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Structures and subjectivities
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1. Some issues at stake

For Esposito (2006), the task of theory is to 'keep pace with the events that involve and transform' it. In other words, a theory becomes obsolete when it can no longer satisfactorily explain the phenomena it is interested in. The explosion of new forms of political subjectivity of the poor in India constitute events that the two main theoretical frames to study such politics, namely canonical 'class analysis' and subaltern studies paradigms, have failed to keep pace with. Such new politics point to the need to explore the limits of these theoretical approaches, and to go beyond them. Intimations of such an impasse are not limited to India. A general impasse afflicts analyses of the relation between 'structure' and 'political subjectivity' in which dominant notions of the totality of 'power' that fully constitutes the subject leave little room to understand resistance, while accounts privileging autonomy, alterity and exteriority from dominant structures of power in the formation of subjectivity are often empirically difficult to sustain. (Blackman et al 2008).

One way forward is suggested by Foucault-inspired accounts that emphasise the interstitial emergence of subjectivity, in which institutional spaces that express governmental power become sites of and modes for constituting new subjects, for example in Agrawal's (2005) account of the emergence of environmental subjects who 'care for the environment'. Biehl and Mackay (2009: 1210) suggest a slightly different interstitiality when they talk of 'intermediary power formations' in which "ambiguous political subjectivities that crystallize amidst the blurring of distinctions between populations, market segments, target audiences and collective objects of intervention or disregard."

To my mind, these are fruitful new avenues for analyzing the relation between structures and subjectivities. However, some challenges need to be encountered more explicitly. One is the return to centrestage of 'the economic' in current movements of resistance worldwide. Another is the likelihood that the political subject whose emergence one is looking to analyse is not being formed de novo but has been 'political' in other ways before. Such subjects, in other words, are not novices in comprehending 'structures of power', and likely have been exposed to some elaboration and critique of them previously, and their lifeworlds are already touched by political projects aiming to incorporate them. How a political subject becomes another kind of political subject is therefore important to understand.

On 'autonomy' as a constituent element of subjectivity, Balibar's (2002) definition of the subject as 'a self-determining political actor' suggests the need to delineate the realm of 'autonomy' and its transformation: autonomy from,

autonomy to, and indeed the political processes that produce autonomy all enter the frame. Is it necessary that forms of political subjectivity that resist dominant structures have some autonomy they have from them, and what would such autonomy mean in lived situations? What would 'autonomy' mean specifically for the poor and the marginalized? On the one hand structures bear down on them heavily, but also, paradoxically, perhaps there are cognitive and communicative resources they have that are not colonized. Would this necessarily involve thinking about forms of counter-power that provide an opening for this sort of autonomy? That is where the issue of 'solidarity' – as a relation that opens up an alternative and oppositional forms of subjectivity as a condition for 'autonomy' in the sense of an expanded set of political options – becomes important. I read the papers in this section against the background of attempts to think afresh the issues involved in the constitution of political subjectivity.

The context for the emergence of new forms of rural political subjectivity is set by structural *changes*. A number of attempts have been made to describe these changes more precisely in relation to India, in addition to general categories such as 'neoliberalism' and 'accumulation by dispossession', for example, Sanyal's (2007) category of 'postcolonial capitalism', d'Costa's 'compressed capitalism' (2011). Both refer specifically to large-scale privatization of the economy, so that forms of 'mature' and 'primitive' accumulation of capital coexist. But they also rub against democracy, human rights and development, an awareness of which is distributed widely across potential subjects. Insurgent political subjectivities that emerge in opposition to these structural changes and how they are experienced in everyday lives provoke both the emergence of 'consciousness' and the prompt for 'action' that 'subjectivity is normally taken to refer to.

For Negri, political subjectivity is achieved through opposition to capital (or, for our purpose, dominant formations and structures generally), and the realization by potential subjects of their own needs. (Harrison 2011) But, to my mind, this would require a set of analytical move by potential subjects: how they recognize an experience as an experience of, for example, privatization; how they recognize others' experiences as similar to theirs; how they communicate this commonality with possible similar others; what possibilities exist for them to make common cause; what assistance they receive from others not in the same 'structural' position as themselves; and how all of these change over time.

