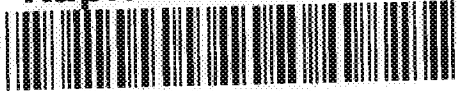


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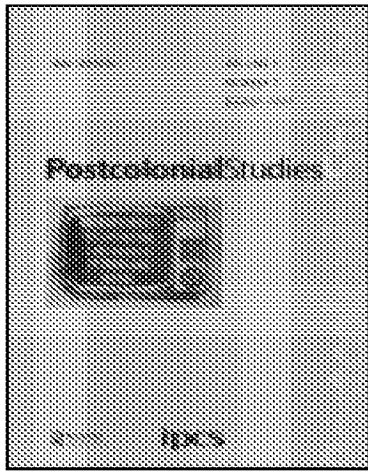
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# The politics and possibility of historical knowledge: continuing the conversation

DIPESH CHAKRABARTY

Any project of ‘provincializing Europe’ would be untrue to itself if it proposed or presumed to speak for everybody. My only hope in writing a book by that name was that it might speak *to* everybody. Of course, it did not. But I felt immeasurably fortunate in that the book brought me friends from far and near and I was deeply honoured that several of them—some represented here in their essays—should have come together on 12 March 2010 at the University of Chicago to mark the tenth anniversary of the book.

One of the most gratifying experiences of my scholarly life has been that of getting entangled in several rounds of conversation with the friends who have written for this collection. Needless to say, I have been the main beneficiary of all of these exchanges over the years: with Faisal Devji, Ajay Skaria, and Sanjay Seth on matters bearing on postcolonial thinking and history, especially in the context of South Asia; with Bain Attwood and Miranda Johnson on indigenous histories; and with Carlo Ginzburg and Sandro Mezzadra on issues of European past and present in the context of a global, post-colonial world in which Europe increasingly had to share her pre-eminence with other established and emergent world-powers. At the heart of these conversations have been some common and shared questions: the role the intellectual traditions of Europe played in the process that was once called ‘the Europeanization of the earth’, the discipline of history as an exemplar of such traditions, and the problem of European domination of other peoples’ lives and imagination over the last several centuries, until the coming of the age of decolonization and contemporary forms of globalization.

Increasingly, I have come to think of ‘conversation’ as one of the most effective and apt metaphors for how ideas from different parts of the world cross borders as we, so to speak, provincialize Europe. Conversation is always, by its very nature, situated in encounters. Based on curiosity, it runs simultaneously along multiple tracks that may not all converge in the end; it is thus necessarily open-ended, incomplete, and discontinuous; and it is impossible to conduct a conversation without moving between different perspectives. It is, in short, always provisional even when it entertains the possibility of a generalization. I am enough of a student of Nietzsche and Foucault to know that conversations do not take place outside of the many lines of worldly force that connect us to webs of power and domination and

thus differentiate us, in any situation, into unequal relations. Yet conversations always come at a tangent to these relations of domination or inequality. Based on the possibility of curiosity and exchange, conversation often blurs the boundaries that institutions of domination attempt to consolidate. Conversation is not the negation of domination. Nor is it an answer to the problem of domination. But it saves us from the danger of reducing the colonial encounter to domination alone.

The conference in Chicago was, thankfully, not about my book in any direct way; it was more like an intersection at which friends with whom I had been in conversation met and presented their work. The tenth anniversary of the book simply provided the ground for this meeting. There is, thus, not much point in my responding specifically to the scholarship and points of view embodied in each individual contribution carried here. Let me, instead, say a few closing words by referring to a moment at the conference that never got into print but that connected deeply with some of my concerns in *Provincializing Europe*. This moment I have in mind came after Bain Attwood had presented his paper detailing the difficulty of producing Aboriginal history with the help of European-colonial sources. I reproduce the exchange here from memory with the hope that the persons named here will forgive me if the goddess Mnemosyne has misled me in my recollection of what happened. In case I am wrong, I hope the reader will simply use the proper names as convenient tags for certain intellectual positions and not ascribe them to the people named.

