

# Minority histories, subaltern pasts

DIPESH CHAKRABARTY

Recent struggles and debates around the rather tentative concept of multiculturalism in the western democracies have often fuelled discussions of minority histories. As the writing of history has increasingly become entangled with the so-called 'politics and production of identity' after the Second World War, the question has arisen in all democracies of including in the history of the nation the histories of groups previously excluded. In the 1960s, this list usually contained names of subaltern social groups and classes—viz former slaves, working classes, convicts, women, etc. This came to be known in the seventies as 'history from below'. Under pressure from growing demands for democratising pasts, this list was expanded in the seventies and eighties to include the so-called ethnic groups, the indigenous peoples, children, the old and gays and lesbians. The expression 'minority histories' has come to refer to all those pasts on whose behalf democratically-minded historians have fought the exclusions and omissions of mainstream narratives of the nation. The last 10 years, as a result, have seen the flourishing of almost a cult of pluralism in matters pertaining to history or memory. Official or officially-blessed accounts of the nation's past have been challenged in many countries by the champions of minority histories. Post modern critiques of 'grand narratives' have been used as ammunition in the process to argue that the nation cannot have just one standardised narrative, that the nation is always a contingent result of many contesting narratives. Minority histories, one may say, in part express the struggle for inclusion and representation that are characteristic of liberal and representative democracies.<sup>1</sup>

Conceived in this way, 'minority histories' are oppositional chiefly in the early part of their careers when they are excluded from mainstream historical narratives. As soon as they are 'in', the oppositional stance appears to have become redundant (or its continuation would be seen as a sign of ingratitude if not something in bad taste). Begun in an oppositional mode, 'minority histories' can end up being additional instances of 'good history'. As Eric Hobsbawm says in a recent article: '... bad history is not harmless history. It is dangerous.'<sup>2</sup> 'Good histories', on the other hand, are supposed to expand our vista and make the subject matter of history more representative of society as a whole. One can ask legitimate Foucauldian questions about who has the authority to define what 'good' history is or what relationships between power and knowledge are invested in such definitions, but let us put them aside for the moment.

The transformation of once-oppositional, minority histories into 'good' histories illustrate how the mechanism of incorporation works in the

discipline of history. The process of canon-formation in history curricula in Anglo-American universities is different from the corresponding process in literature/English departments. History is a subject primarily concerned with the crafting of narratives. Any account of the past can be absorbed into, and thus made to enrich, the mainstream of historical discourse if two questions could be answered in the affirmative: Can the story be told/crafted? And does it allow for a rationally-defensible point of view or position from which to tell the story? The first question, that of crafting a story, is what has enriched the discipline for a long time by challenging historians to be imaginative and creative both in their research and narrative strategies. How do you write the histories of suppressed groups? How do you construct a narrative of a group or class that has not left its own sources? It is questions of this kind that often stimulate innovation in historians' practices. The point about the authorial position being rationally defensible is also of critical importance. The story has to be plausible within a definable understanding of what plausibility may consist in. The author's position may reflect an ideology, a moral choice, a political philosophy but the choices here are not unlimited. A madman's narrative is not history. Nor can a preference that is arbitrary or just personal—something based on sheer taste, say—give us rationally-defensible principles for narration (at best it will count as fiction and not history). The investment in a certain kind of rationality and in a particular understanding of the 'real' means that history's, the discipline's, exclusions are ultimately epistemological.

I give two instances to show, therefore, that so long as these two questions—can the story be told? And does it allow for a rationally-defensible position in public life from which to tell the story?—can be answered in the positive, the discipline has no serious problems incorporating into itself, or even making central to itself, what once occupied a marginal or minority position.

My first case is that of British Marxist/social-democratic history or so-called 'history from below'. Consider for a moment what the results have been of incorporating into the discourse of history the pasts of majority-minor groups such as the working classes and women. History has not been the same ever since a Thompson or a Hobsbawm took up his pen to make the working classes look like major actors in society, or since the time feminist historians made us realise the critical importance of gender relations and of the contributions of women to social processes. So the question whether or not such incorporation changes the nature of historical discourse itself can be answered simply: 'of course, it does'. But the answer to the question: did such incorporation call the discipline into any kind of crisis? would have to be, No. To be able to tell the story of a group hitherto overlooked, to be able to master the problems of crafting such narratives—particularly under circumstances where the usual archives do not exist—is how the discipline of history renews and maintains itself. For this inclusion appeals to the sense of democracy that impels the discipline ever outward from its core. Both conditions of history writing were met in the tradition of 'history from below': the stories could be told provided one were creative and enterprising in one's research, and they could be told from a position (liberalism or Marxism) rationally-defensible in public life.

