

**Self-consciousness of the *Dalits* as “Subalterns”:  
Reflections on Gramsci in South Asia.**

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Becoming “Dalit” is the process through which the caste  
subaltern enters into circuits of political commensuration and  
into the value regime of “the human.” (Rao 2009, 264).

In this article I reflect on Gramsci’s category of the “subaltern”, taking into consideration recent contributions to this topic, particularly those offered by Joseph Buttigieg, Giorgio Baratta and Marcus Green. The latter, besides presenting an eloquent critique of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s article *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, allows me to return to Gramscian sources so as to carry out a radicalisation of Gramsci’s positions with reference to the experience of “Untouchables”/*Dalits* in South Asia. There is little doubt that the enquiry into the “Subaltern Question” in India today cannot ignore the “Dalit Question” as “the political unconscious of Indian society” (Rao 2009, xiii). The case study referring to the Rishi-*Dalits* of Bangladesh accentuates still further the precarious position of these groups as subalterns, but also their aspiration to overcome subalternity.

**Key-words:** Subalterns, Dalits, Gramsci, South Asia, Bangladesh.

### **1. Gramsci and the Subaltern: Methodology and Historiography.**

Green's systematic analysis of the concept of the "subaltern" underlines abuses and misconceptions of this category in the Anglophone world, showing that the passage of the term from a literal to a figurative usage is already evident by the end of *Notebook 1* (Green 2002, 2). Having made several comments in the *Notebooks* regarding the subalterns, in 1934 Gramsci embarked on writing *Notebook 25*, where - under the title "On the Margins of History (The History of Subaltern Social Groups)" - he copied, transcribed and developed the notes of *Notebooks 1* and 3. Besides not concluding his project, Gramsci found himself in a position of "subalternity" which gives his notes an often indicative and fragmentary perspective, though containing relevant intuitions. Significantly Green points to the need to interpret this concept as "... interwoven with his political, social, intellectual, literary, cultural, philosophical, religious, and economic analyses" (Green 2002, 3). We might say that Gramsci was interested in developing a multidisciplinary approach to the study of subalterns.

Within this methodology, we need to take into account the development of the Gramscian concept of the sovereign state as "the protagonist of history" in relation to the "integral State" where both political and civil society intervene to preserve power for dominant groups through the hegemony of consent and coercion. There is a remarkable closeness between the two expressions "State as Protagonist of History" and the definition of subaltern groups as being "On the Margins of History," including slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races and the proletariat. It is clear that Gramsci has in mind "subaltern groups" both in Italy and in

Europe, where a process of colonization was already taking place even prior to the development of a territorial colonialism outside Europe.

Despite Gramsci's interest in proposing a theory *für ewig* and formulating general theories and conclusions, his methodology is based on "particular events, pieces of information, and observations" (Green 2002, 8; Buttigieg 1992, 48), in order "to 'translate' the elements of historical life into theoretical language" (Q 3 § 48). In summary, writes Green "He wants to understand how the conditions and relations of the past influence the present and future development of the subaltern's lived experience" (Green 2002, 8).

I return below to the "subaltern's lived experience", since this affects what Gramsci calls their "common sense", their understanding of reality or, their "philosophy". In order to accomplish a translation into theoretical language, and to understand these "conditions and relations of the past", Gramsci appeals to "integral history" as a versatile workshop which takes into account political, socio-economic, cultural and religious dynamics, in which the "integral historian" is able to perceive "the totality and complexity of the historical process, from the tendencies of the economic structure to the forms of popular culture that shape . . . the consciousness of the masses (Morera 1990, 61; in Green 2002, 9)."

In *Notebook 3 § 90* Gramsci offers a methodological process divided into six progressive phases which should be further developed to include intermediate phases, so that, as he specifies in *Notebook 25 § 5*, "The [integral] historian must record, and discover the causes of, the line of development towards integral autonomy, *starting from the most primitive phases.*" It is noteworthy that in the transition from Q 3 to Q 25, already at a methodological level and perhaps intentionally, Gramsci uses the

expressions “subaltern classes” and “subaltern groups” interchangeably (Green 2002, 9).

In order to prove the Gramscian thesis on phases of development, Green refers to other passages in the *Notebooks* where Gramsci discusses Manzoni’s position in relation to subalterns, who “ ‘have no history’: [that is to say] there are no traces of their history in the historical documents of the past” (Q 14, §39). This example points towards the famous note of Q 3 where Gramsci analyses the “element of spontaneity” as “characteristic of subaltern classes.” There is a history considered so marginal and peripheral that they “have not attained a consciousness of the class per se and ... consequently do not even suspect that their history might possibly have any importance or that it might be of any value to leave documentary evidence of it” (Q 3 § 48). Those who have conducted research among *Dalits* have experienced the difficulty of proving the researcher’s genuine interest in their history and their life. While *Dalit* scholars might question the validity of ‘outsiders’ producing insightful accounts on *Dalits*, serious scholarship remains sensitive to this problematic issue (Rao 2009).

