Introduction: Subaltern Political Subjectivities

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Introduction. Subaltern Political Subjectivities

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Abstract

This introduction outlines the ways in which the volume at hand approaches subaltern political subjectivities in (proto-)democratic, autocratic, and colonial contexts. It defines political subjectivities as being formed by perceptions, knowledge, and expressions of power, as well as by experiences gained from communicating with authorities. Subalternity, approached from a broad Gramscian perspective, is viewed not as a passive, paralyzing state, but as a dynamic that can be placed on a sliding scale. Moreover, the introduction sheds light on previous works in the fields of subaltern studies, colonial history, the history of writing upwards, and the histories of experience, emotions, and the senses, all of which can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the political engagement of subaltern people.

Keywords

political subjectivities

subalternity

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By approaching the analytical category of subalternity from a broad Gramscian angle, this volume contributes to our understanding of popular politics in parliamentary, autocratic, as well as colonial contexts. The themes and scope of this book challenge the approaches put forward by institutionally oriented political historiography and its attention to the top-down construction of political representation, citizenship, and power(lessness). At the same time, the themes of this book are also different from histories of the masses, which focus on mass party politics, mass protest, or class-consciousness. Instead, this volume explores a multitude of individual stories and micro-histories of complaints, requests, rumors, and other mediated and unmediated interactions between political institutions and the subjects they claimed to govern or represent. The focus on formal and informal negotiations between those in power and those who lacked concrete entitlements to such power complements the existing histories of violence from either side, viz., violent oppression from autocratic and colonial authorities and violent protest from below. The book chapters all shed light on more subtle forms of agency and the spaces these pertained to, which could indicate contestation or resistance taking place within a framework of loyalty toward the existing political institutions. Consequently, this book does not only bridge the divide between political and apolitical frames of reference, but also challenges the dichotomy between loyalty and resistance, by acknowledging the sliding scale of nuances between these seemingly opposing stances. Precisely this approach situates the chapters between top-down institutional history and history from below, as it explores negotiations of notions related to (national, regional, local, or colonial) identities. By adopting this interactive lens, the present collection of analyses can shed a different light on the legitimization attempts of regimes and their supposed (dis)continuities.

Contested Concepts

This volume results from the international conference entitled Subaltern Political Knowledges, 19th–20th centuries, organized by the University of Antwerp in October 2017. During the conference, we tried to reveal what "subalterns" actually knew about organized politics, how they acted upon this knowledge, and whether it turned them into political agents. However, as it became clear during the conference, the words subaltern, political, and knowledge are all open to interpretation and even contestation. Before engaging in our exploration of this field, therefore, it is crucial to elucidate their meaning. First of all, this book is about **politics**. But what makes things "political?" We neither understand this term in its most narrow nor in its broadest sense, but at an intermediate level. This means that we do not limit ourselves to people's attitudes toward the state's institutions, but focus on the ways in which they engaged with power and hierarchy at a level beyond that of their daily lives, that is, within the broader society to which they belonged.

Potentially more controversial is our use of the notion of **subalternity**. Although historiography of subalterns is usually linked to the study of the voice of the colonized, Antonio Gramsci's original interpretation of the concept encompasses all groups of people who did not have any public platform to voice their opinions, nor any entitlements to power or leverage in society (Green 2002, 2). Thus, it could equally apply to people whose citizenship was acknowledged but incomplete, as they were denied the right to vote. By extension, and more controversially, even voters could be seen as subaltern, because the mere act of voting did not give them a say in the debates about their own rights and duties. Subalternity was, after all, not necessarily exterior or completely opposite to hegemony. Therefore, this volume suggests using the word "subaltern" in the sense of Peter D. Thomas's reading

of Gramsci (2018, 871–79), and more specifically along the lines of his definition of the "citizen-subaltern" who was/is not necessarily characterized by a complete absence of "expressive capacity." This also implies that we are incorporating Gayatri Spivak's (1988, 284–85) understanding of the in-betweenness of buffer-groups – between the (in her case colonial) subaltern and the dominant elite – into our broader notion of subalternity. Indeed, being subaltern was and is not a passive, paralyzing state, but a dynamic that can be placed on a sliding scale, showing different "degrees of emergence" from it (Thomas 2018, 873).

