

INTERVIEW

The Journal of Resistance Studies' Interview with David Hardiman: Subaltern Studies and Resistance

by **Stellan Vinthagen**, *Editor of JRS, University of Massachusetts, Amherst*,
Conducted online Sep 2020

Introduction to the Subaltern Studies Group and David Hardiman

Based in the UK and India, David Hardiman was one of the historians who created the Subaltern Studies Group, an editorial and research collective that received worldwide recognition for a book series that started in 1982, conferences on subaltern studies, and numerous articles. The Subaltern Studies Group was part of a larger post-structural and cultural turn in the humanities and social sciences, which has profoundly changed how we today discuss history, power, the Subject, consciousness, colonialism, and resistance.

One of the key contributions of the Subaltern Studies Group was the focus on the concept of 'subaltern' (the subordinated), originally introduced by Antonio Gramsci, yet during the 1980s and 1990s made into a key field of study itself. The definition of 'subaltern', its relations to power, dominance and 'elites' (or those above the subordinated) and to various social contexts, as well as the role of subalterns for resistance and social change in history, are some of the key questions that the Subaltern Studies Group engaged with, which this interview will revisit.

The work of the Subaltern Studies Group resulted in ten books between 1982 and 1999, when the Group stopped acting as a collective. However, there were also individual articles and books, emanating from each of the members, that influenced the discussions in ever-widening circles and fields, which continued beyond 1999. The main person linked to the project was Ranajit Guha, whose *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) has been described by James C. Scott as 'the founding

document of what is now known as the Subaltern Studies School' (Scott, p. ix, in Guha 1999).

David Hardiman wrote about his own experiences, and the work of the Group, in the introduction to a recent book, *The Nonviolent Struggle for Indian Freedom, 1909-19*. Here, he highlights several key insights emerging from the 'history from below' perspective developed by the Subaltern Studies Group, something that made me interested to interview him, hoping he wanted to develop further.

David Hardiman was born 1947 in Rawalpindi (Pakistan), but was brought up in England and completed his PhD in history at the University of Sussex in 1975. His sociologically informed history research has focused on the colonial period in India and he is now a professor emeritus of history at the University of Warwick, UK. At the time of the publication of the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*, he was a visiting fellow at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, where much of the development of Subaltern Studies happened. From 1983 to 1989 he worked at the Centre for Social Studies, Surat, in Gujarat, where he was able to carry out research on the Indian peasantry and adivasis (indigenous people)—travelling frequently to their villages to live amongst them and conduct interviews.

The work of David Hardiman is a clear example of what the Group made into its significant contribution; by highlighting the role of subalterns in the historical changes of India they wrote an alternative, new and radical interpretation of liberation struggles, challenging the conventional focus on formal leaders, educated oppositional elites and nationalist frameworks. Hardiman researched mobilisations that were ignored by both nationalists and socialists in India, as for example the mass mobilisation among tribal people during the early 20th century in the form of the Devi movement in Gujarat (*The Coming of Devi*, 1987). In this, his most cited publication, Hardiman documents a major tribal agency, impact and self-organising, which although taking the form of spiritualism and internal reforms of tribal life, had profound political meanings and constituted a strong resistance to different exploiters (moneylenders, landlords, nationalists, and others).

The radical approach and texts of the Subaltern Studies Group had a deep impact on me during my studies of sociology and international relations at the University of Gothenburg towards the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s. Thus, it was exciting for me to meet David Hardiman in 2012 at a Symposium on 'Nonviolent movements and the barrier of fear'

at Coventry University, UK. Then, during the pandemic lockdown at the beginning of 2020, I was confined to my activist-scholar community and our rich reference library at the Irene Residence in the deep forests of Sweden (Sparsnäs, Dalsland), which gave me the opportunity to revisit the complete work of the Subaltern Studies Group. It then felt like the right time to reach out to David.

At the time of the interview, David was working on a follow-up book to the very book I was then reading (*The Nonviolent Struggle for Indian Freedom, 1909-19*), which gave me the idea of the interview. The follow-up book, which was published in March 2021, is titled: *Noncooperation in India: Nonviolent Strategy and Protest 1920-22* (Hurst, London 2021).

Since both David and I were confined to our homes due to the pandemic, we used digital means to conduct the interview. During the process, the author on subaltern studies and my long-term collaborator, Prof. Sean Chabot, generously helped me to develop the questions for David Hardiman.

Stellan Vinthagen: You were involved in the Subaltern Studies Group from the beginning, and stayed on until the end. This puts you in a unique position to tell the history of this remarkable group of historians, who began collaborating in Sussex, UK, and continued to do so in Calcutta, India. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed on the work of the Subaltern Studies Group, and its implications for us today.

To begin with, I would like to hear your thoughts on the creation of the Group. The intellectual origins of the Subaltern Studies Group are, to my understanding, connected to the preceding ‘history from below’ approach developed by British scholars such as Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson, who critiqued the official ‘History’ of nation states from the perspective of national elites. But, as far as I understand, you were also inspired by radical politics in the 1960s and 70s, when a new wave of anti-colonial movements emerged in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, which sparked liberation movements by students, workers, women, Blacks, and many others in the West. Could you please elaborate on what factors, ideas and perspectives influenced the creation of the

Subaltern Studies Group? Why did people feel it was needed? What was your own motivation for getting involved in the Group?