Nevertheless, I advocate a historiography of a more recent kind, with reference to Michel de Certeau, who seems to validate Gramsci’s thesis in relation to the methodological criteria used by Gramsci to retrace even those minimal signs of initiative found amongst subaltern groups, despite the fact that their history is “necessarily fragmented and episodic” (Q 3 § 14). In his famous note of Q 25 § 2, Gramsci writes:

Every trace of independent initiative on the part of subaltern groups should ... be of incalculable value for the integral historian. Consequently, this kind

of history can only be dealt with monographically, and each monograph requires an immense quantity of material which is often hard to collect.

Certeau explains the production of historiography as “operation” and “fabrication” of texts by the “circles of writing” and “institutions of power” which transform findings through the “practice of interpretation” into a “science”, thus preserving the authority of official history and achieving a kind of hegemony. According to Certeau, this is History with a capital ‘H’, since all others are “small histories”, in lower case. Yet “official History” – although a fabrication – contains “traces” that the hegemonic historiography is unable to eliminate, thus preserving traces of “small histories” if only to contradict them. Certeau returns continuously to the idea of “traces as inassimilable fragments of alterity” which spring up time and again “to importune” the interpretative apparatus of centres and institutions of learning and knowledge (Certeau 1988).

These traces reveal the tactics – as opposed to the “strategies” of power – used by groups which find themselves “at the margins of history” and which occupy “zones of silence” (Certeau 1988, 79): heretics, mystics, possessed, as Certeau defines them; people not dissimilar to the Lazzaretti personage examined by Gramsci (Green 2002, 13; Hobsbawn 1965, 65-73). Differently from the interpretation given by Italian “intellectuals” (Lombroso and Barzellotti) who presented “narrow, individual, pathologic, etc. explanations” (Q 3 § 12), Gramsci analyses the conditions and the historical processes that have determined subordination. He displays even more sarcasm when commenting on Manzoni’s “caste attitude”, towards the so-called “humble classes.” “In the novel *The Betrothed*”, Gramsci writes, “there is not one

common person who is not teased or laughed at ... They are depicted as wretched and narrow people with no inner life. Only the nobles have an inner life” (Q 23, § 51). Gramsci cannot avoid noticing that the official interpretation of the subalterns offered by Italian intellectuals does not rest merely on a narrow definition but strikes at the very heart of their personhood as human beings, leaving them incapable of “an inner life.”

As a conclusion to his analysis, Green summarises the Gramscian position thus: (1) it is possible to produce a history of the subalterns; (2) these groups evolve according to phases or degrees of political organisation; (3) the hegemonic context in which subalterns find themselves (the political, social, economic and cultural milieu) promotes and strives to maintain the situation of subalternity; and (4) despite these difficulties, subaltern groups are able to transform their social subordination (Green 2002, 15).

At this point, Green examines recent trends in publications by the *Subaltern Studies* collective, headed by Ranajit Guha, which taking inspiration from Gramsci, has disseminated the term “subaltern” internationally. In his analysis Green includes Spivak’s article (1988) and prefaces his argument by maintaining that both Spivak’s and Guha’s reading of Gramsci is based almost exclusively on *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971) and therefore offers a very restricted interpretation of the Gramscian concept of the “subaltern.” Yet whilst Guha’s reference to Gramsci seems motivated by an acknowledgement of Gramsci’s relevance to the *Subaltern Studies* project (Guha 2007), Spivak’s intentions seem to be different, as I demonstrate below (Buttigieg 1998, 56).

The shortcomings of Guha's approach is emphasised also by Spivak, who defines as "essentialist and taxonomic" Guha's description of subalterns as "different from the elite". According to Spivak, the discourse of *Subaltern Studies* is intrinsically flawed because it relies on British, nationalist and colonialist documents, in which subalterns leave minimal traces. If the representation of subalterns finds itself "inscribed" into the dominant discourse, Spivak concludes "the subaltern cannot speak." Clearly, this position dissociates itself from a Gramscian approach when referring to the search for "traces" offered by the subaltern.

## **2. Can the Subaltern Speak? Not merely a rhetorical question.**

Taking into consideration Green's meticulous analysis, I want to propose a further reflection on Spivak's question *Can the Subaltern Speak?* which "has gone around the world" (Baratta 2008) and never ceases to challenge our intellect.

Spivak does not seem at all interested in deepening a reflection on the Gramscian discourse on the subaltern, as she herself has pointed out (Spivak 2004).<sup>1</sup> Rather, Spivak underlines at various stages that her critique of both the occidental "desire" to problematise the subject and the way in which the "third-world" subject is represented in western discourse, finds pertinent and ample support in Marx and Derrida, thus making Gramsci – presumably – redundant. She maintains that the occidental intellectual production colludes with the international economic interests of the West, a position with which I am in complete agreement. What leaves me perplexed is not so much her proposal of an alternative analysis of relations between "Western discourses" and the possibility of "speaking of (or for) the subaltern woman" (Spivak 1988, 271), and not even so much her choice of case-study - the

abolition of the “widows’ sacrifice” (*sati*) by the British in India - but more the process she adopts to reach this end.

