Guha and the Trotskyist Quandary

Juan Ignacio Staricco

Abstract: Subaltern Studies have appeared, in the last years, as a new perspective to understand the history of peripheral societies from a non-Eurocentric point of view. In this article, I discuss their leading figure’s work on the concepts of the political and consciousness. By comparing his situation to that of Trotsky, I analyze his attempt to eliminate a unitary philosophy of history and arrive to the conclusion that Guha is unsuccessful in producing a real shift of paradigm.

1. Introduction

When it comes to the novelty of Subaltern Studies during its first phase (Chaturvedi 2000) we have a main star, who is Ranajit Guha, and one of his main achievements: the re-elaboration of the concept of “the political” and its link with the idea of “consciousness”. Just to show the reception it had we could use a couple of quotes: “Guha’s critique of the category ‘prepolitical’, I suggest, fundamentally pluralizes the history of power in global modernity and separates it from any universalist narratives of capital” (Chakrabarty 2000, p.14); “Elementary Aspects emphasizes the dangers of reading the process of insurgency with a political grammar based on mid-twentieth century nation-state political form” (Scott in Guha 1999, p.xiii). If it were not for the space restrictions, much more praise could be quoted on this matter. But what may be a very interesting critique of western Marxism by Guha might not necessarily be understood as an innovation by this Subaltern scholar.

The first elementary form of peasant insurrection described by Guha is Negation (Guha 1999). According to him, this kind of negative consciousness is characterized not so much by a positive identitarian definition of the self, but mainly by the denial of the other, of the enemy. In the same way as Guha proposes to take this negation as the point of departure for the study of peasant insurgency in colonial India (Guha 1999, p.20), I would like to use this strategy as the point of departure for my paper. In this way, I will not express my main thesis in an affirmative way, but by negating a quotation on Guha’s work: “Guha’s critique of the category prepolitical challenged historicism by rejecting all stagist theories of history” (Chakrabarty 2002, p.14). In this paper I will try to show how that affirmation is wrong and that much of the celebration around Guha’s
work on the concept of the pre-political tends to be exaggerated. My aim is to show that Guha’s disagreement with the notion of the pre-political involves the rejection of a particular philosophy of history which, in the end, cannot be destroyed by the author and, consequently, he continues working within that same framework, loosing the opportunity of producing a change of paradigm.

In what follows, I will first briefly expose Trotsky’s situation when theorizing about (Russian) revolution. The reason to do this is to add the resource of analogy to the explanation, in a second part, of Guha’s problem with the category of pre-political and his final solution. In the conclusion, I will make a balance of the subaltern pioneer’s effort to overcome Marxism.

2. Trotsky’s Quandary

The idea of the (pre) political is closely linked to a conception of history which orders those notions in a chronological sequence: this is the historical materialism of Marx or, as Chakrabarty calls it, historicist Marxism (Chakrabarty 2000). Guha finds Marxist categories to be insufficient to understand the position of peasants in colonial India and it is in this moment when he faces what I have called here “Trotsky’s quandary”.

In the beginning of the twentieth century Trotsky had an important job to do: to theorize about revolution but with the intent of starting one. I would even dare to say that he was in the middle of a dialectical task: he had to theorize about revolutions, with a normative spirit, and, at the same time, he had to justify with philosophical support the empirical revolution he was leading. The source for both, his thoughts and actions, was the classic Marxist thought, but within it there was a hard core group of postulates (Burawoy 1989, p.780), those of historic materialism, which caused him some trouble. Marx’s philosophy of history drew a teleology in which the development and change of social formations, motioned by the contradiction between the material productive forces and the relations of production, would lead through consecutive revolutionary changes to a final communist society. Marx left no contingency nor surprise in history: a bourgeois (or liberal democratic) revolution would put an end to authoritative regimes, perpetrators of a feudal system, and begin with the development of capitalist societies; only when the development of the capitalist productive forces is such that it cannot continue under the
established mode of production, a new (socialist) revolution led by the proletariat will arise.