David Hardiman: The Subaltern Studies Group was inspired by Ranajit Guha, an intellectually charismatic figure who gathered around him a small group of like-minded younger historians and political scientists. Born in 1923 in a village in Bengal, he had been an activist in the Communist Party of India up until the suppression of the Hungarian rising by the Soviet Union in 1956, when he resigned from the Party. In this, he was acting in common with the New Left—a group that included the English Marxist historians. A leading figure in this group, E.P. Thompson, wrote in 1957 that he stood for a ‘socialist humanism’ that was a ‘revolt against irrationalism’—as in Stalinism—and a ‘revolt against inhumanity, the revolt against the dogmatism and abstractions of the heart, and the emergence of a warm, personal and humane socialist morality’ (E.P. Thompson, ‘Socialist Humanism and Epistle to Philistines’, *The New Reasoner*, 1, 1957, p. 107). Thompson’s approach was epitomised by his notion of the ‘moral economy’, with its focus on ‘lived experience’ as being central rather than being merely a ‘superstructure’ on the supposedly all-important economic ‘base’. In this, he was influenced by the sociology of Durkheim and Weber, and an anthropology that brought out the great complexity of the intellectual world of those hitherto labelled as ‘backward’ peoples. He focused on the way that such people fought to defend their values in ways that went beyond narrow economic interests. He saw class as a human relationship that was made consciously through lived experience and in struggles with ruling groups. Thompson thus restored agency to class. Thompson was however very critical of structuralism, unlike Guha, who admired the work of the French structural anthropologists Claude Lévi-Strauss and Louis Dumont.

Guha was influenced by the Naxalite insurrection in India in the late 1960s that, inspired by the Chinese example, sought to base itself amongst the peasantry rather than the urban proletariat. Accordingly, he studied the history of peasant insurgency in colonial India. In this, he sought to discover a structure of peasant insurrection, as well as a complex politics of the peasantry that went far beyond the crude economism of most existing explanations for peasant revolt. He argued that this politics had a quite different logic than the elite politics that forms the subject of most histories.

Guha taught history at the University for Sussex—where I was a postgraduate student. I was not supervised by Guha for my doctorate but

was inspired strongly by him in my study of peasant nationalism in Gujarat in the 1917 to 1934 period. I gained my doctorate in 1975, and soon after that became involved in the small group of young historians of India that gathered around him—consisting of myself, Gyan Pandey, David Arnold, and Shahid Amin. We thrashed out our ideas in a series of meetings, coming up with the idea that in colonial India there were two separate domains of politics, that of the elite and the subaltern. The latter term was taken from Gramsci, meaning all those who are subordinated. Gramsci wrote in a situation—Italy in the 1920s and 1930s—in which the industrial working class was comparatively weak and underdeveloped, while the peasantry continued to be the chief subordinate group. A project that called for a socialist revolution could not afford to ignore the peasantry, and hence there was a need to understand the politics of this subordinate group. At the time we were developing our ideas—the 1970s—we had before us the examples of the peasant-based revolutions in China and Vietnam. In this, the peasantry could be regarded as a potentially radical force. We were able to apply Gramsci to India as under colonial rule, and indeed for many years after, it was also a predominantly peasant society. We argued that almost all existing histories of India focused either on the elites or took the elites as the chief movers of politics. We held that this led to a frequent misrepresentation of the politics of the subaltern, which operated according to different rules and on different conditions. We sought to focus in our work on the domain of the subaltern. Mechanical and economistic Marxism was rejected, with culture and religion being crucial to any understanding of the subaltern. The project was subjected to strong criticism by many historians of Indian nationalism in India and Britain, and also by many orthodox Marxists in India, but embraced with enthusiasm by the New Left, dissident Indian Marxists, and numerous historians outside Britain—particularly in the USA and Latin America.

SV: In your recent book, you write about the core claims of the Subaltern Studies Group regarding Indian nationalism. There you suggest that members primarily studied the difference between elite groups and subaltern groups within the independence movement, arguing that the subaltern were radical, focused on self-rule, horizontal in their organising, ready to use violence and combining material interests with a belief in ‘supernatural powers’, in stark contrast with the bourgeois Indian ‘nationalist elite’. While the Group’s empirical studies focus on

South Asian, do you feel that its core claims about subaltern politics and history are relevant for subaltern struggles outside of India? In other words, do its core claims constitute a more general theory?

DH: The idea that resonated in other parts of the world was—I believe—the emphasis on the hierarchy of power, with its interplay of domination and subordination, and the analysis of its impact on popular politics and resistance. I think that Dr Suchi Sharma, of Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Delhi, has put it well recently:

Society as a whole operates through a power-play which is exhibited by the dominance of one group over the others. This dominance is asserted by and penetrates through the layers of class, caste, race, sex, and gender among others as it imbues the oppression at all levels while denying a voice to those in the subjugated position. The subaltern becomes the invisible being who is unable to articulate its identity amidst the lacunae resulting from the hegemonic silencing and their subsequent marginalisation.

Political theory of both the bourgeois and Marxian varieties had tended to emphasize the economic as the prime driver of popular action, while we sought to highlight a range of social, political, economic and cultural forms of oppression that braided together in different ways in different historical situations, and which provided the focus for action by subaltern groups. Many groups were subjected to multiple layers of oppression. I think that this broad idea could be applied regardless of the specific cultures of oppression of a given society, and it was this that struck a chord.