It seems clear that Spivak is not only interested in exposing the deficiencies of “the Western subject”, but she is also interested in taking an explicit position within the struggle for “intellectual supremacy” in the West. At a time when in the U.S. intellectual scene the alternative choices are between the poststructuralist positions of Foucault/Deleuze or Derrida, Spivak sides with the latter. Indeed, this is apparent when she states that her essay was written “whether in defence of Derrida or not” (291), or when she affirms that “this is not an apology” (292). The counterposition Foucault-Derrida is most noticeable at the beginning of part three of her article, where Spivak writes with perceptible dissent referring to the choice of U.S. academics and students who prefer Foucault to Derrida (Spivak 1988, 291). This critique had already been raised in a previous, apparently harmless note:

It is important to note that the greatest “influence” of Western European intellectuals upon U.S. professors and students happens through collections of essays rather than long books in translation. And, in those collections, it is understandably the most topical pieces that gain a great currency... (Spivak 1988, 309).

No objection can be raised to this argument, except that Spivak is accusing her North American colleagues of operating in the same way she has in relation to Gramsci. I confine myself here to the substantial acknowledgement by Spivak of the advantages of deconstruction as a methodology appropriate to resisting the assimilation of Alterity, as this happens in the imperialist formation of the colonial subject. In more specific terms, Spivak maintains that even efforts carried out by anthropology,



history, political science and sociology “will, in the long run, cohere with the work of imperialist subject constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization. And the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever” (1988, 295).

Perhaps we should deduce that, precisely because Derrida’s text does not contain the word “woman”, the latter becomes an inaccessible absence and for that very reason inassimilable by Derrida’s text and hence not exposed to logocentrism. This motivates Spivak’s choice to propose for reflection *the silence* of a woman (her grandmother’s sister) who, in 1926, hanged herself in her own father’s house in Calcutta. Ten years after her death, it was discovered that Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri – this woman – was part of a group supporting independence and, unable to carry out a political assassination assigned to her, killed herself. For Spivak this suicide becomes “an unemphatic, ad hoc, subaltern rewriting of the social text of sati-suicide” (308), given that at the end “the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read.” (ibid.).<sup>2</sup> Spivak’s critique, both against British imperialism, in its intent to carry out a civilizing mission, and against fanatical nationalism, is impeccable both from historical and literary perspectives. The analysis of texts leads Spivak to conclude that *sati* is the result of a “grammatical error”, thus stressing once again the impossibility of recovering the subaltern woman as a subject. In her very last paragraph, Spivak reiterates once more the supremacy of Derridian deconstruction – “which I do not celebrate as feminism as such” (308) – over the positions of Foucault and Deleuze.

I fully concur with Spivak that Derrida’s radical critique has had a decisive impact in exposing “the danger to appropriate the other by assimilation.” I also share her view that Derrida provides us with useful analytical tools with which to contest the violent

supremacy of the occidental Logos-subject. But I also maintain that Derrida is not the only theorist within western thought *to question the subject* and to motivate ethical responsibilities that resist the assimilation of the Other. I believe a return to Gramsci's thesis on subaltern groups is imperative to avoid mystifying traps: Gramscian theory, always directed towards praxis, is no less demanding.

Without diminishing the value of Spivak's reading of events, we could perhaps put forward a more radical critique meant to contrast both western imperialism in India and the persistence of colonialism within postcolonial India. The original title of Spivak's article was "Power, Desire, Interest" and as such it awakens possible Gramscian reflections. There are, indeed, a few questions which need to be addressed. The first would be: why did the British feel the need to abolish the "widows' suicide" (*sati*) and, judging it an abhorrent tradition, try to justify their colonial enterprise as a "civilizing mission"? Why did the abolition of "Untouchability" not receive the same consideration by the colonizers? In a sense, *Untouchability* more than *sati* would seem to include western ideological imperialism connected with colonial economic exploitation, as Spivak rightly maintains.

Whilst the practice of *sati* had been formally abolished in the Presidency of Bengal in 1829, only as late as 1833 did the British Parliament approve the "Slavery Abolition Act." In South Asia today, *Dalits* represent the quintessence of this reality, not only from an economic and social point of view, but also from an ontological perspective, touching the order of being and of human personhood. Our main concern is that at the basis of their subalternity there lies an ideology defining them less-than-human, which is then translated and ramified in very concrete terms in the daily life of *Dalits*. For them subalternity becomes a spatial/territorial, economical, social, educational and, above all, religious/ontological segregation. This is also the poignant and

powerful meaning of the word “*Dalit*” – “broken, downtrodden” . The adoption of the term *Dalit* as self-designation springs out of the awareness and perception of the oppression/humiliation (Guru 2009) they have to endure: the real subaltern in Gramscian terms. When the word *Dalit* is spoken by a non-*Dalit* it might have the character of a derogatory remark. Yet for *Dalits* themselves the term has become a place of resistance and a reason for struggle.

