement of higher education in the twentieth century. Between 1945 and 1980, the number of colleges and universities in the country doubled, from 1,650 to more than 3,200, with the bulk of the growth coming after 1960.⁷ Furthermore, the university itself became a site of struggle — indirectly, as students swarmed to social movements that were sweeping the nation, but also directly, once the military draft was instituted and hit the student population in particular. University campuses, which had always remained relatively insulated, were now sucked into the vortex.

The coincidence of these two factors made for an intellectual environment radically different from the one fostered by the upsurge of the 1920s. Whereas the burst of theoretical and artistic energy in the 1920s had occurred outside the university, and in the orbit of the organized Left, this time the radicalization of the intelligentsia occurred mainly within the academy. This was especially pronounced in the United States, where the Left political parties were confined to the very margins of national politics — far more than in Europe — and the powerful socialist currents in the labor movement had been purged or driven underground in the 1950s. There were simply very few magnets for the young generation of activists and budding intellectuals outside the boundaries of the campus. On the other hand, through the latter part of the 1970s, the expansion of the higher education system offered an easy and quite safe haven to deepen their analyses and continue some form of radical engagement. The New Left, therefore, not only established a presence in campus life, as the early postwar Marxists had, but because of its numerical weight in the concurrently expanding educational system, actually managed to exert real influence on mainstream academic production.

2. The Transformation of Area Studies

This is the context in which we need to approach the advance and retreat of Marxism, or class analysis, within South Asian studies. As academic culture became radicalized and transformed by the tumult, it was to be expected that area studies generally would share in the process. Indeed, if anything, the study of the Third World was at the epicenter of the radicalization thing. On campuses, the Vietnam War formed something of an axis for many of the movements to come together, and it naturally placed the problem of imperialism at the core of much intellectual work being undertaken at the time. But within this, South Asian studies in the United States stood slightly apart. While it too experienced some growth in class theory and political economy, this was, relative to the ex-

7. *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, Series H, 689–99, 382–83; *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2004–2005*, Table 261.

perience of other specializations, more limited in scope and depth. As a result, when the New Left went into decline a decade later, South Asia as a field had fewer defenses against the PSPC onslaught. In a very real sense, I will argue, to call the fate of class analysis in South Asian studies a “retreat” is a misnomer — for class as an organizing concept had never advanced very far to begin with.

The most powerful change in analytical frames was probably witnessed in Latin American studies and African studies, though not evenly. This should not be surprising. In the United States, the radicalization brought about by resistance to the Vietnam war naturally led students to begin questioning the nature of U.S. involvement in its own “backyard,” and from there, it was but a short step to carry a Marxist framework to the region’s internal politics and history. The emergence of powerful revolutionary currents in the region itself gave the radicalization an additional fillip. The Cuban Revolution was of course an electrifying event, but the ongoing radicalization through the 1960s, culminating in the surprising victory of Salvador Allende in Chile and the extraordinary struggles of his regime against internal and external subversion — all this suffused the study of Latin America with debates about the class, class struggle, socialism, etc. This led to the formation of the Union of Radical Latin Americanists in the early 1970s, and its launch of the journal *Latin American Perspectives* some years later under the editorship of Ronald Chilcote.⁸

A similar process was underway with respect to the study of Africa. The 1960s witnessed the onset of decolonization on the continent, a process that continued apace into the 1970s, and again brought U.S. students into direct contact with radical currents from the region that they were studying. As in Latin American studies, it was extremely significant that Africa was not only being swept up into anti-imperialist movements, but that many of these were captained by political organizations committed to some kind of socialist ideology — starting with the Algerian F.L.N and reaching to Frelimo in Mozambique during the 1970s. It would be fair to say that, while African studies in the United States was certainly influenced by the currents, the turn to class was probably more pervasive in the British end of the discipline. Here too, as in Latin American studies, the shift culminated in the establishment of a journal committed to radical and materialist analysis, the remarkable *Review of African Political Economy*.

The range and quality of scholarship generated by these parallel processes is quite extraordinary. For almost two decades, U.S. and British scholars were immersed in an intense series of debates on class dynamics in Latin America and Africa: the structure of capitalism, the nature of the state, the role of imperialism, the composition of the ruling coalitions, the strength and weakness of popular movements, etc. By the middle and end of the 1980s, the bedrock of work on the political economy of both regions was impressive. While internally uneven, the value of this work is not to be underestimated. The deep inroads that Marxist political economy made in these specializations left a lasting impression

8. See Berger 1997; Chilcote 1997, 73-77.

on their internal culture — which was to become more apparent in the 1990s, in that they were better able to fend off PSPC than was South Asian studies.

3. The Peculiarity of South Asian Studies

To an extent, South Asian studies shared in the process of radicalization that overtook other area studies. The founding in 1968 of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars and the launch of the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* in May 1969 created an opening for Marxist and radical analysis of Asia, in broad parallel with the other left-wing area studies journals. Even though BCAS was initially more focused on East Asia than it was on South Asia, the latter region nonetheless figured prominently in the journal's pages. The subject that experienced the deepest inroads by Marxist analysis was, unsurprisingly, agrarian relations, both in the United States and in Great Britain. Under the steady hand of Terry Byres, the London-based *Journal of Peasant Studies* quickly emerged as the central locus for agrarian studies generally, but with a particular interest in the subcontinent. Byres himself penned some highly influential essays on the Indian rural scene,⁹ but the journal became the center of gravity for several U.S. and British names associated with the class analysis of Indian agriculture: John Harriss, Keith Griffin, Barbara Harriss-White, Ronald Herring, Gail Omvedt, and others.¹⁰ To this day, in the English-speaking world, the analysis of Indian rural social structure and history remains class oriented, and in no small measure due to the body of work published by this journal.

Still, if we look beyond the domain of agrarian studies, what stands out about South Asia scholarship in the United States is that Marxism and political economy made little impression on the field in the 1970s. It remained curiously resistant — or perhaps unattractive — to the New Left. Hence, class analysis rarely reached out beyond the confines of rural social structure or movements. With the exception of Francine Frankel's book on post-independence politics, U.S. and British scholars produced little on the class basis of the Indian state;¹¹ less still on the Indian capitalist class, or on the dynamics of industrialization; virtually nothing on the structure and fortunes of the labor movement, etc. If we compare this with the flood of class analysis focused on other regions, the difference is striking. While the collapse of democratic regimes in South America was the occasion for Guillermo O'Donnell's analysis of bureaucratic authoritarianism, which in turn triggered an immensely rich debate on the dynamics of development in the region, it had no counterpart in South Asia scholarship — even after the Emergency. And while the Tanzanian experiment under Julius Nyerere gave rise to a whole literature on the nature and limits of "African socialism," nothing even remotely comparable analyzed its Nehruvian counterpart; no parallel to the "Kenya debate," which became an opening to study the regional

9. Among these, see Byres 2001, 210–44, and his perceptive essay on Charan Singh 1990, 139–89.

10. An excellent retrospective is provided by Byres himself in "The Peasants Seminar of the University of London, 1972–1989: A Memoir." See 2001, 343–88.

