# BELATEDNESS AS POSSIBILITY
## subaltern histories, once again

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Even though I will be discussing historiography, not art, in the main body of this essay, I have to acknowledge that the essay owes its title to the accident of an invitation I received recently from the noted historian of visual culture in South Asia, Professor Christopher Pinney, to speak at a conference on art history he had organized at the Northwestern University in Chicago in May 2008. The topic of belatedness was being discussed at the conference, and the invitation made me remember that my most recent encounter with the theme of belatedness was at an exhibition of Indian art held in Chicago in 2007.

A marvelous exhibition of "contemporary art from India" was held at the Chicago Cultural Center that year. The art works of Gulammohammed Sheikh, Nalini Malani, Subodh Gupta, Vivan Sundaram and others were impressive and brilliant in their own right. But the catalogue of the exhibition, *New Narratives: Contemporary Art from India* made it clear what the sense of time was that underwrote words like "new" or "contemporary."[2] Indian art could be "contemporary" because, as the curator, Betty Seid, put it in her introduction to the volume, it "reflect[ed] her [India's] world recognition as a major player in the new millennium." American museums had avoided purchasing or exhibiting contemporary Indian art until it became truly contemporary, something that had moved from being "stuck in an ethnographic mode of self-comparison" to a state where "contemporary artists from India *of the world* happen to be living and working in

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[2] Betty Seid, *New Narratives: Contemporary Art from India* (Ahmedabad and Ocean Township, N.J.: Mapin, Grantha, 2007).

India."[3] So "Western curators of contemporary art" are now "beginning to catch on about India" but it is easy to see why: they are catching on because Indian artists are, at long last, catching up!

Has the curse of belatedness been ever lifted from India, I wondered? The same catalogue goes on to speak of the history of modernism and feminist art in India thus: "Like Modernism, feminist art came to India later than to the West."[4] Indian art does not become "global" or of "the world" until it arrives at the point that is recognized in the West as "contemporary" – a point at which the West presumably has always been, at least long before Indian art got there. "The communication capabilities of our electronic age have provided global cognition of the art-making world that was unavailable to many mid-twentieth century artists of India," the catalogue essay explains, and continues:

> Before independence in 1947, Western modern art was virtually unknown in India. Indian artists had not been exposed to the gradual evolution of modern art history. Rather, they were bombarded with the entirety of it, with exhibitions in India and with newly available opportunities to study and travel abroad.[5]

I felt honored by Professor Pinney's invitation but, for me, it spoke to the issue of belatedness in ways both formal and personal. I was, first of all, a belated choice for the conference. Their second keynote speaker absented himself at the last moment and I was parachuted into the conference to fill the gap. I felt I was in a situation somewhat similar to what the All India Radio once used to describe as being "in the place of the scheduled artiste." I was invited most cordially but belatedly – not anybody's fault; but that was how it worked out. Besides, some of the themes adumbrated in the conference-statement Professor Pinney had circulated also spoke to the idea of belatedness. The conference, the statement said, was meant to be window into "the logic of a certain sort of historiographic practice." Certain modes of art production get disqualified from the canons of art history by being seen as "belated" – modernism in India would be an example, I presumed. "Is there a single temporality at stake?" the statement asked. In fact, it was issued in a spirit of rebellion against any such judgment: "Is the putatively universalizing space of the white cube itself only a EuroAmerican fantasy …? Would a global practice dictate a heterogeneity which eschewed the possibility of the 'global'? … Can territories be abandoned in favor of 'flows'?" And it also met the question of judgment head on: "How can the attributions of value occur in unfamiliar aesthetic worlds? … Are such attributions … necessary to a World Art?"[6]



[3] *New Narratives*, p.13
[4] *New Narratives,* p. 15
[5] *New Narratives*, p. 19.
[6] Conference statement, "(World) Art: Art History and Global Practice," Northwestern University, 23-24 May 2008.

