



Bringing Subalterns into Speech? Investigating Anarchic Resistance to Hegemonic Modernity*

¿Llevar a los subalternos al habla? Investigando la Resistencia Anárquica a la Modernidad Hegemónica

ABSTRACT

This article aims to critically examine Gayatri Spivak's (1992) demand to undo subalternity by inserting subalterns into the circuit of hegemonic modernity. For Spivak, working for the subaltern does not demand speaking for them, rather it entails facilitating their speech acts. From the perspective of an anthropology of anarchy, the opening up of political communication towards inclusion of subaltern speech is, on the one hand, an essential goal. It is congruent with the basic democratic principles of consensual decision-making among social groups living outside or at the margins of state influence. On the other hand, the insistence on including subalterns into hegemony entails an inherent paradox: many subalterns, who resort to anarchic ways of life, escape from the state and its communicational structures as a cultural and political survival strategy. My ethnographic example from the Andaman Islands in India addresses this tension. I focus on the subaltern history and resistance practices of the so-called Ranchis, Adivasis (first settlers, Indigenous Peoples) from the Central Indian hill region, who migrated to the Andamans as contract labourers and settled in marginal forests. The Ranchis' evasion from the state into the margins, enabled by subsistence practices, presents an alternative

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to Spivak's compelling demand to bring subalterns into speech: an inclusion of the Ranchis into the circuits of hegemony would moderately benefit them in terms of getting access to the state and the economy, but, at the same time, it would also imply a loss of their partial autarky, as well as cultural and socio-political autonomy from the outside world.

Keywords: Subalternity, Anarchy, Anthropology, Hegemonic Speech, Resistance, Adivasi, Migrant Labour, Chotanagpur, Andaman Islands.

RESUMEN

Este artículo pretende examinar críticamente la exigencia de Gayatri Spivak (1992) de deshacer la subalternidad mediante la inserción de los subalternos en el circuito de la modernidad hegemónica. Para Spivak, trabajar para los subalternos no exige hablar por ellos, sino que implica facilitar sus actos de habla. Desde la perspectiva de una antropología de la anarquía, la apertura de la comunicación política hacia la inclusión del discurso subalterno es, por un lado, un objetivo esencial. Es congruente con los principios democráticos básicos de la toma de decisiones consensuada entre los grupos sociales que viven fuera o al margen de la influencia del Estado. Por otro lado, la insistencia en incluir a los subalternos en la hegemonía conlleva una paradoja inherente: muchos subalternos, que recurren a formas de vida anárquicas, huyen del Estado y de sus estructuras comunicativas como estrategia de supervivencia cultural y política. Mi ejemplo etnográfico de las islas Andamán, en la India, aborda esta tensión. Me centro en la historia subalterna y en las prácticas de resistencia de los llamados Ranchis, Adivasis (primeros pobladores, Pueblos Indígenas) de la región de las colinas de la India central, que emigraron a las Andamans como trabajadores contratados y se asentaron en bosques marginales. La evasión de los Ranchis del Estado hacia los márgenes, posibilitada por las prácticas de subsistencia, presenta una alternativa a la imperiosa demanda de Spivak de incorporar a los subalternos al discurso: una inclusión de los Ranchis en los circuitos de la hegemonía les beneficiaría moderadamente en cuanto a su acceso al Estado y a la economía, pero, al mismo tiempo, también implicaría una pérdida de su autarquía parcial, así como de su autonomía cultural y sociopolítica respecto al mundo exterior.

Palabras clave: Subalternidad, Anarquía, Antropología, Discurso Hegemónico, Resistencia, Adivasi, Trabajo Migrante, Chotanagpur, Islas Andaman.

At first glance, the undoing of subalternity appears to be self-evidently desirable.¹ All over the world, subalterns have been continuously subdued by exploitative state systems, corporations and feudal relations of clientelism. In India, for example, interactions between “the poor” and state bureaucracies are structured by inequality, arbitrariness and indifference (Gupta, 2012, pp. 22-26). Anthropologist Akhil Gupta estimated that, since Indian Independence, about one hundred and forty million people have been left to die (Gupta, 2012, p. 5), with the lack of access to nutrition and medicine causing about two million untimely deaths a year. This number is much higher than the annual loss of human life due to global disasters (Gupta, 2012). In my view, the condition of subalternity is a key factor causing such rampant morbidity. Lacking voice and recognition as legitimate subjects across several generations, subalterns continue to have unequal access to means of production and essential goods such as food and medicine.

The mechanisms of subaltern exclusion from the means of production can be understood by drawing on Spivak’s (1988) famous and often misunderstood conceptualisation of subalterns as people who cannot speak and be counted in institutionalised frameworks of representation.² Hegemony implies that representations of subalterns have to follow culturally codified patterns in order to be recognised as legitimate political subjects.³ “Hegemonic listening” (Dhawan, 2007a, pp. 273–274) functions to render only those voices legible that are articulated within the epistemic boundaries of science and post-enlightenment rationalism (cf. Chakrabarty, 2010).