11. Frankel 1979.

bourgeoisie in Africa; nothing on the internal structure of the Indian ruling class; there still is not a single study of postwar labor in India beyond a few journalistic books. Indeed, it is fair to say that while class analysis was growing by leaps and bounds for other regional specializations social scientific work on India more generally slipped into decline in the 1970s and 1980s. So it not just that class analysis failed to transform the research agenda in these years — it is that materialist analysis as such remained on pretty shaky ground.¹²

There are, I believe, two likely reasons for the discipline's imperviousness to Marxism. The first — and this is somewhat conjectural, though, I believe, reasonable — is simply a matter of timing and geography. Latin American studies and African studies attracted some of the best and brightest of the New Left because those regions were undergoing momentous changes at the time. The 1960s was when British colonialism finally collapsed in Africa, but more importantly, the whole colonial game seemed to be coming to an end — not only exciting times to be studying Africa, but a good reason to *enter* the field. India, on the other hand, had shaken off British rule almost a half-century before — and was thus less attractive to young radicals. In the United States, it was not only that Fidel, Che, and Allende appeared relevant to students, but U.S. citizens also felt a responsibility to involve themselves in the struggle of their counterparts below — after decades of U.S. subversion and terror in the region. India, on the other hand, was pretty remote and rather mysterious in comparison. On both sides of the Atlantic, it was the combination of geographic and historic links, on the one hand, and the explosion in class conflict in those regions, on the other hand, that seems to have attracted activist and radical scholars. India as well had mass mobilizations at this time, and its own radicalization, as I will discuss later, and this did attract some to the PSPC current, but nowhere near on the same scale as in the other two continents.

A second reason for the weaker Marxist impulse, I believe, is that South Asian studies already had a well-consolidated and entrenched internal culture, namely, classical Orientalism. Had a powerful radical current desired to enter the field and take it over, it might perhaps have been able to push back the older approaches and take their place, but given that India's attraction to student radicals was weaker to begin with, old-style Indologists never had to work particularly hard to maintain their dominance. This is crucial, because the traditional approach to Indian studies was as far removed from class analysis as is imaginable. Whereas Marxism was motivated by a bedrock materialism and universalist assumptions about human needs and interests, the Orientalist tradition was resolutely *culturalist* in approach — meaning not just that it focused on the

12. A quick search of the major database of American PhD dissertations reveals that political science was the only discipline among four — history, anthropology, sociology, and political science — in which dissertations on India actually *decreased* in number from the 1960s to the 1970s. The method used was to do a search using the Keyword “India” on the University Microfilms database for each decade.

production of culture, but on culture as the *source* of the institutional and structural differences of these areas from the West.

So, because of the weaker attraction of the field to young radicals, and because of the presence of a powerful and consolidated tradition that was markedly uncongenial, not just to Marxism, but even to materialism, South Asian studies was not transformed to anywhere near the same extent as the other two areas I have discussed. And even more ominously, as I noted above, it was not just Marxism, but social science approaches more generally in the field that went into temporary decline.¹³ It is easy to forget that in the early-to-mid 1960s social science literature on India was abundant and shared similar basic assumptions with scholarship on other regions. Indeed, the work on India fares pretty well in comparison to what was being produced on the other parts of the world. Books by Stanley Kochanek, Alvin Hansen, Myron Weiner, Paul Brass, and others were certainly not exemplars of radical analysis.¹⁴ But they were entirely in synch with the social science literature on, say, Latin America — and sometimes better. Indeed, the stream of U.S. scholarship on India in the two decades after Independence was noteworthy and it strained mightily against the conventions of Orientalist scholarship. But even this framework suffered a relative decline in the 1970s.

Two consequences of this retreat are worth noting. First, within the social science scholarship on India, there was not much change between the 1960s and the 1980s. Kochanek, Hanson, and others had worked within a basically pluralist framework, which was in keeping with the conventions of the time; two decades later, Lloyd and Suzanne Rudolph published *In Pursuit of Lakshmi*, the major study of the Indian political economy produced in the 1980s — an exemplar of the same pluralist analysis.¹⁵ It was as if the New Left had never existed. But more importantly, even the social scientific literature — such as it was — did not set the tone for the discipline. Because of the unshaken place of old-fashioned Indology, culturalism retained a very strong hold on the discipline's basic assumptions, and in its mode of training. Religion, language, literature — these were what incoming students encountered when they took a South Asian studies class. They served not as the phenomena to be explained, but as the *sources* of Indian history and its politics.

Here, then, is the answer to the first question that I proposed to take up in this paper. Why did PSC take deeper root in South Asian studies than in other regional concentrations? Because South Asian studies never underwent the kind of transformation that other parts of the area studies field had experienced

13. It is not clear to me why this might have been. Some have ventured to guess that with the deterioration of relations between Indira Gandhi and the United States after 1970, it became harder for U.S. scholars to secure visas for field work in India, especially on political topics. Perhaps, but this remains for someone else to check.

14. See, inter alia, Kochanek 1968; Weiner 1962; Weiner 1968; Brass 1965; Hanson 1966; and Austin 1966.

15. Rudolph and Rudolph 1987.

in the 1970s. By the 1980s, Latin American studies and Africana had been overtaken by the New Left on a scale sufficient to establish a solid political economy tradition. Not so in the case of India scholarship. The New Left largely passed India. This was particularly important for South Asia scholarship, because the traditional approach of the field was one that gave central importance to discourse and culture. This trajectory made the field especially fertile ground for not only a decline in class analysis — since the latter had never been very widespread in the first place — but for the rise of PSPC in particular. When the full force of PSPC came to be felt in area studies during the 1980s, it could easily meld with the existing practice of this field in particular. South Asian studies was to provide fertile ground for the growth of PSPC.

4. The Social Basis of Nativism

Had the convergence between New Left's trajectory and old-style Indology remained the provenance of U.S. scholars, its influence would have been significant, but limited. It would have been too easily associated with a kind of conservative reflex in the wake of the Left resurgence of the 1970s. But by the late 1980s, this trend was given an additional boost by the emergence of a stratum of Indian intellectuals — some based in the subcontinent, but many located in U.S. universities — who were operating in a methodological framework that also gave culture, symbols, and discourse a central explanatory role. Further, these were intellectuals whose self-identity was openly radical and anti-imperialist, and this only added legitimacy to arguments that progressives at least would have regarded as a continuation of the conservative tradition of old-style Indology. To understand how this strand of theorizing could not only emerge but become so influential, and how Indian intellectuals could play so prominent a role in its dissemination, we must again locate the evolution of South Asian studies in the wider trajectory of the New Left in the United States after the 1960s.