So in agreeing to speak belatedly about belatedness, I was reminded of a joke in my home-town of Calcutta. Bengali senior citizens are often addressed by adding a respectful "da" at the end of their names: thus Ashisda for Ashis Nandy, or Ranajitda for Ranajit Guha. When Derrida visited the city a few years ago to inaugurate and speak at a book fair, people ignorant of foreign ways assumed that he was probably an older Bengali man whose real name was "Deri," a word that in Bangla quite appropriately means "delay," and that it was as a mark of respect that he was called "Deri-da." So when it was clear that I could be at the conference only in somebody else's place, the chain of association to the noted philosopher led me to one of the thoughts that I will be elaborating in this essay – the relationship between belatedness and displacement, for I do think that it is through that connection that belatedness becomes an opportunity, or a "possibility," an association I gesture towards in the title of this essay.

The questions raised by Professor Pinney in his conference statement reverberate in the halls of subaltern histories that I frequent in the course of my work as a historian. The theme of belatedness and a certain spirit of rebellion against it were written all over *Subaltern Studies*. That discussion was a critical part of the process through which *Subaltern Studies,* a series that we could once think of only ever as an *Indian* project, became a part of global or world-history. So while Professor Pinney's conference bracketed the word "world" in the expression "(World) Art," let me speak of the world as it gets constituted when we convert belatedness into possibilities. You will see that the same problem of judgment that occurs in art history when the trope of belatedness is used occurs in political historiography as well: How do we evaluate developments in subaltern history as that history becomes part of an emergent global formation?



Right from the moment of its birth, *Subaltern Studies* was greeted by several commentators as a "belated" project, carrying out in the subcontinent what British "history from below" had accomplished a long time ago. Arif Dirlik was one of the better known of these critics. Belatedness in history was not a new problem as such. Alexander Gerschenkron, the reputed Harvard historian who wrote a book in the early nineteen sixties, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*, saw the problem of Russian modernization through the prism of belatedness and the politics of having to "catch up" with the more "modern" nations.[7] The Indian Prime Minister Nehru would often say after independence that India had to accomplish in decades what the Americans had achieved over a few hundred years. "Belatedness," as I tried to argue in *Provincializing Europe*, was an integral part of a certain kind of historicist outlook that was born in the nineteenth century. As my quotations from the catalogue volume of last year's exhibition in Chicago will have shown, the outlook still informs discussions of art history in the public realm.

[7] Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective – A Book of Essays* (Camb., Mass: Bellknap Harvard, 1962).

The problem of belatedness speaks to a problem of repetition and re-cognition in history. If something happens that resembles something else within a field that is conceptually structured by before-after relationships, then that which comes later is seen as belated. This in turn raises a question that Homi Bhabha once asked, using Rushdie's words with some sense of urgency: How does newness enter the world?[8] How do we know what is new in what seems like repetition?

I want to submit to you two propositions that may seem a little paradoxical. My first proposition is that newness enters the world through acts of displacement. My second proposition is that newness confounds judgment because judgment tends to see the new as repetition and therefore deficient. Newness is hard to distinguish from a simulacrum, a fake that is neither a copy nor original. To be open to the new is to engage in a Heideggerian struggle: to hear that which I do not already understand. Judgment, and in my case I mean political judgment, makes this a very difficult task. In the rest of this essay I will elaborate and explain my propositions by using *Subaltern Studies* as an example.

Before I do so, however, it may be helpful to take a page out of Gilles Deleuze, surely someone who has in our times thought more than most about some of these questions. Deleuze makes a primary distinction between "repetition" and "generality" in order to make a further distinction between "repetition" and "resemblance." "Repetition is not generality," he says and adds: "Repetition and resemblances are different in kind – extremely so." Generality, according to Deleuze, "presents two major orders: the qualitative order of resemblances and the quantitative order or equivalences. Cycles and equalities are their respective symbols." Repetition, on the other hand, refers to "non-exchangeable and non-substitutable singularities." To repeat "is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique or singular that has no equal or equivalent."[9]



> If exchange is the criterion of generality, theft and gift are those of repetition. … This is the apparent paradox of festivals: they repeat an 'unrepeatable'. They do not add a second or third time to the first, but carry the first time to the 'nth' power.… [I]t is not the Federation Day which commemorates or represents the fall of the Bastille, but the fall of the Bastille which celebrates and repeats in advance all the Federation Days; or Monet's first water lily which repeats all the others. Generality, as generality of the particular, thus stands opposed to repetition as universality of the singular. The repetition of a work of art is like singularity without a concept, and it is not by chance that a poem must be learned by heart.[10]

