

## Geography 516 Urban Geography: Subaltern Urbanism



*clashing built form near Bandra-Kurla, Mumbai; source: unequalscenes*

**D. Asher Ghertner**

**Tuesdays 12:10-3:10, Lucy Stone Hall, B120**

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### **Course Introduction**

In a 2004 lecture, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reflected on the trajectories of “the subaltern” as an historical concept, discussing how her interpretation of the concept related to but differed from those who wrote before her. For Antonio Gramsci, the subaltern was a class category—the “subaltern classes,” as he termed them—defined in a relation of difference from (but not opposition to) “the proletariat” or “the working class” through its historical subordination not just within relations of production (economic class position) but also relations of force. The subaltern lacked representation in political society and was defined by its denied autonomy and epistemological erasure: “The history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. There undoubtedly does exist a tendency to (at least provisional stages of) unification in the historical activity of these groups, but this tendency is continually interrupted by the activity of the ruling groups” (Gramsci 1971, 54–5). This gives “the subaltern” in Gramsci a necessarily ambiguous form, defined by its position in domination, its tendency toward autonomy, and its occupation of a structural position between subjection/subordination and *subjectivation*—or its realization as an historical Subject (an agent of history).

The Subaltern Studies Collective, a group of Indian historians most famous for advancing the term, encountered a snippet on the subaltern in Gramsci's methodological notes (from Notebook 25 of his *Prison Notebooks*) in an English volume on Italian history in the early 1980s. They used Gramsci's reflection on the absence of the subaltern classes in the historiography of the Italian unification to launch a new, non-nationalist, anti-colonial historiography aimed at taking into account, and even privileging, the history of the subaltern classes, especially the peasantry.

Spivak was not a founding member of the Subaltern Studies Collective, and she claims no direct inspiration from Gramsci's concept, given that her hugely influential 1983 lecture, later published and retitled as "Can the Subaltern Speak?," was prepared before Gramsci was widely available to English readers and before she had come into contact with the Subaltern Studies historians. She thus developed two uses of the subaltern in her work, both of which align with Gramscian premises but with different emphases: the subaltern as a position (not identity) defined by its exclusion from the means of social mobility and the subaltern as *differential space*.

The subaltern, we thus see, is an itinerant concept, one that travels, taking on different valences in different conjunctural moments and historical debates. Throughout, however, the subaltern, as Spivak insists and Gramsci affirms, is not an identity but rather a position—a relation, or aporia, between subject and object status. This course explores the differential spaces inhabited, endured, and created by the subaltern, and the relative position of the subaltern as subject of history and object of historical discourse. It does so by considering the specific spatial practices that structure subaltern experience: those that both deny subaltern groups historical autonomy and subjectivity, that bury or burn subaltern history (epistemic violence, Spivak would call it), and those that aim toward autonomy—that intermediate step that Gramsci theorized within the march toward subjectivation.

As an urban geography course invested in the itinerant theory of the subaltern, we will explore a wide scope of differential spaces shaped by subaltern practice: the blockade, the rebellion, the rent strike, the assembly, the squat, and especially the racialized/gendered/caste-marked body—which Spivak reminds us is the primary space of politics (for it is *the woman* that is the subaltern in her reading). We aim to cling to the dual horizons of subalternity as (i) a space of difference or of autonomous possibility, and (ii) an epistemological problem, one of illegibility vis-à-vis hegemonic relations/discourse, but one whose active presence (as an erasure) is central to the maintenance/reproduction of imperial geographies of enclosure, capture and control. While clinging to the subaltern as subject and subalternity as space of denied-but-potential autonomy, we also aim to retain the epistemological critique of knowledge production that all of the above subalternists develop, to avoid the problem of what Spivak calls "the transparency of the academic," or the way that knowledge of the subaltern works to elevate (while evading) the Subject status of the analyst/writer/ intellectual. She developed this critique with specific reference to male European theorists (Foucault and Deleuze), but I hope we take it up in the largely ethnographic texts we engage—and in our own mode of reading/critique, this semester. Throughout, we aim to refuse the imperial geography the locates Southern thought/critique as contextually rooted in regionalist or area studies concerns. Subaltern urbanism is thus not a "corrective" or fix to the Eurocentrism of urban theory, but a refusal of imperial geography as lived and thought.

