From the Subaltern to the Precariat

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This essay aims to trace moments in the modern trajectory of what I will call the subaltern problem—the problem, for both practice and theory, of how to conceive and overcome the distance between subalterns and elites, especially intellectuals. By focusing first on Carlo Levi's account of his 1930s exile in a remote southern Italian village in his famous memoir *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*), and next on the social revolutions of 1968 and their intellectual aftermath, it draws attention to important historical attempts to articulate and overcome this problem, which organized much twentieth-century leftist thought. I shall make the case that Levi came to regard the subaltern problem as intractable, turning instead toward autonomism; while in the aftermath of 1968, as autonomism receded, the politics of subalternity were largely absorbed into the machinery of an emergent neoliberal state capitalism.

The terms under which the subaltern problem have long been under-

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stood no longer hold because new, more extensive and less visible patterns of global dispossession are gaining ground. Relatively geographically and culturally stable relations of dominance and subordination are being replaced by relatively unstable and dispersed conditions of deprivation and insecurity.[1] Intimations of imperilment are extended more widely across various societies in a situation where global social insecurity is backed by planetary ecological insecurity. No widely accepted nomenclature for contemporary dispossession in these terms has appeared, but I will use *the precariat*, a term that does have some currency.[2]

This name seems right even if it has not yet been fully connected to the risks of global warming. *Precarity* effectively invokes the insecurity of all those who live without reliable and adequate income or without papers. And it also applies to those with no, or unstable, access to the institutions and communities best able to provide legitimacy, recognition, and solidarity. More radically, if more loosely, it also points to those whose work, often hand-to-mouth, serves the interest of ethical orientations that cannot be smoothly aligned to the instrumental values that have come to reign over global capitalism. The arts and the humanities figure largely among these. Even First World members of the middle classes, including intellectuals and, I'd wager, some readers of this essay, are decreasingly protected against material insecurity and find themselves, at the very least, at risk of precarity.[3]

1. That's the mood caught, for instance, in the Occupy movement's otherwise rather misleading "99%" slogan, which effectively signals that old divisions between elites and subalterns (or bourgeoisie and workers, colonizers and colonized, etc.) are unraveling.

2. See Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011). For philological treatments of the term, see, for instance, Frassanito Network, "Precarious, Precarization, Precariat?," thistuesday.org/node/93 (accessed February 21, 2012); and Angela Mitropoulos, "Precari-Us?," www.metamute.org/en/Precari-us (accessed February 21, 2012), as well as Gerald Raunig, *A Thousand Machines*, trans. Aileen Derieg (New York: Semiotext[e], 2010). In her *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), Judith Butler uses the concept of precariousness in a rather different, if related, way. Another possibility as a name for this group would be Alain Badiou's preferred term, the "excluded," a category that, he insists, now includes large majorities (Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, trans. Steve Corcoran [London: Verso, 2006], 34). But, of course, that name does not refer to an experience, or a state of being, and so is less useful for my purposes.

3. It is interesting to note that the young Walter Benjamin, in a 1913 (only posthumously published) essay, made a somewhat similar case for writers and intellectuals (and especially Jewish writers and intellectuals) as an oppressed group, driven by and to a love of the invisible, as he put it, and the thence custodians of a broken religion that seeks to

Yet this is only to begin to broach precarity's epistemic reach. It is also, as I shall seek to show, a condition that references an important history—that more or less religious lineage which has always privileged precariousness and its many cousins (vulnerability, uneasiness, groundlessness, and fallenness, for instance) as conditions of human existence. Thought this way, precarity extends beyond social and intellectual zones to connote an experience that is also an anthropological truth—the truth of what we might call, following Marcel Gauchet, the anthropology of negation, the anthropology of lack.[4] In other words, the conditions of contemporary precarity lead us once again to recognize and accede to a particular account of what it is to be human.

That account was primarily formed within the Christian (or, more exactly, the Pauline and Augustinian) understanding of human nature as defined by its sinfulness, death-centered weakness, insecurity, and restlessness, an understanding that took firmest hold in Protestantism. This, of course, was an anthropology that stood apart from the old Aristotelian and scholastic emphasis on the rationality and dignity of human beings. It is worth noting at once that, for quite obvious reasons, unlike Aristotelianism and scholasticism, the anthropology of negation cannot easily affirm human substance against social injustice and in that way support social critique.[5] At best, it can emphasize what Martin Heidegger and Max Scheler each called human life's "openness" (*Offenständigkeit*) to the world, a positive result of a finite state. Here, human lack actively exposes and connects us to the world and its flows. And, importantly, as such, it may be chosen. Indeed, when detached from its old connection to Adamic transgression and sin, precarity can form the basis of an ethic of authenticity, which is what, arguably, grants it its full spiritual, ethical, cultural, and literary force, even as it becomes increasingly a material consequence of post-Fordist, globalized capitalism and, as such, invites both judgments against it and reformist efforts at alleviating it.

"transmute values into life" (cited in Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. James Rolleston [Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1997], 28).

4. Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oliver Burge (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 225. See also Kathleen Stewart, "Precarity's Forms," *Cultural Anthropology* 27, no. 3 (August 2012): 518–27.

5. I am thinking here, in particular, of Luc Boltanski's sociological finding that one of the grounds for critique is appeal to a philosophical anthropology. See Luc Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, trans. Gregory Elliott (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 10.

The anthropology of negation has, in its various forms, repeatedly moved literary and philosophical writing and speculation, especially since the Reformation. Here, for instance, is the Anglican mystical poet Henry Vaughan, writing in the middle of the seventeenth century:

> Man . . . hath no root, nor to one place is tied,
> But ever restless and irregular
> About this Earth doth run and ride.
> He knows he hath a home, but scarce knows where.[6]

At the beginning of the modern commercial and capitalist era, this vision became less God-directed and more philosophic. Sin, which under orthodox Latin Christianity, was, anyway, a collective rather than an individual predicate of humanity, gradually falls out of the way, being replaced by worldly forms of guilt and lack.[7] It did so, for instance, in Thomas Hobbes's analysis of the fundamentally mobile and fear-driven human life, or in John Locke's insistence, even as innate human qualities were being denied, on the centrality to human lives of what Locke called "uneasiness." In the second (1694) edition of *An Essay on Human Understanding*, he argued that uneasiness is "the chief, if not our only, spur to human industry or action" (230), "whereof the greatest part of our lives are made up" (25), which underlies "the weak and narrow Constitution of our Minds" (276).[8] To leap over a thick history, by about 1900, this anthropology reacquired ontological and ethical force in Heidegger, particularly (as Simon Critchley has pointed out) after his 1919 turn from Catholicism to Pauline Lutheranism.[9] The *Not* (anguish) that Heidegger posited as a "calling" of the human becomes *Dasein*'s *Angst*, "Being-towards-death" (*Sein-zum-Tode*) and "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*), in *Being and Time* (1927). What was once a punishment for a collective transgression is now a condition of authentic individual human existence. As I shall suggest below, this lineage even, and amazingly, survives the structuralist "death of man." Given another twist, it finds echoes in

6. "Man," in *The Works of Henry Vaughan*, 2nd ed., ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 477.