¹ Subalternity can be defined as a positionality of disenfranchised groups in the modern state, who are denied access to the state. Since colonial times, subalterns have been cut off from lines of upward social mobility and the cultural lines that produced the colonial subject (Spivak, 2000, p. 325). Here, I draw on the term subaltern as promulgated by the Subaltern Studies collective of historians to represent subaltern persons or groups in colonial South Asia. Since the 1990s, Subaltern Studies are no longer understood as a project that exclusively engages with the historical reconstruction of subaltern consciousness. For instance, “Subaltern Studies XI” (Chatterjee & Jeganathan, 2000) put emphasis on rethinking subaltern theory in the contemporary era. Currently, subaltern theory applies to all regions of Planet Earth and addresses a wide range of interlinked issues, such as globalization (Dhawan & Randeria, 2013), digitalization and new forms of subaltern authorship and visibility (Fadlalla, 2009; Georgiou, 2017; Meret, 2020; Schäfers, 2011), subaltern migrations (Zehmisch, 2017), struggles over space and place (Alexandrakis, 2013; Moore, 1998; Salwa, 2013), borders (Jalais, 2013), local biologies (Bharadwaj, 2013), subaltern citizenship (Pandey, 2010), race and racism (Pandey, 2016), ethics (Arcilla, 2019), as well as various forms of subaltern resistance movements (Borde, 2017; Nilsen, 2018; Nur, 2012; Rabasa, 2010).

² Between speakers and listeners, there is a hierarchical asymmetry, so that the one who speaks with authority knows that s/he is heard and acknowledged. The act of listening empowers the speaker because it recognises her/him as person with a political voice. For Spivak (1988), the speech act functions as a transaction between speaker and listener, in which those who are not listened to are unable to speak (Dhawan, 2007a, p. 278).

³ From a Gramscian perspective, hegemony is the power of the ruling class to convince the other classes that their interests are the interests of all (Ashcroft et al., 1998, p. 116). The modern capitalist state is, thus, not simply an apparatus of force. In most cases, as electoral democracy it relies on populist politics and a variety of social institutions to mobilise such consent (Chatterjee, 2011, p. 145). Domination by consent is produced through a subtle and inclusive power over the economy, the education system and the media, in which the interests of the ruling classes are presented as general interests of all (Ashcroft et al. 1998, p. 116).

Acknowledging the harmful socio-economic effects of subaltern exclusion from public speech, global public sphere theories prescribe universal “remedies”: they propagate formal equality, human rights, development and democratic participation. However, while these “remedies” are applied to empower the powerless in order to claim rights and recognition, they regularly produce opposite effects. Politicians, for example, often hijack subaltern voices in order to put forward their own hegemonic agendas. Bureaucrats design and execute development and welfare policies, which are meant to ameliorate the lives of subalterns without asking what these very subalterns themselves want. Human rights exist on paper, but only “those who govern” are able to claim them, while “those who are governed” are not recognised as subjects of law (cf. Chatterjee, 2004). The “selective hearing” and “strategic deafness” (Dhawan, 2007a, p. 279) of these political actors, who ignore and silence non-hegemonic forms of articulation, contributes to subaltern exclusion from regional, national, and transnational discourses, in which recognition, entitlements, rights and resources are negotiated.

To sum up, subalternity is an effect of persistent inequality, a theme that has come under scrutiny in David Graeber (1961-2020) and David Wengrow’s recently (and posthumously) published book *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021).⁴ The undoing of subalternity appears thus, at a first glance, as imperative. At this point, it makes sense to draw attention to Spivak’s suggestion how subalternity could possibly be undone. Spivak demands that we have to work against subalternity by “inserting the subaltern into the circuit of hegemony” (Spivak, 1992, p. 46).⁵ Her claim rests on the assumption that “to work for the subaltern, means to bring it into speech” (Spivak, 1992, p. 46). Reading Spivak, bringing

⁴ Graeber & Wengrow (2021, pp. 1-77) argue for viewing the genesis of the idea of equality (and hence, inequality) as a product of enlightenment, originating from an extensive – ignored, silenced and subalternized – history of intellectual exchange with indigenous Americans during the 16th and 17th century about the idea of freedom. Indigenous American intellectuals criticized the absence of freedom – and hence, reciprocity and mutual aid – in early modern European societies, based on their interactions and observations made during decades of cohabitation in the “New World” and during occasional visits to Europe. Contrary to Rousseau’s portrait of Americans as “egalitarian”, ideas about equality – which the authors characterize as the European idea of being equal in front of a sovereign or the law – were, unlike notions of freedom, not innate to American thought. As Graeber & Wengrow (2021) emphasize, the centrality of the idea of equality to enlightenment resulted from the very transcultural exchange between colonizers and colonists with indigenous thinkers and was thus – as a reaction to indigenous critique – introduced into European social thought.

⁵ I draw on the following statement: “When you say cannot speak, it means that if speaking involves speaking and listening, this possibility of response, responsibility, does not exist in the subaltern’s sphere. You bring out these so-called subalterns from the woodwork; the only way that speech is produced is by inserting the subaltern into the circuit of hegemony, which is what should happen, as subaltern. Who the hell wants to museumize or protect subalternity? Only extremely reactionary, dubious anthropologicist museumizers. No activist wants to keep the subaltern in the space of difference. To do **a thing**, to work for the subaltern, means to bring it into speech. The third thing, which is the worst, that is, you don’t give the subaltern voice. You work **for** the bloody subaltern, you work against subalternity” (Spivak, 1992, p. 46, italics in orig.).

subalterns into speech implies that the academic and/or activist must not speak for the subaltern, but that she or he should work towards undoing the space of epistemic difference, in which the subaltern is banished. Such a reconfiguration of the conditions of speech would theoretically enable subalterns to speak for themselves within hegemonic frameworks, consequently undoing subaltern silence and their ruthless exploitation.