## Requirements

This course will be run as a reading-intensive seminar. Expect to read the equivalent of an academic book plus an article or two each week. Each week we will systematically discuss the argument, method, and implications of the required texts; present our ideas and questions to each other; and generally learn from the diverse backgrounds and perspectives we all bring. Accordingly, it is imperative that everyone comes fully prepared to participate. I fully recognize that we all come to social theory and human geography with different backgrounds, styles, languages and levels of preparation. My only expectation is that you engage the materials and come ready to discuss them collectively in group: bring questions, key concepts you want to discuss, passages you want to engage in a close reading, etc. Please feel to visit me during office hours to discuss readings further.

Each student will be expected to undertake the following each week:

- (i) Prepare a short, ~one-page (max 500 words please) **critical commentary** on each week's readings and to post this on Canvas for that week by the Monday evening (no later than 7 pm) prior to the Tuesday seminar meeting. These commentaries can engage with your own specific research interests, but should always narrow in on a problem raised by the key text(s). Beginning with a key quote, explaining its argument, locating it in the larger argument of the author, and problematizing that claim either by juxtaposing it against other arguments you've read or with the author's own propositions is one model for the critical commentary. Basic summaries of argument or explications of what "is interesting" to you are not *critical* in this sense. You do not need to prepare a commentary on weeks when you are presenting.
- (ii) **Lead/chair class discussion**, which involves a short (~10 minute) presentation of the key theoretical and conceptual issues in the readings pertaining to that week. This does not mean a summary of the authors' main arguments or an expansive literature review. Rather, it means laying out key empirical, theoretical, or methodological contributions of the week's readings, and posing a set of questions to open up and structure conversation. What shared themes, methods, critiques, or concepts emerge from the readings; or what might we learn by asking questions posed in one text of an accompanying text? I will circulate a sign-up sheet during week 2 for you to choose the week(s) you'd like to present.

## Course paper

At the end of the semester, you will submit a paper that engages the themes of the course. I do not feel strongly about the format of this paper; it should be useful to you, given where you are in your graduate studies. You are welcome to write a typical term paper (12-20 pages double spaced) that draws on course readings, but you could also write a literature review for your dissertation or a proposal – as long as it overlaps with course themes. If you are unsure whether your planned final paper/project is sufficiently related to the course, please speak with me in office hours.

## Assessment

Students will be assessed according to the following scheme:

Critical commentaries	30%
Seminar presentations	10%
Seminar participation	20%
Final paper	40%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Readings

Required course texts:

- Bandopadhyay, Ritajyoti. 2022. *Streets in Motion: The Making of Infrastructure, Property, and Political Culture in Twentieth Century Calcutta*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chari, Sharad. 2023. *Apartheid Remains*. Duke University Press.
- Cowen, Thomas. 2022. *Subaltern Frontiers: Agrarian City-Making in Gurgaon*. Cambridge University Press.
- Forgacs, David. *The Gramsci Reader*. NYU Press.
- Gonick, Sophie. 2021. *Dispossession and Dissent: Immigrants and the Struggle for Housing in Madrid*. Stanford University Press.
- Gregory, Derek. 1999. *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community*. Princeton University Press.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 2019. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. W. W. Norton & Co.
- Ross, Kristen. 2015. *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*. Verso.
- Roane, JT. 2023. *Dark Agoras: Insurgent Black Social Life and the Politics of Place*. NYU Press.
- Romero, Mercy. 2021. *Toward Camden*. Duke University Press.
- Simone, Abdoumalig. 2022. *The Surrounds: Urban Life within and Beyond Capture*. Duke University Press.

Many of these books are available electronically through the Rutgers Library. Others are available for purchase from the Rutgers Bookstore on College Ave or... anywhere.

All additional readings will be posted on the course Canvas page or placed on reserve at the Carr Library on Livingston Campus.

## Seminar Outline

### Week 1 (September 6<sup>th</sup>) – Introduction

#### Reading:

Romero, Mercy. 2021. Prologue and “Empty Lots,” from *Toward Camden*. Duke University Press, pp. 1–46.

## Week 2 (September 13<sup>th</sup>) – The Subaltern

### Readings:

- Gramsci, Antonio. 1981 [1935]. "VI. Hegemony, Relations of Force, Historical Bloc" and "XI. Philosophy, Common Sense, Language, and Folklore," in *The Gramsci Reader*, edited by Forgacs. NYU Press, 189–221 and 323–362.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. MacMillan, 271–313.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 1997. "Introduction," in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century America*. Oxford University Press.
- Jazeel, Tariq and Stephen Legg. 2019. "Subaltern Studies, Space, and the Geographical Imagination," from *Subaltern Geographies*. University of Georgia Press, 1–35.