7. The classic history of this process remains Jean Delumeau's *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th–18th Centuries*, trans. Eric Nicholson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

8. The references embedded in the text are to the following edition: John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

9. Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless* (London: Verso, 2012), 169–71.

Jacques Derrida's nonanthropological, nontheist concept of *différance* and so comes to inhabit another important branch of contemporary theory.[10]

My purpose here is not to enrich our understanding of this anthropology—let alone to argue for or against it. For me, the anthropological turn implied by precarity is not based on a human nature independent of culture and history. Rather, I want to argue that the secular notion that uneasiness and instability are primary to human existence is kept alive precisely under capitalism since it is a mode of production that, in effect, invests in insecurity and that therefore reaches a certain fulfillment in today's global precarity. I will also suggest that Western progressivism, in attempting to reconcile justice to modernization, characteristically attached itself to "humanism," namely the doctrine that history could and should provide ground for the development and extension of human capabilities. So when subalternity is displaced by precarity, one background anthropology may be displaced by another. In this shift, literature's relation to society can also be realigned, as I show in the reading of Amit Chaudhuri's novel *The Immortals*, which ends this essay.

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Christ Stopped at Eboli

First, then, a text famous for wrestling with the subaltern problem in the period which turned out to be the Left's apotheosis: Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli*.

In 1935, Levi, an Italian doctor, painter, and politician, was punished by the fascist government for his political activism by being exiled to the village of Aliano (called Gagliano in the book) in the remote and mountainous south. His memoir, published after the end of the war, concentrates on his relation to Aliano's peasants. Levi begins by declaring the village's inhabitants as foreign in the boldest possible terms. He reports them saying to him, "We are not Christians; we are not human beings." To which he responds,

> Christ never came this far, nor did time, nor did the individual soul, nor hope, nor the relation of cause to effect, nor reason, nor history.

10. This lineage is not exactly Stephen Mulhall's concern in his *Philosophical Myths of the Fall* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), but this book is certainly well worth reading in relation to it.

> Christ never came, just as the Romans never came. . . . None of the pioneers of Western civilization brought here his sense of the passage of time, his deification of the State, or that ceaseless activity which feeds upon itself. No one has come to the land except as an enemy, a conqueror, or a visitor devoid of understanding.[11]

This statement is startling for the rhetorical force with which it insists upon the peasants' otherness, severing them from rationality, monotheism, historicism, Christianity, humanness, and the anthropology of negation all at once. Yet although Levi does not claim that he ever reached full understanding of the peasants' world, this judgment is softened once the villagers call on him to work for them as a doctor. It also then becomes clear that his literary writing is well adapted to represent the difficult progress of his radical judgment. Levi's rhetorical skills, which enable him to combine invention with analysis, judgment with introspection, suggestion with skepticism, allow him to present not just a compelling sense of intimacy across a distance with a social and cultural other but to hint at less easily expressible possibilities, too. I will return to this point.

The book reaches its climax when Levi's experiences are translated into a political program, nothing less than a rewriting of the Italian constitution. This happens after he returns to Aliano after having visited Turin for a few days. Up north, he realized that even metropolitan experts have no real sense of life down in the rural south. The difficulty, he notes, is that while his northern friends are all "unconscious worshippers of the State," there is and always will be an "abyss between the peasant and the State." So there can be no state solution to the southern peasant's predicament. On the contrary: the state constitution *is* the problem (*CE*, loc. 3474). Even state efforts of reformist internal colonialism will never succeed: there will always be a peasantry, even if only in the form of "brigandage" or "under the cover of patience" (*CE*, loc. 3487).

It is at this point that Levi declares that the only solution is to create a "new form of government, neither Fascist, nor Communist, nor even Liberal," in which the "juridical and abstract concept of the individual" is replaced by a "concept in which the individual is a link, that meeting place of relationships of all kinds" (*CE*, loc. 3515). This, in turn, will be possible only if the state accepts the autonomy of its parts, treating the peasants with what I will call *responsible indifference* so that they can join "the com-

11. Carlo Levi, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, trans. Frances Frenaye (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 2011), Kindle ed., loc. 54. Hereafter this book is cited parenthetically as *CE*.

plex life of the nation" (*not* the state) as a "self-governing rural community" (*CE*, loc. 3527), where community has something of the force that it acquires in Roberto Esposito's recent work, namely as an (ideal) impersonal and deindividuating zone of sharing or commonality.[12] In this pluralist scheme, autonomy rules across the nation's communities and associations, stopping only at the level of the individual, who, among the peasants, exists just as that communal "meeting place of relationships." Subaltern autonomy here is based on a desubstantializing of human qualities, a flight from philosophical anthropology, since for Levi that meeting place possesses no recognizable human qualities of its own. Let us not forget, the peasants have—in their radical refusal to become Italians—declared themselves neither human beings nor "restless" at all.

Having reached these conclusions, Levi falls asleep. He awakes in a world of the senses, which turns out indirectly to reveal his politics' ambiguity. The mountain landscape now looks different to him than it did before he left for Turin:

> The mountain rose up as before, with its gradual rises and irregular crags, to the cemetery and the village, but the earth which I had always seen gray and yellow, was now an unexpected and unnatural green. Spring had suddenly burst forth during my brief absence, but the green, which elsewhere is a symbol of harmony and hope, here seemed artificial and violent: it was out of key, like rouge on the sunburned cheeks of a peasant girl. This same metallic green extended all the way along the mountain road to Stigliano; it was like the false notes of a trumpet in a funeral march. The mountains closed in after me like prison gates. . . . In the sunshine little patches of green that were scattered over the white clay stood out even more intensely and strangely than before, like expostulations. They seemed the torn pieces of a mask, thrown down at random. (*CE*, loc. 3547)

This remarkable passage inverts one of Europe's most familiar literary conceits—spring as a figure of life's renewal. At this place, at this time, spring's greenery is an image not of nature but of violence and artifice. The passage's figuration of this inversion is carefully sequenced: green spring is first like rouge on a peasant girl's cheek, then like a trumpet in a funeral march, then like an expostulation which, as it were, talks to Levi, and, last,

12. For Esposito on this, see Roberto Esposito, *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*, trans. Rhiannon Noel Welch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 14–37.

like a mask covering the face that expostulates. In the peasants' rejection of human substance, we might say, language and the real come to substitute for one another so as to destabilize the order of things. The landscape has become an inhuman language spoken through a mask. And at the same time, a certain hermeneutic instability—hermeneutic precarity, even—imperils Levi's consciousness as he comes to understand that in moving back and forth from the city to the mountains, he is losing control over what nature—the world—means to him.