SV: Within the social sciences and history, the concept of ‘subaltern’ originates with Antonio Gramsci, being revived through your work in the Subaltern Studies Group and through the emergence of postcolonial theory in the 1980s. Still, despite its popularity, the concept seems pretty unclear for most people, perhaps due to the widely different ways it has been used. It is sometimes used to refer to ‘the most oppressed’ in a society, something that seems impossible to determine, at least if we accept the intersections of multiple forms of domination along lines of caste, class, gender, sexuality, ability, religion and so forth. Others, like Gayatri Spivak, use ‘subaltern’ as a placeholder for those made mute by

imperial hegemony. Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot be heard due to hegemonic representations that silence and ‘speak for’ them, including various counter-hegemonic intellectuals. This seems like an overly totalising position. Take the example of Fannie Lou Hamer’s ‘Is This America’ speech at the 1964 Democratic Convention (Chabot, 2019). While it is true that neither civil rights movement leaders nor scholars listened carefully enough to her message, this does not necessarily mean that ‘counter-hegemonic listening’ is impossible. By assuming that the subaltern cannot speak—and that as soon as they can speak, they are no longer subaltern—Spivak seems to dismiss the possibility of ‘subaltern politics’. At other times, ‘the subaltern’ is simply a generic concept for all those who are ‘subordinated’, encompassing everyone subordinated by hierarchies of class, gender, race, sexuality, religion, age, and other social categories. But then the question is, why not just say ‘subordinated’?! To complicate things further, etymologically the concept refers to a lower officer in the military, thus not the rank-and-file soldier, which seems to speak to some kind of ‘middle’ category within a hierarchy. Could you please clarify the meaning of the concept ‘subaltern’, how it was used originally within the Subaltern Studies Group, how it evolved, and how it matters for our understanding of resistance?

DH: To take your last question first, the English word ‘subaltern’. The word itself has been used in various ways, as the Oxford English Dictionary reveals. We however used it in just one of the meanings set out there, namely: ‘A person or (occasionally) thing of inferior rank or status; a subordinate’. This is the way that Gramsci understood the term. The dictionary even notes that this usage is now commonly associated with ‘critical and cultural theory, esp. post-colonial theory’, meaning ‘a member of a marginalised or oppressed group; a person who is not part of the hegemony’. In this respect, *Subaltern Studies* has found a place in the English language, and indeed many other languages (it is after all based on the Latin word *subalternus*, and thus easily integrated into most European languages). The usage of ‘junior officer’ is also given in this dictionary, but as just one of many meanings. In English, before the 1980s, it was the most widely understood use of the term. I remember in the early 1980s discussing my research with the distinguished political scientist W.H. Morris Jones, and he immediately said: ‘so you are working on lower-level political leaders’. I had to explain to him the quite different

meaning we accorded to the term.

It is true that the term has been applied very broadly, including to groups that are oppressed or dominated at one level, but who in turn dominate other groups. Thus, white Australians have been depicted as historically 'subaltern' in relationship to the British ruling class, while they in turn have oppressed Australian aboriginals in often genocidal ways. Ramachandra Guha once remarked humorously about this tendency of *Subaltern Studies* to go far beyond its original remit that everyone except the President of the USA is now being defined as subaltern!

Gayatri Spivak sought to delineate the subaltern in a more exclusive way by arguing that they are those who have no voice—that is people who are rendered invisible and mute by the dominant culture. She argued that all we can hope to do is to examine the ways that the subaltern is rendered in the texts of the dominant classes. She applied poststructuralist methods of textual analysis to this task and enjoined on us to do the same. I have discussed this issue in an introduction to a collection of my articles titled *Histories of the Subordinated* (pp. 17-25) and in my book *Missionaries and their Medicine* (pp. 19-32). Briefly, I have argued that although it is true that our knowledge of the subaltern in history is from texts produced almost always by the elites, these texts do reflect a material reality that we can analyse in a way that brings the subaltern centre-stage. For example, in *The Cheese and the Worms*, Carlo Ginzberg uses the transcripts of the Catholic Inquisitions' interrogation of a 'heretic' to uncover the attitudes and beliefs of a sixteenth century miller, Menochchio. As the Inquisition sought to record objectively the specifics of Menochchio's eccentric beliefs, we do—we may argue—have a meaningful glimpse into his mental world. Radical historians such as Ginzberg seek to write about the poor and oppressed with sympathy while bringing out what appears to us today to be the very different ways in which they thought and acted. This is what we should try to do to the best of our abilities.

When applied to their resistance to oppression by dominant classes, we find that subaltern groups were often informed by aims, objectives and beliefs that are poles apart from the driving forces in contemporary movements. There are, for example, notions of restoring a kingdom of justice and godliness. There is a frequent belief that a saviour or messianic figure is coming to sweep away the old order. And so on. My stance on this is that this reflects merely a different consciousness and that it is valid in its own terms, in that it provides a driving force and inspiration for possible radical change.

SV: The Subaltern Studies Group's approach was to study the history, consciousness and resistance of different subaltern groups in India, in order to empirically demonstrate the relative autonomy of the subaltern, and to analyse their conflicts of interest with the national elites leading the anti-colonial struggle. At the same time, as you emphasise in your writings, any 'subaltern' is, per definition, in a relationship with an 'elite', and there are always moments of temporary alliances based on mutual interests and complex entanglements between the subaltern and elites. Firstly, how would you describe these entanglements? And secondly, what consequences do these have for understanding resistance by the subaltern?

DH: Ranajit Guha sought to delineate two streams of politics in colonial India—those of the elite and subaltern. While one was essentially hegemonized by the liberal version of imperialism—that is, the notion that the imperial rulers were creating structures that would allow modern liberal political culture to develop in a 'backward' region of the world, and it is the task of the enlightened Indian to work the new systems so as to advance to self-rule—the other, that of the subaltern, was not hegemonized in this manner, only dominated by force. Their resistance was accordingly informed by very different beliefs and agendas, and was thus relatively autonomous. It was our task as historians to study the consciousness that informed subaltern politics and action, using tools that were available to us from social sciences such as sociology and anthropology. Yet, at the same time, the resistance occurred in a context in which the subaltern was bound up at many points with the dominant classes. Members of the elite could act as champions or agents of the people. The dominant classes might allow a degree of subaltern resistance in order to defuse or neutralise the more radical objectives of the subaltern. In these ways the two streams of politics braided together in complex ways.