### Additional Readings:

*The Gramsci Reader*

- Guha, Ranajit. 1982. "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in *Subaltern Studies I*, Oxford University Press, 1–8.
- Gandhi, Leela. 2014. "On descent," from *The Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy*. University of Chicago Press, 55–92.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1999. "History," in *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Harvard University Press, .
- Morris, Rosalind (ed.). 2010. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Columbia University Press.

## Week 3 (September 20<sup>th</sup>) – The Right to the City

### Readings:

- Lefebvre, Henri. "The right to the city," In *Writings on Cities*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 65–86.
- Harvey, David. 2006. "The Right to the City." *New Left Review*.
- Ross, Kristen. 2015. *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*. Verso.

### Additional Readings:

- Bayat, Asef. 2000. From 'dangerous classes' to 'quiet rebels': Politics of the urban subaltern in the global south. *International Sociology*, 15(3).
- Harvey, David. 2001. "Globalization and the 'spatial fix'," *Geographische Revue* 3(2), 23–30.
- Purcell, Mark. 2013. "Possible Worlds: Henri Lefebvre and the Right to the City." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 36:131–154.

## Week 4 (September 27<sup>th</sup>) – Apartheid Remains

In-class guest, Dr. Sharad Chari (UC-Berkeley Geography)

### Readings:

- Chari, Sharad. Forthcoming. *Apartheid Remains*. Duke University Press. Selections.
- Chari, Sharad. In Progress. *Gramsci at Sea*.

### Additional readings:

- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2014. "The Rot Remains," from *Imperial Debris*, Duke University Press, 1–38.
- Chari, Sharad. 2017. "The Blues and the Damned: (Black) life-that-survives capital and biopolitics." *Critical African Studies* 9(2): 152–173.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2016. "A Deadly Embrace: Of Colony and Camp," in *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in our Times*. Duke University Press, Ch 3.
- Khan, Azeen. 2019. "The Subaltern Clinic: On Fanon and Postcolonial Trauma." *boundary 2* 46 (4): 181–217.
- Gordillo, Gaston. 2014. "The Void: Invisible Ruins on the Edge of Empire," from *Imperial Remains* (Stoler), Duke University Press, 227–251.

## **Week 5 (October 4<sup>th</sup>) – Urban Community**

### **Readings:**

- Gregory, Derek. 1999. *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community*. Princeton University Press.
- Ekers, Mike. 2013. Gramsci and the Erotics of Labor: More Notes on the 'Sexual Question.'" In Ekers, Hart, Kipfer and Lotfus (eds), *Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics*. Wiley-Blackwell, 217–238.

### **Additional Readings:**

- Crehan, Kate. 2018. Antonio Gramsci: Toward and Ethnographic Marxism. *Saggi* 7(2):133–150.
- Kipfer, Stefan. 2013. "City, Country, Hegemony: Gramsci's Spatial Historicism." In Ekers, Hart, Kipfer and Lotfus (eds), *Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics*. Wiley-Blackwell, 83–103.
- Ralph, Laurence. 2014. Prologue and "Development, or why Grandmothers Ally with the Gang". In *Renegade Dreams*. University of Chicago Press, iii–ix and 15–38.

## **Week 6 (October 11<sup>th</sup>) – Occupancy Urbanism**

### **Readings:**

- Chatterjee, Partha. 2004. "The politics of the governed," from *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. Columbia University Press, pp. 27–90.
- Das, Veena. 2011. "State, citizenship, and the urban poor," *Citizenship Studies* 15: 319–333.
- Caldeira, Teresa. 2016. "Peripheral urbanization: autoconstruction, transversal logics, and politics in cities of the global South." *Environment and Planning D* 35: 3–20.
- Benjamin, Solomon and Bhuvaneshwari Raman. 2011. "Illegible claims, legal titles, and the worlding of Bangalore." *Revue Tiers Monde* 206 (July), 37–54.
- Routray. 2021. "Timepass and Setting: The Meanings, Relationships, and Politics of Informal Work in Delhi." *Urban Studies*, 1–17.
- Ghertner, D. Asher. 2020. "Lively Lands: The Spatial Reproduction Squeeze and the Failure of the Urban Imaginary." *IJURR*
- Chalfin, Brenda. 2014. Public Things, Excremental Politics, and the Infrastructures of Bare Life in Ghana. *American Ethnologist* 41(1).