At this point, too, our judgment of Levi's effort of antistatist constitution-making shifts. No doubt the passage indirectly expresses Levi's fear of spending two more years in the village, where rewarding engagement is all but impossible for him. But it also hints that his notion of a pluralist state open to multiple governmental autonomies is driven not just by his anticolonialist antistatism, or by his uncomprehending sympathy for peasant lifeways, but by his own desire to keep the peasants' world apart from his own, to *prevent* the emergence of overarching—statist—institutions in which exchanges, distributions, and messages across the cultural and economic divide between the metropolitan intellectual and the southern peasant might be possible. Through adroit literary sequencing and figuration, spring's garish green silently spells out the almost unsayable message that haunts all radical politics based on the will for the other's autonomy, namely, that the drive to respect and empower the other is shadowed by a will to distance oneself from the other, not least because it is so difficult to know and treat the other as fully and properly human, and not least because radical autonomy keeps precarity at bay. It is as if Levi is here refusing to choose both precarity *and* the politics under which the intractable subaltern problem is set in place.

I offer this reading of Levi's politics, first, to give a graphic (and influential) instance of a modern radicalism based on the subaltern division that does not assume shared human qualities and, second, to provide terms which will help us, in our reading of Chaudhuri, to move toward a more universalist and connective model of "meeting places" (both social and subjective) that allows precarity to become not so much a bondage as a calling.

1968 and Its Academic Aftermath

First, however, the twentieth-century moment when the subaltern problem was put to its severest tests as the postwar welfarist consensus broke down, a moment which, in my view and despite everything, continues to organize our own, not least since it mutates into neoliberalism.

The movements that we recognize under the name "1968" belonged to a different world than Levi's. They appeared in affluent, more or less social democratic and meritocratic (and nationalized) postwar societies, as an irruption primarily by educated youth against inherited structures of authority, now rather suddenly revealed to be unable to command new social conditions. At that moment, new sets of demands were spectacularly addressed by the West's educated young to their elders:[13] demands for a democratization of the lifeworld which might break through the colonialist and class divides that had persisted in Western postwar social democracies; demands for the recognition of different identities, values, and spiritualities; and demands for more joy, freedom, and imagination in everyday life. In this revolution, a new critical terminology became compelling, which we can sum up in a phrase: social authority was linked to what Herbert Marcuse, in 1966, called "surplus repression," that is to say, repression which damaged creative civilization and the good life in the interests of maintaining instituted and inherited privilege.[14] And this generation's antirepressive surge was enabled by its disconnection from the anthropology of negation.

Among some students, this (mainly disorganized) uprising against surplus repression was channeled into two formal liberation movements in order to face the subaltern problem as directly as possible. The first attempted to join students to factory-worker activists. In France, where this alliance between students and workers seemed most promising, it led to a Maoist understanding of their relation, namely, that intellectuals should share the workers' experiences in order to absorb and learn from their needs and values.[15] Here, the subaltern divide was to be overcome by dissolving the education system's hierarchization of society into labor's lifeworld.

Among the Maoists, the intellectual's relation to the proletariat was also soon theorized in less orthodox terms. An important strain of radical activism became committed to protecting worker autonomy, and, at the same time, to maintaining what distance remained between the pro-

13. For arguments in the spirit of this contention, see, for example, David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 58–97.

14. This is an argument put in Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), esp. 37–40.

15. For Maoism and the 1968 revolution in France, see, for example, Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2007).

letariat and capitalist ideology in something like the spirit we have already encountered in Levi's relation to Aliano's peasantry.[16] This is to say that this autonomism, too, was a politics that invoked an ethos of responsible indifference and began to break the spell of terms such as *equality* and *democracy*. In its most radical form, to be responsibly indifferent is, to repeat, to understand first that society and politics may be constituted by groups who need not know and acknowledge each other, even as humans, even as sharing an anthropology, that is. It is to understand, second, that distributive justice need not be applied across society as a whole just because individuals or groups marked by radical differences may make legitimate claims to stability and independence that may be put at risk by institutionalized efforts at redistribution. This post-1968 moment petered out, although "autonomia" became the name of a different radical movement in Italy in the mid-seventies, one which formed the groundwork for many of today's activist practices.[17] Certainly responsible indifference was thence exiled from advanced societies and polities to the degree that its values and purposes seem to have become all but unimaginable today.

Now to the social aftermath of 1968. Over the decades that followed, the spirit of May 1968 was at least partially absorbed into capitalism's ideological and institutional infrastructure so as to help transfer power from producers to consumers and financiers.[18] Despite itself, then, 1968 belongs to what Paolo Virno has called the "genealogy of post-Fordism."[19] Via its denial of bourgeois hegemony; via its demand for autonomous self-management; via its emphasis on innovatory and joyous experiences; via its rejection of statism; via its optimism, the sixties revolutionary impulse paradoxically helped enable the market to become an increasingly important agent of and for governmentality, since the market, too, could reward indifference to hierarchy, entrepreneurial energies, and new imaginations and experi-

16. See Sunil Khilnani, *Arguing Revolution: The Intellectual Left in Postwar France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), for a history of this moment.

17. Sylvere Lottringer, *Italy: Autonomia* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1985).

18. This formulation owes something to Wolfgang Streeck, "Citizens as Customers," *New Left Review* 76 (July–August 2012): 27–49.

19. "The Dismeasure of Art: An Interview with Paolo Virno," by Sonja Lavaert and Pascal Gielen, *Open 17: A Precarious Existence* (2009), www.skor.nl/_files/Files/OPEN17_P72-85%281%29.pdf (accessed October 15, 2014). For the case that cultural studies is as much a product, and instrument, of post-Fordism as a critique of it, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Labouring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), and Simon During, introduction to *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 1–32.

ences.[20] It would be wrong to think that 1968 was a *primary* cause of the neoliberal triumph, which needs to be analyzed in the political economic terms David Harvey and others have spelled out. But there can be little doubt that it helped provide the ethos for that triumph—after all, the market, too, was interested in access and inclusion, at least into the machinery of consumption. In this process, the subaltern problem was gradually ideologically finessed in nonleftist terms by naming both sides (elites and subalterns) "consumers" or "customers," or, conversely, "human resources," a discursive shift in which, tellingly, the old official political representatives of European organized labor and subalternity—Tony Blair's New Labour in the UK, the SPD under Gerhard Schröder in Germany, and even the Parti Socialiste under François Mitterand in France—played an important role.[21]

These passages from May 1968 to neoliberalism were partly closed around September 11, 2001, when in the United States, but not only in the United States, the neoliberal market state became fused with a war-on-terror, or security, state. At this point, it became clear not just that sixties revolutionary energies had disappeared into increasingly market-orientated politics but that popular reaction against globalized neoliberalism would, to a significant degree, take place as a conservative resistance to the sixties' democratization of the lifeworld. This conservative resistance—especially the Christian Right—secured itself against the perceived geopolitical threat of Islamic terror (which also, of course, emerges from religious conservatism) by aggregating different creeds, spiritualities, and social practices, some formed around what William Connolly has recently called the "evangelical-capitalist resonance machine."[22] It appealed variously to family values, Evangelical spiritualism and soteriology, virtue ethics, civility, orthodoxy, and nationalism. These values also, of course, resisted emancipatory identity politics and social democracy, and, even, sometimes, neoliberal market expansions, too.[23] At the same time, it seems likely that Evangeli-

20. For the argument that the spirit of 1968 underpins neoliberalism, see, for instance, Raunig, *A Thousand Machines*, 82.

21. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2007) provides the classic analysis of this move. For the political history, see the essays collected in Ravi K. Roy, Arthur T. Denzau, and Thomas D. Willett's collection, *Neoliberalism: National and Regional Experiments with Global Ideas* (London: Routledge 2007).

22. William Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 39–68.

23. Sara Diamond, *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000).

calism also provided spiritual, and to some degree communal, protection for those increasingly threatened by precarity.[24] After all, Evangelicalism is ceaselessly able to establish new congregations/voluntary associations even among the most vulnerable, usually around a theology based on individual salvation and Christological sacrifice rather than sin and election.

Still, one of the Christian Right's fundamental elements (which it shares with Maoism) has been its capacity to construct educated liberals as enemies of the people via a populist discourse against elitism and meritocracy, which implicitly carries the Pauline belief that sin and anxiety are primordial human conditions. After all, it is the cosmopolitan and educated class who are most bound to the ideology of hope and progress.[25] And by helping to roll back, although by no means overturn, one familiar solution to the subaltern problem—the rival "liberal" alliance between the educated elite and the disadvantaged that helped underpin the social-democratic state—the postsixties Right also helped prop up neoliberalism, even against evidence of neoliberalism's incapacity to effectively manage capitalist states, and even against at least some groupings within the Christian Right's suspicion of the market state as a continuation of sixties godlessness.

Let us turn from the social to the *academic* aftermath of 1968. At this point, the student revolutionary movement was displaced into the postdisciplines of subaltern studies, cultural studies, and postcolonialism, each of which was also directed at, and barred by, the subaltern problem.[26]

Subaltern Studies

As has often been remarked, subaltern studies was developed from Maoism's autonomist turn after 1968.[27] In that spirit, a group of mainly

24. David Martin, "Evangelical Expansion in a Global Society," in *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (London: Ashgate, 2005), 26–46.

25. The best-known discussion of this alliance probably remains Thomas Frank's, in his *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004). It has to be said that the politics of working-class electoral support for the enemies of social democratic or welfarist policies are more complex, and less far-reaching, than Frank suggests, but this is a phenomenon that has long existed even outside the United States (where it is complicated by racism), and it is hard to see how neoliberalism would have been as successful as it has been without it.

26. For the concept of postdiscipline as used here, see Simon During, "Postdisciplinarity," www.academia.edu/764233/Postdisciplinarity (accessed March 13, 2013).

27. This genealogy is, of course, acknowledged from within subaltern studies: Dipesh

expatriate South Asian historians examined a wide variety of Indian archives so as to connect to, and learn from, peasant insurrectionary energies. They did so in order to sidestep modern political rationality. Their purpose was to affirm the distance between the subaltern and the privileged that Levi had described, while insisting that the subaltern had shaped history, if not on terms that empire had recognized. It goes without saying, however, that the project was curtailed by being carried out by professionals whose relation to the subaltern was one of *connection in theory*, or what Roland Barthes long ago called (mere) "theoretical sociality."[28] Here, the theorist was separated from the subaltern by the international, meritocratic, academic system.

Thus, let us take the key instances. Ranajit Guha's groundbreaking *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) was an academic structuralist work of classification and decoding. Drawing on the only available archive—that of counterinsurgency—it presented a grammar of nonstatist, nonrationalist rural insurrectionary styles and motives, a grammar with only a utopian application to practical national politics. By the time Partha Chatterjee was writing *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), that utopian politics had been transformed for subaltern studies: the movement's purposes could be described there as a "search, both theoretical and practical, for the concrete forms of democratic community that are based neither on the principle of hierarchy nor on those of bourgeois equality"—a search and a politics directed primarily against the Indian state system.[29] Here, classically enough, democracy is seen to subsume the subaltern problem. Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000) no longer addressed the issue at all. It made no claims to overcoming the subaltern problem.

Nonetheless, it was at this point that subaltern studies revealed its full intellectual strength—its capacity to imagine a different conceptual terrain than that of mainstream European social theory, one scored by new divisions and connections, new geographies and pasts. The West was removed from the world's center. History was separated from histori-

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Chakrabarty, in an insightful article on subaltern studies and politics, makes the point that the movement owes as much to Maoism as to E. P. Thompson and indeed to Antonio Gramsci ("Subaltern History as Political Thought," in *Political Ideas in Modern India: Thematic Explorations*, ed. V. R. Mehta and Thomas Pantham [New Delhi: Sage, 2005], 93–110).

28. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1972), 157.

29. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 191.

cism. Secularization, Eurocentrism, and modernization were disjoined from one another. The state was no longer seen legitimately to represent or order society. Political participation was granted to those without a Western, rights-bearing, interiorized, liberal subjectivity. Political agency was restored to those without a political voice, both by expanding the reach of politics as a category and by reimagining democracy associationally rather than representationally. In this remapping, pluralist themes familiar to European radicalisms were restructured and supplemented by the subcontinental case so as to displace the subaltern problem, as I say.[30] But it all happened at the level, and in the sites, of *theory*. And, of course, subaltern studies did not engage the Western anthropology of thrownness and uneasiness with its immense cultural and social weight and reach.

Other risks, too, were attached to the subaltern studies project, especially in the aftermath of September 11. At that point, it became clear that globalized post-Fordist capitalism was one day going to provincialize Europe all by itself. Surprisingly, as a result, it also became clear that subaltern studies' critique of historicism, statism, secularism, and liberal subjectivity shared (quite despite itself) something with those popular nonsecular, antiprogressivist conservatisms—the Religious Right—that, as we have seen, came to stand against the alliance between 1968 and neoliberal democratic state capitalism around the world. Its antielitism now resonated with other antiliberal, antistatist populisms. All the more so as the global peasantry, without necessarily becoming richer or more educated, was being increasingly drawn into the ideological and institutional apparatuses of global capital and, at the same time, into that new material precariousness over which subaltern studies' purposes and methods have little purchase.

Cultural Studies

Cultural studies was also originally organized around the question of social, cultural, and political relations between rich and poor, advantaged and disadvantaged, intellectuals and workers. And its passage into the neoliberal era is, in broad outline, quite familiar to the scholarly literature.[31] But by focusing more insistently on its shifting relation to the sub-

30. For the history of pluralism or associationism as a political theory, see, for instance, W. G. Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), as well as the collection edited by Mark Bevir, *Modern Pluralism: Anglo-American Debates since 1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

31. My account of cultural studies here is deeply indebted to Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture* (London: Routledge, 2000).

altern problem, we can cast further light not just on it but on the problem's historical diminution.