I argued in the preceding section that the New Left failed to transform the basic assumptions guiding South Asia scholarship in Anglo-American universities. But while the New Left may have failed to have a direct effect on the field, it did exercise an important *indirect* effect, by transforming the academic and cultural environment in which area studies functioned. In particular, it created a *structural space* for intellectuals from the Global South to wield real influence. In more propitious times, this probably would have given a significant impetus to Marxist and class-based scholarship on U.S. campuses — indeed, for a while it did, and in some cases, it still does. But the timing was largely detrimental to any such outcome. The internationalization of the fields came at a time when there was a greater space for scholars from the Global South, but when interest in class theory was in rapid decline. Even more, the Left was turning firmly toward a culturalist bent. This placed a filter on the kinds of Third World scholarship that elicited interest in the United States. The arrival of projects like Subaltern studies did not, therefore, signal a continuation of the radical thrust of the 1970s. What it did, ironically, was legitimize and give a radical face to a literature that undermined class analysis.

The Sixties Civilizes the United States

The massive increases in higher education during the 1960s and '70s created an enclave where radicals could find some haven, as described in the preceding section. But another critical consequence of this same phenomenon was that it also changed the social ecology of the university. This not only meant a massive increase in the sheer number of Americans undertaking some form of higher education, but a change in their composition as well — chiefly, much greater numbers of women and students of color. Higher education now became much more of a mass institution than it had been in the interwar years; and while universities did not, by any means, overturn class hierarchies with their “massification,” nor could they simply be regarded as the ivory towers of years past. The social composition of student bodies was now more representative of the population at large. This would have had an appreciable effect on intellectual culture under any circumstances: a new stratum of students would never have streamed into colleges and passively abided by the traditional elite canon. Academics would have been under considerable pressure to address, at the very least, matters of racial and gender dynamics.

But what greatly heightened the prospects of such a turn was that this transformation of students' social composition was occurring in the midst of a mass radicalization of students across the country. In more neutral circumstances, there would have been some pressure for changes in curricula and instruction, perhaps to make it less glaringly reflective of the dominant culture. But in the context of the times, the push went further, toward a more profound change of academic culture itself. On one side, entire new programs focusing on ethnicity, gender, African Americans, Latinos, and the like were established. And these focused specifically on the power relations in which these groups were enmeshed, bringing matters of oppression and marginalization to the fore.

Just as important as the changes in curriculum, however, was a powerful momentum for initiating changes in the composition of staff and faculty. Universities now entered an era when it could no longer be taken for granted that patterns of departmental staffing would remain unaffected by the content of the curriculum. Newly formed African American studies or Latino studies departments, for example, could not ignore the need for racial diversity — whether in their faculty, or in the literature they taught. This was one of the most important cultural advances brought about by the movements of the 1970s — the aggregate effect of the anti-imperialist and civil rights movements in the United States, not to mention the global collapse of colonial empires since the 1960s. The scope of what was regarded as acceptable intellectual production exploded to not just include the work of subordinate groups and regions — but to demand it.

As part of this transformation, the content of area studies could not remain dominated by Anglo-U.S. scholarship. And, after a time, nor could hiring patterns continue unchanged. By the 1980s, it was possible to observe a noticeable shift in graduate curricula, as U.S. scholars actively included research coming out of the developing world — not just as ornamentation, but as a valid and es-

sential part of the scholarly universe. A structural space had opened up for some of the extraordinary outpouring of scholarship, literary work, and polemics from the postcolonial world. This was to have a profound effect on the evolution of the field, in two ways. First, scholarship coming out of the Global South was now considered not only a legitimate part of the intellectual universe, but in some respects even central to it. In English departments, for example, it was in the 1980s that the study of colonial and postcolonial literature became a legitimate specialization for Ph.D. students. Second, once this new culture had set in, it would incline area studies departments to consciously seek out scholars from the Global South in their hiring practices, or at least to include the latter in their ambit. Disciplines where area specialization played a central role — history and anthropology — but cultural studies as well felt the pressure especially strongly.

The Limits of Campus Radicalism

While these advances in the academic culture were real, they were structured by an underlying contradiction, viz., that as matters of social oppression were entering the mainstream of scholarly production, the concern with class and capitalism was beginning to wane. This was to have a tremendous impact on the kind of work from the South that would be promoted in the Atlantic world, so it is worth considering.

In principle, the inclusion of gender, race, etc., as central to radical analysis could have led to a deepening of the class-based agenda of the 1970s — and for a brief spell it did. But the dominant trend was for an abandonment of the latter. This should not be surprising. Intellectuals associated with the New Left were primarily located in universities. They were therefore subject to two sets of influences: their immediate professional surroundings and the wider social integument. It was the latter that had drawn students and academics toward Marxist and socialist currents in the 1970s, through the anti-imperialist movement and the labor mobilizations at the beginning of the decade. By the end of the decade, however, while the movements around nonclass identities had scored impressive gains, there was no comparable advance for the working class. Indeed, the balance of class power shifted powerfully to the right, and by the onset of the Reagan era, a full-scale assault on labor and the Left was underway. As a class movement, the New Left had met with a crushing defeat.

In some respects, this mirrored the defeats of the working class movement worldwide in the 1930s, which was followed by rightward shift in political culture. But the setbacks of the New Left during the 1970s were in many respects deeper. For the upsurges of the first quarter of the twentieth century had left in their wake a panoply of socialist parties and class organizations, which provided the milieu in which radical intellectuals survived for much of the century. They served as conduits — however weak — to the more radical sections of the labor movement, and immersed the intellectuals in an intensely charged culture outside of academic institutions. But in the case of the New Left, even this was not accomplished — its defeat was more complete, leaving no organizational legacy, and hence no political milieu that could sustain its intellectual coherence.

The environment that most directly shaped the evolution of New Left intellectuals, therefore, was the academy.

The defeat of the working class upsurge across the advanced capitalist world was critical to the evolution of the New Left. Intellectuals had little or no connection with actual working class organizations — unlike the Left of generations past — and what they saw of the movement was now in tatters. Their world was now confined to the walls of the university, and their social milieu consisted of the professional middle class. This set into train a somewhat natural process of deradicalization. First, and most directly, it triggered a growing sense of disillusionment — first with the prospect of anticapitalist movements, and later, with the very idea of mass organizing.¹⁶ It was during the 1980s that the argument become increasingly popular within radical circles that a major flaw in Marxist theorizing was an overly optimistic, even teleological, take on class formation. Marx was guilty of assuming highly deterministic relations between class structure and class formation — or between class-in-itself and class-for-itself, as the jargon would have it. Such criticisms led to two reactions. One was a gathering pessimism about the salience of class analysis itself, within large sections of the erstwhile Left; the second was a turn to culture and discourse to explain the highly mediated relation between class structure and class formation — a turn that, over time, gave shorter and shorter shrift to the former pole of the dyad.¹⁷ This wing of the New Left became the vanguard of the turn to culturalism over time, and provided the seedbed for the growth of PSPC, both within area studies, and without.

