Let me say at the outset where I am headed in this paper. I want to extract from the history of Subaltern Studies, the Indian series started in 1982, a methodological point that may allow us to see this series, for all its faults (and there were many), as part of a possible genealogy of the “masses” as political actors in Indian democracy. Democracy in India has some strongly populist aspects to it. Events such as riots and violent street demonstrations are an everyday feature of the political process in India. How do we write the histories of the “masses” as a form of collective agency? I will go on to argue that the resources made available to us by the English “history from below” tradition are not adequate in this respect mainly because this historiography, even when it originates from the Left, derives from political thought predicated on “the fear of the masses”. Under the influence of such thought, much European historiography of crowd-action tends to treat the crowd, a collectivity, as the coming together of so many individuals. How would historians think of the collective itself as an agent? A review of the failures and achievements of Subaltern Studies, and in particular of its foundational text – Ranajit Guha’s The Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India (1983) – may give us a handle on the question of how to think of the agency involved in popular political actions. Given the elusive nature of the agency of “the masses”, attempts to write
histories of such agency necessarily run into certain formal issues pertaining to the formal aspect of the historian’s craft. How do you catch that which comes into being at the moment of a riot, say, and then dissolves into so many individuals during interrogation by the police and the court? What kind of evidence does a “crowd” leave of its own existence as a collectivity, and not simply as a collection of culpable individuals? To pursue these questions, however, I will begin by discussing certain related theoretical problems raised in the works of Hayden White, for he, more than others perhaps in our times, has discussed issues of form and content as they bear on the writing of history. I shall then return to the domain of subaltern history in the Indian subcontinent.

I

In his 1982 essay “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation”, Hayden White made a remark that deserves elaboration. Referring to an early nineteenth-century essay by Schiller on the idea of the sublime, White said:

“Historical facts are politically domesticated precisely in so far as they are effectively removed from displaying the aspect of the sublime that Schiller attributed to them in his essay of 1801.” White’s statement is cited approvingly in F. R. Ankersmit’s paper “Hayden White’s Appeal to the Historians”, an essay that generally defends White with some passion against his more simple-minded detractors. What did White mean by “political domestication” of historical facts? Ankersmit, I have to say with respect, reduces “the politics of interpretation” to the question of subverting the distance and the distinction between the object and subject of history (i.e., the historian). He cites Simon Schama’s brilliant books Dead Certainties and Landscape and Memory as successful examples of narratives that take up, intentionally or otherwise, White’s challenge by
deliberately crossing the boundary between fact and fiction. There is no doubt much to be gained from Ankersmit’s thoughtful defence of White. But I do think that to reduce the meaning of the word “political” in White’s expression “political domestication of historical facts” to the question of subject-object distinction is to underestimate the political charge of that expression itself. For the subject-object distinction, in the destruction of which, Ankersmit sees the guarantee of politics, belongs more to the realm of epistemology than to that of politics as such.

White himself, however, provides a more expansive reading of his own sentence. He says:

[B]oth for the Left and the Right … [the] aesthetics of the beautiful presides over the process in which historical studies are constituted as an autonomous scholarly discipline. … For this tradition, whatever “confusion” is displayed by the historical record is only a surface phenomenon: a product of lacunae in the documentary sources, of mistakes in ordering the archives, or of previous inattention or scholarly errors. If this confusion is not reducible to the kind of order [emph. added] that a science of laws might impose on it, it can still be dispelled by historians with the proper kind of understanding.\textsuperscript{iv}

White prefers the vision of history as “sublime” - something innately disorderly and hence constitutionally incomprehensible - to the usual vision of the historian who sees the historical process as containing some inner order that it is the job of the historian to discern. At the very least this process is seen as something amenable to the orderliness that the historian brings to bear on it. That is the usual function of the historical
explanation: to produce, precisely, an ordered reality. White follows Schiller in thinking of the beautiful as orderly and the sublime as that which resists ordering. The sublime – as much for White as for Schiller as we shall see - also forms the basis of their thoughts on human freedom. The sublime, in other words, is – according to White, anyway – essentially political.

“The sublime object is of a dual sort,” writes Schiller. “We refer it to either to our power of apprehension [emphasis original] and are defeated in the attempt to form an image of its concept; or we refer it to our vital power [emphasis original] and view it as a power against which our own dwindles to nothing.” The beautiful, on the other hand, is something that Schiller compares to the regularity of “a French garden,” and asks: “Who does not prefer to tarry among the spiritual disorder of a natural landscape rather than in the spiritless regularity of a French garden?” In the beautiful “reason and sensuousness are in unison.” The sublime separates them. “But it is not merely what is unattainable for imagination, the sublime of quantity, but what is incomprehensible for the understanding, confusion, that can … serve as a representation of the supersensuous” and thus direct us to the sublime. The natural history of the world, for Schiller, is sublime, for the “laws of nature” that the human “discovers” do not make nature predictable. “Crass coincidence rather than a wise plan seems to rule.” From this position, however, Schiller develops a counter-intuitive argument that inspires White. If men would only accept this fundamentally chaotic nature of nature, their reason would become “free” within its own domain. It would then be a purely human faculty without any cognitive
responsibility toward the innate “truth” of the natural world. The sublime, for Schiller, is the condition for the freedom or autonomy of human reason. He writes:

It is true that anyone who illuminates the vast economy of nature with the pale light of understanding, and whose only concern is to resolve its bold disorder into harmony, will not be satisfied in a world in which crass coincidence rather than a wise plan seems to rule…. If, however, he willingly abandons the attempt to assimilate this lawless chaos of appearances to a cognitive unity, he will abundantly regain in another direction … [For] pure reason … finds in just this wild incoherence of nature the depiction of her independence of natural conditions.ix