As is often acknowledged, British cultural studies began in Leavisism, a sui generis school of literary criticism. From the thirties on, Leavisism came to see the state education system, and in particular the university English department, as a means both for overcoming the subaltern problem and for integrating the national community—that is, for overcoming autonomy and responsible indifference across classes. In effect, by supposing that, in a modern state, equality of opportunity required the objective gradation of talents and skills, it proposed to insert a particular model of literary reading into the selection processes of a national meritocracy. Society's planned gradations were to be ordered by the degree to which students and teachers were able to fully appreciate and enter into those literary experiences that best resisted what Leavisism (following T. S. Eliot) regarded as modern leveling, abstraction, and commercial vulgarity. These experiences were, however, based on what was common to all, on ordinary or mundane everyday life, where, for F. R. Leavis, life was a categorical value. Good students were those who, deploying the techniques of what came to be called "close reading," most sensitively and rigorously affirmed canonical and countermodern literature's vitality in these terms. Only good students would become teachers, and only the very best of them, teachers of teachers. For Leavis, the bridge between mundane communal life, on the one side, and exceptional literary experiences, on the other—a bridge that was also a path into the national meritocracy—was most clearly exemplified in D. H. Lawrence's fiction. Lawrence's works were unique because, read closely, they showed how everyday modern working-class experience could offset modernity when creatively transfigured into literature by one who had been trained in the state's postcompulsory education system. That is, Lawrence, a miner's son who studied at what is today the University of Nottingham, provided a way out of workerist autonomy and the subaltern problem more generally. It is important to note for my argument to come that, as Leavis saw it, Lawrence's transfiguration of ordinariness into literature appealed neither to humanism nor to the existential ethics of precarity nor to the anthropology of negation. His literary (as against institutional) resources were simply experience, language, and, most importantly, *life*—vitality.

The meritocracy that Leavisism implied was theorized and legitimated by Karl Mannheim in the thirties and forties. For Mannheim, a democratic society is required to draw the previously "politically indifferent" subaltern classes into "political life" in order to prevent what he presciently

called "organized insecurity."[32] But this, nonetheless, required planning, which meant, in effect, management by "sublimated" experts or elites, mainly selected via the education system. For Mannheim, modern democracy could not be decoupled from meritocracy.

In a move that set British cultural studies on its way, Eliot took issue with Mannheim's defense of meritocratic elitism in his *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* (1948). He appealed, instead, to culture as "a whole way of life" (a term he invents here) that operated across three levels—that of society as a whole, that of the group or class, and that of the individual. He argued that planning or managerial elitism would damage culture as a whole way of life, not least if it meant that all citizens were required to join a national education system. He defended, instead, the slow processes of inheritance and class reproduction, since, in his view, they alone could preserve the cultures and subcultures (a term he also invents here) of different groups or classes. Eliot, in other words, defended a conservative, traditionalist, and nonhumanist form of autonomy and responsible indifference against the integrative, meritocratic, social-democratic, capitalist nation-state. And he did so, at least in part, because, as an orthodox Anglican, he had retained ties to a Pauline rather than a progressivist understanding of shared humanness.

In *Culture and Society*, the book that pretty much establishes institutionalized Anglophone cultural studies as we know it, the young left-Leavisite Raymond Williams accepted Eliot's critique of Mannheim. He, too, saw culture as a whole way of life, grounded in ordinariness. But Williams hoped to secure that whole way of life in secular laborism and socialism, believing that only in that way could history unfold human creativity's full potential. That is to say, a humanist philosophical anthropology (which his Leavisite appeal to Lawrence's centrality to the culturalist tradition does not gainsay) grounded Williams's push for the *political institutionalization* of the nation's whole way of life against managerialism and meritocratic statism. And he believed that the subaltern problem would disappear with the socialist reorganization of the relation between civil society and the state. That belief, of course, turned out to be mistaken.

1968 marked a break within cultural studies thought like this, since appeals to laborism, socialism, and humanism then became impossible. As is well known, one particular concept—ideology—displaced that of culture.

32. Karl Mannheim, *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*, trans. Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1940), 199 and 129–43.

In Stuart Hall's work in the seventies, as well as in Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, common sense, the everyday, and the whole way of life are treated not as legitimate and filiative inheritances but as shaped by, and saturated in, ideology, whose primary function is to enable capitalism and the class system's reproduction and naturalization. In this body of work, ideology is the all-powerful instrument of surplus repression, which, by making the subaltern problem itself invisible, also renders it incontestable.

In the 1980s, seeking a way out of this bleak model, cultural studies made three important moves: First, it turned to ethnography, studying how people in the world actually use culture. This turn provided an entry for cultural populism since it revealed how much pleasure, differentiation, and resistance sheltered in commercialized and industrialized culture.[33] This line of thought once again provided a pathway into neoliberalism's undoing of the subaltern problem since it, too, came to figure people primarily as creative consumers free to choose among an array of goods and activities. Second, cultural studies embraced identity politics, especially, early on, feminism and Black Power. These were, indeed, emancipation projects, but within strict limits. In their most successful form, anyway, they aimed to secure full recognition by, and participation in, democratic state capitalism for disenfranchised groups. But in so doing, they papered over internal divisions between educated and uneducated, rich and poor. That is, they, too, avoided directly facing the subaltern problem. And as it turned out, insofar as they thus enabled previously disenfranchised and repressed groups fully to participate in democratic state capitalism, they also, inadvertently, helped extend precarity's reach. In particular, the increasing participation of women in the workforce provided one (admittedly fairly minor) condition for organized labor's loss of power and influence from the seventies on. Third, cultural studies turned to Michel Foucault's work on power and governmentality.[34] At this stage of his career, Foucault rejected the ideology concept and its totalizing effects by sedulously avoiding categories such as capitalism, democracy, society, even experience. Seeking also to avoid humanism at any cost, he established a theory of power as produc-

33. This move was made by the Media Group at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the second half of the seventies. Its first published fruits were Charlotte Brunsdon's *Everyday Television—Nationwide* (London: BFI, 1978), and David Morley's *The "Nationwide" Audience: Structure and Decoding* (London: Routledge, 1980).
34. This move is particularly associated with Tony Bennett, especially his *Culture: A Reformer's Science* (London: Sage, 1998).

tive rather than repressive, a concept of power that also disavows concepts such as emancipation and subalternity at the same time as it stands apart from the anthropology of thrownness and loss. Thus, it can be used to defend and legitimate more modest and practical notions not just of self-government ("techniques of self," "spiritual practices," "self-fashioning," and so on) but also at the macrolevel institutions of government and management, including those of state and corporations. So in this Foucauldian lineage (and especially within so-called cultural policy studies), cultural studies effectively returned to a version of Mannheim's project: an insistence on the bureau-technocratic ordering of the democratic lifeworld, which, both in Foucault himself and in cultural studies, proved to be quite easily reconciled to neoliberalism.

This (as I say, in parts quite familiar) narrative helps us understand how, in the decade after 2001, cultural studies, which seemed as if it might secure a firm foothold in the academic humanities in the 1980s and 1990s, has largely been displaced as a mode of critique. Not only had it failed sufficiently to address the subaltern problem, but it possessed insufficient resources to effectively critique the new conditions of global capitalism.[35] These days, critique is more often carried out by theorists such as Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Bruno Latour, and the Deleuzians, who are more philosophically than culturally oriented. Yet insofar as they are involved with metaphysics, they neither propose practical policies to overcome subalternity or precarity nor have the capacity concretely to connect to the experiences and feelings of contemporary groundlessness and suffering. This appears to be true even of theorists who, more recently, have drawn attention to the importance of philosophical anthropology for political thought—I am thinking in particular of Roberto Esposito and Giorgio Agamben—but whose thought poses no lines of connection between themselves qua theorists and the precariat, or, for that matter, the subaltern.[36] In this

35. The key instance here is cultural studies' first response to what would later become known as neoliberalism, that is, Stuart Hall's *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988). It brilliantly and influentially applied a Gramscian concept of "hegemony" to Margaret Thatcher's politics, arguing that they were a new form of managing, and indeed creating, popular consent. But Hall's culturalist analysis failed sufficiently to consider, for instance, the economic forces that underpinned neoliberalism as a global phenomenon; its intellectual roots (which Foucault had outlined a decade earlier in his 1978–79 lectures at the Collège de France); its connections to Evangelicalism and other forms of Christianity; or its resonances with 1968 as a mode of liberation from statism.

36. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford Uni-

situation, it is at least arguable that those disciplines that are most attached to the practices of close reading as originally introduced by Eliot and Leavis retain certain advantages, as we shall see.

Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism has been distinguished from subaltern studies by its attention to the colonizer/colonized relationship, mainly across societies, rather than the elite/subaltern relation within a distinct society. In the wake of Edward Said's pioneering Foucauldian analysis of Orientalism, it aimed, more specifically, to name efforts to undo Eurocentrism's spell across the humanities and social sciences as a whole. In carrying out this task, rather than addressing the colonial version of the subaltern problem head on, it increasingly turned to deconstruction—through which it acquired some of its metropolitan prestige from the mid-eighties on. This is not the place to unravel relations between deconstruction and the post-1968 politicized humanities in any detail, except to remark that deconstruction is difficult to connect to any form of practical emancipation and reformism. Nonetheless, deconstruction is pertinent to my argument because it is where the Pauline philosophical anthropology of precarity rejoins the post-1968 progressivist and emancipatory humanities.

Deconstruction is relevant here not because it is committed to a philosophical anthropology. Indeed, I accept accounts, such as Martin Hägglund's, that understand it as a radically secular or "atheist" philosophy that affirms no stable and discrete metaphysical or anthropological substances at all.[37] Deconstruction is relevant because, at least in Derrida's work, it is based on a set of categories—the trace, spacing, *différance*, autoimmunity, for instance—that claim to demonstrate that *all* identities, substances, and projects are accountable only as coherent, discrete, and fixed on terms that undo or threaten their presumed coherence and stability. They can be articulated as such only in signifying systems that are *in movement*. But as a matter of historical fact, this radically secular affirmation of conceptual instability does, indeed, join a particular metaphysical heritage. Deconstruction's meanings and effects, too, are not owned by itself.

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versity Press, 2004), 33–39, and Esposito, *Terms of the Political*, 39 ff. Also see note 12 above.

37. See Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

In particular, deconstruction has often been received as an heir to the Heideggerian existential critique of metaphysics and, at the same time, to the particular philosophical anthropology outlined above.[38] For Heidegger, as we have seen, no unmoved, fundamental reality exists: existence is constitutively temporal, and directed toward death, and human beings are thrown into the world in ways that demand an ethics of care sensitive to the opening of the world. This condition is universal for human beings: it knows no cultural differences or social hierarchies (so the subaltern problem is irrelevant to it), even if the "retreat of Being" happens in history and at different rates in different societies. It is this universalism that has permitted deconstruction to detach certain Heideggerian themes from metaphysics and apply them instead to semiotics, so that abyssal human experience could be conceived not so much as ontological as linguistic and conceptual.

Thus, for instance, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Gayatri Spivak attempted to replace a fixed or "essentialist" understanding of the division between the elite and the subaltern, arguing that each side is marked by internal aporias and *différends*. This argument expunges difference in the name of extending it, since aporias are now everywhere. In general, then, postcolonialism could only turn to deconstruction at the risk of losing what mattered most to it: a sense of the violent division between the colonizer and the colonized, that extreme case of the subaltern relation. But it also meant that, more or less unacknowledged, postcolonialism retained a connection to the thematics of anxiety, dislocation, conceptual instability, uneasiness—those ultimately Protestant philosophical anthropological concepts that, as I want to argue, can today be used to think the condition of precarity, which potentially covers so many of us.

Amit Chaudhuri's *The Immortals*

And so, at last, how does postsixties literary culture today express and, indeed, choose precarity?

Amit Chaudhuri's novel *The Immortals* (2009) provides one possible response to this question. At the time the book appeared, Chaudhuri had indeed publicly signaled his sense that the subaltern paradigm was losing its purchase on the contemporary world in his 2004 review of Chakrabarty's

38. For a characteristic example of the line of thought that regards deconstruction as a continuation of Heideggerianism, see Richard Rorty, "Deconstruction," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 8, *From Formalism to Poststructuralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 166–96.

Provincializing Europe in the *London Review of Books*.[39] He had argued there that subaltern studies had, for what are, in effect, cultural nationalist reasons, failed to fully account for how Eurocentric global modernization has shaped modern India, and not wholly for the worst. In particular, Chaudhuri suggested, subaltern studies' pursuit of a specifically Indian modernity deflects attention from the complexities of Indian contemporary life in relation to the West and, most of all, ignores the attraction of those forms of aestheticism and high culture attached to Western-style capitalism. The colonialist division between the West and India no longer quite held; India itself was moving to new modes of hierarchization and ethical styles. And, in effect, Chaudhuri was resisting not just subaltern and postcolonial studies but, more generally, cultural democratization, autonomy, and populism in one cultural studies mode.

The Immortals is a brilliant novelistic contribution to this argument. Set in Bombay around 1980, it describes the lives of rich bourgeoisie who are experiencing both the beginning of India's urban boom and a specific experiential uneasiness. Its primary move is to avoid describing relations of subalternity, replacing them with less rigid and political relationships, such as those between master and servant, teacher and pupil, guru and disciple. In doing so, like subaltern studies, it departs from the norms of liberal individualism. Rather, it displays a social world ordered by what Jonathan Swift long ago called "mutual subjection."[40] For Swift, mutual subjection was a social ethic, a dispositional framework, in which individuals were capable of exchanging their positions of authority and obedience as particular situations and conventions demanded. And in *The Immortals*, positions of command and dependency continually move from one person to another even across hierarchies—to give just one instance, they do so between a rich Bombay housewife and her jamadarni servant, this time to keep egalitarianism as well as individualism at bay.[41] Since mutual subjection assumes no shared qualities between people, it falls outside integrative humanism. And since it does not engage groups as such, either, it stands outside—and does not threaten—structures of hierarchization, or, for that matter, of autonomy or responsible indifference.

39. See Amit Chaudhury, *Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), 57–69.

40. Jonathan Swift, *Three Sermons: I. On Mutual Subjection. II. On Conscience. III. On the Trinity* (London: R. Dodsley, 1744), 18.

41. Amit Chaudhury, *The Immortals* (New York: Vintage, 2009), 49. Hereafter, this book is cited parenthetically as *TI*.