Surveying some debates about history and memory in Aboriginal studies in Australia, Bain Attwood's presentation at the conference asked in effect if the sources left by the white settler-colonials were not inadequate for writing the histories of Aboriginal peoples whose lives and societies the settlers came to dominate, and from which fact of domination these sources could not be separated. Being a historian himself, Attwood did not suggest that the historian simply let Aboriginal testimony and other forms of memory stand in for history, even at points where the available archives did not serve the historian well. But the question really was—and still is: Does not the discipline of history, so dependent on the existence of documents, reach its limit when we try to capture the past experiences of a group that had no tradition of writing? It is important to note that indigenous history is not exactly like the field of peasant or subaltern histories where indigenous elites have left us records about their subordinate classes going back over hundreds of years, where the problem of historical knowledge often presents itself as a question of reading elite sources in innovative ways. There are also the examples of Greg Denning, Inga Clendinen, Marshall Sahlins, Henry Reynolds, Bain Attwood and others who have done very admirable work on indigenous histories using European archives; but the fact that there were, for a long time, absolutely no documents from the Aboriginal side (unlike, say, Mughal documents on the peasantry in India) surely made a difference. I still remember my surprise and wonderment at encountering the subject called 'Aboriginal history' in Australia in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, where what was being called 'history' could only stretch over the 200 years of

white occupation of the land. Beyond that, historical time—like a sea beach that abruptly develops a steep gradient—suddenly dropped away into the depths of pre-history and archaeology where narratives went over much larger chunks of time (thousands of years sometimes) with astonishing rapidity and where scientific procedures like radiocarbon dating took matters beyond the social or cultural historian's competence!

I thus resonated to Attwood's posing of the problem and asked Carlo Ginzburg during the question-and-answer session following Attwood's presentation what he, Ginzburg, made of the problem that Attwood's paper suggested. He gave a provocative answer—one that was both rhetorically and substantially powerful while conveying simultaneously a sense of impatience and self-irony. He said: 'I am a reactionary man, so I would say that if you waited another thousand years, you would get dense enough sources from Aboriginal persons themselves to have historical knowledge of their own society!' Not exactly these words maybe, but something to this effect. It made me think.

That moment has stayed with me and I want to return to it to discuss an issue that was central to the project of *Provincializing Europe* and that I know is a continuing concern of scholars who see themselves writing out of the postcolonial field. One could understand Ginzburg's answer as suggesting a convergence between various societies over time. Given time, the Aboriginals would come into the fold of reading and writing—as indeed they have and are—and would leave future historians copious sources for crafting their history. Ginzburg would probably acknowledge the facts of European cultural domination or at least the passing of traditional Aboriginal society in the process but he would also see the process as one creating possibilities for historical knowledge. The position is not, politically speaking, without empathy for the indigenous peoples. One could obviously maintain Ginzburg's position even while acknowledging the various sufferings and injustices that the settling of Australia by European and other populations has entailed for the Aboriginals.

Ginzburg's intervention reminded me of the peculiarities of history, the discipline, as a form of knowledge, and of its in-built inequalities. Think of the physical sciences: physics, chemistry, geology, and so on. One could, in principle, conduct investigations in these areas at any place in the world without asking the world to change and become worthy of these disciplines. Of course, it could be said to me that these are disciplines for studying the physical world, and every place possesses their conditions of possibility. But that is not so for a subject like history. Historical knowledge depends on there being documents that could be used to understand how people in the past experienced their lives. But those people of the past in turn need to leave documents so that later generations can study and reconstruct their histories. Historical knowledge thus assumes as one critical condition of its own possibility that there are societies that produce historical documents. 'No documents, no history', as Charles V Langlois and Charles Seignobos once famously said.<sup>1</sup> But that only means that this form of knowledge of the past is society-specific. It can only emerge out of societies that in the course of their

own functioning secret documents. Ginzburg's implicit proposition, I suppose, was that given European expansion, colonization, settler-colonial rule and globalization, all societies would become increasingly productive of documents. Hence there must come about a time when there will be an even distribution of historical knowledge in the world. It is only a matter of time. Until that time comes, there will be history-rich and history-poor societies. I, of course, use the word 'history' in the disciplinary sense (and not in the old and much-maligned Hegelian sense of historical consciousness).

