

SUBALTERN STUDIES – AN INTRODUCTION

compiled for the conference
*The Cosmopolitan Subaltern. Marginalized
Literatures and Cultures in a Globalizing World.*
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, June 4-7, 2008

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Overview

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Abstract:

This presentation provides a brief overview of key elements of the Subaltern Studies movement within historiography.

Subaltern Studies

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- Subaltern Studies Journal
12 regular, 2 special issues, 1982-2005

- founding editor: Ranajit Guha

- other contributors (select.):
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, David Arnold

Subaltern Studies

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- topics:
Indian colonial and post-colonial history and society
- strong influence on post-colonial theory
- term „subaltern“ originally by Antonio Gramsci, Marxist context, denoting workers mostly
(*Prison Notebooks, The Modern Prince*)

History and Historiography

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- focus on history
- including “other” histories by incorporating the “colonial” story into academic discourse
- thus “provincializing Europe” (Chakrabarty)
- pointing towards inadequacies in the historical record

History and Historiography

“ It is only from our knowledge of the subsequent history of Western Europe that we can presume to rank events in terms of their world-historical significance, and even then that significance is less world historical than simply Western European, representing a tendency of modern historians to rank events in the record hierarchically from within a perspective that is culture-specific, not universal at all.

(Hayden White. “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality.” *The Content and the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989. 9.)

History and Historiography

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- inbuilt tendency to narrate the “universal”, the new Ecumene, from the view of the imperial (Western) position
- questioning & critiquing historiography = occasionally, revising our sense of history
- history is what happened – vs.
history is about finding out why sth happened?

History and Historiography

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- who is an agent in history?
- who is described by history - rulers and privileged classes vs. subalterns
- “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak, 1988)
(= who speaks: do they speak for themselves – or does someone else do the speaking for them)
- does being able to speak also create political agency?
(who is listening / who can change material conditions)

Guha: Dominance without Hegemony

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- Ranajit Guha. „Dominance Without Hegemony And Its Historiography.“ *Subaltern Studies VI*
- “ The knowledge systems that make up any dominant culture are all contained within the dominant consciousness and have therefore the latter’s deficiencies built into their optics. (216)

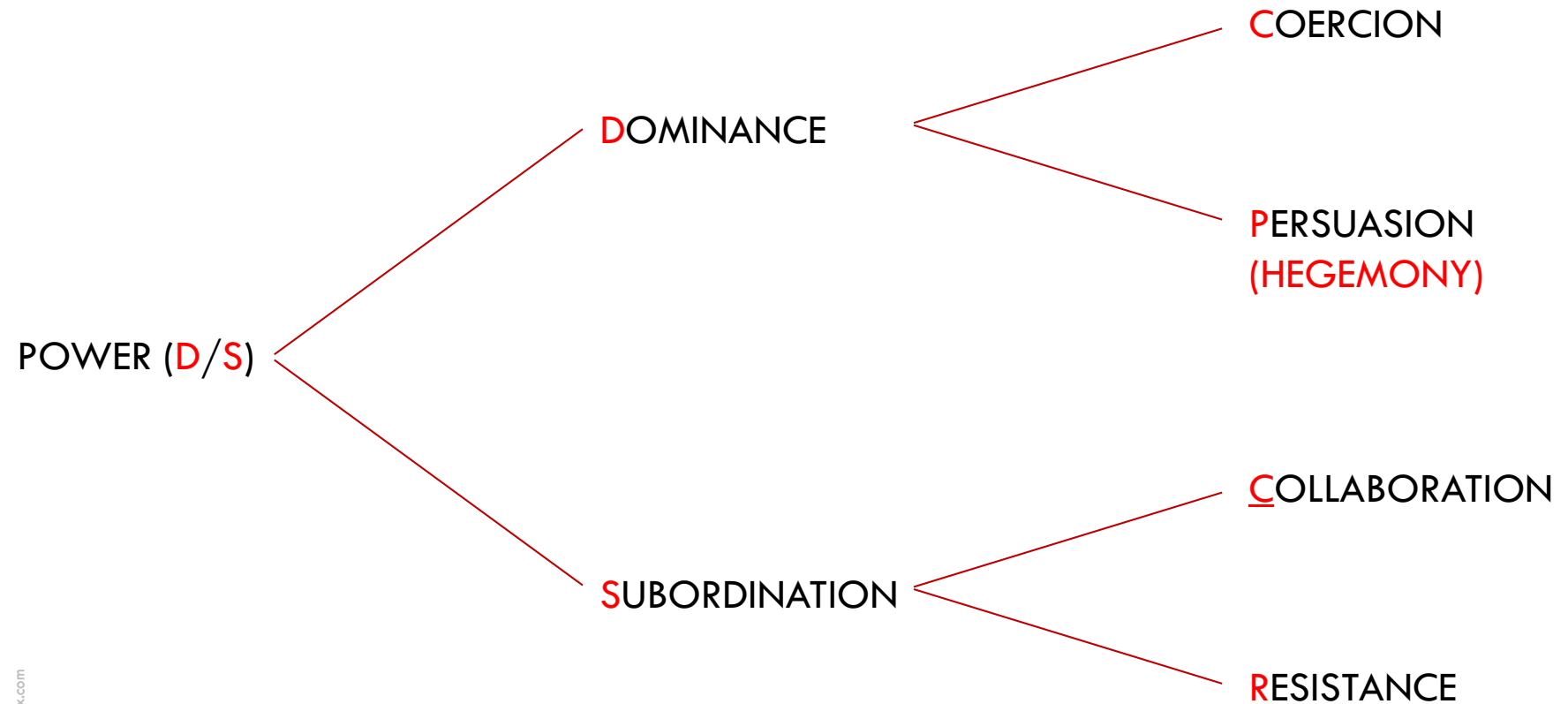
Guha: Dominance without Hegemony

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- **disconnect between capitalist-liberal theory and practice:**
 - “ ... historiography has got itself trapped in an abstract universalism thanks to which it is unable to distinguish between the ideal of capital's striving towards self-realization and the reality of its failure to do so. [...] It is this critical failure which has been primarily responsible for a serious misrepresentation of the power relations of colonialism in historical discourse. The crux of this misrepresentation is that dominance under colonial conditions has quite erroneously been endowed with hegemony. Hence the attempt, in colonialist writings, to make the rule of British capital in India appear as a rule based on the consent of the subject population. (228)

Guha: Dominance without Hegemony

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Guha: Dominance without Hegemony

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- hegemony: ruling through consent
- center: the „empire“ – the governing discourse
- periphery: the dependent

The Subaltern Project

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To conclude:

- history is told in a specific way
- this is not an arbitrary choice
- the writing (and teaching) of history is often linked to communicating civics lessons

The Subaltern Project

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- this maintains and strengthens the governing interpretation of history:
 - „Orientals“ as uncivilized, benefiting from conquest and colonial rule
 - the imperial colonial past as glorious and benign
 - „*mission civilatrice*“ into the heart of darkness

The Subaltern Project

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- Subaltern Studies aims to question this interpretation by
 - not only looking at the victims but also taking their view
 - restoring agency (which will also include complicity in conquest)
 - questioning the imperial project as a whole
 - refining „our“ view of the past
 - refining „our“ view of identity