This raises questions about a possible end to subalternity. Once people gave proof of certain forms of political knowledge and agency, or leveraged their loyalty to the state in order to make claims to full citizenship, can we still call them subaltern, or did they, at a certain point, emerge from their subordinate position? Where did the political interpretations and expectations of these "ordinary" agents or actors come from? And how did they act upon their views and knowledge in their interactions with (members of) political institutions? In which form or format did subalterns' "hidden transcripts" catch the attention of political authorities, and how did they subsequently manage to influence the "public transcript" (Scott 1990, 138)? How did their different frames of reference (religious, educational, colonial, etc.) shape the political practices of the time? Through a wide range of geographically diverse investigations of concrete political contacts between different groups of subalterns and the state, or other institutions of power, this volume wants to contextualize the dynamic interpretations of subalternity, and encourage a dialogue about colonial and non-colonial definitions of the notion.

The third concept included in the conference title has disappeared altogether from the title of the present volume. Indeed, the notion of **knowledge(s)** turned out not to suffice as an umbrella to cover the wide variety of interconnected topics dealt with by the participants. Rather than limiting

themselves to the cognitive aspects of people's engagement with politics, they also, or even primarily, highlighted its emotional, imaginative, and performative aspects. Studying these phenomena in their interrelatedness sheds a fuller light on what politics meant for people's lives. For that reason, we brought them together under the notion of "political subjectivities and practices." Locating the importance of knowledge within this broader set of human capacities and activities does remain, however, one of the main objectives of the book, since all contributions identify certain carriers and agents of knowledge. Some chapters highlight these carriers through which subalterns not just passively obtained political awareness, but also actively searched for a political context in which to place their experiences and shape their self-awareness. Others dissect the vehicles of knowledge used by subalterns or intermediate levels (between subjects and dominant elites) for spreading news among themselves, or for transferring their own frameworks (religious, educational, class- or caste-related, institutional, etc.) into the dominant political one. Inevitably, (re)interpretations concerning the validity and legitimacy of the origins, content, form, and trajectory of these knowledges took place at both ends of the sliding scale, from the subordinate subjects to the ruling authorities. The carriers of news and knowledge, subject to (re)interpretation and (de)legitimization, could be vocalized (via meetings, rumors, poems, myths, etc., which constitute the focus of Part III) or written (in the press and via correspondence, which are central to Parts I and II).

Between loyalty and resistance

An obvious surplus value of this broad and dynamic approach is that the subaltern attitudes toward politics do not remain limited to either indifference or (mass) rebellion to state policies. Instead, these attitudes could also be expressed in the form of more accepted, institutionally conforming

communication, such as petitioning, by which virtually voiceless (or voteless) individuals introduced themselves into the political sphere. The practice of either resisting to or assimilating into the political framework that determined their subordinate position was not black-and-white. Resistance and loyalty to a regime did not always occur as opposite practices, but were, on the contrary, often coexisting dynamics. By making use of political communication channels provided by the state, subalterns abided by the rules and subscribed to the top-down-created roles and identities. At the same time, this participation allowed for subtle forms of protest from within, as it enabled subaltern actors to transfer elements from other frames of reference to the political framework they contributed to. During these negotiation processes, they exchanged political knowledge and interpretations of "right" and "wrong" ways of political participation. In other words, their interactions added a bottom-up dynamic of political education and knowledge transmission to the roles imposed on them from above. Sources of knowledge and patterns of knowledge-gathering that might seem apolitical at first, in fact interacted with political-institutional (democratic, parliamentary, autocratic, or colonial) contexts. Similarly, practices and patterns of power and communication dating from before the advent of modern politics (such as patronage relations) were carried into the political sphere, sometimes to the extent of becoming institutionalized.

This volume tries to find answers to the question of whether and to which degree the articulation of these variegated political subjectivities was determined by the institutional context in which they occurred. More specifically, it wants to test the "success" of the modern political frameworks that political elites throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries imposed on their populations, in the West and in other parts of the world. The different chapters investigate the characteristics of concrete interactions between subalterns and (members of) political institutions, but at the same time, they also

shed a clearer light on "ordinary" people's self-identification and their perceptions of citizenship, including coping mechanisms with subalternity.

As has become clear from the previous paragraphs, this volume stands at the intersection of many burgeoning fields of scholarship such as subaltern studies, the study of everyday nationalism, or the history of experiences, emotions, and senses, not to mention the tradition of history from below. The need for this volume is also underlined by the growing attention to the history of colonialism in many parts of the global north where this history has hitherto been sidelined. When considering the obvious link between colonial history and subaltern studies, there is a reason to believe that the term subaltern will find new contexts of use, as political, social, and cultural historians find new angles from which to approach former empires and diverse regions in which complex power dynamics and cross-cultural transfer took place. One aim of this volume is to provoke thoughts about how the concept of subalternity fits certain historical contexts and what the limits and pitfalls are of using it outside of postcolonial theory.

