

January 2012

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Recommended Citation

Simon, During. 2012. "From the subaltern to the precariat." *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art* 32, (1): pp.72-80. <https://tsla.researchcommons.org/journal/vol32/iss1/9>

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From the subaltern to the precariat

Simon During

Abstract: This essay argues that ,given the global dominance of neo – liberal capitalism ,the concept of the subaltern now needs to be replaced by that of the precariat , a term first used by Pierre Bourdieu. It further argues that the category of the subaltern emerged in key post – disciplines of cultural studies , postcolonialism and subaltern studies , all of which themselves belong to the aftermath of the West ’ s 1968 revolutions. In our era of global capitalism ,their usefulness is in decline. Indeed the precariat is a broader category than the subaltern since it covers not just those who live on the margins of the world system but all of those who are attached to cultural formations that are not primarily economic in purpose or benefit. The essay presents its arguments in part through literary critical readings of two particular texts: Primo Levi ’ s *Christ stopped at Eboli* , and Amit Chaudhuri ’ s *The Immortals*.

Key words: subaltern the precariat neo – liberal capitalism post – discipline post – colonialism

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从贱民阶层到无保工

摘要: 由于新自由主义在全球取得了主控地位 贱民阶层这一概念如今已日渐不再适用 ,而需要布尔迪厄所创的“无保工”这一术语加以取代。继而 本文进一步论述 贱民阶层这一范畴之源是文化研究、后殖民主义与贱民研究这几个关键的后学科 ,而这些后学科本身则是西方 1968 年革命的产物。在当今这一全球资本主义时代 ,这些学科的适用性日趋式微。与贱民阶层这一概念相比 ,无保工概念则更加宽泛 ,不仅仅包括了那些生活在世界体系边缘的人 ,而且可以包括所有附加于某些文化形成过程中的人;而这些文化的形成并非主要以经济为主要目的或收益。本文的论述所涉及的文学批评部分则集中在普利莫·莱维的《基督止于艾伯利》和阿米特·乔杜里的《不朽者》两部作品。

关键词: 贱民阶层 无保工 新自由资本主义 后学科 后殖民

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As is often said , subaltern studies , cultural studies and postcolonialism are the academic offspring of a social revolution—May 1968—when a new set of demands were spectacularly addressed by the West ’ s educated young to authority.^① Demands for more joy , freedom and imagination in everyday life. Demands for the recognition of different identities and values. Demands for a democratization of the life world which might break through the colonialist and class divides that had persisted in Western post-war social democracies.

Amongst some revolutionary students this disorganized politics was channeled into two more formal movements , both beset by the difficulty of securing alliances with non – students—difficulties that ultimately caused blockages. The first such movement attempted to join students to factory – worker activists. In France , where this alliance between students and workers seemed most

promising, it led to a Maoist understanding of their relation, namely that intellectuals should share the workers' experiences in order to absorb and learn from their needs and values.^② While these efforts came to nothing politically, Maoism did gradually enter academic theory, especially in France, through figures like Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, although, as I shall suggest below, the appeal of Maoist populism waxed only as the appeal of identity politics waned.

Amongst the Maoists, the intellectual's relation to the proletariat was also quickly theorized in less orthodox terms. An important strain of radical activism became committed to protecting worker autonomy, and, by the same stroke, to maintaining what distance remained between the proletariat and capitalist ideology. Autonomism was a politics that began to break the spell of terms like equality and democracy. It invoked an ethos of what I will call *responsible indifference* to society viewed as a totality, thereby returning to an older tradition of political pluralism. (See Runciman 2005 for an account of political pluralism.) To be responsibly indifferent is to understand that the worth of an individual's or group's relation to society cannot be assessed solely by the norms of justice, including those of distributive justice, since, individuals or groups may make proper and primary claims to independence or autonomy from society considered as an organic totality. When attached to the idea that the knowledge and imagination produced by, and belonging to, the species or community (aka "immaterial capital") can itself be an emancipatory agent, autonomism became left radicalism's most enduring grouping in the late twentieth century, at least in Europe.