The point about historical narratives requiring a certain minimum investment

in rationality has recently been made in the discussion of postmodernism in the book *Telling the Truth About History*.<sup>3</sup> The question of the relationship between minority histories and post-war democracies is at the heart of this book authored jointly by three leading feminist historians of the US. To the extent that the authors read postmodernism as allowing for multiple narratives—the possibility of many narratives and multiple ways of crafting these narratives—they welcome the influence of postmodernism and thus align themselves with the democratic cause of minority histories. However, the book registers a much stronger degree of discomfiture when it encounters arguments that in effect use the idea of multiplicity of narratives to question any idea of truth or facts. For here the idea of a rationally-defensible position in public life from which to craft even a multi-vocal narrative, is brought into question. If ‘minority histories’ go to the extent of questioning the very idea of fact or evidence, then, the authors ask, how would you find ways of adjudicating between competing claims in public life? Would not the absence of a certain minimum agreement about what constitutes fact and evidence seriously fragment the body politic in the USA and would not that in turn impair the capacity of the nation to function as a whole? Hence the authors recommend a pragmatic idea of ‘workable truths’, based on a shared, rational understanding of historical facts and evidence. For a nation to function effectively even while eschewing any claims to a superior, overarching grand narrative, these truths must be maintained for institutions and groups to adjudicate between conflicting stories/interpretations. Many historians, regardless of their ideological moorings, display a remarkable consensus of opinion when it comes to defending history’s methodological ties to a certain understanding of rationality. Georg Igger’s recent textbook on twentieth-century historiography emphasises the discipline’s investment in ‘rationality’.

Peter Novick has in my opinion rightly maintained that objectivity is unattainable in history; the historian can hope for nothing more than plausibility. But plausibility obviously rests not on the arbitrary invention of an historical account but involves *rational* strategies of determining what in fact is plausible ...<sup>4</sup>

Hobsbawm echoes sentiments not dissimilar to those expressed by Appleby and her colleagues:

The fashion for what (at least in Anglo-Saxon academic discourse) is known by the vague term ‘postmodernism’ has fortunately not gained as much ground among historians as among literary and cultural theorists and social anthropologists, even in the USA ... it [‘postmodernism’] throws doubt on the distinction between fact and fiction, objective reality and conceptual discourse. It is profoundly relativist.<sup>5</sup>

What these historians see as postmodern resistance to the idea of facticity does not thus meet the rationality condition for incorporating other narratives into the discipline of history.

Nevertheless, *Telling the Truth About History* is important for demonstrating the continuing relevance of the two questions about crafting historical narratives and their connections to public life. So long as the two conditions can be met, ‘minority histories’ can change the discourse of the discipline without having to practice any principle of permanent revolution. Successfully incorporated ‘min-

ority histories' are like yesterday's revolutionaries become today's gentlemen. Their success helps routinise innovation.

The debate about minority histories, however, allows for another understanding of the expression 'minority.' Minority and majority are, after all, no natural entities; they are constructions. The popular meanings of the words 'majority' and 'minority' are statistical. But the semantic fields of the words contain another idea: of being a 'minor' or a 'major' figure in a given context. For example, the Europeans, numerically speaking, are a minority in the total pool of humanity today and have been so for a while, yet their colonialism in the nineteenth century was based on certain ideas about being 'major' and 'minor': the idea, for example, that it was their histories which contained the majority instances of norms that every other human society should aspire to, or that compared to them others were the still the 'minors' for whom they, the 'adults' of the world, had to take charge. So numerical advantage by itself is no guarantor of a major/majority status. Sometimes, you can be a larger group than the dominant one, but your history could still qualify as 'minor/minority history'. The problem of 'minority histories' thus leads us to the question of what may be called the 'minor-ity' of some particular pasts, ie constructions and experiences of the past that stay 'minor' in the sense that their very incorporation into historical narratives converts them into pasts 'of lesser importance' *vis-à-vis* dominant understandings of what constitutes fact and evidence (and hence *vis-à-vis* the underlying principle of rationality itself) in the practices of professional history. Such 'minor' pasts are those experiences of the past which have to be always assigned as 'inferior' or 'marginal' position as they are translated back into the historian's language, that is to say, as they are translated back into the phenomenal world the historian—as a historian, that is, in his or her professional capacity—inhabits. These are pasts which are treated, to use Kant's expression from his essay 'What is Enlightenment?', as instances of 'immaturity' on the part of the historical agent, pasts which do not prepare us for either democracy or citizenly practices because they are not based on the deployment of reason in public life.<sup>6</sup>