If Spivak's call were ever to be put into practice, I believe that it might be conducive to improve the lives of many subalterns worldwide. However, I doubt that Spivak's ideas would necessarily be appreciated by all subalterns. What if not every subaltern wants to be heard by hegemonic actors and speak within these frameworks because they prefer to avoid interaction with persons and institutions that represent the state and the market?

This article seeks to critically examine Spivak's claim of undoing subalternity by including the subaltern into hegemonic circuits. In what follows, I will outline some theoretical ideas in order to critically rethink Spivak's argument. Questioning Spivak's presupposition that each and every subaltern wants "to get the hell out of subalternity" (Spivak, 2003 cited in Dhawan, 2007b), I assert that many subalterns might be rather content with a subaltern positionality – i.e. being external to hegemony – under the condition that they succeed in subsisting on resources and in maintaining their political and cultural independence.

In the first part of the article, I aim to juxtapose Spivak's ideas with an emergent disciplinary approach that locates anarchy and anarchism as central to the anthropological endeavour. David Graeber (2008) had labelled this approach "anarchist anthropology". Contrary to Graeber, I prefer to use the term "anarchy" (*an-archía*: without rule), when writing about hunting, foraging, herding, gardening and farming communities that anthropologists have investigated since the inception of the discipline.⁶ Here, anarchy describes an idealized condition of freedom from external rule that may be usefully applied to communities that have historically governed themselves, or which have even recently found a way to free themselves from the shackles of outside interference.⁷ I view an "anarch-ic"

⁶ Anthropological research on societies that live outside or at the margins of state influence is characterized by a broad interest in the political, cultural, socioeconomic, and ecological strategies striving to preserve or retrieve partial or complete autonomy from the state. These practices assume primary importance in the light of the growing expansion of states and markets in previously self-governed and self-sustaining spaces inhabited by communities that, if viewed from the "centre", are located in the margins.

⁷ Throughout history, communities have consciously evaded interaction with states by resorting to economic and political strategies that have ensured their partial autonomy from hegemonic influence (Gibson & Sillander, 2011; Scott, 1995, 2009).

positionality of being historically located outside the state in a markedly different way than what is popularly understood as “anarch-ist”. Anarchism builds on a conscious political program and movement originating in the industrializing societies of the Global North during the last decades of the 18th century, gaining worldwide traction in the course of the 19th century (Morris, 2014, pp. 63-64).

The major difference between the political ideology of anarchism and anarchy is thus a matter of perspective: while the former calls on people to distance themselves from the state and build the base a new society on the foundation of what has been called “pre-figurative” politics, consisting of overlapping values such as autonomism, egalitarianism, decentralism, and direct action (Lagalis, 2016, pp. 64-65); in stark contrast, anarchy builds on the idea that communities have, to varying degrees, already put the political ideals anarchists strive for – mutual aid, decentralisation, basic democracy, voluntary association, self-organisation, individual liberty, economic autarky and political autonomy – into practice without being labelled and understood accordingly. The history of these “organic” anarchists can, therefore, be understood as subaltern to both the movement of anarchism as well as the hegemonic project of the state. However, I admit that it makes sense to use the term “anarchist anthropology”, if one does anthropological research on the contemporary anarchist movement (cf. Lagalis, 2013, 2016); or, alternatively, if one applies the “ism” of anarchism to one’s own ideological preference – a lens through which one transmits a political conviction into an informed and politically engaged anthropological practice – rather than to the emic orientation of one’s anthropological interlocutors.

The second part of the article is going to carve out the problem of subaltern participation in the state. While certain communities are conspicuous through their absence from the state, one cannot easily declare all subalterns as anarchic. Many subalterns are not able to ignore the presence of the state in their lives, but have to find ways to negotiate with it and, to a certain extent, participate in it.⁸ Often, subalterns expect states to provide them with resources and services in return for their participation in electoral democratic processes and in contributing to the larger economy through their labour power (cf. Zehmisch, 2016). Even

⁸ The earlier generation of subaltern historians had insisted that subaltern consciousness was external to the state. This claim cannot be upheld in the present (cf. Nilsen, 2018; Zehmisch, 2017). Firstly, since the 1970s, the postcolonial nation-state has targeted the subaltern as subject of electoral politics and government welfare (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 84). Secondly, in the context of social, cultural and economic globalisation, the role of the subaltern in transnational spheres needs to be rethought, because the subaltern is “no longer cut off from lines of access to the centre” (Spivak, 2000, p. 326).

if these expectations are hardly matched, subalterns have continued to engage with the state, while, at the same time, living according to anarchic principles in the margins of the state. I argue that an oscillation between inclusion *in* and exclusion *from* the state structures the everyday-lives of subalterns – a process that may be understood as a dialectic between participation and autonomy. I will discuss this dialectic more concretely by referring to the ethnographic example of the Ranchis, a community of subaltern labour migrants, who have settled in marginal zones of the Andaman Islands. I am going to elaborate on the ways in which the Ranchis resort to anarchic principles of self-rule and subsistence, while, at the same time, appropriating the state apparatus in order to get recognition and access to funds.

Anthropology of Anarchy

The hegemonic narrative of modernisation constructs communities living at the fringes or outside of states as in need of inclusion into hegemonic circuits in order to get access to the lines of social mobility. Disputing this normative assumption might be difficult. I am, however, at least inclined to ask about the other side of the coin: Could one imagine other ways of looking at the world’s “poor” apart from stereotyping them as backward and deprived victims of modernity? Do subalterns, in spite of their obvious hardships conditioned by a life in the margins, even enjoy some aspects of their marginality?