The second important extension of 1968 radicalism came in the attempt to forge alliances between first – world students and third – world, anti – colonialist revolutionaries, especially in Cuba and China. This move was politically inconsequential, partly because successful anti – colonialist nationalisms were then routinely mutating into repressive governments.^③ No strong alliances between first – and third – world movements were in fact cemented. But, drawing on the intellectual breakthroughs of older French leftist struggles against Algerian colonialism, as well as on the increased access to first – world universities from the global South, anti – colonialist thought was absorbed into the West's humanities and social sciences from the mid – seventies on. This is the origin of both postcolonialism and of subaltern studies.

Over the next decades, May 68's spirit continued to shape the Western academic humanities in the form of the new emancipatory postdisciplines even as it was absorbed into capitalism's ideological and institutional infrastructure. Via its denial of bourgeois hegemony; via its demand for autonomous self – management; via its emphasis on expanded and innovatory experiences; via its appeal to hope, the sixties revolutionary impulse paradoxically helped enable the market to become an increasingly important agent of governmentality since the market too could reward indifference to hierarchy, individual entrepreneurial energies and new experiences.^④ This is to say that, as many have noted, emancipatory postdisciplines, despite themselves, belong in part to what Paolo Virno has called the "genealogy of post – Fordism."^⑤

My contention is that these passages from May 68 to neo – liberalism were closed around Sept 11 2001 when it became clear not just that the sixties revolutionary energies had disappeared into increasingly market – orientated politics but that popular reaction against globalized neo – liberalism and post – Fordism would mainly take place as a conservative resistance to the sixties' democratization of the life world. This conservative resistance—let's call it the religious right—appealed variously to family values, God, virtue ethics, civility, and heritage against both sixties' emancipatory politics and the neo – liberal market expansions. It has flourished in many regions of the world, even though it has often ultimately been contained by neo – liberalism in its turn. And one of its fundamental elements (which it shares with Maoism) has been its capacity to construct the educated as enemies of the people via a populist discourse against elitism.

At this moment, it gradually also became clear to what remained of the radical left that old names for the oppressed, like the "proletariat", the "subaltern," the "colonized" were inadequate to capture new patterns of global dispossession. No widely accepted nomenclature has come to replace the old one, but I will use a name first used by Pierre Bourdieu that now does have some currency— "the precariat."^⑥ I choose this term because it denotes the insecurity of all those who, across a wide range of social, regional and cultural groupings, live in poverty, or without papers, those who live under what Aihwa Ong calls "neo – slavery," and, more than that, all who lack reliable social, economic and cultural support, and, therefore, trust — and, then too, because it connotes a much more widely felt mood and condition of unease and groundlessness, characteristic of modernity as such.^⑦ It is important immediately to note that the politics of autonomism has relatively little purchase on the precariat since the precariat by definition lacks substantive, easily available, social connections and networks.

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It does not follow from this conspectus that subaltern studies, cultural studies and postcolonialism emerged jointly in dialogue

and exchange. Not at all. They are attached to different localities, disciplinary bases and analytic machineries. Let me briefly summarize these for each academic formation.

Subaltern studies was developed mainly by expatriate South Asian historians with theoretical interests. And it remained connected to politics longer than its fellows. That is because, unlike postcolonialism and cultural studies, it emerged where anti-colonialism was joined to labourism, i. e. the point where, after 1968, Western Maoism modulated into autonomism.^⑧ Subaltern studies began as an attempt by academics to connect to, and learn from, peasant insurrectionary energies in order to sidestep modern political rationality. Its tools for such a connection were necessarily professional. Ranajit Guha's ground-breaking *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, for instance, was an academic structuralist work of classification and decoding. Drawing on the only available archive—that of counter-insurgency—it presented a grammar of non-statist, non-rationalist rural insurrectionary styles and motives, a grammar with only a utopian application to practical national politics. By the time Partha Chatterjee was writing *A Nation and its fragments* (1993) that utopian politics had been transformed for subaltern studies: the movement's purposes could be described there as a “search, both theoretical and practical, for the concrete forms of democratic community that are based neither on the principle of hierarchy nor on those of bourgeois equality” — a search and a politics directed primarily against the Indian state system. (Chatterjee 1993, 191) Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000) no longer attempted to connect to practical politics at all, the revisionary efforts now being directed to concepts. There, archivally-based history is saturated in, and displaced by, theory.

