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Editorial: Jacques Pouchepadass, In Memoriam

Vanessa Caru

- 1 Right when we were discussing this special issue on subalterns, we were immensely saddened to learn of the death of our colleague, the historian Jacques Pouchepadass (1942–2021). Jacques was there when SAMAJ was created, standing by us with kindness and advice, and until very recently he was a member of the journal’s advisory board. But if we choose to publish here, as a preface to this issue, a short commemorative text, it is because he played a fundamental role in the French public’s discovery of the writings of the Subaltern Studies group, which will often be mentioned in this issue.
- 2 When he published a review article in 2000 entitled “Les Subaltern Studies ou la critique postcoloniale de la modernité [Subaltern Studies or the Postcolonial Critique of Modernity]” (Pouchepadass 2000) the publications of this collective, the earliest of which date back to the early 1980s, were still almost unknown in France.¹ The first French-language anthology had just been published the previous year (Diouf 1999). Significantly, however, it had been put together by the Senegalese historian Mamadou Diouf. Diouf was working in Dakar at the time and took on the project to open up a dialogue with African historiography. Subaltern Studies thus first entered into Francophone space through its academic margins. There are three main reasons for this delayed reception. First, there is the relative difficulty of accessing the texts, as there were few translations available before the beginning of the 2000s. Then, as Michelle Zancarini-Fournel has pointed out, the state of the field of social history in France, which was marked by a strong rejection of Marxism from 1975 onwards, must be taken into account. This state of affairs made it difficult to get involved in an editorial project that wanted to write a radical history and initially claimed to be very openly inspired by the writings of Antonio Gramsci (Zancarini-Fournel 2012/1). Concomitantly, the prevalence in the French academic field of the notion of universalism hindered the dissemination of the writings of the second phase of Subaltern Studies, initiated in the 1990s, when the current merged into that of postcolonial studies.

- 3 The late emergence in the French public space of debates around postcolonial issues— notably around the very controversial law of February 2005 whose article 4, which was ultimately repealed because of public outcry and demonstrations, celebrated “the benefits of colonization”—awakened interest in Subaltern Studies. During the 2000s, many texts and works by the group and its main authors were translated, while French-language contestatory and review articles about this movement multiplied. In addition to his 2000 article, which is now considered foundational, Jacques Pouchepadass continued to fuel this discussion. Between 2000 and 2018, he published no less than 15 articles, dictionary entries, and book chapters dedicated to these issues. His contributions stand out in two ways. On the one hand, while the majority of translations and discussions were then focused on the “postcolonial” period of Subaltern Studies, he consistently returned to the first period, capturing with great finesse the contributions but also the depth of the debates raised, particularly in India, by the work of this history from below. On the other hand, and in contrast to the warped and distorted reception of postcolonial studies that has often characterized the French public and academic space, Jacques always adopted a nuanced and situated approach to them, taking their proposals seriously and discussing them with a keen intellectual appetite.
- 4 The intellectual curiosity, always combined with benevolence, that characterized him undoubtedly predisposed him to play with brio this role of intermediary between France and India. But, by virtue of his research subjects, he was also a pillar of social history and a historian of the subalterns. His first works, begun in the 1970s, focused on the peasant classes of Bihar, in the Champaran region. In addition to an analysis of agrarian structures, he conducted a detailed study of peasant mobilizations, focusing in particular on the role played by rumors in the latter.² Thereafter, while he did deal with differently focused subjects, he continued to devote part of his work to the history of subaltern groups: “criminal” tribes, Adivasi, non-free labor, inhabitants of the forests of South India, etc., with endeavoring constantly to entwine together environmental and social history in particular.³
- 5 This collective special issue therefore provides us with a wonderful opportunity to salute him and to highlight his important contribution, both to the knowledge of the Subaltern Studies movement in France, and the field of Indian social history in general—the history of the subalterns in particular.

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NOTES

1. It should be noted, however, that as early as 1988, Roland Lardinois decided to commission a translation of the introduction to Ranajit Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Lardinois 1988).
 2. These works have given rise to the publication of two books in French, which were subsequently translated into English; we provide the references in this language here: Jacques Pouchepadass. 1999. *Champaran and Gandhi: Planters, Peasants and Gandhian Politics*. Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2000. *Land, Power and Market: A Bihar District under Colonial Rule, 1860–1947*. New Delhi: Thousand Oaks; London: Sage Publications.
 3. A complete list of his publications can be found at http://ceias.ehess.fr/docannexe/file/461/membres_pouchepadass_biblio_juin2018.pdf
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