To understand processes by which new subjects emerge and have a new recognition of themselves and of others, of solidarity and adversary-ness, of resources available to them and obstacles in their path requires considering changes in the deep political structures. In contemporary India this includes the deepening of the institutions of representative democracy, including the rise of numerous new political parties and changes in the class composition of the support base of traditional ones. This also requires recognition of the sedimentation into common sense of past collective struggles. In addition, there is the grid of new linkages between the poor and those in solidarity with them: the relations between the politics *of* and *for* the poor, including social movements and NGOs as well as religious groups. Media, including 'social' media,

today are important elements of the political field. Social structures of caste and gender today hold a different valence and disposition than in the recent past. Subjectivity today thus is constituted in a very different structural context than the one in which canonical class analysis and subaltern studies held sway until recently.

2. Life-stories and ethnographies of political subjectivity

The outline of issues above stems from a reading of the papers in this section, which provide ethnographic and life-story narratives of the emergence of individual political subjects, linked to wider currents of emerging *collective* political subjectivity. They aim to better understand emerging political subjectivities in rural India and their relation with urban ones, and to explore the modes of activism and organization in social movements. The papers record the everyday work that goes into maintaining structures, how structures shapes the set of options for possible subjectivity, and how subjectivity emerges both in and against structures. They locate political subjectivity in the connections between the mundane and the local on the one hand and 'movement' politics on the other. All the four papers go beyond standard account of the emergence of political subjectivity rooted in 'contention': while of course that remains a key site, the other relation productive of subjectivity that each paper systematically reviews is the vexed politics of solidarity. This is indeed a fertile site for ethnography. Let me now consider the papers' engagement with the issues laid out in some detail.

Nielsen studies the emergence of different and opposition political subjectivities in the context of a movement against land acquisition in Bengal. Countering the tendency in writings about the Nandigram-Singur movement to assume a 'peasant community', he shows a schism between middle-caste Bhadralok-imitating land-owners and those oppressed-caste workers on their land in terms of their material interests. Such structural features of agrarian economy and society, and the everyday class struggles waged along them, militate against any long-term or stable collective subjectivity. Landless labourers are mobilized in defense of the rights of land-owing farmers, and demands specific to their structural location in production relations are either relegated in the charter of the movement, or are accommodated on a lower footing. Coercion, cajoling and cooptation work together to create a sense of 'unity' among rural inhabitants, but the always present tensions simmering below the surface make it transitory, unstable and contingent.[1] This is partly because the landed and the landless are connected to different 'external' political formations. Playing the role of a 'catalytic agent'. (Nilsen 2013) Ajay, akhet major activist influenced by the Majur Kranti Parishad (MKP), works to enhance class unity among landless workers, and reminds me of Gramsci's point that everyday experiences of oppression

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[1] His narrative recalls Assadi (1994: 215) who quotes Nanjundaswamy, the leader of the Karnataka Rajya Ryata Sangha, saying "We cannot divide ourselves into landlord and landless farmers and agitate separately, for the agitation will have no strength nor will it carry any weight."

produce among subalterns a contradictory and fragmented view of the world with implicit and explicit acts of rebellion, and the task of the leader/external activist/party/intellectual is to construct a collective – class – consciousness from such elements. (Gramsci 1959) Landless majurs do possess a class-in-themselves consciousness, but are unable to translate it, despite Ajay's help, into class-for-itself action because of the forces arrayed against it in the name of the unity of the rural community.

Nicholas Jaoul connects the CPI (ML)'s struggle to construct class subjectivity with the emergence of individual class subjects. More specifically, he wants to see the methods and practices used by the party to ground revolutionary politics in popular identities. Following Balibar, he explores the productive tensions inherent in the encounter between the *possible* proletariat and revolutionary party intellectuals/activists.[2] Jaoul shows that the salience of caste in everyday life forced the CPI(ML), a 'class-based party', to make it into an important organizational category. While remaining wary of 'dalitist' politics, the party is sensitive to the caste/class dimensions of the everyday experiences of oppression and exploitation among whom it sought to embed itself. While opposed to the state, it engages with the NREGA and other government policies of development and welfare. The paper moves beyond Chatterjee's 'politics of the governed' (2004) framework in showing that governmental programs becomes the basis for the formation of political subjectivities of a different sort.