This volume continues the work done in two previous Routledge anthologies, which refer to subalterns and the history from below in their titles. Both are anchored in the tradition of "history from below," constituted in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and in the field of subaltern studies that developed in the following decades. The first of these anthologies, *Subalterns and Social Protest: History from Below in the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Stephanie Cronin (2008), was a pioneering work in its challenging of the elitist character of the historical scholarship on the region, and in turning the attention to the experience of diverse subaltern groups in the Middle East and North Africa. The contributions to the anthology turned their attention to strategies of protest and resistance

employed by major social groups, on the one hand, and strategies of survival adopted by marginal groups, on the other. In the introduction to the anthology, Cronin (2008, 3) makes the important point that the history of the excluded should avoid romanticization of the subaltern, and explore not only how subalterns have resisted and protested, but also how they have negotiated and colluded with those in power, sometimes even acting as agents of repression. The anthology covers a longer time span than this volume as it contains contributions with a focus ranging from the early modern period to the beginning of the twenty-first century. Groups under examination include emancipated female slaves, migrant workers, shanty town dwellers, the rural poor, Roma people, jobless leftist activists, migrant workers, and insurrectionary Palestinians. The scope of these groups reveals how widely the concept of subalterns can be applied in historiography.

A second, and more recent, anthology with a close link to our volume is *Ancient History from Below: Subaltern Experiences and Actions in Context*. In the introduction to this anthology, Julio Cesar Magalhães de Oliveira and Cyril Courrier (2022, 3) point out that "in studying the strategies, agencies and solidarities of subaltern groups, we can also show their margins of freedom, their capacities of resistance and the potential for social change that persist in spite of the many forms of domination and oppression." They also address the source problem, which is always to be taken into account when studying the voiceless people of the past, and which is especially pressing in the study of the ancient period. In the present volume, too, the scarcity of sources that would directly elucidate subaltern experiences is an issue for most contributors.

Both of the aforementioned anthologies state as their explicit aim to trace the "experiences" of subalterns, and the interest in lived experiences is also observable in many contributions to this volume. This is nothing new, since ordinary people's experiences were a topic of interest already for the so-called new social history that emerged in the 1960s, which is well illustrated by E. P.

Thompson's (1963, 9–11) statement that class is not a structure but an experience that happens in social relations. Nonetheless, the history of experience has appeared as a burgeoning field of scholarship in recent years, bridging and bringing together approaches and theories from the new social history, the German tradition of *Erfahrungsgeschichte*, and more recent advances in the history of emotions and the senses (e.g., Boddice & Smith 2020; Plamper 2021; Kivimäki, Suodenjoki & Vahtikari 2021; Eiranen et al. 2022). Scholarship in this field approaches experience not as located within an individual mind but as a strongly cultural and social phenomenon, connected to societal structures, institutions, power relations, and language. Moreover, this new interest in the history of experience(s) examines them as processes, which are always situated and embodied, and which blend into memories, as they are shaped by individuals' earlier experiences and memories. This volume offers a variety of cases pointing out how experiences (of physical suffering, discrimination, exclusion, or inclusion) have shaped subaltern political practices and subjectivities, and how political bodies and structures, in turn, have nourished the experience of subalternity.

The history of experience builds on partly similar premises to the idea of "new history from below," which has been advocated most notably by historians Tim Hitchcock (2004) and Martyn Lyons (2013). They argue that while the history-from-below tradition, which emerged in the 1960s, focused on marginalized groups and highlighted their agency, it relied more on sources *about* ordinary people than on sources *from* them. By contrast, the new history from below seeks to re-evaluate individual experience and to search for the personal voices of ordinary people. In doing so, it regards ordinary people as active agents in their own history rather than passive consumers of official ideologies. In practice, a key feature of new history from below has been the interest in the writings of subordinate

or marginalized people, such as workers, women, prisoners, and immigrants, and how these people have used writing as a way to perform resistance and gain power (O'Hagan 2020, 15–16).

One of the modes of political communication used by subaltern people in many historical contexts is "writing upwards," which, as introduced by Martyn Lyons (2015), denotes both individual letters to authorities and collective petitions. This practice has received considerable scholarly attention in recent years, for example, in the dedicated *Journal of Epistolary Studies* (Lyons 2020) and special issues centering on petitioning as part of various political cultures in the Western world and Asia (Miller 2019; De & Travers 2019). Furthermore, important efforts have been made at the crossroads of colonial history and history of petitioning, to bring the imperial context of the practice to our attention. These provide compelling results on petitioners from Samoa to the League of Nations (Pedersen 2012), and first insights into petitions from British India to the House of Commons (Huzzey & Miller 2020, 2021), and people of color in the US, with anti-slavery petitions to the US Senate (Griffin & Sager 2020) as well as Native-American petitions to Congress (Blackhawk et al. 2021). Our volume aims to broaden this field by including research into other controversial manifestations of the practice, such as letter-writing to dictators, which combined expressions of loyalty with subtle forms of resistance.