What we sought to promote was a mindset that is not patronising towards subaltern groups. In terms of contemporary relevance, we may say that it allows radical members of dominant classes to be open to the aims, objectives and desires of subaltern groups in sympathetic ways. In doing this, they may contribute their own skills, expertise and ability to communicate with a ruling class in a way that facilitates the resistance. This allows for the building of powerful coalitions. To take a recent example, the support

of large numbers of sympathetic white people to the Black Lives Matter movement undoubtedly make it a much more potent force. Interestingly, one of its central agendas is for Black History to be made mainstream, and in this the historian may contribute to the struggle using his or her own expertise.

SV: In what way does it matter whether it is the subaltern doing the resistance? Is the quality of subaltern resistance different from resistance by other social groups? In what ways are values, consciousness, strategy or tactics, and outcomes of subaltern struggles distinct?

DH: Any movement that hopes to succeed must seek to build alliances of different class groups. By itself, one social group is unlikely to gain much traction. In my opinion, what matters above all is the agenda that is being pursued. One problem found in the original *Subaltern Studies* was the assumption that subaltern resistance was itself characteristically radical in intent. As we now know from hard experience, the subaltern can often be mobilised in support of the most reactionary and oppressive causes. In India, the xenophobic and fascistic Hindu Right has managed to gain mass support by claiming to be the champion of Hinduism. In fact, it supports the most narrow and intolerant form of this religion—one that we associate with the most elite caste of all, the Brahmans. It builds appeal by holding out a promise to the lower Hindu castes that they will gain respectability if they support this agenda. In practice, it involves genocidal attacks on members of the Muslim minority. We have seen this happening in culturally specific ways all over the world. Thus the movement in the UK to dismantle the regulations that impede the crony capitalism of the propertied elite was able to gain popular support for its Brexit campaign by reaching out to working class groups with the fraudulent claim that it was a movement for ‘the people’ to ‘take back control’ from the supposedly self-serving bureaucratic apparatus of the European Economic Community. As in many other parts of the world today, its populist agenda was pursued with appeals to the worst prejudices of the subordinated classes—such as xenophobia and racism. Radical activists, by contrast, seek to build coalitions on progressive agendas, such as democratic representation, a rule of law, anti-racism, international solidarity, regulations that protect citizens, the protection of the environment and so on. I would hold, therefore, that it is the agenda that is being pursued that is of primary importance, and what matters is the dialogue between different classes that occurs in the space of such a movement.

SV: In the same time period as the Subaltern Studies Group was emerging in the 1980s, James C. Scott developed the concept of ‘weapons of the weak’ and ‘everyday resistance’, based on studies of a village community in Malaysia. While Scott was inspired by the same ‘history from below’ approach, he mostly drew on peasant studies instead of history. As a friend of Ranajit Guha, Scott’s research project was very close to that of the Subaltern Studies Group, but for some reason no explicit connection was made. Do you think the Subaltern Studies Group would have benefitted from incorporating Scott’s theory of how subaltern resistance can undermine colonial systems and domination? How does Scott’s theory compare with the Subaltern Studies theory of resistance?

DH: Scott’s concepts of ‘weapons of the weak’ and ‘everyday resistance’ were valuable in that they brought out that the subaltern keeps a mental distance from those who dominate them, and often work in silent and underhand ways to undermine the work or liabilities that are imposed on them. Scott’s position is that such obstruction leads to gradual modifications in the system of domination that in time can build into real change. On the other hand, Subaltern Studies focused on active peasant revolt. Scott’s writing does not tell us how silent obstruction could escalate into active resistance. Yet, this has happened often in history. Ranajit Guha analysed this process in his work on peasant insurgency in nineteenth-century India. Others in the Subaltern Studies group carried out studies of peasant revolt in other periods of Indian history.

SV: Given that the Subaltern Studies Group as a whole, and Ranjit Guha in particular, valued the role of revolutionary violence by subalterns in the struggle against elite groups, why did it almost totally ignore the Marxist rebellion by the Adivasis, the indigenous tribes in West Bengal? And why did it not devote a single chapter to armed struggles by the subaltern? Wouldn’t you agree that in order to show the importance of armed popular uprisings and everyday resistance for Indian liberation from colonialism, it is necessary to systematically study empirical instances of armed popular uprisings in the history of Indian Nationalism?

DH: We sought to change the commonly held view that the Indian peasantry were historically passive, due to their supposedly fatalistic acceptance of their place in the caste hierarchy. We provided an alternative narrative, that of

many past struggles and revolts by the Indian peasantry. Our focus was on the British period of rule—which was our period of expertise as historians—and one of our initial tasks was that of analysing peasant insurgency and the peasant contribution to the Indian nationalist struggle against imperialism. We also wrote about the ways in which such insurgency was understood by the British (for example, Ranajit Guha, ‘The Prose of Counter-Insurgency’, in volume 2). There were contributions in the first four volumes of *Subaltern Studies* on the history of peasant revolts in the Gudem-Rampa region of Andhra from 1839-1924, the rebels of the 1857 Indian revolt, and the peasant protests in Awadh, Gorakhpur, Kumaon and Bengal during the nationalist agitations of the 1919-42 period. The nineteenth century revolts were indeed ‘armed struggles’, while the protests during the nationalist period tended to be nonviolent. The chapter by Stephen Henningham in volume 2 on the peasant rising in eastern UP in 1942 was about a campaign that was often violent—though the weapons available to these insurgents were so crude and inadequate compared to the modern weapons of the military as to hardly qualify this as an ‘armed revolt’. In general, armed insurgency during the nationalist period was the preserve of small groups of revolutionaries, who carried out bombings and assassinations. They came generally from a relatively well-off strata of society. Theirs was more a theatre of revolt that was designed to shock and rouse fear amongst imperial officials and their supporters, as well as provide inspirational martyr-figures for the nationalist cause. Such groups were not taken as a subject for *Subaltern Studies*.

