Subaltern Studies emerged in 1982 as a radical challenge to existing models of history-writing. It aimed ‘to overturn the existing historiography of modern India and to establish the centrality of subaltern aspirations and actions in the historical process’ (Arnold 2000, p. 38). The new subalternist paradigm sought to recover the voices and struggles of those that were written out of history by élite-centred historiographies, whether colonial or nationalist. However, while the early volumes were ‘full of references to “subaltern classes”, evocations of [the Italian Marxist, Antonio] Gramsci, and the use of much Marxian terminology’ (Sarkar 2000b, p. 300) the scope, focus, and audience of the project changed with its gradual embrace of a postmodernist theoretical paradigm through the 1990s. In the process, Subaltern Studies has been transformed from an Indian phenomenon to a global institution, from a collection producing Marxian histories of colonial India to one featuring poststructuralist readings and crossing temporal, regional, and disciplinary boundaries (p. vii).

The greatest achievement of Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial lies in its ability to map critically this transformation, to ‘trace the trajectory of Subaltern Studies from the Marxism of its inception to its current postmarxist contours’ (p. vii). The anthology gathers a diverse number of commentaries by subalternists and their critics that were published outside the school from 1982–2000; only Ranajit Guha’s essay (2000 [1982]) was originally published in Subaltern Studies. Vinayak Chaturvedi’s selection of texts is excellent, producing an overview of the most hotly debated topics around the school, including the subalternists’ conceptualisation of the peasantry and ‘history from below’, problems and developments in their model of subjectivity, and

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1 Following Callinicos 1989, I use the term ‘postmodernist’ to describe literary/aesthetic, philosophical, and economic theories that identify current shifts and innovations in art, culture, notions of self/nation, and relations of production/consumption as belonging to an epoch of ‘postmodernity’ – one that is fundamentally different from capitalist modernity.

2 See also Vanaik 1997, p. 180.

3 Chaturvedi 2000 advocates reading Mapping Subaltern Studies, alongside the original series. The anthologies edited by Guha and Spivak 1988, and Guha 1998, are useful, but the selections are tilted in a postmodernist direction. For a consideration of work on subalternity outside South Asia, see Ludden 2002.
the ideological underpinnings of the new historiography. Further, by revealing the trajectory of *Subaltern Studies*’ transformation through the prism of secondary texts written over two decades, *Mapping Subaltern Studies* invites the reader to witness the changing and dialectical relationship between theoretical schools (Marxism, postmodernism, postcolonialism), *Subaltern Studies* itself, and individual contributors (especially Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rosalind O’Hanlon, Gayatri C. Spivak, and Sumit Sarkar), with each element transforming the other in decisive ways.

My aim here is to outline a Marxist understanding of the category of subalternity by contextualising and elaborating upon the main essays in *Mapping Subaltern Studies*. I begin by contrasting Gramsci’s use of the term and that of the subalternists – both Marxian and postmodernist – in order to reveal the fundamental shift from Marxism and class analysis that *Subaltern Studies*, as a whole, represents. While Gramsci explicitly linked subalternity to the structures of capitalism, emphasising both the possibilities and limitations of subaltern action, *Subaltern Studies* has always maintained a strict dichotomy between subaltern and élite spheres, asserting the complete autonomy of the subaltern. Next, I examine the specific differences between the early-Marxian and late-postmodernist phases. I argue that the postmodernist intervention of the late 1980s and early 1990s ‘corrected’ the theoretical ambiguities of the school by directly challenging its essentialist and/or its residual Marxist tendencies. However, the postmodernist method of defining the subaltern by its *difference* and of insisting on the impossibility of representation has not only resulted in a new essentialism, but has even turned *Subaltern Studies* away from its focus on the subaltern.

The weakness of the category of subalternity, in either its Marxian or poststructuralist versions, emerges from its attempt to invoke the peasantry as the revolutionary class in the place of the proletariat and, as a consequence, to displace classical-Marxist notions of objective class position with concepts of experience, community, and power. Ultimately, the peasant-centred category of subalternity has done little more than to say, as it were, ‘They cannot represent themselves; they cannot be represented’, twisting Marx’s famous phrase about peasants, ‘They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented’. Like the peasant in classical Marxism, the subalternists’

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4 Postmodernism, especially Foucauldian thought, is the key link between *Subaltern Studies* and postcolonialism; see Prakash 2000a and Sarkar 2000a. One might also argue, however, that *Subaltern Studies* and postcolonialism have given postmodernism new life since the 1990s. For Marxian critiques of postcolonialism today see Ahmad 1992, San Juan, Jr., 1998, Lazarus 1999, and Bartolovich and Lazarus (eds.) 2002. Under the impact of the postmodernist turn in *Subaltern Studies* over the last fifteen years, O’Hanlon 2000 has gone from embracing postmodernism, to gaining prominence as one of its key critics, in O’Hanlon and Washbrook 2000, Chakrabarty 2000, has rejected his innovative Marxism of 1983, for an anti-Marxist position, and Sarkar 2000b has left the collective entirely. Spivak has maintained her position on the borders of the school, publishing within it, and editing its collections, Guha and Spivak 1988, and appropriating its terminology, in Spivak 1988 and Spivak 2000, while always constructing herself as an outsider, as in Spivak 1999.

5 Marx 1963, p. 124. Marx’s phrase has long been a favourite target of postcolonial and postmodernist critics in their quest to portray all nineteenth-century thinkers, regardless of