An anthropology of anarchy offers different responses to these questions in contrast to hegemonic state narratives. This emerging disciplinary approach embraces Graeber’s (2008, p. 65) argument that throughout human history, the majority of non-state communities have governed themselves through modes of self-reliant social organisation and subsistence practices. From this perspective, state rule is regarded as a comparatively recent invention that covered only fragments of the world population until the modern state considerably expanded two centuries ago. However, state institutionalization does not necessarily mean that states are pervasively present within their official territories, but rather that they coexist with anarchic spaces (Graeber, 2008, p. 54).⁹ Pierre Clastres (2008) similarly describes how Indigenous Peoples in the Amazonian lowlands create social cohesion through mechanisms of consensual decision-making. Treating each other as equal members

⁹ Applying these generalizing ideas to the history of anthropology from the 19th century onwards, I believe it is safe to argue that the majority of political institutions studied by anthropologists as an antidote to modern state societies can be labelled as anarchic (cf. Maine, 1861; Morgan, 1877; Radcliffe-Brown, 1922; Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Leach, 1954; Sahlins, 1974).

of a community, Amazonians do not swear allegiance to any form of external domination that divides them politically (Clastres, 2008, p. 24). This ensures that neither their own headman nor any external state entity is in a position to institutionalize rule.

James Scott's seminal book "The Art of Not Being Governed" (2009) adds another layer to the ideas put forward by Graeber and Clastres. Highlighting the Southeast Asian hill region as an example of an anarchic history that spans over the course of two millennia, Scott argues that the majority of the region's population had lived outside or at the fringes of states and governed themselves (Scott, 2009, p. xiv ff.). Following the desire not to be governed, many hill residents, who could be understood as runaway, fugitive and maroon communities, once migrated from the fertile, irrigated rice-farming states in the Southeast Asian lowlands to the highlands in order to flee from "slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labour, epidemics, and warfare" (Scott, 2009, p. ix). Drawing inspiration from Willem van Schendel (2002), Scott calls this highland region Zomia (Scott, 2009, p. xiv).¹⁰ Not being fully incorporated and governed by states, peoples' self-rule and autonomy as well as their evasion from statehood have been historically marked as proof of their "primitivism" and "backwardness". Scott seeks to correct this hegemonic representation by arguing that most highlanders had willingly resorted to a lifestyle of pastoralism, foraging or shifting cultivation outside the state centres in order to evade state influence. Their escape from the state, therefore, must be regarded as a conscious strategy of "self-barbarianization" (Scott, 2009, p. x). Highlanders had, accordingly, adapted to the geography of the hills through specific subsistence techniques and changes in their social structure (Scott, 2009).

In order to understand Scott's macro-historical argument, one may productively apply some ideas he outlines in his previous book "Weapons of the Weak" (1985). Here, Scott elaborates on the efficacy of everyday resistance strategies applied by subaltern peasants when interacting with state authorities "who seek to extract labour, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them" (Scott, 2009, p. xvi). The weapons of powerless groups Scott describes are "foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on" (Scott, 2009). These practices do not require elaborate planning or coordination;

¹⁰ Zomia is a term for highlanders in several Tibeto-Burman languages in the Bangladesh-Burma border area (Scott, 2009, xiv). *Zo* means remote and carries the connotation of living in the hills. *Mi* means people (Scott, 2009, p. xv). *Zo-mi* designates remote hill people, living in a geographical niche (Scott, 2009). Zomia stretches across two and a half million square kilometres – roughly the size of Europe – and eight nation-states of South-East Asia. Scott points out that presently, Zomia would encompass a population of eighty to hundred million, hundreds of ethnic identities and at least five language families (Scott, 2009, p. xiv).

rather disenfranchised people and groups utilise already existing informal networks, based on mutual understanding and self-help. Scott contends that peasants' avoidance of direct confrontation with authorities are among their most significant and effective forms of resistance (2009).

The discussed theories enable a reappraisal regarding the practices of subaltern communities around the globe. They return agency to subaltern actors whose actions are either disregarded or blatantly misinterpreted by hegemonic discourses. Contrary to what we are told by Spivak and others, a good number of subalterns have not been simply "left back" by modernity. Instead of pursuing inclusion in hegemonic circuits, they have consciously decided to escape from the frustrating and exploitative interaction with state institutions and the capitalist system (cf. Gibson & Sillander, 2011). Their partial political autonomy from exclusionary state structures implies that they apply modes of self-governance relying on small-scale, face-to-face, basic democratic and consensual forms of decision-making, some of which are entwined with traditional forms of kinship (cf. Amborn, 2016; Barclay, 2009; Shah, 2010). Furthermore, to ensure their economic subsistence, many self-sufficient peasants, nomadic herders or hunter-gatherers adhere to a mode of production that ensures their partial or complete subsistence as well as their independence from money and external supplies (Ahmed, 1982; Morris, 1986).

If some of these peoples are indeed content with their lives without necessarily participating in the system, as claimed by anthropological theorists of anarchy and anarchism, how does one assess Spivak's demand to insert "the subaltern into the circuit of hegemony" (Spivak, 1992, p. 46) I do not want to deny that her claim to create conditions for subaltern speech could mitigate unequal forms of distribution among many subalterns. Furthermore, Spivak's idea of opening up hegemonic communication structures would be congruent with basic democratic principles. Enabling equal conditions of speech across social, cultural and political boundaries would surely be conducive to subaltern communities around the world. It would essentially benefit the landless poor in rural areas and urban squatters.