At that point, subaltern studies revealed its full intellectual potential—its capacity to imagine a different conceptual terrain than that of mainstream European social theory, one scored by new divisions and connections, new geographies and pasts, even if marked too by utopianism. The West was removed from the world's centre. History was separated from historicism. Secularization and modernization were disjoined from one another. The state was no longer seen legitimately to represent or order society. Political participation was granted to those without a Western, rights-bearing, interiorized, liberal subjectivity. Political agency was restored to those without a political voice, both by expanding the reach of politics as a category, and by reimagining democracy associationally rather than representationally. In this remapping, pluralist themes familiar to European radicalisms were restructured and supplemented by the sub-continental case.^⑨

Yet risks were attached to this work, especially in the aftermath of Sept 11. First, its critique of historicism, statism, secularism and liberal subjectivity shared something with those popular non-secular, anti-progressivist conservatisms—the religious right—that, around the world, came to resist the alliance between 1968 and neo-liberal democratic state capitalism. (Indeed subaltern studies' antistatism was shared by conservative libertarianisms too). And second by 2001 it had become clear that globalized post-Fordist capitalism was going to provincialize Europe all by itself so that subaltern studies' emancipatory charge was also absorbed by transformations within the established world system.

Postcolonialism has reached further into the post-68 humanities than subaltern studies because it was not so closely attached to the subcontinent's history, because it attended more to indigenous peoples than to subaltern groups, and because, partly for that reason, its methods were more usually literary than historical at a moment when theory was being disseminated more by English than by History departments. At the moment when it was able to connect a variety of regions and disciplines, however, postcolonialism also came to name efforts to undo Eurocentrism's spell across the humanities and social sciences as a whole. But at the level of high theory, it was hampered by its absorption of post-structuralism and, in particular, of deconstruction, through which it acquired much of its early metropolitan prestige. This is not the place to unravel relations between post-structuralism and the post-68 politicized humanities in any detail except to say that I see them as discordant as much as harmonious. Yet a brief description will help prepare for my argument below.

Deconstruction can be thought of as combining several connected but contradictory theoretical models in terms that allow them to be deployed as an analytic method. The first is the proposition that haunts German idealism from Kant on, although it only comes out into the open when dialectics came to a standstill with Adorno, namely that all metaphysics of immanence are ordered around antinomies, and, in particular, as Adorno contends, the non-identity of the system of concepts with the world of things.^⑩ Deconstruction's second constitutive model was the semiotic understanding of meaning as the product of an open-ended system of signs structured by differences not opposition, in which signifiers and signified are aspects of one another. According to semiotics, this system has no necessary relation to the real, thought as a metaphysical category. The third was the Heideggerian existential critique of metaphysics for which no unmoved, fundamental reality exists. Instead existence is constitutively temporal,

and human beings are “thrown” into the world in ways that both causes anxiety and demands an ethics of care sensitive to the “opening of the world”. For all its originality, Heidegger’s phenomenology belongs to a genealogy of a particular European philosophical anthropology, one that thinks of unease and anxiety as primary to the human condition, and which, from a sociological perspective, can perhaps be regarded as expressing the lived precariousness attached to capitalist modernization.¹¹ The last model deployed by deconstruction is the hardest to summarize in a couple of sentences. It is Maurice Blanchot’s French avant – garde contention that the abyssal structure of human experience is not so much ontological as linguistic: it is language’s capacity to construct, and turn into, reality, the way in which reality disappears into language and vice – versa, that drives our existential unease.

When charismatic postcolonial theorists tried to harness deconstruction, with its European genealogy and sensibility, to the undoing of Eurocentrism, incoherence quickly loomed. Theoretical postcolonialism never quite overcame this difficulty, and as a result later, less theoretical, postcolonialisms were weakened because they had largely been disconnected from other lineages of political and social theory. Until Leela Gandhi’s recent work, postcolonialism never resolutely addressed, for instance, the various heritages of guild socialism, associationalism or even anarchism, which were so important to early anti – colonial movements in and beyond the West.¹² Or to put this argument differently, poststructuralism’s dismantling of determinate oppositions between the same and other, between identity and difference, could not be adequately reconciled to a postcolonialist project for which ontologies, ethics, and truth are relative to cultures, and indigenous and local peoples simply resist colonization.