The distinction hinted at in this passage between law and poetry, history and memory, is what gives repetition its power to transgress. "The theatre of repetition is opposed to the theatre of representation, just as movement is opposed to the concept and to

[8] Homi Bhabha, "How Does Newness Enter the World?" in his *The Location of Culture*
[9] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p.1
[10] Deleuze, *Difference*, pp.1-2.

representation which refers it back to the concept."[11] Deleuze makes it clear that repetition is how newness enters the world but it does so in disguise and through displacement – "disguise no less than displacement forms part of repetition" – for repetition (this is Deleuze's reading of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche) is "the double condemnation of habit and memory" both of which, as we shall see, underlie political judgment.[12] Repetition thus constitutes a crisis of political judgment.

Now I want to elaborate the themes of displacement and disguise, the two aspects of Deleuzian repetition, through the example of *Subaltern* Studies. First, let me document the theme of displacement and then I will turn to the more difficult question of disguise.

*Subaltern Studies*, the series with which I have been associated since 1982, was an instance of politically motivated historiography. Political judgment was central to this project. It came out of a Marxist tradition of history-writing in South Asia and was markedly indebted to Mao and Gramsci in the initial formulations that guided the series. The tradition of history-writing on the Left in India was deeply, though perhaps unsurprisingly, influenced by English Marxist or socialist historiography, the so-called "history from below" tradition pioneered by the likes of Edward Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, George Rudé, and others. Just as Thompson's work on English popular history was predicated on the question: what contributions did the lower orders of society make to the history of English democracy?, so did historians in the *Subaltern Studies* series begin by asking a similar question: What contributions did the subaltern classes make on their own to the politics of nationalism in India, and hence to Indian democracy as well?[13] But here the similarity ended. English Marxist narratives of popular histories were moulded on a developmental idea of time: the peasant, in that story, either became extinct or was superseded to give rise to the worker who, through machine-breaking, Chartism, and other struggles for rights, one day metamorphosed into the figure of the citizen or the revolutionary proletariat. The peasant or tribal of the third-world who – as if through a process of telescoping of the centuries – suddenly had the colonial state and its modern bureaucratic and repressive apparatus thrust in his face, was, in this mode of thinking, a "pre-political" person. He or she was someone who did not, as it were, understand the operative languages of modern, governing institutions while having to deal with them. In terms of the English "history from below" propositions, it was only over time, and by undergoing a process of intellectual development, that the subaltern classes could mature into a modern political force.



[11] Deleuze, *Difference*, p.10.
[12] Deleuze, *Difference*, pp. xvi, 7.
[13] See E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*.

*Subaltern Studies* began by repudiating this developmental idea of "becoming political." The peasant or the subaltern, it was claimed, was *political* from the very instance they rose up in rebellion against the institutions of the Raj.[14] Their actions were political in the sense that they responded to and impacted on the institutional bases of colonial governance: the Raj, the moneylender, and the landlord. We did not then think much about the implications of our claim that the subaltern could be political without undergoing a process of "political development." Yet the implications of that claim were writ large on our historiography.

I should explain that the legacies of both imperialism and anti-colonialism speak to each other in this implicit debate about whether the subaltern became political over time (through some kind of pedagogic practice) or whether the figure of the subaltern was constitutionally political. Developmental time, or the sense of time underlying a stadial view of history, was indeed a legacy bequeathed by imperial rule in India. This is the time of the "not yet" as I called it *Provincializing Europe*. European political thinkers such as Mill (or even Marx) employed this temporal structure in the way they thought history. Nationalists and anti-colonialists, on the other hand, repudiated this imagination of time in the twentieth century in asking for self-rule to be granted right away, without a period of waiting or preparation, without delay, "now." What replaced the structure of the "not yet" in their imagination was the horizon of the "now."[15]