But what about those anarchic communities who, as argued previously, do consciously choose strategies ensuring that they remain outside of hegemony, as an inclusion would also imply giving up their economic and cultural independence? Would it be conducive to enforce a hegemonic condition of speech on them in the name of desubalternisation? From this perspective, Spivak's demand may be understood to represent an imposition of a hegemonic view of the centre on the subaltern that

proposes a teleological subaltern “evolution” aiming towards becoming a subject of hegemonic modernity.

Clearly, I do not seek to portray subalternity as a desirable positionality. My point is, rather, to view subaltern exclusion from hegemonic communication structures as an enabling condition for the partial autonomy anarchic communities struggle for. If subaltern inclusion into the circuits of hegemony brings with it the demand to adapt to the dominant economic and cultural system, I believe that many anarchic communities do prefer to stay away from it in order to maintain their ability to sustain and govern themselves. Therefore, unless a viable alternative emerges, a subaltern inclusion into the hegemonic fold of modernity appears as a generalizing ethical demand that should be reflected upon with critical caution.

Chotanagpuri Adivasis as Subaltern Migrant Labourers

To illustrate this tension more concretely, I am now turning to an ethnographic example from the Andaman Islands, where I conducted around twenty-four months of fieldwork between 2006 and 2016.¹¹ The focus will be on the anarchic history and present of the so-called Ranchis,¹² Adivasi (“first dwellers”, aboriginal, indigenous) migrant labourers from the Chotanagpur region in Central India. In order to embed the specific case study of the Ranchis into my larger argument about the dialectics between autonomy *from* and selective participation *in* the state, I will highlight three interlinked forms of subaltern history, which are entangled in the historical narrative of the Ranchis: Firstly, the history of people evading the state; secondly, the history of aboriginal labour migration from Central India; thirdly, the history of Ranchi migration to the Andamans and their subsequent attempts of place-making.

¹¹ As a colony of the British Empire and the ensuing Indian nation-state, the Andamans in the Bay of Bengal have been a destination of various migrations from different parts of South and South-East Asia. From 1858 onwards, a British penal colony was installed on the islands, to which subaltern convicts, soldiers and contracted labourers were transported (Anderson, 2004; Sen, 2000; Vaidik, 2010). After Independence, refugees, repatriates, landless people and labour migrants settled on the islands. The Andaman society has been called “Mini-India” because the migrant population of more than 400,000 people represents a large variety of castes, linguistic and religious groups of the subcontinent (Zehmisch, 2017).

¹² The term Ranchi does not indicate the “traditional” name of an ethnic group. It stands for a subaltern aboriginal labour force named after their place of recruitment, the town of Ranchi. Instead of enumerating and recognising a large variety of aboriginal labourers according to their affiliation to different ethnic groups, such as Oraon, Munda, and Kharia, all of them were subsumed under one category as “Ranchiwallahs” or Ranchis. The Ranchis came to be defined as a diasporic “ethnic” community. This ascription was adopted by the Ranchis themselves as a means to define the boundaries of their community in the multi-ethnic Andaman migrant and settler society.

I propose to include the Andaman Islands into Scott's conceptualization of Zomia,¹³ because their dense forests and creeks have functioned as zones of geographical and social retreat for the indigenous islanders (Pandya, 2009) as well as for certain migrated communities like the Ranchis (Zehmisch, 2017). Beyond that, I argue for an extension of the Zomia idea towards the Central Indian hill region of Chotanagpur, from where the Ranchis originated. A closer look at the history of Chotanagpur provides remarkable parallels to the history that Scott (2009) narrates for Southeast Asia. For many centuries, the region and its peoples were never properly conquered by kingdoms in the Gangetic plains. During colonial times, administrative changes in the land tenure system caused massive migrations by lowlanders from the Gangetic plains (Sundar, 2007). This led to the partial institutionalisation of the state in the region. Until today, Chotanagpur has been shaped by continuous struggles between the state and local Adivasi communities.¹⁴

These reflections on Adivasi forms of self-governance and state evasion in the Chotanagpur region are inspired by Alpa Shah (2010), who did fieldwork in the Indian State of Jharkhand among the Munda, an Adivasi community, between 1999 and 2008. Her work elucidates the constant attempts of state actors, NGOs, religious institutions and political parties to enclose largely self-governed Adivasis into larger frameworks of welfare and governance. Shah argues that most Munda viewed the state "as a recent and outside invention" by non-Adivasis that has come to threaten Adivasi society (Shah, 2010, p. 54). Shah was told that, in older times, many Munda fled to the forests or hid somewhere when government officials came to their village. Shah traces this back to the oppressive and exploitative treatment meted out to them throughout history (Shah, 2010).

Many Andaman Ranchis also belong to the Munda tribe. They do not only hail from the same macro-region that Shah researches, but they also share the same history: Since the end of the nineteenth century, millions of Adivasis from Chotanagpur have out-migrated in search of employment, many of them as indentured labour because their means of subsistence and livelihood, most often shifting cultivation, had been severely disturbed due

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¹³ Scott (2009) mentions that the idea of Zomia could be extended to other areas in South Asia (p. xix).