Cultural studies is perhaps the simplest of our three cases. Founded in England before 1968 by left conservatives who routed Leavis and T. S. Eliot’s cultural thought towards a socialism based more on the concept of community than of the state; acquiring prestige through its later application of semiotics along with Gramsci and Althusser’s marxisms to contemporary everyday life, its most innovative and significant (but of course by no means only) response to the new, post – collectivist politics which followed the May 68 moment was a slow turn to cultural populism. The question of how academics could connect to the uneducated, outside of shared institutions like the British Labour or Communist parties, was solved by rejecting the academic task of transmitting high culture. High culture was dubbed elitist, while popular cultures, including the most commercialized, were embraced. Postcolonialism and subaltern studies remained aloof from this move largely because their analyses were directed towards societies in which, as Guha famously put it, domination exists without hegemony. (That is to say, in which ruling groups control subaltern groups without appealing to joint projects, identities and values.) In India, for instance, hierarchy did not require merely human legitimation or consent, including consent solicited via high culture’s spiritual aura. At any rate, in its democratic enthusiasm, and locked into the West, cultural studies often became a servant of a neo – liberalism which found no problems with academic cultural populism. At the same time, an important “non – culturalist” wing of cultural studies moved closer to anthropology (as practiced by Aihwa Ong and Loïc Wacquant for instance) which is committed to examining forms of community and everyday life caught up in the eddies of global post – Fordism. Despite this and paradoxically, by joining those market forces which resisted high culture’s legitimation of oligarchic dominance, key elements within cultural studies helped turn cultural populism into a mode of hegemony.

* * *

This analysis poses an obvious question: what remains vital in the 1968 aftermath post – disciplines, now that their historical moment has passed? In the remainder of this essay I want to think about this question in relation to the sixties postdisciplines’ core problematic (and point of blockage) —that is, the distance between the academic/intellectual and (let’s clumsily say) those who live under relative material and cultural deprivation and disadvantage. And I will consider relations across this distance through a reading of two literary texts—Carlo Levi’s *Christ stopped at Eboli* and Amit Chaudhuri’s *The Immortals*, both of which deal quite directly with the difficulties that radical or disaffected intellectuals encounter in trying to connect with, and align themselves to, the dispossessed or subaltern. In these texts, the blockage point occurs at a more precise point still— where the kind of person who reads texts like Levi’s and Chaudhuri’s (a group which, of course, includes the books’ writers) make contact with those who lack education and access to capital just through the latter’s literary representation. And I will organize my readings of these representations around two concepts— “responsible indifference” (as defined above) and “mutual subjection” (as defined below) — which point to other kinds of social or political relations than those through which we moderns habitually think.

Christ stopped at Eboli can be thought of as contributing to subaltern studies before the fact. In 1935, Levi, an Italian doctor, painter, and politician, was punished by the fascist government for his political activism by being exiled to the village of

Aliano in Italy's remote Southern region of Luciana. His memoir, published a decade later after the end of the war, tells of his exile, and concentrates precisely on Levi's relation to Aliano's peasants.

The book begins by declaring the Southern Italian peasant's otherness in the boldest terms. Levi reports them saying to him, "We are not Christians; we are not human beings." (location 42 out of 3744), on which he comments, "Christ never came this far, nor did time, nor did the individual soul, nor hope, nor the relation of cause to effect, nor reason, nor history. Christ never came, just as the Romans never came... None of the pioneers of Western civilization brought here his sense of the passage of time, his deification of the State, or that ceaseless activity which feeds upon itself. No one has come to the land except as an enemy, a conqueror, or a visitor devoid of understanding."¹³ For all its anticipation of certain subaltern – studies thematics, this statement is startling in the rhetorical force with which it insists upon the peasants' otherness, severing them from rationality, monotheism, modern restlessness and historicism all at once.

Although Levi does not claim that he ever reached full understanding of peasant's world, and although he does not seek to learn a lesson from it as a Maoist might, this judgment is softened as the book continues. It is thinned out in his engagement with everyday village life after he is called on to work as a doctor. In the process, it also becomes clear that the slow dissolution of Levi's hard judgment of the peasant's otherness can be represented best in literary writing like that of *Christ stopped at Eboli* itself. Certainly, there, literary knowledge calls upon its powers of description, analysis, and, most of all, of suggestion, to present a compelling, if ultimately limited, sense of intimacy with radical social and cultural difference. I will return to this point.