The British argued against giving self-rule to educated Indians in the nineteenth century by saying that they were not representative of the larger masses of the Indian "people". The answer came from Gandhi who, following his entry into Indian politics during the First World War, made the main nationalist party, the Indian National Congress, into a "mass" organization. He did so by enlisting peasants as ordinary, the so-called "four-anna" members with voting rights within the party. The "mass base" of the Congress enabled its leaders to claim the status of being "representative" of the nation even if the poor and the non-literate formally did not have any electoral power under the Raj. The educational gap that separated the peasant from the educated leaders was never considered a problem in this idea of representation. The peasant, it was assumed, was fully capable of making citizenly choices that colonial rule withheld from him or her. From the very beginning of the 1920s, Gandhi spoke in favor of universal adult franchise in a future, independent India. The peasant would thus be made a citizen overnight (at least with respect to voting) without having to live out the developmental time of formal or informal education – that was the "now" the nationalists demanded. In the constitutional debates that took place in the Constituent Assembly right after

[14] I discuss this in some detail in my essay "A Small History of *Subaltern Studies*" in my *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), Ch. 1.

[15] See the discussion in the Introduction to my book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000).

independence, the philosopher, and later statesman, Radhakrishnan argued for a republican form of government by claiming that thousand of years of civilisation had – even if formal education was absent – already prepared the peasant for such a state.[16]

What underwrote this anti-colonial but populist faith in the modern-political capacity of the masses was another European inheritance, a certain kind of poetics of history: romanticism. It is, of course, true that the middle-class leaders of anti-colonial movements involving peasants and workers never quite abandoned the idea of developmental time and a pedagogical project of educating the peasant. Gandhi's writings and those of other nationalist leaders often express a fear of the lawless mob and see education as a solution to the problem.[17] But this fear was qualified by its opposite, a political faith in the masses. In the 1920s and the 30s, this romanticism marked Indian nationalism generally – many nationalists who were not Communist or of the Left, for instance, would express this faith. Francesca Orsini, who works on Hindi literature, recently excavated a body of evidence documenting this tendency. To take but stray examples from her selection, here is Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi (1890-1931), the editor of the Hindi paper *Pratap*, editorializing on 31 May 1915:

> The much-despised peasants are our true bread-givers [*annadata*], not those who consider themselves special and look down upon the people who must live in toil and poverty as lowly beings[18].



Or Vidyarthi again on 11 January 1915:

> Now the time has come for our political ideology and our movement not [to] be restricted to the English-educated and to spread among the common people [*samanya janta*], and for Indian public opinion [*lokmat*] to be not the opinion of those few educated individuals but to mirror the thoughts of all the classes of the country…. democratic rule is actually the rule of public opinion.[19]

One should note that this romantic-political faith in the masses was populist as well in a classical sense of the term. Like Russian populism of the late nineteenth century, this mode of thought not only sought a "good" political quality in the peasant, but also, by that step, worked to convert the so-called "backwardness" of the peasant into an historical advantage. The peasant, "uncorrupted" by the self-tending individualism of the bourgeois and oriented to the needs of his or her community, was imagined as already endowed with the capacity to usher in a modernity different and more communitarian than what was prevalent in the West.[20] The contradiction entailed in the very restricted

[16] See *Provinicializing Europe*, "Introduction" for details.
[17] See Gyanendra Pandey's essay on the topic in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak eds, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
[18] Francesca Orsini, "The Hindi Public Sphere and Political Discourse in the Twentieth Century", unpublished paper presented at a conference on "The Sites of the Political in South Asia", Berlin, October 2003
[19] Ibid.
[20] For an excellent discussion of this point, see Andrzej Walicki, *The Controversy Over Capitalism: Studies in*

nature of franchise under colonial rule and the simultaneous induction of the peasant and the urban poor into the nationalist movement had one important consequence. The very restrictions put on constitutional politics then meant that the field, the factory, the bazaar, the fair, and the street became major arenas for the struggle for independence and self-rule. And it is in these arenas that subaltern subjects with their characteristic modes of collective mobilization (that included practices of public violence) entered public life.

The inauguration of the age of mass-politics in India was thus enabled by ideologies that displayed some of the key global characteristics of populist thought. There was, firstly, the tendency to see a certain political goodness in the peasant or in the masses. And there was, in addition, the tendency also to see historical advantage where, by colonial judgment, there was only backwardness and disadvantage. To see "advantage" in "backwardness" – that is, to see belatedness as an opportunity - was also to challenge the time that was assumed by stadial views about history, it was to twist the time of the colonial "not yet" into the structure of the democratic and anti-colonial "now".