According to this, the socialist revolution would occur first in the most developed capitalist countries, as it is only there where the objective conditions of production are present. Trotsky’s dilemma appears when he wants to conceptualize and, at the same time, instigate revolution in Russia. Why? First, because a liberal democratic revolution has not yet taken place in Russia and, second and consequently, there is no more than an incipient capitalist development in the country. Moreover, as Russia does not have a capitalist mode of production, the subject of revolution, the proletariat, is not more than an embryonic political actor, just a seed far away from blossoming.

Marx’s historical materialism, then, would just turn its back to Russia’s possibility of a socialist revolution, but Trotsky believes that a revolution is imminent. The possibilities appear to be twofold: he could reject historical materialism as formulated by Marx and introduce a new theoretical framework or, on the other hand, he could adapt the empirical process to make it fit the core postulates. His answer is given in the form of his well-known Theory of Permanent Revolution. In a few words, proletarians must make the revolution; they have to break in the political scene, regardless of the given objective conditions and their level of consciousness as a class. But, as they become political actors and seize the power of the State, they should anyway complete the process: proletarians will first make the bourgeois revolution and develop their society under that paradigm, only after the material conditions are achieved, the time will come for the socialist revolution.

Even though it is not anymore the classic “path” described by Marx, Trotsky is careful about keeping the main core of historical materialism intact. In his theory, now, he explains what must be done in order to have a socialist revolution but without disrespecting Marx’s historical process. As a consequence, we can affirm that Trotsky chose the second alternative in his dilemma: historical materialism should be preserved, so reality should be arranged to fit there.

3. Guha’s Quandary

My point here is that Guha faces an analogous problem as Trotsky. When theorizing about peasants, his main objective is to portray them as autonomous political actors and, as he affirms, this is strictly linked with the attribution of a political consciousness: “To acknowledge the peasant
as the maker of his own rebellion is to attribute, as we have done in this work, a consciousness to him” (Guha 1999, p.4). The problem is that this objective does not fit the stages of development proposed by Marx. According to this perspective, as evidenced in Hobsbawm’s work, peasants are still pre-political actors and, as a consequence, there would be no agency for revolution in India until it becomes an industrial country, and proletarians develop class-consciousness. Conceptually, the British historian appears as the worst enemy in this field. Guha says: “He uses this term [pre-political] again and again to describe a state of supposedly absolute or near absence of political consciousness or organization” (Guha 1999, p.5) and Chakrabarty goes beyond, extrapolating the consequences to a whole paradigm: “Hobsbawm’s category ‘prepolitical’ revealed the limits of how far historicist Marxist thought could go in responding to the challenge posed to European political thought by the entry of the peasant into the modern sphere of politics” (Chakrabarty 2000, p.11).

What we can see, then, is that Subaltern Studies are challenging a whole line of thought, finding Marxism as insufficient to explain a peripheral reality. It is the moment now, as proposed above, to analyze how Guha deals with this dilemma, the same one which Trotsky faces: should he reject historical materialism and propose a new look at history in a peripheral society or, on the other hand, should he try to find evidences in his object of study to make it fit in this historical conception? As we can see, it is not only a matter of reformulating a concept but, more importantly, he faces the opportunity of proposing a shift of paradigm by, in Chacrabarty’s words, “rejecting all stagist theories of history”.

When he is explicitly facing this problem, he seems to acknowledge, unlike Trotsky, the first option: “What both of these assimilative interpretations [bourgeois-nationalist and socialist] share is a ‘scholastic and academic historico-political outlook which sees as real and worthwhile only such movements of revolt as are one hundred per cent conscious (…)” (Guha 1999, p.4) and “whatever its validity for other countries, the notion of pre-political peasant insurgency helps little in understanding the experiences of colonial India” (Ibid., p.6). If we follow the first quotation, we can see that both criticized lines of historiography have a common problem: their historico-political postulates, this is, how they understand the development of political forces across history. What we can conclude from this is that, if we want to overcome these elitist approaches of history, we should abandon this notion of historical development. The second quotation supports this interpretation by decentering the analysis: maybe this theoretical approach has been useful in Western societies, but not in India. As said before, when he explicitly
faces the problem, he seems to be proposing a shift of paradigm but, as I am seeking to show now, when we carefully examine his analysis, we will find that he does not abandon a notion of “stagist history”, but just tries to make the peasants fit in there.