¹⁴ Some parts of the region came under control of the Naxalites, a Maoist insurgent force. In 2000, two separate states of the Indian Union, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, were formed as a result of political struggles strongly supported by Adivasi leaders demanding self-rule. This shift of political leadership, however, did not drastically change people's practices of avoiding and evading state interaction.

to population pressure and agrarian transformations (Tinker, 1974, p. 47).¹⁵ As a result of their emigration, Chotanagpuri Adivasis came to be known as a “coolie nation”. The British had classified these “pure aborigines” from Chotanagpur as “first-class coolies”, because they were assumed to be docile, hard-working and racially fit to endure adverse climatic and ecological conditions (Ghosh, 1999, pp. 29–32).

These stereotypes also influenced the recruitment of Chotanagpuri Adivasis to the Andaman Islands from 1918 onwards. The labourers’ task on the islands was to clear forests for the growing timber industry, to create space for settlements and to expand the infrastructure for steadily growing numbers of migrants and settlers. Their recruiters and the Andaman authorities did not regard them as potential settlers but merely as labour power that was expected to leave the islands as silently and invisibly as they had come (Zehmisch, 2016). Contrary to that expectation, many Ranchi labourers dropped out of contracts and settled down wherever they found places in the periphery of settled zones, often near the spaces they had previously cleared. Taking recourse to indigenous land use practices in their homelands, where no concept of private property of land had existed before it was colonised (Bates & Carter, 1992), many former labourers illegally encroached forest land to construct houses and to cultivate gardens and paddy fields. Because the majority of subaltern Ranchis has been permanently cut off from the lines of social mobility, they took recourse to subsistence practices ensuring their autarky. Frustrated with state interaction, their place-making in the margins can be interpreted as a form of evasion and a way to keep the state at a distance.

Between Participation and Autonomy

As a result of their migration, the Ranchis have established themselves over several generations as a diasporic community within the multi-ethnic Andaman society. Due to generous funds distributed by the central government, the Andaman society can be described as upwardly mobile and comparatively resourceful (Zehmisch, 2012). This upward mobility does, however, not apply to most Ranchi labour migrants and their descendants, who have continued to live in political, social

¹⁵ Indentured labour in the British Empire partly relied on the systematic contracting of Adivasi *dhangar* or “hill coolie” labour forces from Chotanagpur (Ghosh, 1999, p. 17, Tinker; 1974, p. 47). Hugh Tinker estimated that, between 1840 and 1850, two-fifths to one-half of the labourers migrating from the subcontinent to overseas destinations were *dhangars* (Tinker, 1974, p. 49). The number of Chotanagpuri coolies recruited for tea plantations in Assam was, however, many times larger than those taken overseas. Between 1870 and 1900, approximately 250,000 labourers from the Chotanagpur area went to Assam (Tinker, 1974, p. 51).

and geographical marginality. From a normative perspective on socio-economic development, their lives in the periphery of settled “civilisation” can be described as poor: Not much has been done for their welfare in encroached forest lands, schools do function only partially, whereas primary health centres, electricity and infrastructure are largely absent (Raju, 2010).

In personal conversations, Ranchi interlocutors regularly confirmed their perception of neglect.¹⁶ For example, when I inquired into the non-functionality of a water pipe connecting my friend Alexander’s¹⁷ house to a stream, he explained: “The water pipe is clogged. We have to clean it ourselves. Here [in our village], we don’t have a Public Works Department. No government institution is present”.

Despite having lived on the islands for more than one hundred years, the Ranchi community remains mostly invisible and excluded from the public sphere (Zehmisch, 2017). There is an intrinsic connection between the Ranchis’ wide-spread absence of socio-economic mobility and their political invisibility. As the third-largest ethnic group on the Andaman Islands, they rarely play a role in public debates or discourses. In local politics, a few Ranchi community leaders claim to represent the interests of the subaltern majority; however, this is done without the active support of most Ranchis. As their numerical strength does not have a significant effect on their political participation, several generations of Ranchis have been cut-off from access to the lines of social mobility.

Only a few community members have established themselves in the Andaman civil society as government servants or traders. Those who did, however, have either tried to conceal their “tribal past” or to advocate the reform of “tribal habits”.

During fieldwork, I interviewed numerous government officials, NGO employees and members of the Andaman civil society, who belonged to diverse communities other than the Ranchis. Investigating the reasons why most Ranchis had not experienced upward mobility, my interlocutors portrayed their social and geographical marginalisation as a logical consequence of their racial characteristics. Reinforcing

¹⁶ The data was generated between January 2011 and January 2012. The fieldwork explored how the Ranchis perceived their own disenfranchisement in contrast to the hegemonic views of bourgeois interlocutors. Furthermore, I focused on the strategies the Ranchis employed to deal with state dominance.

¹⁷ Interviews and conversations were held in Andaman Hindustani, a vernacular of Hindi. All interview translations into English for this article are mine, based on the original data in Hindi. The names of all interlocutors and places were changed for the sake of anonymity.

everyday stereotypes, most interviewees opined that Ranchis were subservient, “simple” or even “dumb” tribals on a “lower stage of civilisation”. They emphasised that these “tribal children of nature” had no aspirations to embrace modernity and that they “like to serve others”, as one NGO employee put it. Reducing Ranchis to their labour power, to hands or bodies without dignity or rights, most bourgeois interlocutors did not speak of Ranchi individuals as personalities, but as a “coolie race” or as illegal “encroachers” of forest land. Symbolising the entanglement of a racial division of labour with ethnic stereotypes, the frequently used expression *gudna* (knee) derogatorily reduces Ranchis to the status of subaltern labourers, who are exclusively able to work with their bodies.