The discipline of History, from this point of view, connotes a pursuit of the beautiful and not that of the sublime. History, in so far as it is a discipline, does not allow us to explore the realm of freedom that only the sublime – history’s innate resistance to order – can make possible. “[I]nsofar as historical explanations become understandable.. or explainable,” writes White, “they can never serve as vision for a visionary politics more concerned to endow social life with meaning than with beauty.”x This sentence gives us a clue as to the idea of “politics” that White might have had in mind in speaking of “political domestication” of historical facts. Historical reality has no order in itself – that is White’s point. To endow it with meaning is a human act, executed, in this case, by the historian. When the historian writes as though the ordered reality of historical narratives was something that existed “naturally” in the world – independent of the historian’s act of ordering reality – then she or he abnegates the responsibility for acknowledging that it is
we humans who put “meaning” where none existed. If we, as historians, accepted this responsibility as ours, we could have used the archives for producing narrative accounts for which we would be morally responsible. By that one single act, we would have acknowledged both the innate disorderliness of historical reality and the (political) vision that inspired the “meaning” we sought in it. It is indeed the burden of White’s complaint that historians, instead of owning responsibility for the order their explanations produce and thus acknowledging historical reality as sublime, remain on the side of the beautiful. They do so by acting as if there were some “objective” historical realities whose hidden order could indeed be deciphered by historical investigation.

White has here clearly extended Schiller’s argument about natural history to the province of human history. “Endowing social life with meaning” is for White an act with existential reverberations. Modern ideologies “impute a meaning to history” but one that only renders history’s “manifest confusion comprehensible to either reason, understanding, or aesthetic sensibility.” The imputation of a meaning that introduces order into history “politically domesticates” historical facts. “To the extent that they [modern ideologies] succeed in doing so [i.e. give history a meaning – D.C.],” writes White, “they deprive history of the kind of meaninglessness that alone can goad living human beings to make their lives different for themselves and their children, which is to say, to endow their lives with a meaning for which they alone are fully responsible.”

The idea of the sublime leads White to some interesting formalistic questions. If historical processes are indeed characterised by what White, following Schiller, calls
“confusion,” then if one does not wish simply to domesticate this “incomprehensible” aspect of history by making it all look orderly and ordered, how would one go about representing the unrepresentable, i.e. the sublime? Here again White’s thoughts bear a certain resemblance to those of Schiller. The capacity to “apprehend” the sublime, said Schiller, is “implanted in all men.” But “the potentiality to do so is unequally developed and must be aided by art.”

White in effect argues that the problem of representing the sublime nature of history calls for certain formalistic responses on the part of the historian (if he or she is not to domesticate the political charge of historical facts). In other words, in the matter of representing the sublime, art needs to come to the rescue of human history as well.

It is a great merit of Ankersmit’s exposition that he draws our attention to White’s propositions regarding what he, White, calls the “the middle voice” of history. The middle voice is a voice that is neither active (subject) nor passive (object) and one that goes someway towards mitigating the subject-object dichotomy that normally underpins the disciplinary realism of historical prose. This is a concept that Hayden White introduced in a controversial essay on the difficulties of representing the victims’ experience of the Nazi Holocaust. Using Barthes’ famous essay “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?”, White pointed out that “although modern Indo-European languages offer two possibilities for expressing this relationship [ the relationship “an agent can be represented as bearing towards an action”- D. C.], the active and the passive voices, other languages have offered a third possibility, that expressed, for example, in the ancient Greek ’middle voice.” Such “modernist” modes of representation, White argues, may
allow us to circumvent the problem created by the persistence, in historian’s prose, of a
tonineteenth-century sense of objectivist realism. Escaping such realism, for White, is a
question of escaping the subject-object dichotomy that sometimes constrains the capacity
of History, the discipline, to represent actual historical experiences.

White’s own interpretation of his position then is much more expansive than that of
Ankersmit. But it too leaves the concept of “politics” in the expression “political
domestication of historical facts” somewhat overspecified. Let us follow through with
White’s argument to see how the overspecification occurs. Both the Left and the Right,
says White, seek to privilege the beautiful over the sublime, the idea of order over the
confusion that history actually is. He prefers a future in which people, acting on an
acknowledgment of the meaninglessness of history, takes responsibility for the future –
democracy, socialism, etc. – they choose. White thus ends up envisaging a rather
particular kind of historical subject or agent who is so constituted as to be capable of
taking responsibility for his or her political choices.

I find the idea of a confusion or incomprehensibility that is innate to the historical process
eminently plausible. It is also helpful in thinking about the history of the subaltern classes
in India. For this history, like any other history, is innately contradictory with no
particular natural direction in favour of socialism or democracy or any other telos divined
by ideologies of the academic or political elite. Besides, the pasts of social groups that do
not leave their own historical records but who are documented by those who rule over
them, are often a combination, in varying proportions, of fragments of recorded history
and social memories. These latter elements are sometimes inextricable from one other. These pasts therefore often resist being made objects of historical analysis. Indeed, one might agree with White that to not acknowledge this resistance is to ‘domesticate’ the political charge of these pasts. Yet, if Ankersmit reduces politics to the politics of representation alone (how does one represent pasts that resist objectification), White’s own explanation of the phrase “political domestication” deploys, it seems to me, a very specifically European and existentialist idea of “responsibility.” I cannot read Indian or subaltern history in the image of this particular agent of moral responsibility. Thus I have two problems with the explanations at hand. Ankersmit, in my reading, reduces the scope of the political to the question of avoiding objectification of reality – a goal worthy in itself but reductive of the meaning of the political. White himself, on the other hand, ends up overspecifying the political agent. A politically committed historian, according to his gloss, is someone who takes moral responsibility for the particular vision the future that guides his or her reading of the sources.