The question thus returns - making today an ever more urgent appeal - for the subaltern-*Dalits* of South Asia: “Can the subaltern speak?” If Derridian deconstruction of the occidental subject prevents us from hearing the cry of the subaltern, then Gramsci becomes indispensable in calling the Western subject to its ethical responsibilities, because this is an ethical question. If upholding the *sati* tradition can be ascribed to a grammatical error, then which grammatical error is it that allowed *Untouchability* to exist and persist in South Asia? If it is true that the Western subject has imposed an imperial domination through the “violence of episteme”, which episteme and what different epistemology validate the continuity of *Untouchability*? Besides the *Manusmirti* there is also the interpretation of these scriptures by the “centres of knowledge” and the creation of apparatuses – including mythologies (Zene 2007) – which further validate caste and *Untouchability*. We witness here the confluence of hegemony employed by civil society – in different ways within South Asia – with hegemony exercised by the State (Buttigieg 1998, 59-60) in a concurrence that preserves caste and *Untouchability*, notwithstanding the fluidity of these concepts and their different construal from the pre-colonial through the postcolonial period.

I do not stand in opposition to the feminist stance adopted by Spivak. My proposal is in fact to radicalise Spivak’s position even further. If a young woman belonging to a

high-caste kills herself without explanation and that gesture is interpreted as the “silence of the subaltern”, my reply is that *Dalit* women are doubly subaltern, both as women and as *Dalit*. Not only does the *Dalit* woman *speak and talk*, but she wants to be listened to through words, poetry, singing, dancing and working - and more precisely the always underpaid extra-work. Often the *Dalit* woman finds herself compelled to subtract a handful of rice from the family dinner, sell that rice and pay for her daughter’s education, so that the latter will not like her, be illiterate, but will learn to defend herself from within and outside the group (Zene 2002). Besides inspiring a different understanding of ‘dalitness’ within their own communities, *Dalit* women have also motivated feminist scholarship to challenge Brahmanical feminism (Rao ed. 2003; Tharu 2003; Rege 2004, 2006; Narayan 2006), to address anew the ‘Caste Question’ (Rao 2009) and to postulate the *Dalit* as a “new political subject” (Rao 2008). There are thus many reasons – around 200 million reasons in fact, equal to the number of *Dalits* in South Asia – that compel me to radicalize our reflection, in this sense Gramscian, on the subaltern.

### **3. “Learning to learn from the Subaltern”**

In more recent interventions (Spivak 1990, 1993, 1999, 2000), especially a key-note address delivered at the UCSB (Spivak 2004), Spivak reaffirms some key-concepts when, for instance, she says: “No one can say ‘I am a subaltern’ in whatever language.” She reiterates well-known positions, such as her dedication to theoretical study, asserting clearly that she is not a political activist, and that she proposes to recuperate the role of abstraction when upholding concepts such as the State and secularism.

In her UCSB communication, Spivak maintains that the “old subaltern” is replaced by a “new subaltern”, asserting that she “read Gramsci separately.” This “new subaltern”, however, highlights Spivak’s own trajectory: by way of her commitment (“my fieldwork”) during the past 15-20 years promoting education among Tribal groups (*Adivasis*) in North Bengal, Spivak has discovered multiple levels of subalternity. The “new subaltern” appears to her as “very permeable” and thus exposed to the risk of being not only represented, but also exploited by the global market. Through this, Spivak has reached a conclusion that leads her to a pedagogic philosophy: “learn from the subaltern”, and more precisely “learn to learn from below.”

For this to happen we must acknowledge that subalterns are in fact able and allowed not only to speak and to talk but also “to teach”. She makes references, for instance to the pertinent ‘logic’ used by *Adivasis*, insisting that “... *logic is not the property of Europe*”. Once again, I believe that Derrida is not alone in highlighting the problematic character of the occidental subject and that a deconstructivist position leaves us insolvent until a manifest ethical stance intervenes to urge the western subject to become accountable and responsible. Spivak’s intention of “learning how to learn from the subaltern”, can be put into practice when this ethical subject is ready “to learn how to listen to, in order to learn from the subaltern.” This pedagogy seems eminently Gramscian to me, in that it looks at “integral history” as an “integral historian”, ready to listen and to search for those “traces” that will allow us to recognize elements of resistance.