There would be no problem with Ginzburg's proposition if societies could find their individual, sovereign paths to being rich in history, while interacting as equals with other societies, that is to say if people from history-rich social formations did not come to dominate those who were history-poor, thus converting the condition of being history-poor into a historical disadvantage for the latter (for the history-rich then spell out the conditions for what kind of versions of the past would be admitted to respectability in the governing institutions).<sup>2</sup> Ginzburg's intervention, while reminding us helpfully that the discipline requires certain conditions for its flourishing, stops short of being a guide in the current world where the past often becomes a matter of dispute between history-rich and history-poor sections of the same society and so for good political reasons. After all, the postcolonial and globalizing world of today contains some necessary political anomalies. The old, imperial injunction that told non-Western people to wait for citizenly rights until they had been fully educated in the doctrinal and legal niceties of citizenship was repudiated by the logic of anti-colonial movements when the colonized rejected this prescription to wait.<sup>3</sup> The momentum of civil rights movements in the 1960s only intensified this logic. The consequence has been that history-rich and history-poor groups, in competing for resources and representations in modern polities, pragmatically use whatever version of the past seems useful in their struggles. And if the discipline of history has not served your pasts very well in the sphere of politics (as in the case of Aboriginal history), it only makes sense to supplement it with other kinds of pasts—thus the political use of memory, myths, museums, and other artifacts. The pressure of the politics of recognition makes such representation urgent in many cases.<sup>4</sup>

From here I do not jump to say that all versions of the past are therefore of the same value as knowledge. They are, after all, not equally open to verification by the historian's methods. But I do claim that in many situations after the advent of European rule over others, not having a documentable past functions as a disadvantage that needs to be recognized. It is this political disadvantage that sometimes leads people to claim that their testimony—be it in the form of memory, experience, or myth—*is* history, which naturally offends many historians because the very search for history begins with the historian's interrogation of testimony, and not by taking testimony on trust.

History as a form of knowledge is thus iniquitous in how it applies to different groups and societies. But that is just an observation, not a complaint. It is easy to see, however, why history would come in for a lot

of criticism in the second half of the twentieth century when, in the wake of the decolonization and civil rights movements that re-shaped our sensibilities, people whose pasts were not amenable to the disciplinary treatment of history sought 'equal' representation in the narratives of the nations in which they found themselves incorporated, leading to much discussion about what history could do and what it could not, and for whom and when and where. The question is not whether we should consider history and myths equally valid forms of knowledge. Nor do I intend to address here the political consequences of being history-rich and history-poor in my sense of these terms. The question I want to ask here is: Does not the moment of encounter between history-rich and history-poor peoples produce a special opportunity for reflection on the nature of historical knowledge and its conditions of possibility? Cannot the discipline become more self-conscious about its limits when it looks at itself in the mirror of such encounters?

This point, which I thought was central to *Provincializing Europe*, has sometimes been misunderstood as a statement of relativist import. Yet it is not. And let me illustrate this with reference to a criticism my book has recently received in published conversations between two historians I otherwise admire and respect: Natalie Zemon Davis and Denis Crouzet.<sup>5</sup> In the course of discussing *Provincializing Europe*, Davis remarks that there is 'one critique of universal theories' in *Provincializing Europe* that she does not think is 'fruitful for cross-fertilization in historical practice'.

It has to do with systems of proof in Western historiography; he [Chakrabarty] challenges the universal application of 'scientific' and 'rational' methods of proof, and argues for the coexistence of 'rational' and 'magical' paths to proof. Now as a choice for personal life, let it happen; I am not addressing that here . . . . But for *historians trying to find agreement about our craft*, I don't think it is good advice . . . . We may not agree [on particular bits of evidence], but we still seek common rules for how to prove a historical case that allows the argument to go on. If you affirm you have a form of proof from a realm into which I cannot enter (your special 'magic' as compared to our shared 'reason'), then there's no ground for us to debate as historians.<sup>6</sup>

Explaining further the difference between 'a historical source and a historical proof', she continues:

Chakrabarty discusses the role that dreams have in India as proof. In fact, dreams have played such a role in many other settings. The Indians of North America took their dreams seriously as form of reality and as carriers of commands for their future actions . . . . Dreams constantly provide a way to talk about the self and the world, and Jean-Claude Schmitt has shown us beautifully how we can use them as sources for medieval discourse.<sup>7</sup>