Neither Schiller’s particular brand of romanticism nor White’s existentialism is thus of much help in thinking about how to write the history of the mass-political subject of Indian democracy. Yet something in White’s use of Schiller remains critically important to the intellectual task of this essay. The Indian series Subaltern Studies was primarily devoted to studying the nature of popular (and mainly peasant) participation in the political process British rule unfolded in India. Questions of agency are at the heart of this project. Were the peasants the “subject” of their own political action? Were their actions political? Can we speak of peasant insurgency as class-political action? How do
we understand the collective violence that marked peasant revolts as political practice? These and other questions marked the early phase of this project. They were inspired by European history and political theory at the same time as they resisted easy assimilation into the body of that theory. Hayden White’s ideas about “sublimity”, the “confusion” and innate incomprehensibility of the historical process, and of the strategy of deploying the “middle voice” have resonances with some of the intellectual problems that historians of the Subaltern Studies group have encountered in their own research.

I now turn to a discussion of Subaltern Studies and to the work of Ranajit Guha, the founding editor of the series.

III

Subaltern Studies was an instance of politically motivated historiography. It came out of a Marxist tradition of history-writing in South Asia and was markedly indebted to Mao and Gramsci in the initial formulations that guided the series. The tradition of history-writing on the Left in India was deeply, though perhaps unsurprisingly, influenced by English Marxist or socialist historiography, the so-called “history from below” tradition pioneered by the likes of Edward Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, George Rudé, and others. Just as Thompson’s work on English popular history was predicated on the question: what contributions did the lower orders of society make to the history of English democracy?, so did historians in the Subaltern Studies series began by asking a similar question: What contributions did the subaltern classes make on their own to the
politics of nationalism in India, and hence to Indian democracy as well? But here the similarity ended. English Marxist narratives of popular histories were moulded on a developmental idea of time: the peasant, in that story, either became extinct or was superseded to give rise to the worker who, through machine-breaking, Chartism, and other struggles for rights, one day metamorphosed into the figure of the citizen or the revolutionary proletariat. The peasant or tribal of the third-world who – as if through a process of telescoping of the centuries – suddenly had the colonial state and its modern bureaucratic and repressive apparatus thrust in his face, was, in this mode of thinking, a “pre-political” person. He or she was someone who did not, as it were, understand the operative languages of modern, governing institutions while having to deal with them. In terms of the English “history from below” propositions, it was only over time, and by undergoing a process of intellectual development, that the subaltern classes could mature into a modern political force. Subaltern Studies began by repudiating this developmental idea of “becoming political.” The peasant or the subaltern, it was claimed, was political from the very instance they rose up in rebellion against the institutions of the Raj. Their actions were political in the sense that they responded to and impacted on the institutional bases of colonial governance: the Raj, the moneylender, and the landlord. We did not then think much about the implications of our claim that the subaltern could be political without undergoing a process of “political development.” Yet the implications of that claim were writ large on our historiography.

The legacies of both imperialism and anti-colonialism speak to each other in this implicit debate about whether the subaltern became political over time (through some kind of
Developmental time, or the sense of time underlying a stagist view of history, was indeed a legacy bequeathed by imperial rule in India. This is the time of the “not yet” as I called it in my book *Provincializing Europe*. European political thinkers such as Mill (or even Marx) employed this temporal structure in the way they thought history. Nationalists and anti-colonialists, on the other hand, repudiated this imagination of time in the twentieth century in asking for self-rule to be granted right away, without a period of waiting or preparation, without delay, “now.” What replaced the structure of the “not yet” in their imagination was the horizon of the “now.”

The British argued against giving self-rule to educated Indians in the nineteenth century by saying that they were not representative of the larger masses of the Indian “people”. The answer came from Gandhi who, following his entry into Indian politics during the First World War, made the main nationalist party, the Indian National Congress, into a “mass” organization. He did so by enlisting peasants as ordinary, the so-called “four-anna” members - an anna being one-sixteenth of a rupee - with voting rights within the party. The “mass base” of the Congress enabled its leaders to claim the status of being “representative” of the nation even if the poor and the non-literate formally did not have any electoral power under the Raj. The educational gap that separated the peasant from the educated leaders was never considered a problem in this idea of representation. The peasant, it was assumed, was fully capable of making citizenly choices that colonial rule withheld from him or her. From the very beginning of the 1920s, Gandhi spoke in favour of universal adult franchise in a future, independent India. The peasant would thus be
made a citizen overnight (at least with respect to voting) without having to live out the
developmental time of formal or informal education – that was the “now” the nationalists
demanded. In the constitutional debates that took place in the Constituent Assembly right
after independence, the philosopher, and later statesman, Radhakrishnan argued for a
republican form of government by claiming that thousand of years of civilisation had –
even if formal education was absent – already prepared the peasant for such a state.xvii

What underwrote this anti-colonial but populist faith in the modern-political capacity of
the masses was another European inheritance, romanticism. It is, of course, true that the
middle-class leaders of anti-colonial movements involving peasants and workers never
quite abandoned the idea of developmental time and a pedagogical project of educating
the peasant. Gandhi’s writings and those of other nationalist leaders often express a fear
of the lawless mob and see education as a solution to the problem.xviii But this fear was
qualified by its opposite, a political faith in the masses. In the 1920s and the 30s, this
romanticism marked Indian nationalism generally – many nationalists who were not
Communist or of the Left, for instance, would express this faith. Francesca Orsini of
Cambridge University, who works on Hindi literature, has recently excavated a body of
evidence documenting this tendency. To take but stray examples from her selection, here
is Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi (1890-1931), the editor of the Hindi paper Pratap,
editorialising on 31 May 1915:

The much-despised peasants are our true bread-givers [annadata], not those who
consider themselves special and look down upon the people who must live in toil
and poverty as lowly beingsxix.
Or Vidyarthi again on 11 January 1915:

Now the time has come for our political ideology and our movement not [to] be restricted to the English-educated and to spread among the common people [samanya janta], and for Indian public opinion [lokmat] to be not the opinion of those few educated individuals but to mirror the thoughts of all the classes of the country…. democratic rule is actually the rule of public opinion.xxx

One should note that this romantic-political faith in the masses was populist as well in a classical sense of the term. Like Russian populism of the late nineteenth century, this mode of thought not only sought a “good” political quality in the peasant but also, by that step, worked to convert so-called “backwardness” of the peasant into an historical advantage. The peasant, “uncorrupted” by self-tending individualism of the bourgeois and oriented to the needs of his or her community, was imagined as already endowed with the capacity to usher in a modernity different and more communitarian than what was prevalent in the West.xxi The contradiction entailed in the very restricted nature of franchise under colonial rule and the simultaneous induction of the peasant and the urban poor into the nationalist movement had one important consequence. The constitutional law-making councils instituted by the British and the street (or the field and the factory) emerged, as it were, as rival and sometimes complementary institutions of Indian democracy. “In the [legislative] Councils and the Assemblies ,” wrote Shrikishna Datt Palival (1895-1968) in an essay in the Hindi monthly Vishal Bharat (February 1936), “one meets power and wealth face to face [and] the rulers’ rights are kept safe in a temple where [people’s] representatives are denied entry, just like untouchables [in a Hindu
The very restrictions put on constitutional politics then meant that the field, the factory, the bazaar, the fair, and the street became major arenas for the struggle for independence and self-rule. And it is in these arenas that subaltern subjects with their characteristic mode of politics (that included practices of public violence) entered public life.

The inauguration of the age of mass-politics in India was thus enabled by ideologies that displayed some of the key global characteristics of populist thought. There was, firstly, the tendency to see a certain political goodness in the peasant or in the masses. And there was, in addition, the tendency also to see historical advantage where, by colonial judgment, there was only backwardness and disadvantage. To see “advantage” in “backwardness” was also to challenge the time of stagist ideas about history, it was to twist the time of the colonial “not yet” into the structure of the democratic and anti-colonial “now”.

I give this potted history of the romantic-populist origins of Indian democratic thought – though not of Indian democracy as such and the distinction is important - to suggest a point fundamental to my exposition. The insistence, in the early volumes of Subaltern Studies (first published in 1982) and in Ranajit Guha’s Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India (1983), that the peasant or the subaltern was always-already political – and not “pre-political” in any developmentalist sense – was in some ways a recapitulation of a populist premise that was implicit in any case in the anti-colonial mass movements in British India. But there was a difference too. The populism in Subaltern
Studies was more intense and explicit. There was, first of all, no “fear of the masses” in Subaltern Studies analysis. Absent also - and this went against the grain of classically Marxist or Leninist analysis - was any discussion of the need for organization or a party. Guha and his colleagues drew inspiration from Mao (particularly his 1927 report on the peasant movement in the Hunan district) and Gramsci (mainly his Prison Notebooks). But their use of Mao and Gramsci speaks of the times when Subaltern Studies was born. This was, after all, the seventies: a period of global Maoism that Althusser and others had made respectable. Excerpts from Gramsci’s notebooks had come out in English in 1971. Both Gramsci and Mao were celebrated as a way out of Stalinist or Soviet Marxism after Czechoslovakia of 1968. Many of the historians in Subaltern Studies were participants in or sympathizers of the Maoist movement that shook parts of India between 1969 and 1971.†

Yet, significantly, neither Mao’s references to the need for “leadership of the Party” nor Gramsci’s strictures against “spontaneity” featured with any degree of prominence in Elementary Aspects or Subaltern Studies. Guha’s focus remained firmly on understanding the nature of the practices that made up peasant revolts in a period that was colonial rule but one that preceded the times when the peasants were inducted by middle-class leaders into the politics of nationalism. Guha wanted to understand the peasant as a collective author of these uprisings by doing a structuralist analysis of the space- and time-creating practices of mobilisation, communication, and public violence that constituted rebellion (and thus, for Guha, a subaltern domain of politics). There were limitations, from Guha’s socialist point of view, to what the peasants could achieve on
their own but these limitations did not call for the mediation of a party. A cult of rebellion marked the early efforts of *Subaltern Studies*, reminiscent of one of Mao’s sayings popular during the Cultural Revolution: “to rebel is justified.” Rebellion was a not a technique for achieving something; it was its own end. Indeed, from a global perspective, one might say that *Subaltern Studies* was the last – or the latest – instance of a long global history of the Left: the romantic-popular search for a non-industrial revolutionary subject that was initiated in Russia, among other places, in the nineteenth century. This romantic populism shaped much of Maoism in the twentieth century, and left its imprint on the antinomies and ambiguities of Antonio Gramsci’s thoughts on the Party as the Modern Prince.

The once-global and inherently romantic search for a revolutionary subject outside of the industrialised West has thus had a long history, travelling from Russia in the late nineteenth century to the colonial and semi-colonial (to use a Maoist expression) “third” world in the twentieth. The political potential of this romanticism is exhausted today. But looking back one can see what plagued this history of a search for a revolutionary subject in the relatively non-industrialised countries of the world. Such a subject by definition could not be the proletariat. Yet it was difficult to define a world-historical subject that would take the place of the industrial working classes that did not exist, not in great numbers anyway, in the peasant-based economies drawn into the gravitational pull of the capitalist world. Would the revolution, as Trotsky said, be an act of substitutionism? Would the Party stand in for the working classes? Could the peasantry, under the
guidance of the party, be the revolutionary class? Would it be the category “subaltern” or Fanon’s “the wretched of the earth”? 