In her speech at Santa Barbara, Spivak hints at personal details - she belongs to the Bengali middle-class, she is an “old socialist”, a non-believer and so does not consider herself Hindu - all reasonable standpoints and irreproachable personal

choices. However, when these choices are pushed to the extreme, they prevent Spivak from seeing reality through the eyes of the integral historian. The fact that she does not consider herself Hindu, does not mean that a great part of the hegemonic Indian civil society has renounced considering itself Hindu. In renouncing to be a Hindu, Spivak does not seem to feel the need to discuss in depth the presence in India of the caste system, as a direct consequence of Hinduism at a social level. Once again, this does not acknowledge that for many the caste system constitutes a most 'painful' reality. As a consequence, she prefers to talk, even in Marxist terms, of social class. However, given this premise, I think that one cannot avoid taking caste into consideration, even when one proposes a discourse on class consciousness. It appears impossible not to perceive that this hegemonic religious ideology justifies an apparently immutable stratification of society, hence providing a validation for the presence of subaltern groups within the caste system. Moreover, we need to move "beyond caste" in order to identify those human groups who are not even considered worthy to belong to the castes and are thus defined as "Outcastes", and hence "Untouchables."<sup>3</sup> This is so because some religious-legal texts deem them to be permanently "impure" (*asuci*), as defined by those who regard themselves as "pure" and want to remain so.

If, on the one hand, the choice of those who do not share a caste ideology seems commendable, on the other, given that they disregard this ideology, it represents a blind choice from the point of view of "integral history", given that castes do not disappear simply by being ignored, and that the subjugation of *Dalits* and others still persists. The latter, for instance, lament that when they adhere to left-wing movements and parties, they are still treated as Untouchables by leaders and "intellectuals" who belong to high castes (Bandyopadhyay 2008).<sup>4</sup>

Returning to Spivak, but also to Gramsci, I would like to point out: (1) If we wish to propose for South Asia a prototype of subaltern who embodies those characteristics expressed by Gramsci, we cannot but think of the *Dalits* or, more precisely, of *Dalit* women. (2) The categories used by Spivak to identify the “new subaltern” clearly point back – in addition to a different comprehension of this reality by Spivak – to the phases proposed by Gramsci for subalterns. The diverse groups of *Dalits* in South Asia reflect this Gramscian classification of phases of subalternity, precisely because they are compelled to progress from the lowest possible level of non-humanity. (3) Gramscian terminology, which contemplates not just “subaltern classes” but also “subaltern groups,” allows us to open up to different circumstances and scenarios, such as those present in South Asia. (4) In their history these *Dalit* groups manifest moments and “traces” of self-consciousness of their subaltern condition and they offer palpable examples of resistance and a willingness to overcome subalternity – at different levels and to varying degrees – despite the persistence of “disaggregation, multiplicity and juxtaposition”.<sup>5</sup> (5) Gramsci invites us to consider “integral history” as an effective methodology employed to discover those “traces” present in the history of *Dalits*. It is a history that takes into account how *Dalits* express themselves, in order to manifest and overcome their subalternity through their own means and their meta-language: folklore, popular religiosity, so-called “superstitions”, tales and myths, proverbs, music, dance, theatre, figurative arts, or what Boninelli (2007) calls “indigestible fragments” or, more poetically, “Gramscian paths.”

No one can be prevented from choosing and defending secularism or agnosticism, as the affirmation of a humanism free from “absolute” ideologies. But we cannot avoid asking ourselves why for subalterns, in this case for *Dalits*, religion represents an important reality, expressed through both their adherence to various reformist

movements within Hinduism (Bhakti, Vaisnava, Sanskritisation) or their conversion to other religions such as Islam, Buddhism and Christianity (Zelliot 2004). Even prior to judging whether their commitment to these movements and religions has effectively resolved their condition of subalternity, we must question the reasons behind their choices and seek to understand their ultimate motivations (Díaz-Salazar 1991).

In a socio-historical context that defines human beings in terms of their ability to relate to and get closer to the divine, it seems obvious that for those who are excluded, ostracised and effectively denied this choice, there remains no alternative but to demonstrate their ability to achieve proximity to the divine, if only in a polemical manner. If “religious language” is reserved by hegemonic powers to maintain the subaltern’s subjugation, then it seems logical – even when different from Western logics and epistemology – that subalterns use this very language to re-affirm themselves and their human dignity.<sup>6</sup> In other words, if to possess *Dharma* – which we commonly translate as “religion,” but which also implies law, moral code, and duty – means to be human and hence capable of practising *dharmikota* (religiosity/religiousness) and of taking upon oneself the range of implied responsibilities, then it is evident that *Dalits*, deprived of the possibility of achieving *Dharma*, will do everything in their power to prove and assert their *dharmikota*. If this is what is asked of me in order to attest to my “being a person,” then I will consider all possible mechanisms and will use every means to attain this. I have no alternative but to use the existing language-code also as a meta-language in order to “announce” (to speak and to talk) that I too am human. And there is nothing more “Gramscian” than this. Following Eleanor Zelliot’s lead, recent scholarship in India



has emphasized the socio-religious and cultural dimensions present in the *Dalit*-subaltern experience (Bhagavan and Feldhaus 2008a, 2008b; Zelliott 1996, 2004).