We should start by clearly stating what Guha is trying to criticize. The following quote sheds light on the aforementioned aspect:

The error derives more often than not from two nearly interchangeable notions of organization and politics. What is conscious is presumed in this view to be identical with what is organized in the sense that it has, first, a “conscious leadership”, secondly, some well-defined aim, and thirdly, a programme specifying the components of the latter as particular objectives and the means of achieving them. (…) The same equation is often written with politics as substitute for organization. (Guha 1999, p.5)

In the first place, there appears to be equivalence between the terms politics, consciousness and organization. The first two have been portrayed as running parallel throughout history: pre-political actors have less developed consciousness according to the Western Marxist tradition. But how can we empirically observe these concepts in reality? Through the idea of organization. In this way, a political (or conscious) action is supposed to have a conscious leadership, well defined aims and a program with objectives and the means to achieve them. As Hobsbawm (or more generally, western Marxism) does not see those characteristics in peasant movements, they cannot be considered more than pre-political, an embrionary figure waiting to become proletariat. If Guha thinks that this equivalence between politics, consciousness and organization is an error, it should be expected that he had looked for evidence of peasant insurgency as political and conscious actors outside this framework. It is clear that he tries to do so by describing a dual political ontology, a structural split (Guha 1998, p.xvi) where one area is governed by colonial institutions and the other, an informal one, where peasants act. But this is not enough, as Guha cannot finally escape from historical materialism and remains within a stagist conception of history. There are two main reasons: the first one, instead of creating a new conceptualization of the political which would express peasants’ uniqueness, he tries to show how they essentially fit in this category, no matter the difference in degree; the second one, he does not abandon an idea of development from traditional to modern, from feudal to capitalist, and that is mainly seen in his evolutionist vocabulary.

Regarding the first point, he starts not by rejecting the idea of organization as such, but by denying spontaneity: “there was nothing spontaneous
about all this in the sense of being unthinking and wanting in deliberation. The peasant obviously knew what he was doing when he rose in revolt” (Guha 1999, p.9); “rejection of the idea of such activity [insurgency] as purely spontaneous” (Ibid., p.4). As we can see, there is not a refusal of what he considered an error in the paragraph quoted above but, differently, he emphasizes in the absence of spontaneity (or what would be the same, in the presence of organization) in the peasant insurrections.

But not only this. If we remember that organization has three characteristics, Guha remembers that too: “More often than not it lacked neither in leadership nor in aim nor even in some rudiments of a programme” (Guha 1999, p.9-10); “Of the many cases discussed in this work there is none that could be said to have been altogether leaderless” (Ibid., p.10); “Almost each had indeed some sort of a central leadership” (Ibid., p.10); “Again, if aim and programme are a measure of politics, the militant mobilizations of our period must be regarded as more or less political” (Ibid.). And we could continue. Here again his choice is clear, he is not discarding the paradigm he criticizes but he is using its criteria to show how the peasant insurgency is, maybe in a lesser degree than workers movements, but still, a political phenomenon.

This idea of degree takes us to the second point mentioned above. If Guha does not reject the philosophical basement of historical materialism and its corresponding categories, he cannot show the peasants as qualitatively different, but just differing in degree: “As such [a project of power] it was perhaps less primitive than it is often presumed to be” (Ibid., p.9); “(...) although none of these attributes could compare in maturity and sophistication with those of the historically more advanced movements of the twentieth century”(Ibid., p.10); “It would be wrong to overestimate the maturity of this politics and read into the qualities of a subsequent phase of more intensified class conflict” (Ibid., p.10-11); “(...)a consciousness which was learning(...)” (Ibid., p.11); “These were, in other words, the very beginning of a theoretical consciousness” and a long etcetera. As all the highlighted expressions show, Guha is still working with an evolutionist vocabulary which is implying a common and only historical path, where different actors can be in different positions, but still running in the same direction. Guha’s vindication of peasants is not about putting them in an alternative modernity or historical development, but just showing that they are not so backward in the universal progress of history as they had been considered until the moment.