When the young, left-Hegelian Marx thought up the category of the proletariat as the new revolutionary subject of history that would replace the bourgeoisie – and he did this before Engels wrote his book on the Manchester working class in 1844 – there was a philosophical precision to the category. It also seemed to find a sociological correlate in working classes born of the industrial revolution. But names like “peasants” (Mao), “subaltern”, (Gramsci) “the wretched of the earth” (Fanon), “the party as the subject” (Lenin/Lukacs) have neither philosophical nor sociological precision. It was as if the search for a revolutionary subject that was not-the-proletariat (in the absence of a large working class) was an exercise in a series of displacement of the original term. A telling case in point is Fanon himself. The expression “the wretched of the earth”, as Fanon’s biographer David Macey has pointed out, alludes to the Communist Internationale, the song – “ Debout, les damnés de la terre’/ Arise, ye wretched of the earth’ “ - where it clearly refers to the proletariat.xxv Yet Fanon uses it to mean something else. This other subject he cannot quite define but he is clear that in the colony it cannot be the proletariat. One only has to recall how quite early on in his book he cautions that “Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem.”xxvi 

A collective subject with no proper name, a subject who can be named only through a series of displacements of the original European term “the proletariat” - this is a
condition both of failure and of a new beginning. The failure is easy to see. It lies in the lack of specificity or definition. Where is the beginning? First of all, the very imprecision is a pointer to the inadequacy of Eurocentric thought in the context of a global striving for a socialist transformation of the world. Outside of the industrialised countries, the revolutionary subject was even theoretically undefined. The history of this imprecision amounts to the acknowledgment that if we want to understand the nature of popular political practices globally with names of subjects invented in Europe, we can only resort to a series of stand-ins (never mind the fact that original may have a simulacrum as well). Why? Because we are working at and on the limits of European political thought even as we admit an affiliation to nineteenth-century European revolutionary romanticism. Recognizing the stand-in nature of categories like “the masses”, “the subaltern” or “the peasant” is, I suggest, the first step towards writing histories of democracies that have emerged through the mass-politics of anticolonial nationalism. There is a mass-subject here, no doubt. But it can only be apprehended by consciously working through the limits of European thought. A straightforward search for a revolutionary world-historical subject only leads to stand-ins. The latest in the series, I may add in parenthesis, is Hardt and Negri’s “multitude”, a category that I fear is, for all the brilliance of their analysis of global capitalism, another such stand-in. Yet in their use of the category “multitude” returns an insistent question of our times: how do we name and write histories of the mass-subject of politics today?xxvii. And it perhaps stands to reason to assume that one encounters this “mass subject” more frequently in the restless politics of the developing countries than in the “orderliness” of the prosperous and liberal democracies.xxviii The global and theoretical failure to find a proper name for the revolutionary subject that is
not-the-proletariat thus inaugurates the need for new thought and research outside the West.

Here I may mention another failure of *Subaltern Studies* that serves as yet another beginning as well. The great insight that Guha had into peasant insurgency is that this was an act of a collective subject, and not of a collection of individuals. This distinction is central to the task of producing a genealogy of the mass-political subject of modern Indian democracy. It is significant that Guha did not think of this subject on a biographical model. His collective peasant-subject had no psychology. He did not write either about a Jung-ian collective unconscious or have recourse to any idea of “mob” or “crowd” or even revolutionary group psychology. In other words, he did not see the collective subject – the author of peasant insurgencies - in the model of an individual. It did not make up a unity. It came into being conjuncturally. There was no need to conceive of it as something of a transcendent entity that continued to exist in the period that separated one rebellion from another though, clearly, insurgencies were mediated by memories of other insurgencies. Guha’s own creative, though problematic, approach to apprehending this subject lay in cross-hatching French structuralism with a Hegelian idea of a consciousness that could only be read retrospectively off peasant actions. \(^{xxix}\) I am not sure that the method succeeded. The Hegelian strand in the argument made the peasant into a world-historical subject rather than a precise sociological category. There were, therefore, many understandable criticisms of the lack of a proper sociology to his method, of the fact that he treated so-called tribals, rich peasants, poor peasants, and the landless on a par. Who exactly was the subaltern? The critics, who did not quite grasp the
Hegel-inspired use of the category “consciousness” in Guha’s work, had a field day shooting us down with these questions. But I think there was something salutary in the structuralist side of Guha’s work, in his insistence that the subject of an insurgency was collective and in his refusal to see this collective either additively – as a collection of individuals – or as a unity having a psychology of its own. In other words, as I have already said, this was not a subject whose history could be written on a biographical model of birth and subsequent growth towards maturity (the model long prevalent, for instance, in labour histories of the sixties and seventies). A subject without a biography, a subject without a psychology, a subject without a continuous existence in historical time, a subject coming into being only in specific conjunctures – all this sounds like a plethora of contradictions. What kind of a subject was this? This familiar criticism, however, simply misses the point. One can see in the twists and turns of Guha’s complicated thoughts that even the idea of the subject – an autonomous, sovereign being – had to be “stretched” (in Fanon’s sense of the word) in order for the word (“subject”) to be pliable at all in the context of subaltern history.

