

21st European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies:

Panel 28 – Subalternity reconsidered – Political and Epistemological Challenges

Panel Convenor: Nikita Dhawan

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- 1. María do Mar Castro Varela/Nikita Dhawan: “Subalternity and the Politics of Representation”**

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- 2. Ritu G Khanduri: The Making of the Subaltern**

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- 3. Marianna Scarfone: Gramsci in India: the reception of his thought in the Subaltern Studies Collective.**

Research Fellow, University of Bologna. E-mail: limariza@yahoo.it

- 4. Jamila Mascat: Subalternity reloaded: from margin to center**

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- 5. Elisabeth Fink: Transnational Feminist Alliances and the Subaltern – Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives on Questions of Agency**

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- 6. Jeanette Ehrmann: Subalternity as a Challenge for a Global Ethics of Alterity**

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- 7. Christina Schramm: “‘From this other side’ – Subaltern Studies in Latin America”**

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Abstracts:

María do Mar Castro Varela/Nikita Dhawan: Subalternity and the Politics of Representation

Colonialism was not just about conquest of geographical territories through economic and military force, but also about subjectivation à la Foucault. At the heart of the working of colonial discourses was the politics of representation, whereby the historical analysis of processes of colonisation and decolonisation must deal with the challenge of political representation, namely, who speaks for whom along with what is being said. As a participant in critical processes who seek to articulate the voices of the marginalized, the postcolonial feminist functions as an agent of decolonisation. However representation as an act of reading of silences is always fraught with dangers of producing anew regimes of truth and forms of violence. Counter-discourses themselves risk silencing those in whose name they claim to speak. Drawing insights from the influential writings of South Asian Subaltern Studies historians, our paper addresses the challenges of representation and the problematic role of the postcolonial feminist in recovering the perspectives of those who have not been able to represent themselves in post/colonial structures of power. Analysing the mutual dependence of social position and political voice and the subsequent dilemmas of political representation, we address the question: How can the sexed subaltern subject be transformed from an object of benevolence to an agent of decolonisation?

Ritu G Khanduri: The Making of the Subaltern

Drawing upon the theme of the session proposal, this paper discusses the contingent nature of subalternity. Arguing for a framework in which the subaltern embodies a shifting and relational subjectivity (Visweswaran), my paper will focus on organic intellectuals in colonial and postcolonial context and present their pedagogical role as exemplifying the process of inbetweenness that I want to explore. Taken to its extreme, it would be a mistake to argue that we are all subalterns. To the contrary, I want to show that gender, caste, class, and ethnicity continue to inflect the position of subalternity, but these vectors are not neatly demarcated. Subalternity therefore remains a useful concept not just as a perspective and story from below, but as a process of making and becoming in which claims about history, citizenship, and belonging for example, crystallized because they are positioned as subaltern claims. Subalternity is therefore an assertion of marginal identity and involves the production of the narrative of marginality. Following this approach, my paper will focus on contentious images in the public domain as a site where the complexity of subaltern claims and identities are played out.

Marianna Scarfone: Gramsci in India: the reception of his thought in the Subaltern Studies Collective.

In the preface to the first volume of "Subaltern Studies. Writings on South Asian History and Society", we find a reference to the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, from whom the mainly Indian scholars of the Subaltern Studies group claim to take their inspiration. As is clear, it is the concept of subalternity, or better of "subaltern groups", that links these two poles of reflection on the condition of marginality: on the one hand we have the solitary Marxist thinker, writing his Notebooks in a prison in

Italy in the Thirties, and on the other the Collective of “marginalized academics” based in India in the Eighties, wishing to investigate through an alternative perspective the archives of counter-insurgency and to refuse historical narratives deaf to voices “other” than those of the dominant groups. This paper deals with the reception of Gramsci’s thought in India. It aims to evoke the stages of this reception – the first translations available, the first figures involved in popularizing Gramsci’s concepts, mainly in the academic field, the birth of the Subaltern Studies Collective – and the historico-political context of this appropriation and re-elaboration. It also tackles the Gramscian concepts and categories that have turned out to be useful for analysing and reading Indian colonial and then national postcolonial reality, as the subaltern-dominant dialectic, the idea of progressive autonomy, the notion of hegemony, the formula of passive revolution.

Jamila Mascat: Subalternity reloaded: from margin to center

This paper aims to develop a comparative analysis of bell hooks’ concept of marginality and Gayatri Spivak’s concept of subalternity. Both concepts have been outlined within a gender perspective and have been conceived as the poles of binary oppositions (margin/center, subaltern/dominant) which reflect unequal power relationships. Moreover both concepts have been collocated in a colonial/neocolonial historical frame and have been related to identity politics and praxis. At the same time Spivak’s concept of subalternity (defined as the condition of those who have no access to the lines of social mobility) seems to discourage any attempt of further comparison with hooks’ theory of margin which refers to a certainly different social and geographical context. But is there any possibility to articulate a political dialectics between these two concepts? By analysing the ‘politics of location’ developed by Spivak and hooks I will try to connect the space of marginality and that of subalternity, in order to explore to what extent the recovery of the margin as a ‘resisting position’ could help in redefining a broader category of subalternity.