Although the Naxalite upsurge in Bengal in the 1960s had provided one stimulus to the project, there were no chapters on the movement itself, either in Bengal or the subsequent extension of the movement to the Adivasis of central India. This lacuna was not, so far as I recall, discussed within the group. We were always on the lookout for significant scholarship on any area of subaltern life, and I think that at that time there was nothing that we found particularly striking on the contemporary Maoist revolt. In recent years, the work of Alpa Shah on the Naxalite upsurge in Jharkhand has had such a quality, and we now would have reached out to her to request a contribution had she been doing such research and writing earlier.

It should be noted that *Subaltern Studies* sought to shed light on all aspects of the life of the subaltern and their relationships with the elites. So, resistance was only one theme—though initially an important one. In the first three volumes, eight of the twenty-one chapters were on resistance. After Volume 4 of *Subaltern Studies*, the focus was more on other aspects

of subaltern life, and there was much analysis of the discourses around domination and subordination.

SV: Over time, you became critical of the Subaltern Studies Group's view on the role of violence in liberation struggles, as well as its opposition to Gandhi and nonviolence. In your book *The Nonviolent Struggle for Indian Freedom, 1905-19* (2018), you refer to how the spread of religious violence in India, and the lack of enduring liberation after successful armed anti-colonial movements, influenced your thinking. Initially, it appears that your objections concern the failure of the Group to recognise the historical, political, and pragmatic contributions of Gandhi and nonviolence in the Indian independence movement. But you also seem to have a more fundamental theoretical critique of the Subaltern Studies Group. Could you elaborate on the Group's concept and role of violence, as well as why you think it has not paid sufficient attention to Gandhi's concept of nonviolence?

DH: The first time I met Ranajit Guha, in 1971, he was carrying out research on Gandhi for a multi-volume biography. He respected Gandhi as someone who had strong principles that he lived by, even when they caused him great difficulties. I remember him saying that he admired Gandhi far more than those he characterised as vacillating liberals such as Jawaharlal Nehru. Guha had learnt Gujarati so that he could read Gandhi in the original. By 1971, he had also become engaged with some young Naxalites, and he soon abandoned the project on Gandhi to focus on peasant insurrection. So, Guha had a deep understanding of Gandhi. Nonetheless, because of his belief in the efficacy of violent insurrection, Guha was critical of what he saw as Gandhi quietist stance, which in practice—so he argued—allowed the Indian elites to maintain their power without serious challenge. He took as his cue here the Marxist critique of 'passive resistance'. Gandhian methods were described as a form of 'passive resistance', and indeed in the early years in South Africa Gandhi had initially used the term to describe his protest, before abandoning it as he disliked its implied passivity. He wanted to emphasise the militancy involved, and thus chose the term *Satyagraha*, that is, 'sticking to truth'. Marxists continued, however, to apply their critique of passive resistance to Gandhi's protests.

As I argue in my book *The Nonviolent Struggle for Indian Freedom*, there was a history here that stretched back to the revolutions of 1848.

The term was used initially in Germany to describe the limited form of the resistance adopted by the Prussian bourgeoisie who sought greater power for themselves while blocking any devolution of power to the masses. Karl Marx accordingly described 'passive resistance' as a counter-revolutionary tactic used by the bourgeoisie to augment their own power at the cost of other classes. He understood the campaign in Hungary against Austrian rule during the 1850s and 1860s led by Ferenc Deák in such terms, as being led by the elites while ignoring the working class. In fact, this was better understood as a nationalist reaction against Hapsburg authoritarianism that united a range of classes. Marx was however far more sympathetic to Irish nationalism—which adopted passive resistance in the 1870s—which he saw as progressive and with radical potential. This was ignored by his followers after his death in 1883, who continued to depict nonviolent methods as a counter-revolutionary strategy of the bourgeoisie. In India, Marxists found it hard to reconcile this with the reality that Gandhian nationalism united a range of classes in the struggle against imperial rule.

The Marxian position failed to grasp the way that nonviolence was being applied in progressive ways with, as Chenoweth and Stephan have shown, a much higher success rate than more violent methods. It is notable in this respect that *Subaltern Studies* was conceived at a moment when violent insurrection appeared to be the way forward, with success in China, Cuba and Vietnam. Che Guevara's tragic failure to foment such insurrection more widely in Latin America was not seen as significant in this respect. Subsequently, in the 1980s and 1990s, a range of nonviolent movements—in for example Eastern Europe, the Philippines, Chile and South Africa—brought the downfall of repressive regimes and the creation of functioning democracies. This history was ignored by *Subaltern Studies*. The analysis of resistance had been central to the project in its early years, but this slipped from the agenda. There was much admirable enquiry in other arenas, but not in *Subaltern Studies* anymore. For the analysis of Gandhian nationalism, the tone was set by Ranajit Guha in his chapter in Volume 7, 'Discipline and Mobilise' (1994), where he held that Gandhi's nonviolence was imposed on the people from above in a way that that ran counter to their real class interests. Guha's general position here was that in a semi-feudal society such as India—in which power was derived from the end of a *lathi* and barrel of a gun—there could be no radical change without violence, and that in seeking to stifle this, Gandhi was acting in the interests of the elites. In this, Guha failed to appreciate the great revolutionary potential that popular nonviolence

has for transforming even the most violent and oppressive of societies. In my opinion, Gandhi's failure was not in his advocacy of nonviolence, but in his refusal to support radical movements against indigenous oppressors such as princes and landlords on the grounds that the focus of nationalist struggle should be primarily against the imperial state.