### **Additional readings:**

- Benjamin, Solomon 2008. "Occupancy urbanism: Radicalizing politics and economy beyond policy and programs." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 32(3), 719–729.

- McFarlane, Colin and Renu Desai. 2016. "The Urban Metabolic Commons," in *Releasing the Commons*, edited by Ash Amin and Phillip Howell. Routledge, 145-260.
- Jonnalagadda, Indivar, Ryan Stock and Karan Masquita. 2021. "Titling as Contested Process: Conditional Land Rights and Subaltern Citizenship in South India." *IJURR* 45(3).

## **Week 7 (October 18<sup>th</sup>) – Obstruction**

### **Readings:**

- Bandopadhyay, Ritajyoti. 2022. *Streets in Motion: The Making of Infrastructure, Property, and Political Culture in Twentieth Century Calcutta*. Cambridge University Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2006 [1939]. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Schocken Books, pp. 171-210.
- Ghertner, D. Asher. 2015. "World-Class Detritus," from *Rule by Aesthetics: World-Class City-Making in Delhi*. Oxford University Press.

### **Additional readings:**

- Roy, Ananya. 2004. "The Gentleman's City," in *Urban Informality*, edited by Ananya Roy and Newark AlSayyad. Lexington Books.
- Collins, Erin, and Sylvia Nam. 2022. "Between the Law and the Actual Situation: Failure as Property Formation in French Colonial Indochina." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 40: 227-44.
- Sopranzetti, Claudio. 2017. "Unraveling the Thai Capital," from *Owners of the Map: Motorcycle Taxi Drivers, Mobility, and Politics in Bangkok*. University of California Press, pp. 196-228.

## **Week 8 (October 25<sup>th</sup>) – Subaltern Frontiers**

### **Readings:**

- Brenner, Neil and Nikos Katsikis. 2020. "Operational Landscapes: Hinterlands of the Capitalocene." *Architectural Design* 90(1): 22-31.
- Cowen, Thomas. 2022. *Subaltern Frontiers: Agrarian City-Making in Gurgaon*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, Joel. 2017. "Odor and Order: How Caste is Inscribed in Space and Sensoria." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 37(3): 470-490.

### **Additional readings:**

- Anand, Nikhil. 2012. "Municipal disconnect: On abject water and its urban infrastructures." *Ethnography* 13 (4):487-509.
- Balakrishnan, Sai. 2019. "Recombinant Urbanization: Agrarian-urban Landed Property and Uneven Development in India." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 43(4): 617-632.
- Bathla, Nitin. 2022. "Planned illegality, permanent temporariness, and strategic philanthropy: Tenement towns under extended urbanisation of postmetropolitan Delhi." *Housing Studies* 37: 868-888.
- Crowley, Thomas and D. Asher Ghertner. 2022. "Itinerant Urbanization: On Circles, Fractals, and the Critique of Segmented Space." *Environment and Planning D*.



## **Week 9 (November 1<sup>st</sup>) – Waywardness**

### **Readings:**

- Hartman, Saidiya. 2019. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. W. W. Norton & Co.
- McKittrick, Katherine. 2011. "On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place." *Social and Cultural Geography*, 12:8: 947-963.

### **Additional Readings:**

- Hartman, Saidiya. 1997. "Fashioning Obligation: Indebted Servitude and the Fetters of Slavery," in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century America*. Oxford University Press.
- Wilderson, Frank B. III. 2003. "The Position of the Unthought. An Interview with Saidiya Hartman." *Qui Parle* 13(2): 183-201.

## **Week 10 (November 8<sup>th</sup>) – Subaltern (People as) Infrastructures**

### **Readings:**

- Simone, Abdoumalik. 2022. *The Surrounds*. Duke University Press.
- Lancione, Michele. 2019. Weird Exoskeletons: Propositional Politics and the Making of Home in Underground Bucharest. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. 43(1): 535-550.

### **Additional readings:**

- Fredericks, Rosalind. 2015. Vital Infrastructures of Trash in Dakar. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34(3).
- Roy, Ananya. 2011. Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35(2): 223-238.

## **Week 11 (November 15<sup>th</sup>) – Insurgent Space**

### **Reading:**

- Roane, J.T. 2023. *Dark Agoras: Insurgent Black Social Life and the Politics of Place*. NYU Press.
- Hawthorne, Camilla. 2019. "Black Matters are Spatial Matters: Black Geographies for the Twenty-First Century." *Geography Compass* : 1-13.