I think that this negative gesture of Guha’s – his refusal to give the collective subject the contours of an individual biography - throws a profound challenge to the discipline of history. Historians of collective practices often practice a methodological individualism that aligns the discipline with the practices of the state or the elites. Imagine how inquisitors and the police deal with collective acts they consider threatening or subversive. They pull individuals out of the collective for the purpose of interrogation and for the purpose of fixing responsibility and punishment.xxx The same happens in the
court of law. Indeed, attempts on the part of historians such as George Rudé to humanize
the revolutionary “crowd” by finding individual “faces” in it is predicated on a prior act
of individuation by the interrogatory processes of the police and the court of law.

Let me not be misunderstood. I am not denying anything that is of enduring value in, say,
the work of a pioneering and creative historian such as George Rudé. His aim to break
away from the ahistorical and conservative Le-Bon-like descriptions of “mobs” and
“rabble” speaks of instincts that are undoubtedly democratic and humanist.xxxi  But his
sociology that sought to highlight “the faces in the crowd” – the original expression,
Rudé informs us, comes from the English historian Asa Briggsxxxii - was crucially
dependent on prior individuation of the “crowd” by the investigative and interrogative
methods of the state officials. As he himself says, discussing his method:

English judicial records are piecemeal and incomplete … with frustrating
consequences for the researcher. Whereas the French police system of the
eighteenth century was … highly developed, the English system was not; and
whereas the French have accumulated substantial records of the cross-
examination of prisoners before trial, the English system … did not allow him to
be cross examined even in open court. As a result, English records of Assizes,
quarter sessions, and consistory courts are not comparable in value with those that
may be found in French national and departmental archives.xxxiii

Rudé perhaps made a wrong assumption: that the individuating procedures of the state
would furnish him with material with which he would recreate the individuals who made
up a crowd. But leaving that point to one side, it may be easily seen that the mode of individuation in question was central to operation of the disciplinary power of the police and the court. This kind of power, as Foucault famously said, individuates in order to control. It is true, of course, that the operation of disciplinary power produces an archive that the historian can mine. But by its very nature this act of dissolving a collective into a collection, or a sum, of individuals misses out on the evidence that speaks of an agency that is genuinely collective. Members of a “crowd” often feel authorised or licensed in their action precisely because others are also engaged in the same act at the same time. Such collectivities that come into being only fleetingly and in particular situations have ways of referring to themselves but the police and the court are often constitutionally deaf to these utterances. From the point of view of the police or the law, collectivities are difficult to hold responsible for a “crime” or to punish for long.\textsuperscript{xxxiv} In my own research on the history of the jute-mill workers of Calcutta, I would come across complaints on the part of European factory inspectors, that workers would “clamour” as a matter of habit instead of taking turns to speak. The inspectors would have to tell them to speak one by one. It was, of course, this so-called clamour that was the speech of a collective agent though, like my factory inspectors, I also missed the cue. Or consider this example from Rudé’s own research. He cites “the remarkable cross-examination” by the Beauvais police of a wool worker “arrested in the marker town of Mouy at the time of the corn riots of 1775”:

Q. How was it known that there were riots elsewhere?

A. Everybody said so in the market at Mouy\textsuperscript{xxxv}. 

\textsuperscript{xxxiv}xxxiv

\textsuperscript{xxxv}xxxv
But what was this figure of the “everybody” in this sentence except a linguistic marker of the elusive and yet collective nature of the agency in involved in the riot? The rest of Rudé’s long quotation only goes to show the inability of the investigating authority to do anything with this obvious linguistic clue as to the nature of participation involved in rioting.

But this tendency to break down the collective agent that is the “crowd” into a collection of so many individuals speaks not only to disciplinary power. It also speaks to a very particular form of political thought: the Hobbesian understanding of state-sovereignty. Historians of the subaltern classes uncritically ally themselves with such thinking when they follow the police and the law in dissolving the collective agency of the “crowd” or “the masses” into the story of “so many individuals (“ringleaders” or not).

The political philosopher Etienne Balibar captures well the “fear of the masses” that is built into this individuating procedure. He makes the point in the context of a discussion of the difference between Spinoza’s and Hobbes’ attitude towards “the masses” that Spinoza called “the multitude”. The “multitude” or the “people” that “establishes the contract” in Hobbes, says Balibar, “is not the concept of the mass”. Hobbes’s “people” are “already decomposed [into] … to the sum of its constituent atoms … capable of entering [the contract] one by one… .” This is directly related to his “fear of the masses.” Hobbesian political thought – or political thought that sees politics as a sphere of action predicated on the emergence of the sovereign power of the modern state – originates, one might say, in a certain kind of fear, the fear of “revolution” or civil war as complete
disorder. Politics, in this construction, thus takes the fear of an imagined social break
down – after all, as Foucault sometimes remarked, the word “revolution” became respectab
le only in the nineteenth century – as the condition of its own emergence.xxxvi

The relevant passage from Balibar’s essay is worth quoting at length:

Hobbes, no less than Spinoza, of course, is a theorist haunted by the fear of the masses and their natural tendency to subversion. His entire organization of the state, including the way in which the distinction between the public and the private sphere operates, can be understood as a system of preventive defense against the mass movements that form the basis of civil wars … and of revolutions. It is in this context that the multitudo becomes in his writings the initial concept in the definition of the contract, [Leviathan, chs. 17, 18]…, in order to constitute the system juridically and establish it ideologically (on equality). But in Hobbes’s writings it is only a question of a point of departure, which is immediately left behind. Hobbes carefully separates the two elements that Spinoza wants to bring together (thus intimately combining democratism and Machiavellian realism). For Hobbes, the multitude that establishes the contract is not the concept of the mass; it is the concept (“methodologically” individualist, as current Anglo-American sociologists say) of a “people” always already decomposed, reduced in advance (preventively) to the sum of its constituent atoms (people in the state of nature), and capable of entering one by one, through the contract, into the new institutional relationship of civil society.”xxxvii
Thus, historians who follow unselfconsciously the individuating methods of the police and the law fail to produce what Jacques Rancière, who writes exactly on this point, calls “forms of knowledge proper to the age of the masses.” The very nature of the collective agency that authors popular action eludes their grasp. Instead, their empirical-individualist method silently aligns them with the Hobbesian, part-royalist myth of the sovereignty of the modern state. For this Hobbesian individualism only “founds an alliance”, to continue to cite Rancière, “between the point of view of science [in this case, the discipline of History – DC] and that of the royal palace [i.e. the state –DC].” Rancière has a name for the kind of empiricism that marks, say, the pioneering researches of Rudé. He calls it “royal-empiricism.” Historians, following the individuating methods of their official sources then miss out on the biggest challenge of their research. The crowd that acts politically in the period of the modern state can indeed be assigned to its historical context by using police, court, and other official documents. But can historians get at the elusive and ephemeral collective that a rioting crowd often is? Can this agency be historicised?