Unlike Jaoul, I do not see any *necessary* contradiction between symbolic and cultural politics, territorial identity and class consciousness in the CPI-ML's theory and praxis. In fact the memorial erected for Manju Devi points precisely to the work of the AIALA in suturing these forms of identity. Blood and martyrdom indeed have been a constitutive element of the *class* identity work carried out by Naxals from the start: recall Charu Majumdar's statement that "he who has not smeared his hands in the blood of the class enemy can hardly be called a communist". The 'emotional' continuity of the AIALA's politics with previous struggles raises the larger question of the role of 'blood' and 'martyrdom' in ML politics, and in the constitution of individual communist subjects.

Jaoul's account of ML politics and its role in producing revolutionary subjects sits well along similar village-level ethnographic accounts of Maoism (Pettigrew 2013; Kunnath 2006; Bhatia 2005; Singh 2005, among others.). It differs from accounts, valid in their own right, in which individuals are drawn to Maoism pursuing other goals: protection, rebellion within the family, or the nudge of

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[2] It is surprising that Jaoul puts Gramsci unambiguously in the camp of those who take Marxism to be a 'higher' science and therefore would place the party intellectual in a position above the possible proletarian subject: recall that following his writings on the factory councils of Turin and his insistence that they should be the building blocks of communism that Gramsci was accused of precisely the opposite. It would be useful in this respect to consider Gramsci's writings on 'spontaneity'. Among other things, this would allow for a productive dialogue between Gramcian analytics and Maoist cultural politics that, to my mind, has not been done explicitly.

family and friends. (Shah 2013) Manju Devi is not an accidental political subject, and the central to the politics of memorializing her is the narrative of her conscious choices and actions that ran counter to structural force. Jaoul provokes intriguing possible lines of inquiry. One is his mention of "social scientific gender research" which affected party thinking. How Marxist-Leninists use social science, what kind of social science they use, and how it is deployed in the constitution of political subjectivities, is a question well worth pursuing. The pedagogic and the dialogic aspects of the encounter between the activist/intellectual and the possible communist subject is an important ethnographic question.

Thakur tracks the emergence of and transformations in the subjectivity of Fattesing, a new 'neta', against the backdrop of the increasing presence of the anti-dam movement, and later of political parties, in his locale. He identifies the sedimented relations of power within bhils and between them and non-local formations from colonial times, to explain the emergence and mutations of Fattesing's subjectivity. He subscribes to the idea of 'continuity' between the colonial and postcolonial state forms, including in the bureaucracy, and suggests that bhil political subjectivity historically, which implicitly partly explains Fattesing's own arc of ascent, is constituted in *opposition* to it.[3]

Thakur's account is different from the other papers in that a crucial moment in Fattesing's trajectory is made by a set of chance encounters that propel him forward, first to the pedagogical relation with the activists that made him 'conscious', and then a contentious encounter with the police that established him as a neta.[4] The account of the emergence of Fattesing as political subject shows that even 'remote' locations are criss-crossed with agents of diverse political projects that want to encompass the poor and the oppressed. Fattesing's chance encounter with NBA activists, and their pedagical role made his subjectivity possible.

While Thakur's view that Fattesing became a 'new political entrepreneur' as described by Krishna (2007) work has some merit, it needs recalling that Krishna's entrepreneurs are working in the context of development interventions from above, while Fattesing's story is located in a social movement and then in political party contexts, and so the resources available for entrepreneurs in the two contexts are likely to be different. This suggests 'new political entrepreneurs' as a category can include multiple forms of political subjectivity. Indeed, as Witsoe (2009, 2011) shows, new netas, as brokers, mediate access to state institutions and shape everyday administration, are key players in distributing political patronage and campaign finance locally, and so

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[3] However, Thakur also presents evidence of a bureaucrat (though not the bureaucracy) whose relation to bhils goes against the grain of the narrative, provoking one to think how some bureaucrats, known to be 'pro-poor', achieve such a subjectivity within a much-maligned and stultifying structure.