By the middle of the 1980s, the New Left had mostly been domesticated into academic culture. Class analysis was practiced only within a small slice of it, and this was an increasingly marginal component of the academic mainstream. If a pressure for the deepening of class analysis was to come, it would have had to be from below — the students. But here too, there was no reason to expect any such development. For students, a college education is a means of social mobility. Even though their origin may be in the working class, their aspirations are of a more elite nature. For those students who make it into college, the mere fact of social advancement serves to confirm central elements of the dominant ideology, which insists on the fluidity of social hierarchies, and the absence of structural constraints. The mere fact of more working class students entering higher education — as they did after the 1950s — would not generate a mass base for socialist ideas. On the other hand, while students coming to college are escaping from their class constraints, they continue to experience varieties of social discrimination, even in their new environment — around issues of identity. So while college dilutes awareness of class exploitation, it often heightens sensitivity to one's subordination on social lines. The result is to create a mass base for

16. Terry Eagleton's opening chapter of *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1992) captures this dynamic brilliantly.

17. This has been discussed well in Wood 1986 and Callinicos 1990.

the study, and the critique, of nonclass forms of domination — or at least, to evacuate the class dimensions of social domination.

This institutional environment created a mass base for what we now call “identity politics” on the campus. This meant that even though class analysis was on the decline, there would be no return to the status quo ante — at least on these other issues. Hence, while the retreat of radicals into the university established an “upper limit” on their radicalism — in that class was more or less taken off the table in rapid order — the changes of the 1970s also put in place a “lower limit” on how far toward the past the culture would drift. In other words, the changed composition of the campus, in the context of the shifts in broader culture, meant that the retreat from class politics would not trigger a slide away from radicalism as such. Criticism of on-class domination would find firm anchor in universities. Hence, forms of radicalism that were indifferent to, or even hostile to, class politics would find fertile ground on U.S. campuses in the 1980s — compared to the 1950s, when any kind of radicalism would have met with great hostility. To anticipate, this created the mass base for a movement like PSPC, which advertised itself as a critique of colonial and postcolonial domination — but with little reference to those elements that Marxists had always focused on: class, exploitation, etc. So as area studies came to include more and more voices from the South in its normal functioning, scholars who found this political shift away from class most appealing were the ones who fit into this mould.

The forgoing discussion lays the basis for understanding our main concern: how South Asian studies, as practiced in the United States, not only experienced a turn to PSPC, but did so with scholars of Indian origin playing a central role. The discussion in Section 3 explained how South Asian studies was especially vulnerable to the advance of PSPC, because Marxism never made much of a dent on the field, leaving a heavy bias toward cultural analysis. In the present section, I suggested that while the New Left did not directly enter the field, its gains in academia more generally, and the consequent transformation of academic culture, did have a critical *indirect* effect on how South Asia scholarship was practiced: it was now impossible to ignore the rich outpouring of scholarship from the subcontinent. Intellectuals of South Asian descent were seen as peers and as natural leaders in the field, whose work was now actively, even eagerly, promoted.

One effect of the changed university environment, then, was to create a space for the increased prominence of Indian intellectuals. But this still left considerable leeway for choosing between different strands of research — different orientations — among such scholars. And this is where the limits of the New Left, as it entered the 1980s, came into play. By the time that the cultural changes had seeped into the firmament of area studies, class analysis was in deep decline. As Anglo-American scholars looked out into the South and sought out scholarship with which they could relate, which they valued and considered exemplary, there was a natural affinity with approaches that *eschewed* a central focus on materialist approaches and even on class. Indeed, there was an inclination to view Marxist work as somewhat quaint, or worse, as simply lacking in sophisti-

cation. The selectional pressure *against* class, in other words, was complemented by a selectional bias *toward* work that could be easily assimilated into the dominant trends in the field — an emphasis on cultural or discursive frames within which to analyze.

This was the breach into which stepped Subaltern studies, and this was the environment that shaped its evolution toward exemplifying PSPC.

5. The Arrival of Subaltern Studies (and Such)

What is remarkable about the importation of the Subaltern studies series into the United States is how influential it has been beyond South Asian studies, a field that has historically occupied a relatively ghettoized position in U.S. academia. That it could do so is largely because the series melded easily into the intellectual culture of area studies, and of disciplines in which area specializations play an important part — especially history and anthropology. In some respects, the fact that Indian scholars experienced particular success in the new context was institutionally driven. First, there was the mundane and quite ordinary fact that, unlike much of the developing world, Indian intellectual production was carried out primarily in English. It was thus readily accessible, not just to specialists in South Asian studies, but to the far reaches of the academic community. This immediately distinguished it from Latin American intellectual circles, which were also producing extremely rich and textured scholarship, but out of reach to anyone lacking the language skills. On top of this was the fact of networks. Indian scholarship was already located in the social milieu of Anglo-American universities, not only by its existing connections with U.S. universities, but also by its long connections with Cambridge, Oxford, and London. This was a circuit that many U.S. scholars knew well, far more so than one that went through Dar es Salaam, Mexico City, or Cairo — all of which were producing tremendous scholarship of their own at the time.

But of course, it wasn't just any Indian scholarship that benefited from these factors. If it were just the institutional factors mentioned above, the importation of scholarship from the subcontinent would have been much more broadly based. There was a flourishing school of Marxist historians and political economists in India who were not given anywhere near the same attention as was Subaltern studies. Indeed, many of the same factors also applied to historical and political research being conducted in South Africa, but which, at the time, was strenuously Marxist in orientation. This latter stream of work, if anything, ought to have resonated more powerfully in the United States, since the middle and late 1980s was the time when campuses across the country were humming with antiapartheid activism. But while the South African Marxists, and their Indian counterparts, did garner some attention (especially the former), this did not even approach the accolades that were showered on the Subaltern series. So, clearly, more was at work here than the mere fact of linguistic affinity or academic networks.

Perhaps the most important element favoring the patronage of work such as that of the Subaltern collective was that it contained streams within it that not only came out of a familiar institutional milieu, but were also moving in a *theo-*

retical direction that was familiar and attractive — both to the New Left and to the practitioners of South Asian studies. This is an important point to stress, because in the commentaries and reflections that are in circulation, the role played by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak in promoting the series is given a great deal of attention. It is becoming something of a fixture that Volume Four of the series, in which Spivak's famous essay "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" was appended as the closing chapter, forms something of a watershed. This is often presented as the point when the series made its entrance into the U.S. scene, and which triggered the turn in a more committed post-structuralist direction.¹⁸ Spivak's imprimatur is accorded some significant responsibility for the series' subsequent success, in that it acted as a stamp of approval to the broader post-Marxist currents. When, a few years later, Edward Said did the same by writing the Foreword to a collection of essays from the Subaltern series, it only added to this dynamic.¹⁹

Spivak's role in legitimizing Subaltern studies to the U.S. academic crowd can't be denied; her influence was enormous. But it should not be exaggerated. The intellectual community would hardly fete unquestioningly everything Gayatri Spivak, and later Edward Said, ordained. What made their endorsements effective was that, from the start, the series was crafted in a framework attractive to reigning sensibilities in area studies, both its Left variant, and its more traditional one.