### **Additional Readings:**

- Miraftab, Faranak. 2017. "Insurgent Practices and Decolonization of Futures." In *The Routledge Handbook of Planning Theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Holston, James. 2019. "Metropolitan Rebellions and the Politics of Commoning the City." *Anthropology Theory* 19(1): 120-142.

## **Week 12 (November 22<sup>nd</sup>) – Thanksgiving Break**

## **Week 13 (November 29<sup>th</sup>) – Dispossession and Dissent**



**Readings:**

- Gonick, Sophie. 2021. *Dispossession and Dissent: Immigrants and the Struggle for Housing in Madrid*. Stanford University Press.
- Blanco, Masaya Lllavaneras. 2021. "The Intimate-Mobility Entanglement: Subaltern Trajectories in the Haitian-Dominican Borderlands." *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*.

**Additional readings:**

TBD

**Week 14 (December 6<sup>th</sup>) – Subaltern Subterranean****Readings:**

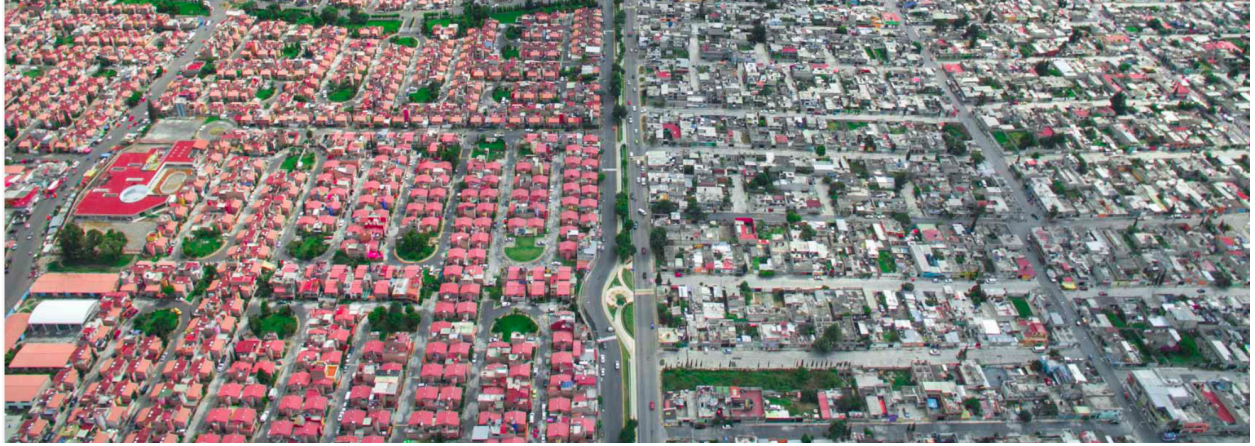
- Foucault, Michel. 2007 [1978]. Lectures 1 and 4 from *Security, Territory, Population*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Osborne, Thomas. 1996. "Security and vitality: Drains, liberalism and power in the nineteenth century." In *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism, and Rationalities of Government*, edited by Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose, 99-122. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Michelle Kooy and Karen Bakker. 2008. "Technologies of government: Constituting subjectivities, spaces, and infrastructures in colonial and contemporary Jakarta." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32 (2): 375-391.
- Stephanie Tam. 2013. "Sewerage's Reproduction of Caste: The Politics of Coprology in Ahmedabad, India." *Radical History Review* 116: 5-30.
- Vann, Michael. 2021. "Colonial Sewers Led to More Rats," *The Feral Atlas*, <https://feralatlas.supdigital.org/poster/colonial-sewers-led-to-more-rats>
- Halliday, Stephen. 2019. *An Underground Guide to Sewers*. MIT Press. Selections

**Additional readings:**

- Dipesh Chakrabarty. 2002. "Of Garbage, Modernity, and the Citizen's Gaze" in *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*. University of Chicago Press.
- Colin McFarlane and Jonathan Silver. 2017. "The Poolitical City: 'Seeing Sanitation' and Making the Urban Political in Cape Town." *Antipode* 49: 125-148.

**Week 15 (December 13<sup>th</sup>) – Course Wrap-up**

----- Final course paper submission due December 19<sup>th</sup> -----



*unequal scenes from Mexico City*