The book reaches its climax, however, when Levi's experiences are translated into a political program, nothing less than a writing of a new constitution. This happens when he returns to Aliano after having visited Turin for a few days. Up north he realized that even metropolitan experts have no real sense of life in the rural South. The difficulty, he notes, is that while his Northern friends are all "unconscious worshippers of the State," there is and always will be an "abyss between the peasant and the State." So there can be no state solution to the Southern peasant's predicament. On the contrary: the state constitution is the problem.¹⁴ Even state efforts of reformist internal colonialism will never succeed: there will always be a peasantry, even if only in the form of "brigandage" or "under the cover of patience."¹⁵

It is at this point that Levi declares that the only solution is to create a "new form of government, neither Fascist, nor Communist, nor even Liberal," in which the "juridical and abstract concept of the individual" is replaced by a "concept in which the individual is a link, that meeting place of relationships of all kinds."¹⁶ That will be possible only if the state accepts the autonomy of its parts, treating the peasants with responsible indifference so that they can join "the complex life of the nation" (not the state) as a "self-governing rural community."¹⁷ In effect, autonomy rules right across the nation's communities and associations, stopping only at the level of the individual, who, among the peasants, exists rather as a "meeting place of relationships."

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

The mountain rose up as before, with its gradual rises and irregular crags, to the cemetery and the village, but the earth which I had always seen gray and yellow, was now an unexpected and unnatural green. Spring had suddenly burst forth during my brief absence, but the green, which elsewhere is a symbol of harmony and hope, here seemed artificial and violent: it was out of key, like rouge on the sunburned cheeks of a peasant girl. This same metallic green extended all the way along to the mountain road to Sigliano; it was like the false notes of a trumpet in a funeral march. The mountains closed in after me like prison gates... In the sunshine little patches of green that were scattered over the white clay stood out even more intensely and strangely than before, like expostulations. They seemed the torn pieces of a mask, thrown down at random.¹⁸

This remarkable passage inverts one of Europe's most familiar literary conceits—spring as a figure of life's renewal. At this place, at this time, spring's greenery is an image not of nature but of violence and artifice. The passage's figuration of this inversion is carefully sequenced: green spring is first like rouge on a peasant girl's cheek, then like a trumpet in funeral march, then like an expostulation which, as it were, talks to Levi, and last like a mask covering the face that expostulates. At this point, we might say, language and real substitute for one another in a Blanchotian manner, so as to destabilize the order of things. The landscape has become a language spoken through a mask.

At this point too our judgment of Levi's effort of anti-statist constitution-making shifts. No doubt the passage translates

Levi's fear of spending two more years in the village where rewarding engagement is all but impossible for him. It is that fear that his vision of Spring's violent artifice expresses. But it also hints that Levi's vision of a pluralist state open to governmental autonomies across all its zones except subjectivity, is driven not just by his anticolonialist anti-statism, or by his sympathy or respect for peasant lifeways, but by his own desire to keep the peasants' world apart from his own, to prevent the emergence of overarching—statist—institutions in which exchanges, distributions and messages across the cultural and economic divide between metropolitan intellectuals and the Southern peasant might be possible. Through adroit literary sequencing and figuration, through a linguistic turn, spring's garish green spells out, silently, the all but unsayable message that haunts all radical politics based on the will for the subaltern's autonomy, namely, that the drive to respect and empower the other is shadowed by a will to distance oneself from the other. This, then, is a passage that is pregnant with the post 68 moment. In a strange way it prophesizes that neo-conservative turn, which is also a Maoist turn, by which intellectuals, especially liberal intellectuals, become enemies of the people—a turn which, I am suggesting, helps constitute the ideology in which contemporary precariousness is realized.