Elisabeth Fink: Transnational Feminist Alliances and the Subaltern – Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives on Questions of Agency

Since Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s assertion that the subaltern cannot speak, questions regarding the agency of the gendered subaltern subject have been an issue of debate within feminist postcolonial theory. Although Spivak later clarified that she has been misunderstood and her emphasis was rather on the issue that ‘the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read’, the question of subaltern agency remains at the heart of current discussions about the (im)possibility of transnational feminist alliances and the challenge of “solidarities across borders”. Juxtaposing two postcolonial feminist theorists – namely Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty – who approach these issues from different perspectives, my paper addresses the question of agency and alliances with regard to the subject-position of the gendered subaltern. Against this theoretical background, I will explore the challenge of transnational feminist alliances in the context of international division of labour in its current form. Postcolonial feminists have accused Western scholars and activists of producing a stereotyped image of women workers in the ‘sweatshop economy’ in the global south, which rather than adequately taking into account the workers’ interests, serves to reinforce Western benevolence. This raises the following questions: How should the feminization of labor and the ‘New’ International Division of Labor be addressed by feminist scholars and activists without producing a ‘third world difference’?

(Mohanty) or a 'culture of global moralism' (Siddiqi) that victimizes third world workers? How should feminists intervene in the debate about international labor standards as a global framework with an eye on the question of subalternity?

Jeanette Ehrmann: Subalternity as a Challenge for a Global Ethics of Alterity

In current philosophical debates in the global North, the possibility of a decolonization of global relations of power and inequality is strongly linked to the project of a global ethics applicable to transnational processes of politics, law and economics. However, the question of the subject of global ethics is frequently not addressed. Here, the notion of subalternity comes into play. If subalternity implies not having access to the public sphere of the nation-state – to use Gayatri Spivak's current definition of the subaltern – one can hardly imagine the subaltern as an agent in the realm of global ethics. In my paper, I aim to trace Spivak's deconstructive reading of Immanuel Kant, one of the most prominent protagonists of European Enlightenment, who in "Towards Perpetual Peace" constructs a cosmopolitan ethics with global reach, being well aware of European colonialism of his time. Spivak scrutinizes the foreclosure of the subaltern from the realm of morality and ethics in Kant's writings. By linking the Enlightenment discourse with the question of subalternity, I contend that Spivak produces important critical insights for the question how to deal with the ideals of democracy, cosmopolitanism and ethics in a postcolonial world. Drawing on postcolonial theories of alterity and the question of the 'Other' in the writings of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Lévinas, I will try to explore alternative visions of a global ethics that takes into account the existence of the subaltern without objectification or romantization, that imagines the subaltern as the agent of an "ab-use of Enlightenment" (Spivak) in postcolonial geopolitics.

Christina Schramm: 'From this other side' – Subaltern Studies in Latin America

Within the new social movements, afro-descendent and indigenous women in Costa Rica, beside other marginalized social groups, participate in the production, reproduction and appropriation of knowledge, but their voices are being silenced. The characterization of these populations as subalterns makes it necessary to revise the construction of Otherness and the hegemonic practices of their representation. Whereas afro-descendent and indigenous women are subsumed under a generalized Otherness, at the same time they are located in different social groups. So we have to question the processes of homogenization and segregation on which the hegemonic practices of representation are based.

One way to do so is to analyze critically the interrelations between the subjectivities and social imaginaries and how afro-descendent and indigenous women in Costa Rica create and transform them. By focusing on the intersections between gender, sexuality, ethnicity as social categories of differentiation, the idea is to break with the hegemonic discourses of western modernity on afro-descendent and indigenous women in Latin America, particularly in Costa Rica. We will start to understand that even the focus on subalternity is not that new as it seems, for it belongs to a long tradition in which the Latin American subject has been colonized, modernized and now globalized and subalternized by discourses that promised its liberation. In the case of Costa Rica, the question is how minorized women, such as Black and indigenous women, handle the colonial legacy inherent to the national Costa-Rican imaginary, based on whiteness, European-ness and equality.

The presentation forms part of my doctoral thesis in Cultural Studies and is a work in progress. I will base my arguments especially on poststructural theories, such as queer, feminist and postcolonial theories. All together the presentation will give a critical reflection on the application of the 'subaltern' in the Latin American context.