

Doing Democracy Differently

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Partha Chatterjee looks at the political mobilization of the governed in former colonies, lacking access to the modes of traditional citizenship. He argues that these people are not powerless and that they engage in a kind of democratic politics that differs from the democracy of national sovereignty.

Reviewed: Partha Chatterjee, *Politique des gouvernés: Réflexions sur la politique populaire dans la majeure partie du monde*, French translation by Christophe Jaquet (Paris, Amsterdam Editions, 2009, 189 pp., 19.50 €) of *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004.

Politique des gouvernés (*The Politics of the Governed*) is a collection of lectures given by Partha Chatterjee in 2001 and 2002, in which he sets out to redefine popular politics in the “postcolonial world” (i.e. outside of Europe and North America), with reference to the example of contemporary India. The first part of the book brings together three seminars given at Columbia University, which define the theoretical framework and present several practical examples of subaltern politics and its relationship to elite politics. The second part does not lose sight of this orientation but focuses rather on the renewal of American imperialism and the effects of the “war on terror” declared on the populations of postcolonial societies after the events of 11 September 2001. The author takes part in the subaltern studies critique of western liberal and Marxist historiographies that (as with Benedict Anderson) portray modernity as a uniform process established in the homogeneous and uncluttered tempo of nations and capital, opposing to this vision a plural and fragmented modernity consisting of a tangle of geographic contexts, identities, traditions and heterogeneous and conflicting timescales, along the lines of the work of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Pursuing this line, he adopts a position in current debates on globalization (for

example, vis-à-vis Saskia Sassen, Amartya Sen and Toni Negri), and directs his criticism especially against the fashionable concept of “governance” that one-sidedly focuses on the politics of state and market elites. He does this in order to demonstrate the existence among the poorest people of an important politics that cannot be fitted into such universalistic Enlightenment categories as nation and citizenship, and with which elite politics is compelled to come to terms and negotiate: this is “the politics of the governed”.

Can Subalterns do Politics?

Partha Chatterjee, currently Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University in New York, has taken part in the Indian historiographical current, subaltern studies, since its foundation around the historian Ranajit Guha in the late 1970s. This current was initiated by the critique of the two historiographical schools dominating the analysis of the Indian nationalist decolonization movement. The Cambridge school of historians, seeing in Indian nationalism the efforts of informed indigenous elites able to lead the masses to liberty, are accused of colonialist elitism; while the nationalist historians, maintaining that the material conditions of colonial exploitation prepared the ground for a class alliance that it was the role of nationalist leaders to represent, are accused of nationalist elitism.¹ The controversy that brought out the subaltern studies point of view focused on the role of the peasant masses (a majority in India) in the nationalist movement. Starting with the seminal work of Guha,² the subaltern studies current showed that the peasants, although initially participating, repeatedly refused to join the nationalist movement, and committed themselves on their own terms. So the politics of the “subalterns” was autonomous from that of the elites.

The term “subalterns” is borrowed from Antonio Gramsci, for whom it meant the dominated classes excluded from any participation in the exercise of power.³ As used in subaltern studies, it draws attention to the fact that a whole section of people in the postcolonial Indian state is excluded from the nation that is supposedly connecting popular politics and elite politics by means of popular sovereignty. This banishment of the subalterns

¹ On this point, see Partha Chatterjee, “Controverses en Inde autour de l’histoire coloniale”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, no. 623, February 2006, pp. 22-23.

<http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2006/02/CHATTERJEE/13178>, consulted 25 June 2010.

² Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1983.

³ Antonio Gramsci, “Aux marges de l’histoire: historiographie des groupes sociaux subalterns” [“On the Margins of History (The History of Subaltern Social Groups)”] (Cahier 25, 1934), in *Cahiers de prison*, vol. V, Paris, Gallimard, 1978.

makes for a “rather fundamental similarity between colonial and postcolonial states”⁴. However, subalternity means something other than proscription from participation in the dominant national politics; it also refers to the subalterns’ capacity for agency, and this implies the existence of an autonomous popular politics. Ultimately, subalternity is not a social condition, it is a dialectical relation between an inferior position of power and a political ability to take one’s own initiatives, which crystallizes in a “fragment” that cannot be assimilated into nationalism and western modernity.⁵

The Governmentalization of the Nation

In *Politique des gouvernés* Chatterjee intends to sign up to “the first phase of the subaltern studies project”,⁶ where “the issue was the political split between the organized elite and the unorganized subaltern people” (p. 53). So it is on this basis that we can appreciate the particular contribution of this book, which introduces the Foucauldian problematic of governability into the understanding of democratic politics in the contemporary world. This problematic allows him to revisit the distinction between “civil society” and “political society”, which was present in Gramsci’s thinking. In a series of investigations, Foucault asserted that the modern western state owed its survival to its exercising “governmentality”, which he defined as steering people. This requires the application of governmental techniques of power, starting with the use of objective empirical knowledge about the people, getting legitimacy from them less by actualizing ideals of civic equality and liberty than by committing to secure their security and welfare. From these basic elements, Chatterjee’s reflection consists of thinking through the conflicting effects of superimposing governmental techniques onto the construction of a postcolonial nation.

⁴ Partha Chatterjee, “L’Inde postcoloniale ou la difficile invention d’une autre modernité”, A conversation with Nermeen Shaikh, *La revue internationale des livres et des idées*, no. 15, January-February 2010. <http://revuedeslivres.net/articles.php?idArt=487>, consulted 26 June 2010.

⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1993.