Let me call these histories subordinated or 'subaltern' pasts. They are marginalised not because anyone consciously intends to marginalise them but because they represent moments or points at which the very archive that the historian of a (marginalised) group mines in order to bring the history of that group into a relationship with a larger narrative (of class, of the nation, etc), develops a degree of intractability with respect to the very aims of professional history. In other words, these are pasts that resist historicisation just as there may be moments in ethnographic research that resist the doing of ethnography.<sup>7</sup>

'Subaltern pasts', in my sense of the term, do not belong exclusively to socially-subordinate or subaltern groups, nor to 'minority' identities alone. Elite and dominant groups can also have subaltern pasts to the extent that they participate in subordinated life-worlds. Being a historian, however, I argue from a particular instance of 'subaltern pasts'. My example comes from *Subaltern Studies*, the group with which I am associated, and from an essay by the founder of the group, Ranajit Guha. Since Guha and the group have been my teachers in many ways, I offer my remarks not in a hostile spirit of criticism but in a spirit

of self-examination, for my aim is to understand what ‘historicising’ the past does and does not do. With that caveat, let me proceed to the instance.

*Subaltern Studies*, as is well known, is a series of publications in Indian history that was begun under the general editorship of Ranajit Guha in the early 1980s. Its explicit aim was to write the subaltern classes into the history of nationalism and the nation and to combat all elitist biases in the writing of history. To make the subaltern the sovereign subject of history, to stage them as the agents in the process of history, to listen to their voices, to take their experiences and thought (and not just their material circumstances) seriously—these were goals we had deliberately and publicly set ourselves. These original intellectual ambitions and the desire to enact them were political in that they were connected to modern understandings of democratic public life; they did not necessarily come from the lives of the subaltern classes themselves though one of our objectives, as in the British tradition of ‘history from below’, was to ground our own political beings and institutions in history. Looking back, however, I see the problem of ‘subaltern pasts’ dogging the enterprise of *Subaltern Studies* from the very outset: indeed it is arguable that what differentiates the *Subaltern Studies* project from the older tradition of ‘history from below’ is the self-critical awareness of this problem in the writings of the historians associated with this group.

Let me explain this with the help of Ranajit Guha’s justly celebrated and brilliant essay, ‘The Prose of Counter-Insurgency’, published in an early volume of *Subaltern Studies* and now considered a classic of the genre. A certain paradox that results precisely from the historian’s attempt to bring the histories of the subaltern classes into the mainstream of the discourse of history in India, it seems to me, haunts the very exercise Guha undertakes this essay. The paradox consists in this. A principal aim of Guha’s essay is to use the Santal rebellion of 1855 in order to make the insurgent peasant’s consciousness the mainstay of a narrative about rebellion. As Guha put it in words that capture the spirit of early *Subaltern Studies*:

Yet this consciousness (the consciousness of the rebellious peasant) seems to have received little notice in the literature on the subject. Historiography has been content to deal with the peasant rebel merely as an empirical person or a member of a class, but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion ... insurgency is regarded as *external* to the peasant’s consciousness and Cause is made to stand in as a phantom surrogate for Reason, the logic of that consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

The critical phrase here is ‘the logic of that consciousness’ which marks the distance Guha has to take as a historian from the object of his research which is this consciousness itself. For in pursuing the history of the Santal rebellion of 1855—the Santals are a ‘tribal’ group inhabiting large areas of what are today Bengal and Bihar—Guha, unsurprisingly, comes across statements by peasant leaders which explain the rebellion in ‘supernatural’ terms, as an act carried out at the behest of the Santal god ‘Thakur’. Guha himself draws our attention to the evidence and underscores how important this understanding was to the rebels themselves. Quoting statements made by the leaders of the rebellion, Sidhu and Kanu, to military interrogators wherein they explained their own actions as

flowing from instructions they had received from their god (Thakur) who had also assured them that British bullets would not harm the devotee-rebels, Guha takes care to avoid any instrumental or elitist reading of these statements. He writes:

These were not public pronouncements meant to impress their followers.... these were words of captives facing execution. Addressed to hostile interrogators in military encampments they could have little use as propaganda. Uttered by men of a tribe which, according to all accounts had not yet learnt to lie, these represented the truth and nothing but the truth for their speakers.<sup>9</sup>

A tension inherent in the project of *Subaltern Studies* becomes palpable here in Guha's analysis. His phrase 'logic of consciousness' or his idea of a truth which is only 'truth for their speakers' are all, as I have said, acts of taking critical distance from that which he is trying to understand. Taken literally, the rebel peasants' statement show the subaltern himself as declining agency or subjecthood in action. 'I rebelled', he says, 'because Thakur made an appearance and told me to rebel'. In their own words, as reported by the colonial scribe: 'Kanoo and Sedoo Manjee are not fighting. The Thacoor himself will fight.' In his own telling, then, the subaltern is not necessarily the subject of his or her history but in the history of *Subaltern Studies* or in any democratically-minded history, she or he is. What does it then mean when we both take the subaltern's views seriously—the subaltern ascribes the agency for their rebellion to some god—and want to confer on the subaltern agency or subjecthood in their own history, a status the subaltern's statement denies?

Guha's strategy for negotiating this dilemma unfolds in the following manner. His first move, against liberal or standard Marxist historiography, is to resist analyses that see religion simply as the non-rational expression of a secular-rational non-religious entity, relationship (class, power, economy, etc) or consciousness:

Religiosity was, by all accounts, central to the *hool* (rebellion). The notion of power which inspired it ... [was] explicitly religious in character. It was not that power was a content wrapped up in a form external to it called religion ... Hence the attribution of the rising to a divine command rather than to any particular grievance; the enactment of rituals both before (eg propitiatory ceremonies to ward off the apocalypse of the Primeval Serpents....) and during the uprising (worshipping the goddess Durga, bathing in the Ganges, etc); the generation and circulation of myth is its characteristic vehicle—rumour ...<sup>10</sup>

But in spite of his desire to listen to the rebel voice seriously, Guha cannot take it seriously enough, for there is no principle in an 'event' involving the divine or the supernatural that can give us a narrative-strategy that is rationally-defensible in the modern understanding of what constitutes public life. The Santal's own understanding does not directly serve the cause of democracy or citizenship or socialism. It needs to be reinterpreted. Clearly, in the narrative of the rebels, the Event (the rebellion) was not secular; in our language, it included the supernatural. The supernatural was part of what constituted public life for the non-modern Santals of the nineteenth century. This, however, simply cannot be the past in the language of professional history in which the idea of historical

evidence, like evidence allowed in the court of law, cannot ascribe to the supernatural any kind of agential force except as part of the non-rational (ie somebody's belief-system). The Protestant theologian–hermeneutist Rudolf Bultmann has written illuminatingly on this problem. 'The historical method', says, Bultmann, 'includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect'. By this, Bultmann does not reduce the historical sciences to a mechanical understanding of the world. He qualifies his statement by adding:

This does not mean that the process of history is determined by the causal law and that there are no free decisions of men whose actions determine the course of historical happenings. But even a free decision does not happen without a cause, without a motive; and the task of the historian is to come to know the motives of actions. All decisions and all deeds have their causes and consequences; and the historical method presupposes that it is possible in principle to exhibit these and their connection and thus to understand the whole historical process as a closed unity.

Here Bultmann draws a conclusion which allows us to see the gap that must separate the set of explanatory principles that the historian employs to explain the Santal rebellion from the set that the Santals themselves might use (even after assuming some principles might be shared between them). Bultmann's conclusion, which I find entirely relevant to our discussion of 'subaltern pasts', reads as follows:

This closedness [the presupposed 'closed unity' of the historical process—DC] means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers and that therefore there is no 'miracle' in this sense of the word. Such a miracle would be an event whose cause did not lie within history. While, for example, the Old Testament narrative speaks of an interference by God in history, historical science cannot demonstrate such an act of God, but merely perceives that there are those who believe in it. To be sure, as historical science, it may not assert that such a faith is an illusion and that God has not acted in history. But it itself as science cannot perceive such an act and reckon on the basis of it; it can only leave every man free to determine whether he wants to see an act of God in a historical event that it itself understands in terms of that event's immanent historical causes.<sup>11</sup>