#### **4. “We too are Humans” (*Amrao je manus*).**

The question of “humanity” seems to be at the core, even in Gramscian terms, when summing up all other concerns that affect the life of *Dalits*. This is the issue taken up by Baratta in his reflection on the subaltern when he asks, “what is a human being?” thus combining the Gramscian enquiry with a Heideggerian slant on the “sense of being” (Baratta 2004, 128). If *Dalits* in South Asia experience a negation of their being as “humans” - not just as a social practice but from an ontological perspective (“the ontological hurt endured by untouchables” – Gheeta 2009, 107) - then we must conclude they have been placed at the lowest degree of subalternity. Furthermore if, once they have reached the far end of “non-being”, they continue to tell us “I am a human being, too!”, then it becomes a duty for the integral historian to retrace their journey – perhaps together with them – so as to discover those “traces of resistance” that their history offers.

I share Spivak’s pedagogical philosophy according to which we need to “learn how to learn” from the subaltern, a philosophy I find most Gramscian: learning how to be taught and how to understand, hence to experience how to merge theory with practice, to then return to “my initial theory” in order to purify it from the many trivialities that are burdensome, so as to make it more human and humanising. I share this position also because I have experienced it myself, while conducting research in Bangladesh among the Rishi, ex-Untouchables and *Dalits*.<sup>7</sup> In my historical-anthropological research, I contacted various Rishi groups distributed in the south-

west region of Khulna. Some of these groups have, since 1856, converted to Christianity. My research took me also among those who had not converted and were “affiliated” with Hinduism. One evening during 1989 while in Chuknagar, a missionary who had resided with the Rishi for several years organised a meeting so I could interview their headmen. After exchanging views on the general situation of the group, our conversation turned to the issue of “conversion”, since the missionary had not wanted to “accept” them into Christianity. According to the missionary, they were not yet ready. The headmen insisted, but all their remarks received equally “logical” replies from the missionary. After a long pause, the eldest among them got up and before leaving said to the missionary: “Remember, Father, we too are human beings” (*Amrao je manus – Zene 2000*). Those words have never left me and still motivate my present research. The elder headman was teaching us to understand his experience as Untouchable-Subaltern and to recognise his desire to define himself differently from the way others identified him.

During my stay among the Rishi, I came to verify how those words translated into a common praxis within the group, a praxis “necessarily fragmented and episodic” (Notebook 3, §14), but still containing traces of opposition to hegemonic power. For example, when at election time a local candidate promised to provide a tube-well or build a road for the Chuknagar Rishi in exchange for votes, they asked instead for a small temple, at the centre of their quarters, where their rituals could be celebrated. Besides challenging those who drive them “out of the temple”, they were also making a statement to all others that, if the divine was in their midst, they too must be humans. This choice, well beyond ‘Sanskritization’ or against religious ostracism, reveals a desire to obtain socio-religious and political visibility, as the following example shows: likewise during election time, the big Rishi electorate in Dumuria

was divided among three different polling stations, so that they could not unite their votes to elect their own candidate, but they nevertheless gained a small majority. Again, the Chuknagar Rishi, hired by the caste-Hindus to play for the Durga *Puja*, played their drums throughout the night in celebration of *Narajan*, one of the lesser divinities, always with the intention of showing that they too knew how to be in touch with the divine. The last example comes from the successful Rishi community of Tala, who have become agriculturalists and are no longer “cow skimmers.” They refused the invitation of the caste-Hindus to celebrate the Durga together with them, and instead did so on their own, spending lavishly and showing great pride. All these ‘Hindu’-Rishi groups have put much effort, with the help of missionaries, into the education of younger generations.

After much time spent among these Rishi groups, it became easier to ask them how they saw themselves. Initially, in fact, their comments were a reflection of what others – caste-Hindus, Muslims, missionaries, police, teachers – would say about them. Only later did they feel at ease to let me know what they thought about themselves. At times I judged their statements false, until I realised that they were projecting a vision of themselves in the future, not just as they were seen by others but most of all as they “wanted to be” seen. I was re-reading Heidegger at that point and I had in front of me the clearest example of the “futurity of being.” I also remembered a passage in *Notebook 14*, where Gramsci discusses “Pirandello’s Theatre”, introducing there a variation on the question “what is the human being?”: “... It seems to me that ‘one’s real nature’ is determined by the struggle to become what one wants to become” (Gramsci 1985, 145).

There are many more examples relating to the history of the Rishi that could be cited as a commentary on this “struggle to become what one wants to become”. These

examples correspond to the traces left by these “groups without history”, inscribed within the histories of colonial powers or in missionary diaries. For instance, in response to the Census Reports from 1850 onwards, the Rishi used different names in their entries – Chamar, Rishi, Muchi and also *Kristan* (Christian) – thus confusing the officials in charge of logging the census data. The Rishi of Baradal, at the beginning of 1900, refused the invitation of the Calcutta Jesuits to convert to Christianity. However, in 1937 they sent a delegation to Calcutta to invite the Jesuits back in order to be “protected” from the police and the many law-suits made against them. They had been accused of carrying out “illegal activities” and had been threatened to be registered under the Criminal Tribes Act (1871). Later, in 1947, soon after the partition of India, these Rishi found themselves in East Pakistan (today Bangladesh) and the Belgian Jesuit Fr. Koster helped them carry out their activity as smugglers, not to enrich themselves, but to survive. The Jesuits, and others subsequently, understood that the “conversion” of the Rishi was a slow process entailing a great deal of bargaining and, according to this logic, the Rishi tried to achieve benefits for themselves, while negotiating with Catholics, Hindus, Muslims and Protestants (Zene 2002).