SV: The critique of the Indian National Congress and the dominance by urban, intellectual and economic elites within the independence movement is a clear thread in the work of the Subaltern Studies Group. The elites are criticised for seeking liberal-constitutional independence from the British, a very limited freedom and liberation for most of the subaltern in India, and rejecting struggles for communal autonomy from landlords, corporations, and wealthy capitalists. The populism of the Congress, particularly during the 1920s and 30s, made possible by the village- and peasant-orientation of Gandhi, is basically seen as a way to exploit the masses to gain a liberal-constitutional independence, while maintaining elite dominance in a post-colonial India. Why would the Subaltern Studies Group aim much of their critique at Mohandas K. Gandhi, the very person who believed (like the Group) not only in the key role of the masses and ordinary people for creating independence, but who also (like the Group) worked against the hegemony of the urban, professional and Anglophile middle-class in Congress? Gandhi could very well be seen as an early proponent within anti-colonial politics of similar points made later by the Subaltern Studies Group within academia, for example in his attempt to empower poor Indians and transform the modern British system of capitalism and state power, instead of merely replacing bourgeois British with bourgeois Indian elites. It seems to me that Gandhi was closer to the thinking of the Subaltern Studies Group than to the members of the Congress and Nehru, the future prime minister of post-colonial India. Still, it seems that the Group largely dismisses Gandhi as a charismatic politician manipulating the masses in the interests of the Congress Party, a view that has spread to the wider field of postcolonial studies, where Gandhi is still largely ignored or dismissed as a postcolonial thinker (for an exception, see Jefferess 2008). Is it time to reinterpret Gandhi and his

role in the anti-colonial struggle, and to take him more serious within resistance, postcolonial and subaltern studies today? If so, what is his contribution?

DH: As I have argued in the previous section, Gandhian nonviolence was understood as counter revolutionary. This understanding was never challenged within the pages of *Subaltern Studies*. There was an interest within the field of postcolonial studies in Gandhi as a radical alternative thinker. This was associated above all with Ashis Nandy, who never contributed to *Subaltern Studies*. In *Subaltern Studies*, the only piece published in this respect was by Faisal Devji, 'A Practice of Prejudice: Gandhi Politics of Friendship' in Volume 12, the final one. His subsequent book, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence*, elaborated on this theme, namely that Gandhi sought to forge a society built on nonviolence, with India providing in this respect a beacon to the world. Devji sought to show how Gandhi brought together very different groups within his nonviolent struggle by reaching out with friendship, embracing people with respect, even when he did not follow their way of life. One other member of the editorial collective, Ajay Skaria, was also engaged in this area of enquiry. His book on the subject, *Unconditional Equality: Gandhi's Religion of Resistance*, was published only in 2016, long after *Subaltern Studies* had ceased to be published.

While it is true that Gandhi provided the tools for popular assertion and resistance, he became very wary of opening the gates to subaltern protest due to his experience of mass participation of the Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919, which had been marked by rioting that he had witnessed in person in Mumbai. He abhorred such violence that he saw as counter-productive. Over the next two decades, he demanded very careful preparation before any mass protest was launched, normally at a local level. He also discouraged protests against fellow-Indians, however oppressive they might have been. He thus refused to support powerful protests by peasants and adivasis against Indian princes and landlords during the Noncooperation Movement of 1920-22, even though they were overwhelmingly nonviolent. This I believe to have been a historic mistake as the princes and landlords were generally British quislings who only survived because they were propped up by the imperial state.

SV: It seems to me that there was a shift within the Subaltern Studies Group at the time when Guha resigned from the leading editorial role

(after issue VI, 1988). From then on, the orientation of the Group seemed to change. The editorial team of the book series incorporates more contemporary materials and discussions, brings in other disciplines within social science and humanities, and also discusses contexts outside of South Asia, such as Palestine and Ireland. It also makes gender as a concept and category more prominent within subaltern studies. How would you describe this shift? And what caused it?

DH: As I see it, *Subaltern Studies* was from the start always evolving, searching for new ways of analysing the subaltern and developing new theory. It sought to raise questions and doubts rather than provide facile solutions to difficult problems. It critiqued itself, as with Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's contribution in Volume 4 that brought a feminist perspective to bear on the project. Feminism had been a major blind spot for many Marxian and socialist theorists, and indeed in our work, the 'peasant' had been an unstated male figure. This point was well taken, and Guha himself responded with a harrowing chapter in Volume 5, 'Chandra's Death', about a low caste Bengali woman who was killed through a botched abortion. Spivak also introduced us to deconstructive techniques for textual analysis. These called into question the whole idea that was central to the earlier volumes, that of understanding peasant consciousness. How could we, members of an elite intelligentsia, hope to achieve this by reading texts composed almost exclusively by members of administrative and other elites? All we could do was show in a critical way how the subaltern is depicted in such texts. Once this move was made, there was far less focus on peasant resistance and the consciousness that informed it.

Spivak's contribution in Volume 4 was included in a new 'discussion' section that was started in this volume, and it became a regular feature of subsequent volumes. Questions were raised about the project, it was defended, and there were theoretical reflections on it. Initially, the project was conceived by scholars trained as historians, with Partha Chatterjee, a political scientist, being incorporated before Volume I was published. His important contributions were however largely historical in content. Volume 2 had two pieces by political economists on post-independence agrarian conditions in Bihar and Bengal respectively. Volume 4 had input from a literary theorist (Spivak) and a historical anthropologist (Bernard Cohn). This mix of predominantly historians with contributions from social scientists and literary theorists continued in subsequent volumes. There were

no contributions on non-Indian subjects until Volume 7, when the leading historian of Africa, Terence Ranger, provided a chapter on Matabeleland. Subsequently, there were only three other contributions on non-Indian topics. David Lloyd wrote on Irish history and subalternity in Volume 9, Rosemary Sayigh on Palestinian women in Volume 10 and Pradeep Jeganathan on Sinhalese masculinity in Volume 11.