Here the conversation proceeds somewhat at cross-purposes. Davis, presumably, is referring to the chapter entitled 'Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts' in *Provincializing Europe* where I discussed the case of a tribal insurgency in Bengal, the Santal rebellion of 1855, when the leaders of the

rebels declared that they were working under instructions they had received from their god, Thakur. I in fact completely agree with Davis that this is ‘evidence’ to be interpreted and questioned by historians as they engage in the process of constructing an explanation (‘proof’?) as to why the rebellion occurred when it did. And the interpretation and use of such evidence indeed leaves room for creativity and ingenuity on the part of the historian. So much is not at issue. I was not contesting the possibility of historical knowledge. My point was different. It was more concerned with understanding what makes such knowledge possible. I said that whatever the explanation in the discipline as to why the Santal rebellion of 1855 happened, it would be impossible for a historian, *qua* historian, to describe the rebellion in such a manner as to give the agency to a god in the same way as the historical actors concerned—the Santal rebels, in this case—did. And that is not because a historian as a human being ‘cannot enter’ (to use Davis’s words) the realm of magic, dreams, gods, or the supernatural. Mine was not a point about cultural incommensurability and such like matters. The realm of the supernatural (it presents itself in different and historically-specific forms) is probably a human universal—which society is without it? Being able to enter it imaginatively is not a serious problem. Davis’s own statement mentions Jewish and Christian use of dreams, both religious traditions closer to her own life than my Hindu background, and she herself comments on the similarities between American-Indians’ use of dreams and those by Jewish and Christian prophets: ‘Jewish and Christian prophets used them [dreams] in a similar way [similar to north American Indians’ use of dreams]. The boundary between the dream and a vision was porous.’<sup>8</sup> Such similarities could be extended. My claim was about a duality in the historian’s epistemology. It was that, while the historical explanation of the rebellion might indeed require the historian to distance herself from the past in order to treat it as an object of study, what made the Diltheyan or Collingwoodian business of ‘understanding’ the Santal’s experience as a rebel (also a task of the historian) possible was the fact that the historian, as a human being and not *qua* historian, already had a fore-knowledge—a knowledge that was not formally ‘knowledge’—of the supernatural from her own background since the realm of the supernatural is not absolutely unfamiliar to any society. This does not mean that the supernatural in the Santal’s world is exactly the same as mine—no, for the supernatural is not outside of history. But there are family-resemblances or at least analogues (as claimed for African witchcraft by European early-modernists) that enable the historian to empathize at a human level with the Santal’s statement while strictly harnessing her empathy to the work of historical reasoning. Davis’s own book gives many examples of such dual processes.

All this, I hope, is unexceptionable. But the point I wanted to make, however, was a larger one: that, whatever the proof/explanation the historian might construct of a peasant rebellion, the very methods of disciplinary history would disallow any move that could ascribe agency to supernatural forces. Such forces would always have to be confined to the mental world of the Santal, his ‘beliefs’. The world whose functioning the historian



re-constructs and explains is not one in which supernatural forces have any agency. This reconstructed world is fundamentally secular. The divine or the providential or even the simple matter of curse (an agentive force in many Indian and African tales) has been secularized here into ‘coincidence’ or privatized into a mental entity, ‘belief’.<sup>9</sup> In that sense, Ginzburg’s intervention in the conference had a point: the more the peasant ceases to be a peasant, the closer he or she is to the methodological world the historian, as historian, inhabits.<sup>10</sup> The more the Australian Aboriginals enjoyed the conditions of the modern middle or working classes, the more there would be documents, and the more they would have history. The production of a rich and dense historical knowledge about Aboriginals is thus predicated on nothing short of a complete overhaul or transformation of Aboriginal society. History’s success as a hegemonic knowledge-form then depends on the destruction of the society that made some humans history-poor to begin with. It is this participation in the political ambience and imaginaries of postcolonial societies that makes the question of the historical discipline—and the resistance and collaboration it encounters from other kinds of pasts including the ones that seem magical—such a fraught one in the Aboriginal case.