### **5. From “Untouchables” to *Dalits*.**

If we broaden our reflection to include other *Dalit* groups in Bangladesh, we will obtain an even more radical perspective, particularly when taking into account certain factors: (1) “Untouchability” should not be part of the ideology of the Islamic Republic of Bangladesh. However, neither the Partition of India nor the Independence of the country (1971) were sufficient to guarantee equality for *Dalits*.

(2) The Bangladeshi *Dalits* constitute a substantial minority, and in a more precarious position compared to Indian *Dalits*. (3) Only ten years ago, the word “*Dalit*” was scarcely used by Bangladeshi Untouchables (BDHR – IDSN 2006). This confirms an unmistakable emergence of self-awareness among Bangladeshi *Dalits* and a decisive will to make their status as subaltern firstly recognized and then transformed.

At present, *Dalits* in Bangladesh are creating networks both at regional and national levels and seeking collaboration with international organisations (IIDS – IDSN 2008, BDERM, NU and IDSN 2009; AITPN 2009). In 2001 the association *Bangladesh Dalits’ Human Rights* (BDHR) was created, and in 2005 the *Network for Socially Excluded Communities*, thus inaugurating a series of meetings of *Dalit* organisations in the country. In 2006 the BDHR network organised a consultative meeting, with the participation of UN and other international delegates, in order to assess the situation of *Dalits* in Bangladesh, to prepare a detailed proposal on the presence and consistency of *Dalit* groups and the creation of an association of these groups.

Another suggestion established how *Dalits* who worked on their own would be free to help fellow *Dalits*. The representatives insisted that *Dalits* should take upon themselves the responsibility of the leadership. This self-awareness made them realise it was not enough to gain “small victories” but they had to have an impact at national level. In other words, their interlocutor needed to be the State itself. The sweepers, always considered impure and Untouchables, declared themselves “ready for strike-action.” However, they still needed to solve internal problems regarding their *Dalit* identity: either keeping the old name of *Harijan* or adopting instead the name of *Dalit*:

Naming someone *Harijan* implies that the person is a ‘son of God’ i.e. a person without a father (born of a prostitute or sexual worker), whereas *Dalits* means “the oppressed people”. ... [I]t carries more stigmas for people to label themselves *Harijans*. ... Now there is a conflict because the elderly have always identified themselves as *Harijans*. ( BDHR – IDSN 2006, 21)

This quote contains many “traces” referring to the precarious internal cohesion of *Dalits*, to the difficulties that await them on the road towards full consciousness of their identity and to the ability to implement possible political choices, but it also represents the effort to overcome those limitations. The whole endeavour confirms that these subaltern groups do experience different degrees of self-consciousness and find themselves at different stages, in Gramscian terms, in the process of overcoming their subalternity. However, as Spivak recognised, these groups just as other subalterns, are exposed to manipulation by unscrupulous ‘entrepreneurs’ – the “jackals of development” - who see them as exploitable assets on the international market.

## **Conclusion**

The present moment seems to be particularly favourable in the history of Gramscian studies. There is no doubt that Gramsci’s ideas have reached places of prestige as well as remote corners of all continents, including South Asia. These reflections have been favoured by recent translations of his writings, such as the *Prison Notebooks*, which finally will be available in a complete English edition (Buttigieg 1992; Gramsci 1992, 1996, 2007). Moreover, there has been a real osmosis between Gramscian studies outside Italy and new reflections within Italy, where the novelty of

“Gramsci beyond Gramsci” (Baratta 2007) confronts itself with well-established critical-philological studies on the Gramscian lexicon (Frosini e Liguori 2004, Liguori e Voza 2009) and on translation and translatability (Boothman 2004, Jervolino 2008). My own efforts also take this direction, as I try to make Gramsci “readable” and translatable for the *Dalits* of South Asia, about whom he too, in his own way, had already spoken.