I give this potted history of the romantic-populist origins of Indian democratic thought – though not of Indian democracy as such and the distinction is important - to suggest a point fundamental to my exposition. The insistence, in the early volumes of *Subaltern Studies* (first published in 1982) and in Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983), that the peasant or the subaltern was always- already political – and not "pre-political" in any developmentalist sense – was in some ways a recapitulation of a populist premise that was implicit in any case in the anti- colonial mass movements in British India.[21] But there was, in my sense, a displacement as well, of this term. The populism in *Subaltern Studies* was more intense and explicit. There was, first of all, no "fear of the masses" in *Subaltern Studies* analysis. Absent also - and this went against the grain of classically Marxist or Leninist analysis - was any discussion of the need for organization or a party. Guha and his colleagues drew inspiration from Mao (particularly his 1927 report on the peasant movement in the Hunan district) and Gramsci (mainly his *Prison Notebooks*). But their use of Mao and Gramsci speaks of the times when *Subaltern Studies* was born. This was, after all, the seventies: a period of global Maoism that Althusser and others had made respectable. Excerpts from Gramsci's notebooks had come out in English in 1971. Both Gramsci and Mao were celebrated as a way out of Stalinist or Soviet Marxism after Czechoslovakia of 1968. Many of the historians in *Subaltern Studies* were participants in or sympathizers of the Maoist movement that shook parts of India between 1969 and 1971.[22]



*the Social Philosophy of the Russian Populists* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), Chapters 1 and 2, in particular the section of "The Privilege of Backwardness."

[21] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), Chapter 1.

[22] Shahid Amin, "De-Ghettoising the Histories of the non-West"; Gyan Prakash, "The Location of Scholarship"; in my "Globalization, Democracy, and the Evacuation of History?" in Jackie Assayag and

Yet, significantly, neither Mao's references to the need for "leadership of the Party" nor Gramsci's strictures against "spontaneity" featured with any degree of prominence in what we wrote. Guha's focus in his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* remained firmly on understanding how rebellious peasants mobilized themselves in ninenteenth-century British India, that is to say, before the age of Gandhian "mass nationalism". Guha sought to comprehend the peasant as a collective author of these uprisings by doing a structuralist analysis of the space- and time-creating practices of mobilization, communication, and public violence that constituted rebellion (and thus, for Guha, a subaltern domain of politics). There were limitations, from Guha's socialist point of view, to what the peasants could achieve on their own but these limitations did not call for the mediation of a party. A cult of rebellion marked the early efforts of *Subaltern Studies*, reminiscent of one of Mao's sayings that were popular during the Cultural Revolution: "to rebel is justified." Rebellion was not a technique for achieving something; it was its own end. Indeed, from a global perspective, one might say that *Subaltern Studies* was the last – or the latest – instance of a long global history of the Left: the romantic-popular search for a non-industrial revolutionary subject that was initiated in Russia, among other places, in the nineteenth century. This romantic populism shaped much of Maoism in the twentieth century, and left its imprint on the antinomies and ambiguities of Antonio Gramsci's thoughts on the Party as the Modern Prince.



The once-global and inherently romantic search for a revolutionary subject outside of the industrialized West has thus had a long history, traveling from Russia in the late nineteenth century to the colonial and semi-colonial (to use a Maoist expression) "third" world in the twentieth. The political potential of this romanticism is exhausted today. But looking back one can see what plagued this history of a search for a revolutionary subject in the relatively non-industrialized countries of the world. Such a subject by definition could not be the proletariat. Yet it was difficult to define a world-historical subject that would take the place of the industrial working classes that did not exist, not in great numbers anyway, in the peasant-based economies drawn into the gravitational pull of the capitalist world. Would the revolution, as Trotsky said, be an act of substitutionism? Would the Party stand in for the working classes? Could the peasantry, under the guidance of the party, be the revolutionary class? Would it be the category "subaltern" or Fanon's "the wretched of the earth"?