Yet as human beings all of us—including the historian—are always in proximity to expressions of the supernatural even when we don’t personally believe in it and however distant our own society may be from public expressions of it—after all, weekly horoscopes in newspapers have survived Adorno’s curse. The historian thus has an intuitive, pre-theoretical relationship to the supernatural. And this pre-theoretical understanding that does not quite have the status of ‘knowledge’ must enter into some kind of a conversation with the knowledge-protocols of the historian to enable her to perform the operation of historical understanding—being open to the experience of someone who lived in the past even while knowing that such experience is never repeated and is therefore never quite completely accessible. Otherwise, how would I—someone who is not a Christian and who has never visited an Italian village, not to speak of a village in Mussolini’s Italy—make any sense of what the great writer Carlo Levi wrote about his encounter with peasants when he was banished to the southern Italian countryside by the Fascists?

Only reason, religion, and history have clear-cut meanings.... And in the peasants’ world there is no room for reason, religion, and history. There is no room for religion, because to them everything participates in divinity, everything is actually, not merely symbolically, divine: Christ and the goat; the heavens above, and the beasts of the fields below; everything is bound up in natural magic. Even the ceremonies of the church become pagan rites, celebrate the existence of inanimate things, which the peasants endow with a soul, and the innumerable earthly divinities of the village.<sup>11</sup>

There is thus this double-sidedness to the historian’s position: her world-view as a historian is not that of the peasant; but as a human being she always has some access to the supernatural that marks her own society, however

chronologically and structurally distant it may be from that of the peasant. When those who are history-rich encounter subjects who are history-poor under conditions in which it is politically advantageous to be history-rich, we become aware not only of the peculiarities of history as a form of knowledge—its inherent inequities, as I have called them—but also of its conditions of possibility. We then understand why some groups in certain circumstances may want to trouble—politically speaking—the form of knowledge that the discipline of history is. The Carlo Ginzburg of my story said to the historian of Aboriginal Australia: ‘Wait. Historical knowledge is always possible but its realization will take time.’ But what does the historian do in the mean time, as it were, when faced with the pressures of what I have called above the necessary political anomalies of postcolonial societies? The least she can do, in her capacity as an academic, is to try to transform her awareness of what makes the discipline possible into generative reflections on politics of knowledge in the very present she inhabits.

That was my claim in *Provincializing Europe*. By that claim—always provisional and always open to reasoned challenges—I still stand.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Charles V Langlois and Charles Seignobos, *Introduction to the Study of History* (1898), cited in Daniel Lord Smail, *Deep History and the Brain*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, p 46.
- <sup>2</sup> Bain Attwood’s, Miranda Johnson’s, and Sanjay Seth’s papers here address different aspects of this problem.
- <sup>3</sup> This is what I discuss in the Introduction to *Provincializing Europe* as the distinction between the times of the ‘not yet’ and the ‘now’.
- <sup>4</sup> See my essays, ‘The Public Life of History: An Argument Out of India’, *Public Culture* 20(1), 2008, pp 143–168, and ‘History and the Politics of Recognition’, in Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan and Alan Munslow (eds), *Manifestos for History*, New York: Routledge, 2007, pp 77–86.
- <sup>5</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *A Passion for History: Conversations with Denis Crouzet*, Natalie Zemon Davis and Michael Wolfe (trans), Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2010. The charge of relativism is explicitly laid against me by Professor Orset Ranum in his Foreword to the book (p x) but he is careful to point out that the term is his, not Davis’s.
- <sup>6</sup> Davis, *A Passion*, pp 79–80.
- <sup>7</sup> Davis, *A Passion*, p 81.
- <sup>8</sup> Davis, *A Passion*, p 81.
- <sup>9</sup> The point about ‘coincidence’ was made to me a long time ago by Donald Denoon, the historian of South Africa and of other settler colonies.
- <sup>10</sup> In Charles Taylor’s terms, we could define this as a shift from the ‘porous self’ to the ‘buffered self’. See the discussion in my ‘The Modern and the Secular in the West: An Outsider’s View’ (a review essay on Charles Taylor’s book *A Secular Age*), *Journal of the American Academy of Religions* 77(2), 2009, pp 393–409.
- <sup>11</sup> Carlo Levi, *Christ Stopped at Eboli: The Story of a Year*, Frances Frenay (trans), New York: Noonday Press, 1988 (1947), pp 116–117.