Guha’s refusal to take the path of a Rudé or Hobsbawm gives us a beginning as to how we might think about “mass” subjects of democracies such as the Indian one where the street, as I have said, is as much an arena of politics as the parliament is. Riots, public violence, looting, burning, destroying: these are indeed practices that are as much a part of democracy in India as are elections and the debates – and their forms are changing as well – of the law-making bodies. There are acts of mass-political violence that mark public life in India. A traffic accident, a sudden death in a hospital, an altercation with the
police, can set off such violence. These actions are not without agency. If we think, from some normative position, that public violence is a sign of “backwardness” of Indian democracy – a phase that “more mature”, Western democracies have already been through - we reinvent the historicist time of the “not yet”. To do that would be to bring back the prose of developmental time and to see the Indian “public” as lacking in training in practices proper to democracy. That option seems closed. At the same time, the older historiographical options of the Left have lost their appeal. A crowd blocking traffic or venting its desires and anger on the streets of Calcutta or Bombay is not necessarily world-historical in its implications, at least not in the way a Hegel or Marx would have used the expression “world-historical”. They are not, contrary to what Marxists have thought in India for a long time, shades of the Paris Commune now repeating itself in the subcontinent. There is no a priori reason to think of this crowd as “revolutionary”. Yet the crowd exists as both a modern and archaic phenomenon. It is contemporaneous and interactive with other constitutions of agency in Indian democracy. Nor is it unchanging. Ethnographic accounts of collective violence in South Asia mark significant changes over time. Indeed, something that was said again and again during the recent violence against Muslims in Gujarat was that these riots were different from what India had seen before. Yet the received social-science disciplines do not give us readymade means with which to write histories of these mass-political subjects. Guha, by his insistence that the insurgent peasant was political, was the perhaps the first historian to suggest that the methods of peasant insurgency needed to be studied as a form and strand of modern politics in places such as colonial India.. His own vision of this modernity was still too tied to the telos of “a comprehensive reversal” of the relationships of domination that
made up Indian society. A familiar socialist vision. But now we know that the mass-subjects of Indian democracy, once nurtured into being by romantic-populist aspects of nationalism, will not necessarily traverse paths already charted in Western political theory. We can then think of Subaltern Studies as an initial attempt to create for these subjects a long and deep past. But this proposition, I shall suggest in bringing this essay to a close, also entail some challenges to the methodological conventions of the procedures for writing history. And that questions of writing subaltern history take me back to the suggestions of Hayden White with which I began this essay.

III

The mass-political subject of democracy has a history. Subaltern Studies, one might say, is part of its genealogy. Yet there are some difficult questions about whether of or not all aspects of the past of a mass-subject can be objectified by the usual means of the historian’s method. Let me end with an example from the work of my colleague in Subaltern Studies, Shahid Amin, to show how issues in subaltern history intersect with White’s thoughtful and creative suggestions. My conclusion, however, can only be indicative rather than completely demonstrative.

I refer to Shahid Amin’s acclaimed book Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992. In that book, which is a study of peasant nationalism both under British rule and under the post-colonial government, Amin remains sensitive throughout to questions of form. The book deliberately lacks the traditional organization of chapters or a even a strictly chronological narrative. History jostles with memory on its pages while
archival details lose their trail in conversations Amin had during his research in the field.

One of the formal aspects of the book is projected in Amin’s conscious decision to highlight the problems of translation – in both literal and metaphorical senses – that peasant speech forced him to ponder. The English word “volunteer”, for instance, had metamorphosed, in the speech of these peasant-followers of Gandhi, into the somewhat lexically-meaningless word “otiyar”. Amin begins his discussion by noting the connection between the two words but soon goes on to demonstrate how “otiyar” could not be assimilated into the word “volunteer”, how this was a nugget of local speech and imagination that was best left untranslated. The word “otiyar”, Amin shows, was overdetermined by too many signs to be available for easy, sociological analysis.xl In other words, the word otiyar was a product of collective social imaginings. The agent of that imagination would have had to be a collective. Naujadi, the peasant woman who is the main protagonist of Amin’s story, mentions names of individuals who participated in a piece of riotous action as nationalist “volunteers” or “otiyars”. Her particular mode of recalling the names of individuals, it may be argued, was an instance of recalling the elusive, collective agency of those who took part in the riot that Amin studies.

“[Sharfuddin] was there;” she says, “Nazar Ali was there, Salamat’s father-in-law was there; Nageshar my devar (husband’s younger brother) was there; Rameshar was there…” xli It is clear that in naming individuals, Naujadi is not individuating them, nor does she intend to fill out their biographies. Individual names are invoked by her to mark the presence of a collective agency just as in common parlance references to “uncle so and so” or “aunt so and so” simply mark the points of connection in the collectivity that is kinship. The point, in subaltern history, is precisely not to render these names into
carriers of biographical individuality. These names, even when they are single, proper names, constitute something like the figure of “the everybody” that we earlier encountered in Rudé’s evidence.