⁶ Sumit Sarkar, a member of the original subaltern studies project, distinguishes between the early subaltern studies grounded in Indian social history, and the late subaltern studies bearing the marks of the epistemological relativism of the linguistic turn that characterizes postmodernism. The latter criticize historical knowledge as a western metanarrative, to which they oppose a dissemination of subaltern voices, thereby running the risk of a decontextualized and disembodied approach to subaltern social groups, throwing a veil over the reality of capitalist violence and exploitation. See Sumit Sarkar, “The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies”, in David Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia*, London, Anthem Press, pp. 400-429, cited by Isabelle Merle, “Les Subaltern Studies: Retour sur les principes fondateurs d’un projet historiographique”, *Genèses*, 2004/3, no. 56, pp. 131-147. http://www.cairn.info/article.php?ID_ARTICLE=GEN_056_0131, consulted 26 June 2010.

Pursuing Foucault's intuitions, Chatterjee considers that the effects of governmentality have been more pronounced in colonial states than in western nation states, where they have been deferred. In the modern west, the proliferation of governmental techniques in support of civil society correlates to the formation of the social policy state in the twentieth century. Thus they came *after* the full development of the nation state through the institution of civil and then political rights. By way of contrast, in Asian and African countries "colonial governmentality" (p. 22) has involved an intense objectification of peoples into groups, classes, castes, communities and ethnicities, articulated in the development of ethnographic knowledge. This can be seen for example in the case of "untouchable" castes and religious minorities such as the Muslim minority in India. These criteria of ethnographic classification have continued to be used in the context of development policies in postcolonial states that have called for the multiplication of governmental modernization techniques adapted to the heterogeneity of the relevant populations. Thus population groups get counted when they are targets of public policies related to "land, income, military recruitment, delinquency, public health, famine and drought management, regulation of places of worship, public morals, or education" (p. 50). To paraphrase Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, actual and heterogeneous ethnographic governmentalities have constituted the foundations of formal citizenship and of the homogeneous nation. They have clogged up nation building and straightjacketed the democratic acquisition of citizenship. For they conflict with the two great historical mediations that are part of the institutionalization of citizenship in capitalist modernity: *private property* and *national community*. Income limitation and land deprivation obstruct access to private property, while the shortcomings of education and the exacerbation of ethnic and religious identities interfere with identification as a national community. In the end, the disparity of the effects of ethnographic governmentality on economics and identity in postcolonial states makes real citizenship remote to those who have not been enabled by wealth, values or education to participate in democratic sovereignty as it has been shaped by western modernity.

If we are to continue looking at the twofold meaning of subalternity referred to above, we must now tackle the second meaning, the agency of subalterns and their ability to organize a politics that is different from that of the elites.

Beyond Citizenship?

Chatterjee estimates that the number of the governed who do not have enough mediations to enjoy real citizenship is “three quarters of the world’s population” (p. 16). Those who on the other hand share those “bourgeois” characteristics of a system of property and values make up “civil society”. From this failure of real citizenship, should we conclude that there is an absence of democracy for all the governed who are not part of civil society?

Chatterjee explicitly rejects drawing that conclusion, arguing that the governed are not necessarily reduced to powerlessness, and that in fact there is within governmentality a different kind of democratic politics from that of national sovereignty. The “politics of the governed” is popular politics asserting itself in the context of the formation by governmental techniques of a multiplicity of heterogeneous populations. Heterotopic in relation to civil society, the place where it asserts itself is “political society” grounded in “heterogeneous social policy”. Like shantytown squatters or Calcutta street vendors, the protagonists of “political society” occupy public spaces and work illegally, take public transport without paying, and sometimes steal water and electricity. That is why for them it is impossible, both objectively (it would be a violation of constitutionally guaranteed property rights) and subjectively, to rely on claiming equal rights for the whole community, through the institutional channels of civil society. Nevertheless, they are capable of organizing to obtain arrangements with governmental agencies (to do with housing, or the use of water and electricity) who eventually recognize the existence of paralegal devices, and the application of governmental programs of social development (in health and education).

Chatterjee here gives the example of a group of poor townspeople (refugees and landless day labourers in the government classifications) who settled illegally alongside a railway line in a suburb of Mumbai. They set up a residents association and used this collective form – relying on the town’s Communist party leaders whom they impressed with their electoral weight – to negotiate with the governmental railway agencies, the police and the municipal authorities specific rental arrangements and supplies of water and electricity at preferential collective rates (which in turn enabled the water and electricity companies to reduce the costs of piracy). They also managed to influence the operation of governmentality and to resist the process of expulsion and “urban cleansing” that has accompanied urban gentrification in the postcolonial world as in Calcutta and Delhi, and has increasingly led to a polarization that separates the very rich from the very poor.

The politics of the governed thus does not operate as in the battle for civil rights in the form of citizen claims. It is compelled to develop a multitude of strategic responses related to the flexibility of the political techniques of the elites. But one of the essential points is that during their mobilization the governed commit “the community’s moral content” (p. 91). Chatterjee gives the example of a colony of squatters who describe their association not in terms of common interests but in those of the “family” (p. 72), “which however is not defined by any biological or even cultural affinity, but rather by the collective occupation of a piece of land” (*ibid.*). This is not at all a matter of community identification, but of the invention of a method of collective subjectification in the shared practice of a conflict. This aspect of the politics of the governed is “extremely important” (p. 71), for in addition to foiling governmentality’s attempts to reduce identities to objective categories of statistical science, it demonstrates the governed’s unique capacity for collective agency, that is, for a movement of “internal transformation” by the process of politicization. So that, in the action of the governed, identities (including religious ones – consider the Muslims who inhabit the *madrasas*) can be shifted, and material conflicts coincide with conflicts for recognition.

Stabilized paralegal devices in property and in the moral community are the two means by which political society can manage to include the governed in the modern ideal of citizenship. In this way the politics of the governed does take on a politically democratic dimension, but actually it is through exceptions to civil legitimacy and national sovereignty that most of the world experiences democracy.

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