In *The Immortals*, as in Levi's southern Italy, subjectivity is also disconnected from deep individualism. Indeed, Chaudhuri's characters, even the rich bourgeoisie, lack full interiority, just because their relations of mutual subjection are so intricate. For that reason, the novel is constructed not as a stream of happenings, or as a plot made up of peculiarly significant events, but as a series of apparently contingently chosen vignettes designed to highlight mundane social relations in all their commutability and fragility. It presents characters who are opaque to one another as they form and reform themselves in the ceaseless everyday "meeting places" where microhierarchies and dependencies are both reinforced and inverted. Yet offstage, Bombay's macrohierarchies of class, gender, and caste are at work, congealing fluid and fungible social exchange. The traditional distance between elite and subaltern is endlessly dissolved by being disseminated across relations between all individuals, only to be resolved into itself again, but at a distance.

Furthermore, we, the twenty-first-century reader, understand that the novel is not set in the India we know now, an India marked by endemic corruption, militarization, and vast fortunes among a tiny elite; the growth of a confident urban middle class; a turn to provincial, caste-based, and Religious Right parties; the emergence of a large, educated expatriate community; the continuation of massive immiseration; the intermittent return to insurgencies and riots; and so on.[42] Nor is it set in the India that is described in Chaudhuri's more recent book on Calcutta, where the Bengali capital is carefully contrasted to Bombay. The novel knows that its readers know that its world is neither those worlds nor the world imagined by subaltern studies, and by virtue of that knowledge, it can implicitly present its own vanished bourgeois Bombay moment as an alternative to any anti-Eurocentric but nonetheless Westernized and utopian vision of intellectuals learning from, and teaching, subalterns.

This leads me to my second point. This is not a novel that simply rejects India's chaotic entry into global democratic state capitalism as a misjudgment. It tells the story of two families. The Senguptas, who have moved from Calcutta to Bombay for business reasons, are rich. They have one son, the autobiographically based Nirmalya, now an adolescent. The

42. See T. K. Oommen, *Crisis and Contention in Indian Society* (New Delhi: Sage, 2005); Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (New York: Ecco, 2007); and Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) for up-to-date academic accounts of contemporary India.

Lals are supported by their paterfamilias, Shyam, a music teacher and raga singer. He is teaching the bhajan repertoire to Nirmalya's mother, who, as a girl back in Bengal, trained in Tagore song. Shyamji becomes Nirmalya's teacher, too, and relations between the families are organized around the distance that exists between them, across which puzzlement, silence, admiration, suspicion, learning, and mutual subjection all flow.

Shyamji, the music teacher, is interested in providing for his family. He is looking for ways to profit from his skills and pays mere lip service to the view that classical music is a "temple of art" (*TI*, 125). For him, classical music is no longer worthy of the immense sacrifices of time and energy that mastery of it requires. When Nirmalya reproaches him for selling out, Shyamji seems barely to understand. Yet the novel does not quite countenance Nirmalya's reproach, either. At one level, this is because of its sympathy for Nirmalya's mother, who, understandably, has neglected her own extraordinary musical gifts for the comforts of being a rich businessman's wife, and, more importantly, because the novel recognizes that, among the urban bourgeoisie, love of Indian classical music is now attached not to tradition but to aesthetic values, which exist most of all for those who prosper under capitalism.

Nirmalya's aestheticism, however, adds to the music rather than takes from it. This is not because aestheticism preserves a critical distance from the world, a distance more immune to secular instrumental reason's depredations than are god-directed ritual and tradition. The novel knows no social world sufficiently exterior to the self to work like that. Aestheticism does not present a "world of ideal possibility," either—it is no shelter from existential uneasiness (*TI*, 56). Rather, it adds a worldly discipline to modern life that harbors tranquility or exhilaration, especially when responsibly indifferent to the pressing forms of life around it. For the novel, aesthetic work and reception precariously jostle, juggle, and supplement the world's commerce; they do not—contra Nirmalya and a whole tradition of Western thought—protect us from it or illumine it. But they also provide a fleeting foothold in a kind of autonomy. Importantly, autonomization is here shifting from relations between social groups toward distinct spheres of value—the aesthetic, the moral, the economic, the political—as they exist in contemporary society.

The novel strains to be responsibly indifferent to politics. But it contains at least one seemingly political moment. Nirmalya's parents take him to tea at a new luxury hotel in a devastated Bombay outer suburb. When the family is seated, Nirmalya suddenly declares that he can't eat at the

hotel until his relatively impoverished music teacher, Shyamji, is able to eat there, too. Nirmalya's interior state is not represented even at this moment, although his father thinks he must be experiencing "a sudden outrush of love" for his teacher (*TI*, 265). Whatever Nirmalya's father thinks, the reader cannot but take Nirmalya's refusal as a protopolitical gesture against the social transformations that enable an exclusive hotel like this to be built for the rich—and only the rich—among old Bombay's ruins. This moment of refusal is soon joined by two others. A few pages later, Shyamji, dying, refuses to go into the hospital where his father died before him. This, of course, is a different kind of refusal than Nirmalya's. It signals Shyamji's reentry into traditions of familial respect away from the modernity that a hospital represents but also his rejection of the equivalence between what his father was and what he himself is, his father having also been a great singer but one who never acceded to music's commercialization, even resisting becoming Lata Mangeshkar's teacher (*TI*, 4). In fact, Shyamji seems merely to be avoiding an occasion for comparison between himself and his father. And then, in a third act of refusal at the novel's end, after Shyamji's death, another eminent singer refuses to sing at a Sammelan in front of Shyamji's portrait. This is to be taken, I think, more simply as a traditional act of deference, even if it is accompanied by "bitterness" (*TI*, 336).

This sequence of refusals attests to Shyamji's charisma. But it also undercuts the political force of Nirmalya's act. It is as if, in refusing the hotel's food, Nirmalya, too, is performing a ritual of deference toward his teacher, joining the play of nonsecular microhierarchies, an exchange of subjection beyond the subaltern divide. It is, to repeat, as if his apparently political act masks a traditionally apolitical one. But as soon as that appears likely, it is undone by something darker, since if we know anything about Shyamji, it is that he himself shares nothing of Nirmalyi's delicate and conflicted idealism. He is thirsty for the luxuries and privileges that Bombay lavishly provides to the merely rich. This means that Nirmalya's ascetic gesture is a rebuke to Shyamji as much as an act of solidarity with him. It points to a nonpolitical longing to live outside capitalism, even as the old precapitalist India disappears.

In the end, Nirmalya does not continue with his music. Nor does he stay in India with its bewildering transformations. Since his boyhood, Western metaphysics has communicated a more powerful, if troubling, message to him: the "new undeniable truth . . . that he existed," allowing him to broach the "fathomless puzzle" (*TI*, 263) consequent on that existential perception. Philosophy here is, like music, expressive and univer-

sal, but it is now also an encounter with Being's enigma, via the notion—simultaneously trivial and profound—that he *exists*. So after Shyamji's death, he leaves to study philosophy in London, which, however—surprise, surprise—rarely seems to lead to the contentment that he had more often been able to find in music. Nirmalya's departure is, of course, a jump out of India's modernizing processes into the heart of European modernity itself. More crucially, it is a jump into—a choice of—a certain mode of precariousness, a rich man's child's leap out of those structures, including emancipatory ones, that separate elites from subalterns. Nor is it a calling into a well-functioning meritocracy. Nirmalya is signing up for the humanities at the moment, when, as readers know, they have been subjected to the market state's full force and so are leaking status and value. He has chosen to become one of us.