[4] While I am not aware of any analytics of 'chance encounters' in relation to political subjectivity in India, it is to be noted that they are accorded an important explanatory role in accounts of the rise of 'multitude', for example in Virno (2004)

play important roles in processes of elite capture or vernacularisation of the lower levels of the Indian state. Pattenden (2011) shows the key role of brokers in domination, accumulation and class relations in the context of decentralization in rural India today. Such 'netas', in other words, play critical roles in embedding and changing structures.

The theme of changing political subjectivity is also central to Steur's study of the emergence of 'adivasi' political subjectivity among two Paniya tribal women of Kottamurade village, among whom caste and class identification had been common until recently. She sees this emergence as a 'historical and relational class process' and locates 'local' politics in Kottamurade and the life histories of her two protagonists within the 'pressures of global capital', 'capitalist restructuring', 'totality of capitalist relations' and 'expanded class relations'.

Why did class lose salience, given that once Paniya tribals had been active participants in the Naxalite movement? Perhaps this was because the class frame that became dominant in the Kerala model was not the Naxal one but the one created by mainstream communist parties, which, while popular as a discursive frame in Kerala, never did fully incorporate advasis. After all, the Left Front government did not support plantation workers' movements in the 1990s. Steur mentions falling agricultural wages and the exploitation of tribal migrant workers, at a time that agriculture become an 'increasingly speculative business', in terms of non-payment of wages and mysterious 'accidents' at the work-place. As land and labour acquired new value, 'traditional' tribal leaders developed new motivations and sources of power. Also, 'neoliberal restructuring' reduced Paniya's possibilities of earning a decent income and access to crucial reproductive support. They did not achieve the norms of economic citizenship underlying the Kerala model.

While there is an implicit class analysis explaining the declining salience of class, perhaps this needs to be supplemented by approaches better suited to explain other processes shaping subjectivity. The eviction of Paniyas from Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary is better explained by political ecology explanations of conservation causing displacement. (see Brockington et al 2008) Akkathi's ability to maintain autonomy from the politics of indigenist identity and to "escape the spectre of absolute expediency" is explained partly by her employment in an NGO, and her role as the caretaker of the government kindergarten. In part she draws on the 'social capital' that she has in form of the relation with a brother who boosts her income. Her exposure to Christianity expands her autonomy, and good relations with Christian neighbours help her livelihood. More than 'class' is at play.

3. Structures and Subjectivities: Issues that Remain

The papers provide, in essence, ethnographic accounts of the interstitial formation of political subjectivity, showing "dynamic articulations of class, ethno-religious and gender inequalities and differences". (Doshi 2013: 845). In contemporary 'radical' political theory it is now recognized that the formation of political subjects happens in-between various subject positions (see Ranciere

1995; also Dikec 2013). For Badiou (2005) the *political* subject emerges only when it goes beyond discursive knowledge and claims its own radically subjective truth: an open and continuous process that is necessarily collective in its political manifestation. These papers suggest that part of this process are the negotiated relations between possible subjects and those who have solidarity with them and with those who want their 'support' opportunistically and instrumentally. It is this task that ethnography does well: in putting shape to abstract philosophies of subjectivity, and in laying the ground for their critiques.

It is a common strength of the papers that they represent a politicized ethnographic practice both in explaining the emergence of political subjects, and in their awareness of what sets the field for their work. That structures dispose but do not determine subjectivity is clear from the papers, which describe well the experience, consciousness and critique of structural force that figure in the constitution of specific political subjects. But there is a 'given-ness' with respect to structures: caste, patriarchy, agrarian class structure, developmentalism, global capitalism and capitalist restructuring, and changes within them. Likewise, networks of possible solidarity – in the forms of social movements, NGOs, political parties, revolutionary communism, evangelical Christianity, etc – need to be understood beyond mere 'given' features of the political terrain. Perhaps these questions lie outside the scope of ethnography, in the realms of history, political economy and political sociology. These papers indicate new directions of how ethnography can engage productively with them.

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