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This paper proposes a new approach to the forms of mobilization and politicization of the popular classes, through a study of the tenants' movements in Bombay, from the 1920's to the 1950's.

It seeks notably to question certain assumptions of the Subaltern Studies group. This group dissociates elite mobilization, by nature more legalistic, from subaltern mobilization, relatively more spontaneous and violent. It considers that the political consciousness of the subordinate groups is in essence resistant to the ascendancy of the dominant strata. A study of the archives of the two colonial agencies responsible for the housing of Bombay workers leads to a reconsideration of these assertions. Documenting the everyday relations of domination between the tenants and their landlord, they show that the inhabitants of the colonial buildings resorted mainly to legalistic modes of action, and especially to petitions. The existence of a paternalistic official discourse of the colonial state encouraged the emergence of claims and provided a convenient battleground for its tenants.

This paper will analyse, finally, how these accumulated experiences of collective struggles were used, in the 1930's, by the labour parties to organize a movement of the tenants of the popular classes, able to impress their claims upon the authorities.