This choice is also a choice of the anthropology of negation. At the novel's end, Nirmalya experiences a sudden access of a "melancholy without history," a "dull, buzzing ache . . . which had no present and immediate cause" (*TI*, 338). How exactly to read this melancholy? Melancholy without history or present cause—what, in this context, is that? Up until now, as I have noted, the novel has rarely treated feeling in the Western fashion as a private possessive condition. This moment indicates, then, Nirmalya's entry into interiorized Western subjectivity. And just because his melancholy is historyless and unfathomable, it represents his embrace by the philosophical anthropology of uneasiness, here in its depressive form. All the more so because melancholy possesses him more than he possesses it: that's depression's way. A connection is sparked: a link between: (1) an existential or philosophical problematization (Being's enigma, existence preceding essence); (2) a hand-to-mouth career choice; (3) a social disorientation that is also a historical break; and (4) universalized anxious, occasionally depressive European individuality bound to a vision of what human beings *are*. Precarity's full flush.

From quite another direction, the phrase also echoes the famous "peoples without history," which subaltern studies began by wrestling with in its attempt to return the peasants' past to them. At which point a stranger logic emerges: it is as if Nirmalya's melancholy—expressive though it may be of a South Asian boy's passage to Europeanized contemporaneity—works also to situate him in the place of otherness that the subaltern or peasant occupied for subaltern studies and for Carlo Levi, too. Or that it would do if it were not the case that when subalternity is globalized, when it joins the anthropology of uneasiness, it no longer remains itself. As I

have been saying, it dissolves into precarity, that condition which joins the traditional dispossessed (in the novel, like Shyamji's hangers-on and the Senguptas' servants) and the post-Fordist work-seeking, famine- or terror-fleeing nomads, without secure entry into states or societies, to intellectuals like Nirmalya, who have taken up philosophy and classical music. The mutual subjection that organized his relation to his own and the Lal family has become something else: a condition vaguely shared with strangers hailed and troubled by Being's enigma, joined together in insecure, sometimes sad pursuit of knowledge and self-expression.

I would read Nirmalya's "melancholy without history" as implicitly situating him in a variegated, loose social grouping—the precariat—which joins the liberal-arts educated, theorizing rich to the dispossessed but does not do so *politically* à la 1968. It is, rather, variously, if sometimes also simultaneously, an existential, anthropological and material condition. This also means that the novel silently stakes a further claim, namely, that this is a condition that literature can know best. After all, in *The Immortals*, philosophy is a cause rather than a mirror of precarity, and history is inadequate to it (its affect being "without history"). Literature becomes both a conduit into precarious life and a mode of perceiving and knowing it. All the more so because that life is joined to that old and hallowed Western anthropology of negation in the terms I am suggesting. In the end, it is that anthropology's cultural power which provides the conditions for a sensitive literary knowledge of precarity.

Within the literary itself, this involves certain technical adjustments. In particular, *The Immortals* lets us see that literature provides intuitive knowledge of precarity only by abandoning two well-established modes of representation, both of which (as we can now see) were connected to an older politics of subalternity.

The first of these is social realism (as theorized by Leavis or György Lukács, for instance), in which characters in novels exist as individualized representations of different social groups (i.e., as types), groups that altogether constitute a unified and bounded society extending from elites to subalterns. Often in these social groups, approved characters are given more interiority than disapproved or minor ones, so as to allow them a certain passage across social hierarchies. But, again, typification and totality (which are, of course, also important to many Marxisms and nationalisms) have no purchase on the precariat, just because they have no identity as such and belong to no delimited society, let alone community. So Nirmalya, for instance, is, in the end, typical of no social formation whatsoever, even if

his precise social location is carefully described. The plot of his life will not insert him into what Williams famously called a "knowable community" but just into a particular social and existential node of vulnerability and openness.[43] It is in this context that interiority and Nirmalya's connections to others happen in and as "meeting places," which are presented narratologically in contingently or casually—that is, artfully—connected vignettes or scenes of ordinary life.

This leads to the literature of precarity's second break with the past. Precarity cannot easily engage those forms of literature that are defined around the difference or opposition between modernism and postmodernism. Neither any experimental negation of realism in the interest of revolutionary disruptions of the inherited cultural-political order (i.e., modernism) nor any "end of history" aesthetic committed to irony and recirculation of figures, styles, and forms (i.e., postmodernism) is adequate to connect to the new social conditions. This is why the contemporary literature of precarity, such as *The Immortals*, can be described, more simply, as expressing intuitions and experiences of new, more or less disaggregated flows and moods, as belonging to a literature of inconclusive illuminations, indifferent to European realism's inherited political stakes. Indeed, it seems to belong to—or rather to revive—what Chaudhuri has elsewhere described as the mode in which Bengali literary culture, under the cover of "political invisibility," responded to Europe in the Raj's heyday: "Bengali writing . . . was deeply but strategically realist, *focusing on certain details, excising others*, inventing a world richer than any English-language account of the age."[44] A realism not of representation and closure but of invention and openness. And an invocation of globalized precarity and a Western philosophical anthropology from within what remains—just—a local, non-European literary tradition.

But still, one might ask, how does Chaudhuri's novel relate to the traces of the subaltern problem as classically conceived—to the question, that is, of social justice? The answer is: it doesn't. In pointing to the precariat as a global group, which includes people from many classes, religions, and cultures as they are swept into capitalism's most recent phase, and in which subjectivity becomes increasingly exposed to serial, restless, and vulnerable contextlessness, it scandalizes the demand for those kinds

43. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), 165 ff.

44. Amit Chaudhury, *Calcutta: Two Years in the City* (London: Union Books, 2013), 127; italics mine.

of distributive justice that aim to ameliorate or justify insecurity and poverty, or to service marginalized identities, or both. Or it would so scandalize if an ethic of responsible indifference to the political practices that such justice requires and that is already established in political autonomism is not granted to it, too, just on aesthetic grounds. The novel assumes, I think, that art—and indeed philosophy—is not bound to the demand for social improvement and justice, in part because precarity has no merely political solution.

This, of course, is to return to the *literary* autonomism that *The Immortals* seeks. After all, there is another moral secreted in this novel: if we accept that an especially subtle knowledge of precarity as a subsuming mutation of subalternity is to be found in autonomous imaginative literature, closely read, then we probably have to accept that we best know the lived condition of contemporary modernity partly at the cost of being able to free ourselves from it. In terms of the trajectories from the subaltern problem to precarity that I have been tracing, this means that the political and economic failures that these trajectories reveal may work for literature's benefit just because those of us who have acquired a literary subjectivity are now loosely joined to those who have the least stake in the current system, so that the old politics of division is losing force. But once the literary intellectual joins—chooses to join, even—the precariat, her social capacities, purposes, and even faith begin to be subjected to slippage and erosion. Facing that threat, *The Immortals*, which does not claim the conceptual command or mastery expected of the academic knowledge it nonetheless knows, paradoxically finds its epistemic authority.