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My second case is Amit Chaudhuri's novel *The Immortals*. It takes us to a very different world than Levi's—one for which Levi's prophecy of the peasants' persistence is proved wrong. Set in Bombay around 1980, it describes the lives of rich bourgeoisie who are experiencing both the beginning of India's urban boom and a specific experiential precariousness. Yet *The Immortals* is not unrelated to subaltern studies. After all, Chaudhuri has been an interlocutor of the movement, most notably in his 2004 review of Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* in *The London Review of Books*.¹⁹ There he wrote as a critical admirer, who argued that subaltern studies has, for what are in effect cultural nationalist reasons, failed fully to account for how Eurocentric global modernization has shaped modern India, and shaped it not wholly for the worse. In particular, Chaudhuri suggests, subaltern studies' anti-historicist pursuit of a specifically Indian modernity deflects attention from the complexities of Indian contemporary life in relation to the West, and most of all, ignores the attraction of those forms of aestheticism and high culture attached to Western-style hegemonic capitalism. Chaudhuri then is not just gently reprimanding subaltern studies, he is also resisting cultural democratization and populism in the cultural studies mode.

The Immortals is a brilliant novelistic contribution to this argument. Its primary move is to avoid describing relations of subalterneity, replacing them by less rigid and political relationships such as those between master and servant, teacher and pupil, guru and disciple. In doing so, like subaltern studies, it departs from the norms of democratization and liberal individualism. Rather it displays a social world ordered by what Jonathan Swift long ago called "mutual subjection." (Swift 1744) For Swift mutual subjection was a social ethic in which individuals were capable of persistently exchanging their positions of authority and obedience, as particular situations, rituals and conventions demanded. As such, for Swift, it was able to resist Lockean tolerance and individualism. In *The Immortals*, positions of command and dependency continually move from one person to another even across hierarchies—to give just one instance they do so between a rich Bombay housewife and her jamadarni servant, this time, I think, to keep egalitarianism as well as individualism at bay. (Chaudhuri 2009, 49)

In *The Immortals*, as in Levi's southern Italy, subjectivity is disconnected from deep individualism. Indeed Chaudhuri's characters, even the rich bourgeoisie, lack full interiority, just because their relations of mutual subjection are so intricate. Constructed not as a stream of happenings, nor as plot made up of peculiarly significant events, but as a series of apparently contingently chosen vignettes designed nonetheless to highlight social relations in all their commutability and fragility, the novel presents characters who are opaque to one other as they form and re-form themselves in the ceaseless everyday "meeting places" where micro-hierarchies and dependencies are both reinforced and inverted. Yet, off-stage, Bombay's macro-hierarchies of class, gender and caste are at work, congealing fluid and fungible social exchange.

We, the twenty-first century reader, understand that the novel is not set in the India we know now, an India marked by endemic corruption, militarization, vast fortunes among a tiny elite, the growth of a confident urban middle-class, a turn to provincial, caste-based and religious-right parties, the emergence of a large educated expatriate community, the continuation of massive immiseration, the intermittent return to insurgencies and riots and so on. The novel knows that its readers know that its world is neither *that* world, nor the world imagined by subaltern studies, and by virtue of that knowledge it can implicitly present its own vanished bourgeois Bombay moment as an alternative to subaltern studies' anti-Eurocentric but nonetheless Westernized and utopian vision of intellectuals learning from, and teaching, subalterns.

This leads me to my second point. This is not a novel that simply rejects India's chaotic entry into global democratic state

capitalism as a misjudgment. It tells the story of two families. The first, the Senguptas, who have moved from Calcutta to Bombay for business reasons, are rich. They have one son, the autobiographically – based Nirmalya, now an adolescent. The second, the Lals, are supported by their *pater familias*, Shyam, a music teacher and raga singer. He is teaching the bhagan repertoire to Nirmalya's mother, who as a girl back in Bengal trained in Tagore song. Shyamji becomes Nirmalya's teacher too, and relations between the families are organized around the distance that exists between them, across which puzzlement, silence, admiration, suspicion, learning and mutual subjection all flow.

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

Nirmalya's aestheticism adds to the music rather than takes from it. This is not because aestheticism creates and preserves a critical distance from the world, a distance more immune to secular instrumental reason's depredations than god – directed ritual and tradition. The novel knows no social world sufficiently exterior to the self to work like that. Aestheticism does not present a “world of ideal possibility” either. (56). Rather it adds a mundane but far – reaching discipline to modern life which harbours tranquility or exhilaration, especially when responsibly indifferent to the pressing forms of life around it. For the novel, aesthetic work and reception precariously jostle, juggle and supplement the world's commerce, they do not—contra Nirmalya and a whole tradition of Western thought, including this essay—protect us from it or illumine it.