The most important component of this framework was the influence of Antonio Gramsci. It was the influence of Gramscian concepts that made Subaltern studies appropriate for consumption in the United States — both in South Asia scholarship and within the New Left. The very title of the series signaled his importance to the project. But most crucially, it was their interpretation of Gramsci's work that made it attractive. This was an interpretation that took him to be a theorist of culture and consciousness. Hence, while the series in its early volumes did contain essays of a recognizable Marxist bent, those of a more consciously Gramscian orientation were concerned with the analysis of discursive formations and the production of consciousness. From the start, the collective accorded a central role not just to peasant consciousness and discourse, but to the discursive basis of elite hegemony over the nationalist movement, and to the qualities of nationalism as a discursive formation. This was most evident in the work of Partha Chatterjee and Ranajit Guha, who also went on to become perhaps the most influential members of the collective.²⁰ But it was a preoccupation that ran through the whole collective, effectively marginalizing the concern with the material conditions of class domination.

This struck a resonant chord with the prevailing understanding of Gramsci in the West. The middle of the 1980s was probably the time when Gramsci's influ-

18. See Sumit Sarkar 1994; Chakrabarty 2002, 16–17.

19. See Said's "Foreword" to *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Guha and Spivak, eds. 1988.

20. See Chatterjee 1984; Chatterjee 1986; and Guha 1983.

ence was peaking in Anglo-American scholarship, particularly in the historical profession.²¹ But it was a specific interpretation of his work, particularly of his theorization of hegemony, that was gaining currency. By the middle of the 1980s, two interpretations of his argument were making the rounds. One was an *interest-based*, or objectivist, interpretation, formulated most clearly by Adam Przeworski. For Przeworski, Gramsci based the stability of class domination in the ruling class's successful coordination of its interests with those of subordinate groups. The clearest example of successful hegemonic rule was, on this argument, European social democracy — since it embodied an ongoing negotiated settlement between representatives of labor and capital.²² Similar approaches were taken by Michael Burawoy, Erik Olin Wright, and Joseph Femia, among others.²³

A second interpretation took hegemony to be grounded in the ruling class's successful *ideological or cultural* indoctrination — “interpellation” — of subordinate groups. In this approach, interests played a secondary role in the process, not least because the very idea of objective interests was frequently denied. *This* Gramsci could be traced back to Althusser's followers,²⁴ as filtered through the influential Birmingham University's Centre for Cultural Studies, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*,²⁵ and others. Hegemony thus came to be taken as grounded in the generation of effective discursive strategies. Hence, whereas the analytical focus of the former group of theorists tended to be class organizations and class strategies, the latter group trained its lens on the instruments of ideological production — literature, television, film, etc. Indeed, for a number of years, before post-structuralism took deep roots in the Anglo-American academy, cultural studies subsisted in a basically Gramscian framework.

Even though both of these interpretations of Gramsci were in circulation, it was the second, cultural take, that was far and away the dominant one, especially in the humanities and anthropology. And this was also the very approach

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21. See the trenchant critique of the cultural studies appropriation of Gramscian concepts in Panitch 1985.
 22. See Przeworski 1985 and Przeworski and Sprague 1986.
 23. Burawoy 1979; Burawoy 1985; Wright 1985; Femia 1990. Perry Anderson's well-known essay, in my view, offered an interpretation that is broadly consistent with this view. See Anderson 1977.
 24. This is slightly misleading, since Althusser had a distinctly bimodal legacy in Anglo-American Marxism. The dominant trend was for his followers to veer toward some kind of post-structuralism, and this is conventionally taken as his legacy. Prominent examples are Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe, the intellectuals around the journal *Rethinking Marxism*, and others. But a subordinate trend, which was nonetheless quite productive, led to a kind of materialist structuralism. This was exemplified in theorists such as Ted Benton, Erik Wright, Roy Bhaskar, and the Critical Realist school. The latter has not been as closely identified with an Althusserian legacy, largely, I think, because they don't advertise themselves as such.
 25. A good sampling of the Birmingham school can be had in Hall 1980, and Laclau and Mouffe 1985.

that was (and continues to be) accepted by the Subaltern collective. The Subalterns' Gramsci was, as in much of the New Left at the time, a theorist of ideology and culture — not of the material basis of consent, or of class struggle. Gramsci in Delhi and Calcutta was as much a culture maven as he was in Chicago, New York, or London — not to mention Birmingham.²⁶ This take on his work thus provided a natural point of convergence between the two streams, and a bridgehead for the series into the circuits of the New Left. It is in this context that Spivak's endorsement ought to be viewed. Her patronage was effective because the Subaltern series was recognizable, and digestible, to the U.S. audience. Now of course, *given* this underlying convergence, her intervention was of enormous importance. Without it, the series would have been read and admired, but probably as one of the several efforts at a "history from below" that were ongoing both in the North and South — important, and innovative enough, but not of particular interest to those beyond the specialist community. With the ongoing interest shown by Spivak, and especially by the influential essays she wrote interpreting and introducing Subaltern studies, the project graduated from a disciplinary initiative to something much more. This was the ingredient that allowed the series to break out of the South Asia ghetto and explode onto the larger academic scene.

From that point on, Subaltern studies marched in lockstep with the New Left's turn away from class analysis and toward a wholesale embrace of post-Marxist theorizing.²⁷ Indeed, while the Gramscian roots of the project made it digestible to the New Left in the West, and hence eased its entry into the American academy, the project quickly assumed the role of a vanguard in the drive toward post-Marxism. And with every new volley against the putative shortcomings of the Marxist tradition, the leading theorists of the *Subaltern* series vaulted into ever greater prominence as *radical* theorists. As we have seen in the preceding discussion, the broader demise of class analysis among intellectuals was already underway, a more or less direct result of the rightward political shift, the defeat of working class movements, and the domestication of Marxists within the university. But at the same time, the real gains made by nonclass movements, along with the changed composition of the student body, created conditions friendly to critical analysis of a limited kind — indeed, its very hostility to class made it quite appealing to upwardly mobile students and the radical professoriate. What gave the Subalterns special relevance was that this was an intellectual project that came out of the South, and which not only was shedding its Marxist roots, but was blazing the trail in bringing PSPC to area

26. Indeed, the fate of Gramsci in South Asian studies, particularly in the Subalternist variant, is worthy of study in its own right. His shadow looms over the entire *oeuvre*, and not only in its early phase. But it has required a massive re-configuration of the basic elements of his theory. And what is most ironic is that those parts of his thought that have been transplanted with some fidelity — like the notion of a passive revolution — are the ones least defensible. I hope to have an argument to this effect available soon.

27. Chatterjee 2003; Chakrabarty 2000.

studies. The very fact of the Indian identity of so many of its leading lights gave legitimacy to the theoretical shift.