Indeed, different contributors to this volume investigate written appeals to authorities, including petitions to the representative power(s) of democratic states and similar practices in authoritarian contexts. However, this book does not consider letter-writing as the main and only form of subtle protest from below or within. Oral and bodily forms of political communication and resistance (through meetings, rumors, and songs) are taken into consideration as well. The types of resistance on which the different chapters focus were not just expressed through violent insurgencies. Rather than writing histories of violence or history of social movements, this edited volume places loyalty

and resistance on a sliding scale. Similarly, the contributions concentrate on various groups of subalterns, who can be situated in different places on the sliding scale from oppressed subalternity to hegemony.

The tendency to interpret resistance in such a multifaceted way is becoming increasingly popular in imperial and colonial historiography, and more concretely in the attempt to transcend the binary between colonial violence and anti-colonial insurgency. The latter notion is problematic in and of itself, as is the idea of "revolt," because both are construed by and within the colonizers' narrative. Thus, they need to be deconstructed to lay bare variegated forms of subaltern resistance. The most relevant publication in this context is the recent volume on *Resistance and Colonialism. Insurgent Peoples in World History*, edited by Nuno Domingos, Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo, and Ricardo Roque for Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). Within the context of imperial histories of specific Western nations, the concept of protest gets a nuanced interpretation too. The 2021 conference of the Society for the Study of French History, focusing on Power, Protest and Resistance, invited participants to interpret the theme "in the broadest possible terms, taking into account social, cultural, imperial, political, economic, military, gendered and other dimensions." In addition, the interdisciplinary Resistance Studies Network (launched in 2006) and its *Journal of Resistance Studies* (publishing since 2014) are bringing together research on insurgencies as well as everyday struggles for peace, justice, and rights.

Structure of the book

It is our goal to build further upon this tendency to investigate diverse forms of contestation outside large social movements, by going one step further and analyzing subtle forms of resistance in their

dynamics with expressions of loyalty toward the regime in place. Therefore, the case-studies offered in the following parts will be organized according to the different political contexts which determined the subalterns' position and shaped their possibilities of informal and formal political interactions. Contributions to Part I of this book shed new light on subaltern agency within an institutionalized framework of loyalty toward dictatorial, autocratic regimes – in the first place with its autocratic ruler himself – which has remained under the radar so far. How can the subalterns' concrete interactions be understood in the context of loyalty and/or resistance?

Part II shifts the focus to political interactions between citizens and (members of) representative institutions in Western and Northern Europe. It shows how "ordinary" citizens made use of supposed "democratic" platforms to negotiate – and hence, resist – preconceived images of their own place in society. These negotiations help reveal these subaltern agents' situated and embodied experiences and sources of knowledge, which, together with the transfer of political practices, contributed to the formation of their political subjectivities. Focusing on them improves our understanding of citizen-subalterns' conceptions of representation in a (proto-)democratic context. Although some forms of political communication were part of formal, institutionalized interactions (e.g., petitions), other communication channels under examination were rather informal. Thus, they highlight the diversity of political participation by "ordinary" citizens in Western societies and the various ways in which they tried to overcome their subaltern position.

In Part III, the concept of "subjectivity" transcends the political/apolitical binary and serves as a tool for investigating how religious, spiritual, caste, class, or clan elements were imported into politics in colonial and pre-democratic contexts. Hence, the contributions in this part of the book bring more alternative forms of political communication to the fore, perceived, at times, as apolitical. More specifically, the three chapters analyze embodied, voiced, and/or symbolical practices outside

parliamentary institutions. Central to the two colonial contexts and the one non-colonial context are subaltern spiritual frameworks in their interaction(s) with the dominant political sphere, and the legitimizations, within the latter, for appropriating or discarding such spiritual elements.

In sum, this book teases out a geographically diverse array of (re)imaginings of power and power struggles, and the ways in which they were crystallized in (written and vocal) interactions between (colonial, governing, representative, autocratic) authorities and their (at first sight seemingly voiceless) subaltern subjects. Politics has always been and will always be a part of the everyday lives of most people. It is worthwhile for historians to study it as such.

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