At this point, one might be interested in questioning whether Guha accepted this and proudly recognized that he did not want to produce a
new paradigm but to reposition peasants in a pre-existing one. If that were the case, we should then ask Guha which is the post-colonial and emancipatory contribution made by Subaltern Studies.

Studying history from a teleological perspective leads us to interpret different phenomena as stages, or as moments in a process, which will arrive sometime. Guha tried to break the historical determinism which classified peasants as pre-political, by the division of the space of politics, showing one which was the particular domain of the peasants. In this way, they would appear as autonomous agents, being outside of a Eurocentric approach of politics, they could be considered political subjects from a new perspective. But is this what Guha really does? Unfortunately, not. Although he makes this distinction, when it comes to analyze the role of peasants as political subjects, he has still in mind the idea of progress from feudalism to capitalism, which includes their own development, from peasants to industrial workers. The following quotation proves this:

However, the initiatives which originated from the domain of subaltern politics were not, on their part, powerful enough to develop the nationalist movement into a full-fledged struggle for national liberation. The working class was still not sufficiently mature in the objective conditions of its social being and in its consciousness as a class-for-itself, nor was finally allied with the peasantry. (Guha 1991, p.6)

In the first sentence, Guha recognizes the autonomous domain of subaltern politics, where they can become political actors. But, immediately after that, in a second sentence which seems transferred directly from the work of Marx, he explains the underdeveloped status of the subaltern class: it had not achieved the historical moment of maturity to lead a national liberation movement. It seems that the only achievement made by Guha is to describe peasants as political actors, but they are not still a proletarian class, the real subject of historical change, and consequently, have not reached their potentiality.

In case my negative thesis of the introduction still needs final support, I would like to quote Guha’s point 15 of the Subaltern “Manifesto”:

It is the study of this historic failure of the nation to come to its own, a failure due to the inadequacy of the bourgeoisie as well as of the working class to lead it into a decisive victory over colonialism and a bourgeois-democratic revolution of either the classic nineteenth-century type under the hegemony of workers and peasants, that is a “new democracy” – it is the study of this failure which constitutes the central problematic of the historiography of colonial India. (Guha 1991, p.7)
It is evident that Guha’s project is deeply rooted in a stagist theory of history; how would we explain otherwise the main objective of Subaltern Studies? The failure of the nation to come to its own clearly evidences that there is teleology in the historical conception and the Subaltern group wants to study why the goal was not achieved. Why the nation did not come to be a nation. The absence of a (necessary) revolution, led by bourgeois or workers, is the research question which puts Guha and the first phase of Subaltern Studies surprisingly near Trotsky and his problems of “unachieved” stages of history.

4. Conclusion

Guha’s work can be clearly understood by the analogy with Trotsky’s quandary. Both find that their realities do not match the historical materialism or historicist Marxism and have to decide what to do. Both of them, at the end, choose the same option. They try to show how, even if reality appears not to coincide with theory at a first glance, a careful analysis could lead us to put it back on track. Their solutions are analogue manipulations of the relation between theory and reality: in Trotsky’s underdeveloped Russia the incipient proletarians should take the power to make two revolutions in one, while they act, they produce their conditions of possibility; the peasants of Guha enter the political arena but aware that they have to continue with the development of their political consciousness at the same time as they are already struggling.

Guha’s analysis is sharp in detecting the problem, he shows that Marxism is Eurocentric and cannot be applied anywhere; he even says it every time he has to be explicit on this matter. But, disappointingly, when it comes to the analysis, he is far from producing a shift of paradigm. He still works with a stagist theory of history. He has in mind the evolution form feudalism to capitalism and instead of rejecting the criteria for political consciousness and offering new ones, he keeps them and only tries to show that, unlike previous studies, peasants do have a political consciousness, in spite of its minor degree of development. Guha disappoints, he seems to be willing to offer a new and plural way of conceptualizing history in the periphery but he finally makes the peasant fit in Marx’s scheme instead of destroying it.

As a conclusion, we could say that Guha behaves like Procrustes, Poseidon’s son, who used to stretch or cut people to make them fit in his
bed. The subaltern scholar is keeping the Procrustean bed of historical materialism and stretches and cuts peasants according to its requirements.

**References:**