But can this “everybody” of the crowd ever be properly historicised? Why do we come across the similar but elusive figurations of a collective across differences of time and space? Is the nature of this “everybody” self-evident? I would suggest not. Impossible to interrogate by the methods of record-keeping that the state practices, the collective agent that a crowd is never, as such, fully available to the historian. Only traces of it exist as parts of linguistic and other cultural formations in particular places. We can do histories of linguistic expressions where possible but that would not get us any closer to the ephemeral collective agent that came into being in the course of a particular riot at a particular time. It would simply have the (good) effect of muddling our chronology of the event, for we would then – since the history of a language used by a crowd is always older than the history of a particular crowd - end up assigning different aspects of the event to different periods. And, even then, there would still remain a degree of opacity to the agency of the crowd as a collective.

This problem is what returns me to Hayden White’s proposal about the “middle voice” and his point about the sublime nature of historical process. The idea of the sublime, in White, corresponded to the notion that historical processes, because of their innate disorderliness, always retained a degree of incomprehensibility. Crowd actions, one may say, are sublime moments – in White’s sense - in genealogies of democracy. What makes
the thought timely is the emergence, globally, of forms of crowd-action as part of movements towards self-assertion of subaltern groups caught up in modern structures of politics. Another way to say this would be to claim the history of popular movements towards decolonization and mass-forms of democracy has brought to the fore, in many places, the “crowd” as a form of political agency. What is baffling about crowd action, from the point of view of the historian, is that it always combines elements that seem archaic with those that seem modern and contemporary. A riotous crowd lends itself to both structural and historical analyses, but both only in part, and what may seem structural ends up challenging the chronology of that which seems historical at the same time.

I think Amin’s instinct for leaving chunks of peasant prose untranslated was right. This prose was necessarily collective (otherwise it would be a sign of an individual’s pathology). An untranslatable collective like “otiyars” made sense in its own context of evolution. The historian, faced with these instances, is caught between the impulse of the discipline to render the past transparent – “otiyar” simply meant “volunteer” - and the hermeneutic desire to go native (only the peasants of Chauri Chaura knew what “otiyar” meant). Hayden White’s call for recognition of the “sublime” nature of the historical process and for the narrative deployment of the “middle voice” shows us a way of staying on the cusp. How we visualise this cusp is a formal question but, as in White’s or Schiller’s argument, formal questions are of the utmost importance in narrating an agency that is necessarily fleeting and real, and archaic and modern at the same time. However we execute it, it is only by staying on this cusp – that is, by refusing either to objectify or
to go native – that we can work towards producing the genealogies of the “mass-political” subjects of Indian and other democracies that arose in the wake of anti-colonial and nationalist mass-movements. For its many faults, Subaltern Studies was a historiographic movement in this direction.

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i The author retains the copyright of this essay.

ii Hayden White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation” in his The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.72

iii F.R. Ankersmit, “Hayden White’s Appeal to Historians” in his Historical Representation (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 256

iv White, “Politics”, pp.70-71


vi Ibid., p. 204

vii Ibid., p.199

viii Ibid., p.204

ix Ibid., 205-206

x White, “Politics”, p.72

xi White, “Politics”, p.72


xiv See E.P. Thompson, Whigs and Hunters

xv I discuss this in some detail in my essay “A Small History of Subaltern Studies” in my Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), Ch. 1.


xvii See Provincializing Europe, “Introduction” for details.


xx Ibid.

xxi For an excellent discussion of this point, see Andrzej Walicki, The Controversy Over Capitalism: Studies in the Social Philosophy of the Russian Populists (Notre Dame,
Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), Chapters 1 and 2, in particular the
section of “The Privilege of Backwardness.”

xxii Cited in Orsini, “The Hindi Public Sphere”.

xxiii Ranajit Guha, Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India (Delhi:
Oxford University Press, 1983), Chapter 1.

xxiv Shahid Amin, “De-Ghettoising the Histories of the non-West”; Gyan Prakash, “The
Location of Scholarship”; in my “Globalization, Democracy, and the Evacuation of
History?” in Jackie Assayag and Veronique Benei eds., At Home in Diaspora: South


xxvi Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans., Constance Farrington (New York:

xxvii Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University

xxviii Even the secret, avant-gardist politics of so-called Islamic extremism is often backed
up by mass-mobilisation on the streets of Palestine or Pakistan.

xxix This may be seen as operating throughout the text of Elementary Aspects.

xxx Carlo Ginzburg’s work is very instructive on this point. See his essay, “The Inquisitor
as Anthropologist” in his Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method, trans. John and Anne
also Carlo Ginzburg, The Night Battles Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth
and Seventeenth Centuries, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: The Johns

xxxii Ibid., p.11

xxxiii Ibid., p.13

There are some obvious exceptions to this statement. The British in India sometimes punished a whole village through instruments such as the “punitive tax” when they felt that the village as a whole were refusing to yield individuals responsible for rural crimes.


It follows then that societies in which intellectuals, however defined and for whatever theoretical reasons, do not see civil war as the end of the world, will not develop the concept of “politics” as a specialised domain of life while they may indeed very well possess positive ideas regarding the science and art of governance. Such, one may say, was the condition of thought in India before British rule.


Shahid Amin, Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992 (Berkeley and Delhi University of California Press and Oxford University Press, 1995).:

Amin says: “In Naujad’s mind, chutki [a pinch of grain], bhik [alks] and gerua [ochre] clothes together distinguished the otiyars of Chauri Chaura.” (p.176).
Ibid., pp.175-176.