Some more sympathetic, but nonetheless paternalist interlocutors attributed the failure of the Ranchis’ development to their lack of ambition and their laid-back attitude. Constructing them as in need of support and guidance, employees of NGOs, government servants and Church officials attempted to find ways to control the Ranchi community. They repeatedly told me that they were frustrated by their continuous failure to help the Ranchis to get access to the state or the market. Many attempts to include them in welfare programmes, to enrol them in schools or to teach them to abandon dangerous traditional habits like drinking or hunting have proven to be unsuccessful. As bearers of hegemonic perspectives, my bourgeois interlocutors disregarded the everyday autonomy seeking practices of the Ranchis, and projected their own views on them. They did not consider alternatives to the supposedly inevitable socio-economic and cultural “evolution”, which implies enclosure by the state through so-called welfare and development policies.

When conducting fieldwork in several Ranchi encroachment villages across Andaman, I found out that the hegemonic preoccupation with the Ranchis’ “racial and cultural adversity to modernisation” has blurred the ability of elite actors to acknowledge what motivates these subalterns to strategically participate in the state system in some occasions as well as to stay away from it in others. Most Ranchi villagers, in turn, expressed frustration about their systematic discrimination and disenfranchisement. For example, several complained about the arbitrariness they encountered in public institutions (cf. Gupta, 2012). Sevi, 23 years old, confirmed his experience of routine discrimination in government offices:

I went to school for five years, after that I dropped out. I am poor and I have no possibility of earning money, because among all the

required documents for getting a government job, I have only an election card. One day I went to the Tehsildar office in Port Blair [the capital] in order to get a “Local Certificate” [proof of local status], which is required to apply for a government job. They had asked me for additional photos, so I came and gave them photos. I went altogether three times and handed in other missing documents, too. But they have never handed over any certificate to me. So, I never returned and just gave up. There is one more possibility to get a “Local Certificate”: by paying a bribe. I have a friend who can help. But it also costs money.

Like Sevi, most of my Ranchi interlocutors narrated numerous instances in which they did not succeed to get official chores done – e.g. the issuing of a ration card (one of the most important documents issued by the Indian government, which enables the poor to access the public distribution system, for drawing subsidized food and fuel) – because they were simply ignored or ill-treated. Often, they were made to wait for an entire day only to be asked to pay a bribe, which they could not afford.

When inquiring into my interlocutors’ desires and wishes from the state, I was told that they urgently needed the provision of essential services such as health, electricity, transport, and education. Especially youngsters, who displayed a stronger desire to participate in the larger Andaman society, expressed that they lacked development and welfare policies in their areas, due to which they saw themselves forced to interact with state institutions. Otherwise, most stated that they would prefer to refrain from any contact with officials. This conundrum was expressed when I asked Herman, 43, about the local debate regarding the construction of a road to Bamboonallah, a remote village on Middle Andaman:

PZ: I had heard that the older generation of villagers had years back decided that no road should be built to Bamboonallah. Is that true?

H: Yes, the older generation was against any road construction. They did not want that Forest Department officials, police, and members of other communities would come to Bamboonallah, destroy our Adivasi culture and harass our women. So far, we Adivasi have preferred to stay among ourselves. But now the road will be built because the majority of the village wants it, especially the younger generation.

Based on these statements, one can identify that the Ranchis' everyday lives are shaped by a continuous dialectics between centrifugal attempts of state incorporation and a centripetal anarchic attitude, expressed in the normative will to govern oneself and to be left alone. Hence, when relegating the Ranchis to the sphere of "primitivity" and "backwardness", my bourgeois interlocutors had failed to consider that the Ranchis do resist the state by mobilising multiple and silent "weapons of the weak" (Scott, 1985). When interacting with outsiders, they often resort to discursive strategies of "self-barbarianization" (Scott, 2009, p. x). The phenomenon of feigning different personas by Indigenous Peoples in their interaction with dominant majority populations is a well-established trope in anthropological literature. For example, the Mesquaki (Fox), stage themselves as lethargic and lazy alcoholics in order to resist their acculturation to the American way of life (Amborn, 1993, p. 130). They intentionally accept the consequences of poverty and humiliation in order to protect their ethnic and cultural identity (Amborn, 1993). Along similar lines, I claim that one might understand the persistence of the stereotype that represents Ranchis as "primitive tribals" both as a product of their continuous social marginalisation as well as a strategy that is consciously applied to perform being "dumb", "primitive", "shy" and "docile" in order to evade interaction with outsiders. Such performances serve to protect their culturally intimate subaltern life-worlds. It is a strategy of regulating and inhibiting access of and to the outside world, which serves to maintain internal cohesion as an important aspect of social, cultural, and economic survival.

The conviction that they should govern themselves is prevalent among Ranchi villagers and leads them to actively or passively resist any form of rule that is not embedded in the community. Relevant decisions concerning the community are taken in a basic democratic procedure involving all genders and age groups of a locality. For example, on South Andaman I learnt that a village community had consensually decided who they were going to elect as their village representative in the upcoming Panchayat (the communal council) elections. When the elections were officially held, almost all villagers voted for the selected person and thus undermined state electoral regulations.