When the young, left-Hegelian Marx thought up the category of the proletariat as the new revolutionary subject of history that would replace the bourgeoisie – and he did this before Engels wrote his book on the Manchester working class in 1844 – there was a philosophical precision to the category. It also seemed to find a sociological correlate in working classes born of the industrial revolution. But names like "peasants" (Mao),

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Veronique Benei eds., *At Home in Diaspora: South Asian Scholars and the West* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2003).

"subaltern" (Gramsci) "the wretched of the earth" (Fanon), "the party as the subject" (Lenin/Lukacs) have neither philosophical nor sociological precision. It was as if the search for a revolutionary subject that was *not-the-proletariat* (in the absence of a large working class) was an exercise in a series of displacements of the original term, the proletariat. A telling case in point is Fanon himself. The expression "the wretched of the earth", as Fanon's biographer David Macey has pointed out, alluded to words of the Communist Internationale, in the song – " `Debout, les damnés de la terrre'/ Arise, ye wretched of the earth' " - where it clearly referred to the proletariat. Yet Fanon used it to mean something else, something other than the proletariat. This other subject he could not quite define but he was clear that in the colony it could not be the proletariat. One only has to recall how, quite early on in his book, he cautioned: "Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to deal with the colonial problem."[23]

A collective subject with no proper name, a subject who can be named only through a series of displacements of the original European term "the proletariat" - this is a condition both of failure and of a new beginning. The failure is easy to see. It lies in the lack of specificity or definition. Where is the beginning? First of all, the very imprecision is a pointer to the inadequacy of Eurocentric thought in the context of a global striving for a socialist transformation of the world. Outside of the industrialized countries, the revolutionary subject was even theoretically undefined. The history of this imprecision amounts to the acknowledgment that if we want to understand the nature of popular political practices globally with names of subjects invented in Europe, we can only resort to a series of stand-ins (never mind the fact that original may have been a simulacrum as well). Why? Because we are working at and on the limits of European political thought even as we admit an affiliation to nineteenth-century European revolutionary romanticism. Recognizing the stand-in nature of categories like "the masses", " the subaltern" or " the peasant" is, I suggest, the first step towards writing histories of democracies that have emerged through the mass-politics of anticolonial nationalism. There is a mass-subject here, no doubt. But it can only be apprehended by consciously working through the limits of European thought. A straightforward search for a revolutionary world-historical subject only leads to stand-ins. The global and theoretical failure to find a proper name for the revolutionary subject that is not-the-proletariat thus inaugurates the need for new thought and research outside the West, resulting in a series of displacements of the once- European category, the proletariat.



To sum up, then, much socialist political thought has been made possible outside of the West by a continual process of working through European categories in order to displace them from the locus of their original signification. So much for the theme of

[23] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans., Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 40.

displacement that, as Deleuze reminded us, was a critical part of the transgressive power of repetition. But what about the theme of disguise?

The theme of disguise pertains to our capacity to name and recognize the new. It is here that the tension (to speak with Deleuze) between generality and repetition, between law and poetry, between history/sociology and memory, reveals itself at its most intense and demonstrates how political judgment seeks to tame the new.

Consider once again the foundational text of *Subaltern Studies*, Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. What is the status of the category "political" in Guha's (and our) polemic with Hobsbawm that the peasants and the tribals were not "pre-political," that they were in fact as political as the British or the middle classes?[24] The status is ambiguous: the peasants were political in the already-understood sense of the terms – in that they dealt with the institutions of colonial rule – but they were also "political" in some other sense about which we were not clear at all. The political claim that nineteenth-century peasant rebellions were political could only be made on the assumption – and this remains an assumption - that we already knew completely what 'being political' meant. What was new about peasant resistance in nineteenth-century India could only be expressed in the guise of the old category: "politics."