The culturalism of the series — whether Gramscian or post-structuralist — also made the series palatable to the more traditional wings of South Asia studies, who had been trained to view India through the prism of its culture and ideology. One might have thought that mainstream Indologists would have little interest in an intellectual project inspired by a Marxian perspective, regardless of its particulars. But by the 1980s, the culture of South Asian studies had moved decidedly to the Left in at least this respect, that critical views of colonialism had to be taken seriously, and especially if they were coming out of Indian scholarship. What is more, the Gramscian or culturalist wing of critical scholarship was taken, both within the field and in area studies more generally, as being at the cutting edge. Traditionalist scholars had every reason to join the stream. Here was a field — old-style Indology — that was quite at ease in presenting basically Orientalist constructions of Indian history and politics, explaining economic or political dynamics through the content of religious texts or as expressions of deep cultural facts of a civilization — and it was handed a theory (PSPC) that not only took social reality to be a discursive construction, but stamped it with the moral and intellectual authority of the latest radical fashions. The cache of its moral authority should not be underestimated here. The most venerable of nineteenth century disciplines, long associated with conservative and colonial sympathies, was able to integrate itself with an intellectual trend that carried its anti-imperialism on its very decked-out sleeve.

One consequence of this turn of events was that, in rapid order, well-established traditionalist scholars were able to reinvent themselves as sophisticated practitioners of the new discourse theory. Thus Ronald Inden, who penned a well-known, and thoroughly traditionalist, text on Bengali caste and culture in the 1970s,²⁸ emerged a decade later as a self-proclaimed scourge of that approach with the publication of *Imagining India* — which, despite its excoriation of Orientalism, never strays far from the relentless preoccupation with ritual, symbols, and caste.²⁹ Inden gave an explicit nod to Subaltern studies as “the first time, since colonization [sic]” that Indians are “showing sustained signs of re-appropriating the capacity [sic] to represent themselves” — the evidence being, not surprisingly, that the collective’s approach converges with Inden’s own.³⁰

Thus, the strenuously culturalist commitments of the Indian avant-garde gave it a natural resonance within South Asian studies in the United States, where traditionalist approaches had never been dislodged, as well as providing the bridge to the broader New Left. From the Left, the route to treating the social world as an artifact of culture, or of discourse, came through a defanged and denatured Gramsci, and then French philosophy; from the more conservative

28. Inden c1976.

29. Inden 1990.

30. Inden 1986, 445.

wing, it came through the Durkheimian framework of a Dumont or through the traditional Orientalist tradition. Now even if class analysis had made serious inroads into the field, there is little doubt that a PSPC turn would have wielded significant influence after the 1980s — its spread occurred throughout area studies, regardless of their association with Marxism in the 1970s. But it is equally plausible to suggest that, if the landscape had not been so barren of class analysis, the slide into PSPC would not have been so severe — as, indeed, it has not been in more radical wings of the area studies universe. South Asian studies turned out to be one of the few fields in which the radical and the not-so-radical wings of the field could converge on their hostility to class theory.

6. The Empire Strikes Back: India as Satellite

The decline of class analysis, and its displacement by PSPC, has been especially severe in South Asia scholarship as practiced in the United States. But it would be wrong to imagine that matters in India itself remained unchanged. It is hard to miss the fact that decline in the United States has been mirrored by a similar dynamic in Indian scholarship as well. The culturalism and anti-Marxism of PSPC that have affected South Asian studies in the United States have become tremendously popular in academic settings in India. And here too, we see a generational bubble similar to the one in the West: to the extent that class analysis and Marxism still survives, it does so mainly among intellectuals of the older generation, radicalized in the 1960s and after. Within the younger generation, the far more common orientation — especially in the humanities and anthropology — is firmly set in the direction of PSPC. Class analysis in India, while certainly more visible than in the West, is unmistakably under stress, especially in elite universities.

Now, an immediate caveat is on order. And it is an important one, for it also provides a clue to some of the sources behind Marxism's decline. The turn away from class analysis has not spread across, or even through, most of the forums for intellectual production in the subcontinent. In universities and settings outside the major metropolitan centers, Marxism continues to play a central role in political and cultural debate. Literary production continues to have a deep base in socialist traditions, especially in vernacular languages. Theoretical debates, too, continue to utilize class analysis in settings where the English-speaking intelligentsia have not usurped the available space. Where class *has* made a visible retreat is in the English-speaking elite universities located in Delhi, Calcutta, Hyderabad, and a few other cities. Further, even though Marxism has taken a beating in the elite Indian universities, I do not intend to suggest that it has disappeared. A respectable phalanx of Marxists continues to persevere, not only in the social sciences, but also in cultural studies — the field where, in the United States, there has been the greatest retreat.

The basic causes behind the retreat of class in intellectual discourse in elite universities in India is, I believe, two-fold: first, a fairly deep shift in the social environment of academic production, and second, a much deepened integration of elite academic life into the U.S. orbit since the 1990s. The former weakened

the Marxian impulse in Indian academic culture, so that it was, by the late 1980s more hospitable to various flavors of post-Marxist theorizing; the latter functioned to amplify these tendencies by inserting a large number of Indian academics into U.S. academia, either as professors, or as visiting scholars, or as graduate students.

Sources of Vitality

It is a remarkable fact that, for close to four decades, class analysis occupied a prominent place in elite academic production in India, even if it was not the dominant strain. Certainly, some institutional and political facts accounted for this state of affairs.

There is no doubt that an “official” commitment to socialism — even if it was, in reality, state-capitalism — was an enabling factor in the longevity of class analysis. Hence, the very fact of a powerful Planning Commission created a space for structuralist and heterodox economists, making it easier for Marxists to achieve respectability; Indira Gandhi’s decision to set up Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in the early 1970s, and to allow it an avowedly progressive mission, provided institutional support to radical scholarship. JNU became an extraordinary space for critical analysis in the two decades that followed; and even the official state discourse of egalitarianism, despite its obvious ideological functions, sustained an attention to class issues.

But this tilt within the state could only create the *space* for radical analysis. It could not determine scholarly quality or vitality. If it were only the state’s adoption of socialism that sustained the culture of class analysis, there is no reason to have expected Indian Marxism to be any more creative or vital than the stultifying theoretical work that emanated from the Soviet Union or comes, these days, from China. The remarkable vitality of intellectual production on the Left — not only in specialist circles, but also in the political magazines like the *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Mainstream*, *Frontier*, and others — required fuel from independent sources. The main such source was the two eras of mass radicalization that came with the wave of mobilization before Independence, and then the resurgence of Left struggles in the wake of Naxalbari. Two generations of intellectuals were deeply affected by these movements, each of which had not only a significant class content, but articulated its concerns in the language of class.

The whole arc of politics from the 1960s to the late 1970s is important in this regard. The radicalization of intellectual culture that came in the era of late colonialism was very significant, no doubt. But left to its own, the impulse would have most likely spent itself within a generation. Naxalbari served to not only renew Left culture, but to unleash a torrent of debate on everything from political strategy to the more abstruse questions regarding the conceptualization of Indian history and culture. In doing so, it opened entirely new vistas in scholarship. India in the 1970s thus joined the global melee that produced a whole new generation of radicals, and in the subcontinent, a new generation of Marxists. Indeed, this was probably the zenith of class analysis in South Asia; if Marxism

ever approached dominance in the subcontinent, it was probably in the heady decade of the 1970s, as the generation of '47 was joined by the newer cohort of radicals from the turmoil of '68.