Many of the authors quoted here suggest ways to recover and put to good use a Gramscian methodology that recognises the presence of the subaltern in new contexts and at times different from those analysed by Gramsci himself. Our task will be to recover those “traces” present in the fragmented history of these groups so as to detect the vital elements that will assist them in overcoming their subalternity. Today, more than ever, the *Dalits* of South Asia are able to express their resistance to oppression through media to which in the past they had no access. To the renowned creativity of the *Dalits* who express their experience through singing, music, poetry, dance and the “beating of drums” (Clarke 2000), a great number of new reflections and publications have now been added, both in the shape of detailed monographs discussing *Dalits*’ experiences (Charslay and Karnath eds. 1998, Shah ed. 2001, Gorringer 2004, Narayan 2006), and more general studies (Bhatt 2005, Chatterjee 2004, Das 2004, Jenkins 2003, Yagati 2003, Anand ed. 2005, Yadav ed. 2002, Shah ed. 2002, Webster 2007) addressed to current topics in the processes and developments of contemporary *Dalit* movements (Hardtmann 2009). These efforts are consolidated by the use of the internet by concerned scholars as well as by *Dalits* themselves who find it a valuable means to convey their ideas and programmes of action (web.seminar 2001, 2006).

During the past few years a major change has been taking place: the emphasis seems to have shifted from *Dalits'* mere awareness of their “oppression”, towards the mobilisation of consciousness as a “transforming agent” of subalternity, and hence towards a new path taking them from “desperate cries” to liberating action. This new line of thought, in addition to regaining the historic figures of the “*Dalit* question” – such as Jotirao Pule, Valangkar, Periyar, and Ambedkar (Chatterjee 2004)– addresses the formation of methodological concepts which, by revealing the many spheres in which subalternity is present, offer feasible solutions to overcome it.

A few months before his death in 1956, in a last desperate attempt to recover his humanity, the *Dalit* leader Ambedkar (Zelliot 2004) converted to Buddhism, along with a large number of “Untouchable” Mahars. Prior to this, in 1927, Ambedkar, together with his followers, publicly burned copies of *Manusmirti*, and in 1930, while prompting them to enter Hindu temples, he exhorted them with these words:

It is not true that entry into Hindu temples will solve your whole problem. Our problem is very broad. It extends into the political, social, religious and economic spheres. Today's *satyagraha* is a challenge to the Hindu mind. From this true *satyagraha* we shall see whether Hindu society is ready to treat us as human beings. <sup>8</sup>

For many countries in South Asia, the existing presence of subaltern groups, particularly of *Dalits*, reveals a certain failure of the “democratic State.” The situation of *Dalits* in contemporary India, defined as the “most populous democracy in the world”, invites us to think critically and rigorously about those categories so intertwined with the grasp of “subalternity”: state, civil society and hegemony. All this prompts us to consider how, for Gramsci, “hegemony and civil society remit to



unequal power relations” and that Gramsci “highlights the limits of modern democracy” (Buttigieg 1998, 55).

At this point the question – the Gramscian question – returns to mind as significant as ever, open and still unanswered: “Which conclusions could an analysis of civil society reach, when accomplished today in a Gramscian style – hence an analysis which is critical, concrete, specific, and from the point of view of the subaltern?” (Buttigieg 1998, 62). Or, from the point of view of our reflection: “... if, indeed, the Dalit is an inaugural political subject, then how is it possible to write an account of India’s [and South Asia’s] political modernity without engaging with the problem of Dalit freedom and emancipation?” (Rao 2008, 25).

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<sup>1</sup> Spivak affirms that: “ ... I was just beginning to read the *Subaltern Studies* then and I was therefore dependent upon that group’s reading of Gramsci’s notion of the subaltern. In my essay I made it clear that I was talking about the space as defined by Ranajit Guha ...” (Spivak 1993, 288). However, she never felt the need to return to Gramsci: “I think the word ‘subaltern’ is losing its definitive power ...” (ibid. 290).

<sup>2</sup> Spivak refers to the subtle distinction between “to speak” and “to talk” , according to which “... within the definition of subalternity as such there is a certain not-being-able-to-make-speech acts that is implicit ...” (1993, 290-91).

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- <sup>3</sup> The authors of *Subaltern Studies* have often uncritically adopted the position of Louis Dumont (1970) with regard to the interpretation of the caste system.
- <sup>4</sup> See “Feminist Narratives of Indian Left”,  
<http://readerswords.wordpress.com/2008/04/14/feminist-naratives-of-indian-left/>
- <sup>5</sup> “It may remain a practical impossibility to organise Untouchables as a single, all-India, political force, but as a whole *Dalits* are now more committed than ever before to what they increasingly recognise as their common struggle ...” (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 1998, 1).
- <sup>6</sup> “We argue that, for Gramsci, fragmentation of any social group’s ‘common sense’, worldview and language is a political detriment, impeding effective political organisation to counter exploitation but that such fragmentation cannot be overcome by the imposition of a 'rational' or 'logical' worldview. Instead, what is required is a deep engagement with the fragments that make up subaltern historical, social, economic and political conditions” (Green and Ives 2009, 3).
- <sup>7</sup> The (*Muchi*)-*Rishi* of Bengal and Bangladesh are leather-workers, skimmers, and musicians by trade and share the fate of the *Chamars* present all over the Indian Subcontinent (Zene 2002).
- <sup>8</sup> From the speech of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, 2 March, 1930, at the Kala Ram Mandir, in Nashik (Maharashtra), in the presence of 15,000 *Dalits*.