Ranajit Guha acted as the sole editor up until Volume 6 (1989), though the eight other members of the editorial collective were heavily involved in reading and selecting contributions. Even after this, Guha provided important chapters for Volumes 7 and 9. The editorial collective expanded, with some of the original members dropping out. Rather than shape our research and writing for the project, we developed our own different interests, leading to an inevitable loss of focus. An attempt was made to overcome this problem in the final two volumes, which were thematic; Volume 11 being on community, gender and violence, and Volume 12 on Muslims, Dalits and history.

SV: Why did the Subaltern Studies Group dissolve? Did it continue in some other way, once the book series was discontinued? Did people stay in touch, organise any similar activities or projects together?

DH: The last volume appeared in 2005, and it was apparent by then that the project had run its course. The members of the editorial group had gone their own ways, publishing in many settings. Several became active in the field of Postcolonial Studies. We did stay in touch. For example, many of us met up at Emory University in Atlanta in 2006 to discuss Gyan Pandey's interest in the place of the subaltern citizen in modern societies. The 'hyphenated citizen' is seen as somehow a less legitimate member of the society than majority groups. This is the case with Dalits in India and African-Americans in the USA. Pandey brought out an edited collection on this subject in 2009 titled: *Subaltern Citizens and their Histories: Investigations from India and the USA*. This was the first title in a series on Colonial and Postcolonial Histories that Pandey established and edited. In many respects, it was the successor to *Subaltern Studies*, with themes covered that we had already started exploring already in the project, such as subalternity and religion (Volume 2 in that series) and communalism (Volume 3). Projit Mukharji and myself edited the sixth volume in the series on *Medical Marginality in South Asia: Situating Subaltern Therapeutics*. This volume came out of two workshops that we held in Delhi and Warwick in 2009 and 2010. We were

critical of the way that many popular forms of therapeutics and healing have been discussed in the literature on India, arguing that the most important feature was the marginality of such systems. They existed in subordination to practices that were considered legitimate; besides modern western medicine, this has included Ayurveda, Yoga, Naturopathy, Homeopathy, Unani Tibb and Siddha medicine. While these systems all receive some support from the state, subaltern practices are considered illicit, ‘backward’, and are discouraged.

SV: Today there is an almost mythical aura of Subaltern Studies for radical scholars and researchers. On the one hand, Subaltern Studies is seen as an inspirational example of one of the more radical academic approaches in the world, illustrating how academics can be integrated within and contribute to counter-hegemonic struggles. On the other hand, it has been criticised for romanticising the (violence of the male) subaltern, creating a simplified dichotomy between subaltern/elite, and undermining national coalitions in anti-colonial struggles. What is the remaining legacy of the Subaltern Studies Group today? According to you, what has been its impact and weaknesses?

DH: As I stated at the start of this interview, *Subaltern Studies* grew out of New Left History. The significant difference was that New Left historians such as Eric Hobsbawm understood popular action in pre-capitalist societies as ‘pre-political’, whereas we characterised it as being a different type of politics—one that grew from the experience of subordination. At that time, historians and social scientists—both on the left and right—generally understood popular action as being driven by economic need. We stressed that there was a complex politics involved that went well beyond crude economic urges. We argued that the complex mental worlds of the subordinated and their solidarities were created out of a constant process of differentiation from the dominant classes. This all occurred, however, within spaces that were controlled ultimately by the elite. This permitted elite politicians to appropriate the subaltern in certain situations, as in the Indian nationalist movement. How this worked out in practice was set out as an agenda for research. We need not claim to provide easy answers or a clear historical formula. In this, we differentiated ourselves from some influential studies of modern India of that period that sought to provide a key to the understanding of this historical process; for example, the idea

that Indian nationalists used ties of patronage to mobilise the masses, or that the mass movement was driven by the 'dominant peasantry'. The openness of the project in this respect gave room for many contributions, and for its evolution and growth over time. Issues such as the gendered nature of the subaltern or the idea of a unified 'subaltern consciousness' were addressed. The valorisation of subaltern violence in acts of armed insurgency was not however considered problematic. Indeed, in India many radicals continue to uphold such revolt, as with Naxalite armed struggle. This is an issue that I have examined in a critical way in my recent writing.

One major theme developed by Ranajit Guha that I feel has needed modification is that of the braiding of elite and subaltern politics at different historical junctures. The two, he argued, came together in one moment but drew apart at another. There was a tendency here to envisage two monolithic structures interacting. In my view, the process was a lot more complex. In India, the elites, who came from different social groups (ranging from maharajas to semi-feudal landlords, industrial and finance capitalists, intellectuals and professionals), reached out to the people in a variety of ways, and there was also a braiding of different subaltern streams of politics. Some of the latter were rooted in semi-feudal style polities, others engaged with the oppressions practised by the imperial rulers, while some represented imaginative responses to nationalist initiatives. In his book *Doctoring Traditions*, Projit Mukharji has provided us with a useful way of approaching this issue in his discussion of Indian medical history during the colonial period. He argues that rather than focus on the engagement between what is supposed to be two archetypal forms of medical practice—the 'western' and the 'Indian'—we need to look at the way that different threads within a wide range of practices from both Europe and India became braided into new and unstable forms. Following from this, I would argue that it would be wrong to try to delineate any single structures of either elite or subaltern politics that came together in, for example, the Indian nationalist movement. Rather, a range of disparate threads in both streams became intertwined in varying ways for limited but disruptive periods before they then unravelled. The process nonetheless changed future social relations and politics in important respects. In this, we cannot distinguish any uniform subaltern mode of politics, for there were clearly many differences in the ways that people participated in protests—depending on class, community, religion, region and so on. If we approach the issue in this way, we can, I believe, gain

many insights into the way that movements in all parts of the world have managed to build powerful coalitions of resistance.