This direct engagement with politics was amplified by more distal factors, chief among which was the tectonic shift occurring in world politics — most importantly, the epochal collapse of colonial empires. If we start at the immediate postwar years, the whole period witnessed an escalating progression of mass struggle and decolonization, most all of which was led by avowedly socialist parties — again, ignoring for the moment the actual content of these “socialisms.” Whatever their actual politics may have been once in power (or even before), the combination of their rhetoric, with their very real imbrication in mass movements, added to the resonance that Marxist ideas had for middle class intellectuals. On the other side of this equation, the very vulnerability of colonial powers to these struggles gave great succor to those (like Marxists), whose framework rested on the centrality of class conflict and mass struggle. The whole dynamic reached its crescendo in the mid-'70s with the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, on the heels of which came the abrupt and total collapse of Portuguese rule in Africa. This global political dynamic served to amplify the effects of more local political shifts. For two generations, it must have seemed as if capitalism was reeling under the hammer blows of radicalized mass movements.

And yet, a decade later, class analysis in the subcontinent began its decline. In some ways, this is not altogether surprising. By the end of the 1980s, Marxism was in retreat not just in India, but across much of the world. Intellectual discourse was, by that point, being shaped by new forces, that pushed class analysis to the background before marginalizing it altogether. To some extent, it was only natural that South Asia scholarship should be pulled into this slipstream. What is noteworthy is how rapidly the change occurred among Indianists, and the particular intellectual currents that now emerged as dominant. In a country like the United States, where Marxism had never been anything but marginal in intellectual life before the 1970s, it was not unexpected that this kind of radical scholarship would wane over time, as the pull of social movements weakened. But given that South Asia scholarship, particularly coming out of India itself, had been so steeped in the language of class for four decades, its marginalization merits some discussion.

Sources of Decline

While Marxist intellectual culture has undergone a decline across much of the world since the 1980s, the decline has by no means been universal, even in the developing world. Through the end of the 1990s, there remained a visible stream of literature emanating from Brazil, South Korea, and to a lesser extent, South Africa, that was committed to some kind of class-based theorizing. The factors responsible for this are not hard to locate. In each of these countries, the 1980s and after witnessed significant mobilizations of workers and peasants, led by fiercely left-wing union federations and political organizations. On the subcontinent, however, the political winds pushed in the opposite direction. The past two decades have marked something of a watershed in modern India.

In contrast to the four decades that preceded it, the period since the mid-1980s has been distinctly unpropitious for radicalizing the intelligentsia.

To begin, liberalization has, at least to this point, been a distinctly conservatizing force on the urban middle class. An expanding private sector, the opening up of consumer credit, the greater presence of multinationals looking for English-trained talent — all of this has ballooned the income of several layers within the middle class. And as elsewhere, the cultural and political effects have rippled far beyond the incidence of actual material changes. Even if urban youth and aspirant professionals do not achieve the full extent of their ambitions, it is the orientation to these career paths, and their cultural accoutrements, that is at issue. One need only look to the extraordinary enthusiasm for liberalization in the English media to get some idea of the hostility that the middle class evinces toward the Left, or toward any whiff of class mobilization.

This broad cultural turn has only been exacerbated by the fate of political movements. The uprisings around the time of Naxalbari, which played such an important role in radicalizing a generation, were only twenty years removed from the mass upheavals that accompanied Independence. It has now been close to forty years — twice as long as the preceding hiatus — since Left movements of anywhere near that scope or longevity have emerged in India. Indeed, the mobilizations that have occurred have tended to further *conservatize* the urban middle class: the emergence of Hindutva as a mass strategy of the Sangh Parivar in the 1990s, and the massive mobilization against the Mandal Commission.³¹ Not surprisingly, the political culture within universities tilted visibly in a rightward direction during the decade.³²

These are not propitious conditions for a renewal of Marxism or class analysis. By the late 1980s, it was already possible to see an increasing prominence of various and sundry post-Marxist strands of theorizing in the academic culture. What gave this movement explosive force, however, was some more narrowly institutional facts about elite academic life in India. Chief among these was a deepened integration of Delhi, Calcutta, and some other cities into U.S. academic life. It is important to stress, again, the specificity of the U.S. connection, so as to avoid characterizing it as an integration into the West as such. Indian intellectuals had been integrated into Western academic life for a very long time —

31. I am grateful to Atul Kohli for stressing this point in response to a presentation that I made at Princeton University in May 2006.

32. No doubt, for some intellectuals, especially younger ones, the open chauvinism of Hindutva, and the sheer mendacity with which so much of the middle class attacked the Mandal Commission, served as a source of some radicalization. Indeed, there was an influx of new, younger activists into civil liberties and democratic rights groups around the country, specifically in reaction to the social chauvinism rippling across the culture. But it should be conceded that political energy in the 1990s emanated from the Right. And what radicalization there was, was not in the direction of class politics per se, but a more diffuse disgust at the thin edge of fascism beginning to bare its teeth in Indian politics.

only the main conduit had, for obvious reasons, been the United Kingdom. There were two changes that came in the 1990s.

The first was the basic reorientation, with a relative shift away from England, and toward the United States.³³ This should not be surprising, since, in the wake of Thatcher's assault on higher education in the United Kingdom, U.S. universities had rapidly risen to preeminence in the developed world, especially for graduate instruction. Across the whole of academic life, the entire world was orbiting around the U.S. university system, so much so that there were loud complaints of a British brain drain across the Atlantic. So it is no surprise that Indian intellectual production, too, shifted its frame of reference increasingly to U.S. shores. This was accelerated by the undoubted success of Subaltern studies, and the preeminent positions of personages like Spivak and Homi Bhaba in U.S. academia. Not only was the latter becoming more influential in setting academic fashions, South Asians were experiencing very real success in them. Indeed, they enjoyed some measure of influence in *setting* the fashions.

The second change followed on the first, but was relatively independent of it. This was the apparent increase in numbers of Indians having some experience with the U.S. academic scene. I characterize this as an "apparent" increase, because data on this matter is very hard to obtain. But over the course of the 1990s and after, there seems to have been a noticeable increase of Indian scholars in South Asian studies. This is an interesting phenomenon. After the end of the cold war, there was a general expectation that area studies as a field would be gradually wound down. This may still happen. But at least with regard to South Asian studies generally — by which I mean not departments that come under the label, but, more broadly, academic positions created for the teaching of, and research on, South Asian culture and history — the trend seems to have been firmly in the opposite direction.³⁴ In the past decade alone, there have been initiatives to either reinvigorate, or launch entirely new programs of, South Asia centers and departments in Columbia University, Johns Hopkins, the University of Michigan, UCLA, Harvard, and others.