I have just hinted that the novel is responsibly indifferent to politics. But it contains at least one seemingly political moment. Nirmalya's parents take him to tea at a new luxury hotel in a devastated Bombay outer suburb. When the family is seated, Nirmalya suddenly declares that he can't eat at the hotel until his relatively impoverished music teacher Shyamji is able to eat there too. Nirmalya's interior state is not represented even at this moment, although his father thinks he must be experiencing “a sudden outrush of love” for his teacher. (265) But whatever Nirmalya's father thinks, the reader cannot but take Nirmalya's refusal as a proto – political gesture against the social transformations that enables an exclusive hotel like this to be built for the rich amongst old Bombay's ruins. Except that this moment of refusal is soon joined by two others. A few pages later Shyamji, dying, refuses to go into the hospital where his father died before him. This, of course, is a different kind of refusal than Nirmalya's. It signals Shyamji's re – entry into traditions of familial respect away from the modernity that a hospital represents, but also his rejection of the equivalence between what his father was and what he himself is, his father having also been a great singer but one who never acceded to music's commercialization, even resisting becoming Lata Mangeshkar's teacher. (4). In fact, Shyamji seems merely to be avoiding an occasion for comparison between himself and his father. And then, in a third act of refusal at the novel's end, after Shyamji's death, another eminent singer refuses to sing at a sannelan in front of Shyamji's portrait. This is to be taken I think more simply as a traditional act of deference, even if it is accompanied by “bitterness.” (336)

This sequence of refusals attests to Shyamji's charisma. But it also undercuts Nirmalya's act's political force. It is as if, in refusing the hotel's food, Nirmalya too is performing a ritual of deference towards his teacher, joining the play of non – secular micro – hierarchies, an exchange of subjection. It is as if his apparently political act masks a traditionally apolitical one then. But as soon as that appears likely, it is undone by something darker since if we know anything about Shyamji it is that he himself shares nothing of Nirmalya's delicate and conflicted idealism. He is thirsty for the luxuries and privileges that Bombay lavishly provides to the merely rich. This means that Nirmalya's ascetic gesture is a rebuke to Shyamji as much as an act of solidarity with him.

In the end, Nirmalya does not continue with his music. Since his boyhood, Western metaphysics has communicated a more powerful, if troubling, message to him: the “new undeniable truth... that he existed,” allowing him to broach the “fathomless puzzle” consequent on that existential perception. So as soon as he can, he leaves to study philosophy in London. Philosophy, of course, does not lead to the contentment that he had occasionally been able to find in music, and at the novel's end, Nirmalya experiences a sudden access of a “melancholy without history”, a “dull, buzzing ache which had no present and immediate

cause.” (338)

How to read this melancholy? Melancholy without history or present cause, what, in this context, is that?

Up until now the novel has rarely treated feeling in the Western fashion as a private possessive condition. So this moment indicates Nirmalya's entry into interiorized Western subjectivity. And simultaneously it represents his entry into modernity's moral anthropology of uneasiness, just because his melancholy is historyless and unfathomable. It is not quite his, even if he possesses it and it possesses him. A connection is sparked: a link between existential or philosophical problematisation, social disorientation, and anxious European individuality. From quite another direction, the phrase also echoes the famous “peoples without history,” which subaltern studies began by wrestling with in its attempt to return the peasants' history to them. At which point a stranger logic emerges: it is as if Nirmalya's melancholy—expressive though it may be of a Bengali boy's passage to Europeanized contemporaneity—works also to situate him in the place of otherness that the subaltern or peasant occupied for subaltern studies and for Carlo Levi too. Or it would do, if it were not the case that when subalterneity is globalized, when it joins modern unease and the moral anthropology of thrownness—it no longer remains itself. It dissolves into precariousness. And, as I have suggested, precariousness has a broad social extension: it joins the traditional dispossessed (in the novel, like Shymaji's hangers-on and the Sungapta's servants) and the post-Fordist work-seeking, famine-or-terror-fleeing nomads without secure entry into states or societies, to intellectuals like Nirmalya, especially intellectuals who have taken up philosophy and classical music, and who produce immaterial capital which possesses little or no social or commercial utility. There is, after all, a sense in which all of us who attach ourselves professionally to the humanities are attaching ourselves to something that lacks status and value, firm placement even, in the light of the now populist-democratic hegemonic understanding of things. So I would read Nirmalya's “melancholy without history” as implicitly situating him in a variegated, loose social grouping—the precariat—which joins the liberal-arts educated, theorizing rich to the dispossessed but not *politically* à la 1968. Rather the phrase proposes a connection between Nirmalya the student and the world's insecure and marginalized by joining them in a groundlessness which is simultaneously material and existential, and which covers public, domestic and interior zones, all three. That precarity is an interiorized or spiritual as well as a material condition also means that the novel silently stakes a further claim, namely that literature's capacity to imagine and *suggest* private existential depression and disorientation is also a mode of *perceiving* and *knowing* opaque precarious life.