The Ranchis interpret practices of state evasion and self-marginalisation quite differently in contrast to the outside world, which constructs them as "backward" (cf. Raju, 2010). Especially older migrants highlighted that they were content with to inhabit marginal forest areas. While they had no land rights on their illegally encroached plots of forest land and could be theoretically evicted any moment, they had, at least,

no obligation to pay any rent to a landowner. Living far away from the urban centres, my interlocutors appreciated the absence of noise and air pollution from heavy traffic, characteristic of urban agglomerations. They emphasised that the Andaman environment provides them with sufficient resources to sustain themselves. Talking about his own village, located at the seashore and near dense secondary forests, Mamu, 65, pointed out:

Here, we have safe and clean sweet water, cool air and wind as well as natural building material. We do hunt and gather in the forests. We do harvest crops from our own gardens, plantations and paddy fields. Most of us own cows, buffaloes, pigs, chicken and goats. Further, the creeks and the seashore provide us with fish and seafood.

Hence, in spite of being formally classified as “poor”, one may argue that most Ranchi villagers have sufficient resources of high quality, which – in comparison to the majority of urban slum dwellers – enables them to live a modest but decent, healthy and largely autonomous existence. As a matter of fact, villagers’ recourse to subsistence practices has led them to achieve a certain independence from external sources of income and the influence of state institutions and markets. However, many of the younger generation of Ranchis continue their parents’ legacy of leaving their villages to earn cash as daily wagers or in other forms of precarious employment in order to supplement their families’ income as well as to realize their desires to purchase consumer goods such as mobile phones, fashionable clothes or motorcycles.

Based on what I have outlined above, it is no exaggeration to claim that many Ranchis have strategically taken refuge in the margins in order to evade state influence. Instead of relegating them to the passive status of victimhood, their agency in these processes must be recognised as necessary precondition for any discussion about the undoing of their subalternity. Furthermore, the Ranchis’ case demonstrates that a recognition of their anarchic strategies should not exclude considerations to improve their conditions through state intervention. The central problem may be identified by pointing to the ways in which this help is being offered to them and whose opinions and wishes are heard and considered in the process. So far, most state interference in the lives of the Ranchis’ has not lifted them out of poverty, but rather produced and reproduced their subaltern position.

Conclusion: Speaking with the Subaltern

The dialectics between participation *in* and autonomy *from* the state throws a different light on Spivak's demand to undo subalternity by bringing them into speech. I have argued that the inclusion of subalterns into the circuits of hegemony may bring about ambivalent consequences. It would, on the one hand, benefit them in terms of getting access to the state and the economy; on the other hand, accessing the mainstream implies the danger of kickstarting a process of "modernization" that may cause them to gradually lose their partial autonomy from the outside world.

As experienced during my fieldwork, most subaltern Ranchis refrained from even attempting to overcome the space of difference vis-a-vis the larger society due to their negative and frustrating experiences of interacting with a violent and arbitrary state apparatus. These tribal groups had not only migrated from one marginal area of the state to another, where they again settled in hilly, remote areas; they had also adopted a mode of production appropriate to the environment at the fringes of the forest and a way of life that could be interpreted as a strategy of evading or, at least minimising, state interaction. Their choices reflect their preference for cultural autonomy and self-rule over half-baked and ineffective forms of state co-optation. If an inclusion into hegemonic frameworks would require them to become dependent subjects of the state, it would be no surprise if many preferred to opt out.

To tackle this scholarly and practical predicament, I propose another possibility: Those who are located in hegemonic structures must engage with subaltern, anarchic perspectives in order to learn from them. During fieldwork, I realised that most subalterns want to be listened to. Consequently, ethnographic field work in a vernacular language may be one of several adequate methodological tools to enable such a communication between subalterns and hegemonic groups. The purpose of listening to subaltern expressions of anarchic thought is to counter the omnipresence of state-centred narratives; there is a need to promote decolonial alternatives to the hegemonic, teleological master narrative that reinforces normative ideals of citizenship in nation-states as the one and only desirable form of existence.

I am aware that the anthropological method of participant observation does not undo unequal relations of power between the researcher and those being researched. During fieldwork, ethnographers

must reflect on their own complicity in relations of power along the lines of race, gender, class, nationality, ethnicity, and religion that re-produce subalternity in the very situation of social interaction that one is investigating (cf. Hale, 2007, p. 122). Moreover, an awareness of power inequalities and reflecting on them does not alter the fact that, by virtue of their position within the hegemonic system of academia, scholars exert the power to represent the subaltern.¹⁸ If, however, communication is conducted in a vernacular language, and according to principles of mutual trust, a condition for speaking *with* and listening to the subaltern may possibly emerge. Ethnographic field work is specifically suited to tackle this endeavour as it usually involves the establishment of long-term relationships, which, at times and in specific situations, can reconfigure hierarchical distinctions between subalterns and researchers. Nonetheless, speaking with subalterns does not automatically grant them political agency. Rather, by speaking to subalterns, one has the possibility to learn about their desires and wishes. For instance, during fieldwork I realised that not every subaltern necessarily desires inclusion into hegemony. Hence, the overarching question of how to bring subalterns into speech could be framed differently: How can we, first, undo the rising state intervention into communities' autonomy, and second, stop the ecological onslaught on the very resources that sustain communities' anarchic ways of life?

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¹⁸ Despite numerous turns and interventions in the history of anthropology (cf. Hymes, 1974, Clifford & Marcus 1986), the disciplinary problem of how to represent the Other without being epistemically violent has not been resolved. The official acknowledgement of this problem demands engagement on our interlocutors' behalf (Hale, 2007). Beyond that, one may consider ethics in academic training and practice as essential (Amborn, 1993).

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