Now, if this had been the 1950s, it is most likely that scholars of Anglo-American origin, practicing traditional lines of research, would have filled these new positions. But because of the changes brought about by the movements of the 1970s — discussed above — there has been a laudable impulse to look first, or at least very seriously, at scholars from South Asia or of such descent. This is not just because of the antecedent success of Subaltern studies — though no doubt the latter has endowed Indian scholars with a certain cachet. The receptivity toward Indian academics has its own — independent — sources, in the changed ecology of U.S. campuses, and the greater cosmopolitanism of intellectual culture. Given these changes, and given the incredible successes of the Subalterns,

33. Relative, I should stress, not absolute.

34. My colleague Craig Calhoun informs me that, in his tenure as president of the Social Science Research Council, he tried to organize a systematic collection of data on trends in area studies hirings, but met with very limited success.

it is no surprise that the eyes of university hiring committees have turned to Indian elite universities. Over the past few years, a steady stream of anthropologists and historians have settled into permanent positions in the United States. Others cycle through, either as half-time professors or visiting scholars. What is more, their arrival has been mostly at the elite U.S. universities, since this is where South Asia positions have been opened up (though this is now changing and seeping into smaller colleges).

The mere fact of academic integration is neither here nor there. Its impact on scholarly culture depends on the broader political and intellectual environment in which it transpires. Had it happened in happier times, had effort to give greater presence to Indian academics occurred when Marxian analysis was peaking, the result would have been quite different. But given the changes described in the preceding sections, the whole dynamic has had the effect of further weakening class analysis — and strengthening PSPC. The fact that Indian postcolonial theorists have been most successful in elite U.S. universities has given them significant influence over the direction of future research, even in India. Most of the graduate training in South Asian studies in the United States occurs in elite universities, since it is taught only sporadically in smaller colleges or state universities. Indian students coming to the United States, therefore, are trained mainly at these venues. Western trained PhD's in Delhi, or Calcutta, or Bombay are thus, in increasing numbers, the next generation of PSPC theorists.

The result of this process of integration is that a circuit has been created, linking centers of South Asia scholarship in the United States with elite universities in India. In the past, such circuits had mainly functioned as means of graduate training, funneling Indian graduate students into Western (mainly British) universities, and then back to India for academic employment once they had completed their PhD's. This is still very much the case today, only with two changes: the center of gravity has shifted from the United Kingdom to U.S. shores, and the flow now includes Indian academics headed for employment in the United States. It is hardly a surprise that some key concepts of PSPC — migrancy, hybridity, liminality, and the like — have been developed by this stratum. They effectively convey its own conditions of existence.

Conclusion

In the United States, as well as in India, the past two decades have been a time of a rightward political drift, based on a balance of political power that has tilted massively toward dominant classes. In both countries, anticapitalist movements have become weaker — just about nonexistent in the U.S. case — hence greatly diluting the social milieu that has historically served to both sustain Marxist intellectuals, as well as to ensure generational reproduction. This has left a double burden: on the last generation to have been radicalized en masse — the “68”ers — and on institutions of higher education, which have emerged to play a central role in the production of radical theory. Much of the decline of class analysis, and of the peculiar brands of radicalism that have risen in its wake, can be explained by this simple phenomenon.

In the United States, this process can be observed most clearly, since Marxist theorizing there has essentially been confined to the academic setting since the 1980s. Now, the increased importance of academia in the production of radical theory is true across much of the Atlantic world, and even beyond. The New Left took haven in college campuses across Europe after the defeats of the 1970s. But in this dynamic, the United States stands apart. Nowhere else was the defeat of working class anticapitalist groupings so complete, and organizations of the Left relegated to so marginal a status in the political culture; and nowhere else have academic institutions occupied so central a space for radical theorizing. This amounted to a fundamental shift in the locus of Marxist theorizing — away from a directly political milieu, which had been the hub for the Left historically, and into academia, where the left had hitherto been a marginal presence.

This shift played an important role for the fate of class analysis in South Asian studies, as it did for scholarship across the spectrum. As the central locus for Left scholarship, the university established two sets of constraints on intellectual production. One was the quite predictable limit to how long a distinctively Marxist current would survive, let alone thrive, in any particular discipline. Over time, much of the New Left intelligentsia got absorbed into the professional life and norms of their disciplines. But this did not portend a return to the status quo ante — the academic culture of the 1950s — because of the second constraint now in operation. This was one that established a floor on how far the mainstream could regress to its previous incarnations. Because of the joint influence of social movements and the changing social ecology of campuses across the country, there was to be no going back on matters of social discrimination, and the scholarship relating to it. On this, the New Left converged with students flooding into the universities. Hence, while the *political* basis for *class* analysis was rapidly disappearing, the universities were gaining a *mass* base for a continuing focus on *nonclass* forms of radical theorizing.

Of course, the weight exercised by these constraints was felt unevenly across various fields, and this was very much the case in area studies. South Asia scholarship in the United States had been one of those least affected by the entry of Marxism. Consequently, the field has remained more powerfully influenced by traditional approaches than have cognate specializations like Latin American studies. In particular, the culturalism of traditional Indology was never seriously challenged, much less displaced, in much of the literature. But because of the transformation of academic practice — the second constraint alluded to in the preceding paragraph — this culturalism has been grafted onto a critique of colonialism and an appreciation of indigenous — i.e., South Asian — scholarship far more extensively than ever before.

The result has been an internal momentum toward a radicalism of sorts, but one that is strongly culturalist in approach — unlike in other area concentrations, where culturalism has also witnessed some revival, but has had to coexist with the pockets of class analysis and political economy that were established in the 1970s. In the particular context of South Asia scholarship, it has resulted first off in the emergence of various forms of post-Marxisms as the reigning form of anticolonial or anti-imperialist critique. An interesting offshoot of this devel-

opment is that, because of its culturalism, this movement has not met with a great deal of resistance from the more traditional elements of the field. Indeed, the marriage between them has been quite happy, as scholars coming out of an Orientalist tradition have found a new vocabulary for their substantive arguments.

The penetration of these theoretical fashions into the Indian scene has been more limited, but real nonetheless. I have suggested that the proximate mechanism responsible for this is an institutional one: the increasing integration of intellectuals from elite universities into the U.S. orbit, and the waves of students that have followed in their wake. Interestingly, the growing influence of U.S. training fields like economics has now become a commonplace among analysts. It is widely recognized that the spread of neoliberal ideas into policy circles in the South has been aided by the growing importance of U.S. universities in the training of their economists.³⁵ It is surely plausible that the powerful presence of PSPC theory in U.S. humanities should also be transmitted to the South through similar channels.

There is no reason to expect any of this to change in the visible future. In the past, it has taken deep and enduring mass upheavals for a significant stratum of middle-class intellectuals to turn toward anticapitalist ideas and class theorizing. The way things stand now, the most realistic prognosis is that the visibility of class analysis will decline even further in the next decade or so, as the remnants of the New Left become less active or productive. Once the generational shift is complete to those academics who completed their training in the 1990s and later, the landscape will only get more barren and more hostile to all but the most token nods to class. On the brighter side, it is also likely that, at least in the United States, there will at least be a turn to a greater place for materialist analysis, since South Asian studies is finally recovering from its flight out of the social sciences. This does not, of course, betoken a return to class, but at least it will mean a relative diminution of culturalism as the reigning framework for scholarship.

35. See Dezalay and Garth 2002; Babb 2001; Amsden 1994, 87–125.

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