Something very similar happens – to cite a distant example that will show that the problem is more than historiographical or merely Indian – in the Australian historian Henry Reynold's path-breaking work on Aboriginal resistance to White occupation in nineteenth-century Australia. Take his book, *Fate of a Free People*, analyzing Aboriginal resistance in nineteenth-century Tasmania. Reynolds is aware of the European roots of the modern idea of the political. He writes how some European settlers were astonished to find among Aboriginals "ideas of their natural rights" which Reynolds regards, rightly, as European attempts at interpreting "in European terms" the world-making they encountered among the Aboriginals. Yet, in resisting histories written by earlier White historians and chroniclers, Reynolds, much like Guha, insists on the applicability of the category "political" in describing Aboriginal resistance. He challenges "the clear assumption that the Tasmanians were incapable of taking political action" and deliberately describes the nineteenth-century Aboriginal leader, Walter Arthur, as "the first Aboriginal nationalist," tearing the idea of "nationalism" from all its anchorage in the history of modern institutions.[25] Clearly, "politics" and "nationalism" are under-determined, part-sociological and part-rhetorical categories here, not completely open to the demand for clarification. And it is in their rhetorical imprecision that the disguising of the new happens.



Or take Partha Chatterjee's category of "the governed" – again, a term in the series of displacements of the revolutionary subject that I have already traced before. Having

[24] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: OUP, 1983), Chapter 1.
[25] Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1995), pp. 11, 23, 69.

documented the struggle for survival (including the stealing of electricity) – within which lessons are indeed learned by subaltern and other groups – that goes on everyday in the city of Calcutta, he suddenly, towards the end of his lectures on the theme, makes "the governed" the creators of something that even Aristotle might recognize: democracy. "What I have tried to show," he writes, "is that alongside the abstract promise of popular sovereignty, people in most of the world are devising new ways in which they can choose how they should be governed." He recognizes that "many of the forms of the political society" and their unlawful activities that he describes perhaps would not have met with "Aristotle's approval." Yet he believes that the "wise Greek," if he could see Chatterjee's evidence, might actually recognize an "ethical justification" for democracy in popular action that he might otherwise have disapproved of.[26] My point is, again, the ambiguity of this move, the claim that while popular action in everyday Calcutta does not always look democratic, it still heralds a democracy to come. It is, of course, entirely possible that everyday life in Calcutta looks forward to a future for which we just do not have a category yet. But in Chatterjee's prose, it is, once again, in the ambiguity of old and new uses of the word "democracy" that the actual "newness" of what goes on in Calcutta both shows and hides itself. Now we see it, now we don't.

My last example of disguise of the new is Hardt and Negri's well-known category of the "multitude," once again a candidate for inclusion in my list of terms that displace the original revolutionary subject of Europe. The disguise is ironical for a book that, in its first half, struggles - in a Deleuzian vein - to capture that which is about domination in the world: Empire. Yet their revolutionary agency "the multitude," while conceived of as immanent in a Spinozist way, has to acquire an "adequate consciousness" (resonances of Hegel-Marx here) in order to be political. "How can the actions of the multitude become political?" they ask. Their answer: "The only response we can give … is that the action of the multitude becomes primarily political when it begins to confront directly and with *an adequate consciousness* the central repressive operations of Empire."[27]



I am then left to ask my final question: why does displacement combine with disguise to create the very structure of repetition? It goes back, I think, to a problem that Marx referred to a long time ago. Newness enters the world as a challenge to judgment and law. That is why Deleuze refers to it through the figure of poetry. Political judgment is tied to the old. It is salutary to remember that even Homi Bhabha, whose generative mediations on the postcolonial condition would not have much to say about the conditions for the struggle for socialism (as conventionally understood), began his journey as a postcolonial theorist with a gesture towards connecting with socialist politics as it was known in Britain

[26] Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 77-78.

[27] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p.399.

in the 1980s.[28] I think Marx, in a moment of reflection on the problem of repetition and resemblance in history – and thus on the figure of the belated - put his finger on the necessary disguise of the new. The lines are very well known indeed but may bear repetition in the context of this discussion. Let me give Marx the final word with one minor qualification:

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please…. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem … engaged in creating something that has never yet existed, … they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.

Marx expects this process to have a happy Hegelian ending. He, as you know, compares this process to a person's experience of learning a new language: "a beginner who has learnt a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he has assimilated the spirit of the new language and can freely express himself in it only when he finds his way in it without recalling the old and forgets his native tongue in the use of the new."[29] We are rightly suspicious of such happy endings. We remain interested in remainders and failures of translation that always come back to haunt and trouble what translation achieves. This is indeed where we may have to part with Marx and his progenies in contemplating the problem of repetition and belatedness in our time.



[28] Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory"

[29] Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), p. 398.