In pointing to a precariat as a global social sector which includes people from many classes, religions and cultures as they are swept into capitalism's most recent phase (including those who wish to study, say, philosophy or adhere to the autonomous value of high or traditional arts), and in which subjectivity becomes increasingly exposed to restless vulnerable contextlessness, the novel scandalizes the demand for those kinds of distributive justice that aim to ameliorate insecurity and poverty, or to service marginalized identities, or both. Or the novel would so scandalize us, if we did not accept that it also calls upon an ethic of responsible indifference to the political practices that such justice requires. Which is to say that *The Immortals* grounds itself in a literary autonomism by refusing politics. There is another moral secreted here: if we accept that an especially subtle knowledge of precarity as a mutation of subalterneity is to be found in autonomous imaginative literature, then we probably have to accept that we best know the lived condition of contemporary modernity partly at the cost of being able to free ourselves from it. In terms of the trajectory from subalterneity to precariousness that I have been tracing (or at least gesturing towards) here, this means that the political or political economic failure which that trajectory represents may (shockingly rather than paradoxically) work for literature's benefit, just because in that trajectory those of us who have acquired a literary subjectivity are joined, precariously, to those who have least stake in the current system, i. e. the precariat.

Notes

①For arguments in the spirit of this contention, see e. g. Scott 2004, 58–97.

②For Maoism and the 68 revolution in France see, e. g. Bourg 2007.

③Refer to the situationists,

④For the argument that the spirit of 68 underpins neo-liberalism, see, for instance, Raunig 2010, 82.

⑤Virno 2009, 2. For the argument that cultural studies is as much product and instrument of post Fordism, as a critique of it, see my “Introduction” to the *Cultural Studies Reader*. And also, for instance, Denning 1997, 462.

- ⑥See Standing 2011. For philological treatments of the term see , for instance , Frassanito Network, “Precarious , Precarization , Precariat?” , <http://thistuesday.org/node/93>; and Angela Mitropoulos, “Precari – Us?” , <http://www.metamute.org/en/Precari-us> , as well as Raunig 2010. Butler 2006 uses the concept of precariousness in rather a different , if related , way.
- ⑦For “neo – slavery ,” see Ong 1999 , 195 – 218.
- ⑧This genealogy is of course acknowledged from within subaltern studies: see Dipesh Chakrabarty’s insightful article on subaltern studies and politics , which makes the point that the movement owes as much to Maoism as to E. P. Thompson and indeed to Gramsci. Chakrabarty 2005 , 97.
- ⑨For the history of pluralism or associationalism as a political theory , see for instance , Runciman 2005.
- ⑩See , for instance , Adorno 1973 , 170 – 71. This is not to say that early deconstruction was influenced by Adorno. It seems that Derrida , in particular , did not know Adorno’s work until after his philosophy was quite mature.
- ⑪This is not exactly Stephen Mulhall’s point in *Philosophical Myths of the Fall* , but that book is certainly well worth reading from the perspective that this sentence is intended to invoke.
- ⑫See Gandhi 2006.
- ⑬Levi 2011 , location 54 out of 3744.
- ⑭Levi 2011 , location 3474 out of 3744.
- ⑮Levi 2011 , location 3487 out of 3744.
- ⑯Levi 2011 , location 3515 out of 3744.
- ⑰Levi 2011 , location 3527 out of 3744.
- ⑱Levi 2011 , location 3547 out of 3744.
- ⑲See Chaudhuri 2008 , 57 – 69

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