The main legacies of the project were that it challenged old assumptions about the poor and oppressed, providing a space for far more nuanced and detailed studies of their experiences and life histories. For example, I believe we were able to address issues such as the religiosity of the subaltern classes in new and more productive ways. The volumes also provided a corpus of excellent scholarship that was able to inspire a new generation of radical historians and social scientists. That has, for us, been particularly gratifying. Many of the forms of analysis that were first proposed in the pages of the series became in time mainstream.

SV: How might the Subaltern Studies Group serve as an example, and possibly a warning, for other critical and radical research interventions, such as Queer Studies and Resistance Studies? What is your advice to young academics trying to create counter-hegemonic orientations within mainstream social science and historical fields?

DH: The informing passion of the project was a commitment to the poor and powerless, and this attracted radical historians and social scientists. This commitment is of course just as relevant today, at a time when the subordinated face continuing racism, misogyny, homophobia, religious hatred and other forms of discrimination in their own countries or are being forced into exile from wars and environmental collapse. In his book *Postcolonial Resistance*, David Jefferess refers to Ben Okri's statement that the people must change the 'stories' they live by in order to change the world. Jefferess glosses this to understand 'stories' as the historical and literary narratives that represent 'discourses of identity and power through which subjectivity is constructed and within which action is understood'. I think that this sums up a lot of what *Subaltern Studies* has tried to do.

On a warning note: I learnt personally from my observation of politics in India in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s that we overestimated the radical potential of the subaltern. Being braided so closely within elite culture and religious systems, they were always open to being co-opted by reactionary interests. The lesson is that it generally takes many decades of ideological and cultural struggle to build radical movements. The Indian nationalist movement had in fact done this in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, to the point at which it became a mass movement under Gandhi's

leadership. The reactionary counter by the Hindu Right similarly took decades to become a mainstream force. I think that we can see this now with Extinction Rebellion—it has taken a long time to create such a critical mass behind environmental issues. Similarly, education in nonviolent strategy that has been continuing for many years has borne dividends over the past decade.

SV: Thank you so very, very much for your generous participation in this interview.

Some key publications of Subaltern Studies

Bourke, Angela. 'Reading a Woman's Death: Colonial Text and Oral Tradition in Nineteenth-Century Ireland'. *Feminist Studies* (1995) Vol. 21, pp 553-86.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 'A Small History of *Subaltern Studies*', in Dipesh Chakrabarty (ed), *Habitations of Modernity*, Chicago 2002, 3-19. A look-back at the *Subaltern Studies* project twenty-years-on by a member of the collective. Also, in Henry Schwartz and Sangeeta Ray, *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (2000)

Chakrabarty, Dipesh, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?' *Representations* (Winter 1992) No. 37, pp 1-26.

Guha, Ranajit. 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India'. *Subaltern Studies I* (New Delhi 1982), 1-8. Set out the agenda for the series.

Guha, Ranajit. 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies II* (New Delhi 1983), 1-42. Examines how historical narratives were constructed by colonial officials, in the process building an account of popular insurrection that accorded with the ideological needs of the colonial state in India.

Guha, Ranajit. 'The Small Voice of History', in Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (eds.), *Subaltern Studies IX* (New Delhi, 1996), 1-12. Guha examines the histories that are ignored in what he calls 'statist' history, which, in his words, 'authorises the dominant values of the state to determine the criteria of the historic'.

Guha, Ranajit. 'Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India' (Durham 1999). Foreword by James Scott.

Iggers, G. G. *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (London, 2008), 284-90. For a brief review of *Subaltern Studies*.

O'Hanlon, Rosalind, 'Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and histories of resistance in colonial South Asia'. *Modern Asian Studies* (Feb. 1988) Vol. 22 No. 1.

Some key publications by David Hardiman¹

Hardiman, David. 'Adivasi Assertion in South Gujarat: The Devi Movement of 1922-23', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1984, pp.196-230.

Hardiman, David. 'From Custom to Crime: The Politics of Drinking in Colonial South Gujarat', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1985, pp.165-228.

Hardiman, David. *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1987.

Hardiman, David. *Gandhi: In His Time and Ours*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2003 (paperback edition 2004).

Hardiman, David. *Histories for the Subordinated*, Permanent Black, New Delhi 2006, pp. 392; Seagull, London, New York, and Calcutta. This is a collection of previously published major articles by David Hardiman, with a specially written 28-page introduction, and with the addition of one previously unpublished article.

Hardiman, David. *Missionaries and their Medicine: A Christian Modernity for Tribal India*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2008.

Hardiman, David. *Medical Marginality in South Asia: Situating Subaltern Therapeutics* (edited with Projit Bihari Mukharji), with introduction by the two editors, Routledge, Abingdon, 2012.

Hardiman, David. *The Nonviolent Struggle for Indian Freedom 1905-19*, Hurst, London 2018.

Hardiman, David. *Noncooperation in India: Nonviolent Strategy and Protest 1920-22*, Oxford University Press, London 2021.

¹ See a more complete collection here: https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/people/staff_index/dhardiman (Visited April 15, 2021).