Fundamentally, then, the Santals' statement that God was the main instigator of the rebellion has to be anthropologised (ie converted into somebody's belief or made into an object of anthropological analysis) before it finds a place in the historian's narrative. Guha's position with respect to the Santals' own understanding of the event becomes a combination of the anthropologist's politeness—'I respect your beliefs but they are not mine'—and a Marxist (or modern) sense of frustration with the intrusion of the supernatural into public life. '[I]n sum', he writes, 'it is not possible to speak of insurgency in this case except as a religious consciousness', and yet hastens to add:

except that is, as a massive demonstration of self-estrangement (to borrow Marx's

term for the very essence of religiosity) which made the rebel look upon their project as predicated on a will other than their own ...<sup>12</sup>

Here is a case of what I have called ‘subaltern pasts’, pasts that cannot enter history ever as belonging to the historian’s own position. These days one can devise strategies of multivocal histories in which we hear subaltern voices more clearly than we or Guha did in the early phase of *Subaltern Studies*. One may even refrain from assimilating these different voices to any one voice and deliberately leave loose ends in one’s narrative (as does Shahid Amin in his *Events, Memory, Metaphor*)<sup>13</sup> But the point is the historian, as historian and unlike the Santal, cannot invoke the supernatural in explaining/describing an event.

In other words, the act of championing ‘minority histories’ has resulted in many cases in discoveries of subaltern pasts, constructions of historicity that help us see the limits to the mode of viewing embodied in the practices of the discipline of history. Why? Because the discipline of history—as has been argued by many (from Greg Denning to David Cohen in recent times)—is only one particular way of remembering the past. It is one amongst many.<sup>14</sup> The resistance that the ‘historical evidence’ offers in Guha’s essay to the historian’s reading of the past—a Santal god, Thakur, stands between the democratic-Marxist historian and the Santals in the matter of deciding who is the subject of history—is what produces ‘minor’ or ‘subaltern’ pasts in the very process of the weaving of modern historical narratives. Subaltern pasts are like stubborn knots that stand out and break up the otherwise evenly woven surface of the fabric. Between the insistence of the *Subaltern Studies* historian that the Santal is the agent or the subject of his own action and the Santals’ insistence that it was to their god Thakur that such sovereignty belonged, remains a hiatus separating two radically different experiences of historicity. This hiatus cannot be bridged by an exercise that converts, however understandably from the point of view of the historian, the Santal’s statement as evidence for anthropology. When we do ‘minority histories’ within the democratic project of including all groups and peoples within mainstream history, we both hear and then anthropologise the Santal. We treat their beliefs as just that, ‘their beliefs’. We cannot write history from within those beliefs. We thus produce ‘good’, not subversive, histories. However, historians of Pacific islands, of many African peoples, of indigenous peoples throughout the world have reminded us that the so-called societies ‘without histories’—the object of contempt for European philosophers of history in the nineteenth century—cannot be thought of as societies without memories. They remember their pasts differently—differently, that is, to the way we recall the past in history departments. Why *must* one privilege the ways in which the discipline of history authorises its knowledge? This is not a rhetorical question. It is a question being asked seriously by many historians today.<sup>15</sup>

This suggests that the kind of disciplinary consensus around the historian’s methods that was once—say, in the sixties—represented (in Anglo-American universities at least) by ‘theory’ or ‘methods’ courses which routinely dished out Collingwood or Carr or Bloch as staple for historians has now broken down. This does not necessarily mean methodological anarchy (though some



feel insecure enough to fear this) or that Collingwood *et al.* have become irrelevant but it does mean that E H Carr's question 'What is History?' needs to be asked again for our own times. The pressure of pluralism inherent in the languages and moves of minority histories has resulted in methodological and epistemological questioning of what the very business of writing history is all about. Only the future will tell how these questions will resolve themselves but one thing is clear: that the question of including 'minorities' in the history of the nation has turned out to be a much more complex problem than a simple operation of applying some already-settled methods to a new set of archives and adding the results to the existing collective wisdom of historiography. The additive, 'building-block' approach to knowledge has broken down. What has become an open question is: Are there experiences of the past that cannot be captured by the methods of the discipline or which at least show the limits of discipline? Fears that such questioning will lead to an outbreak of irrationalism, that some kind of postmodern madness will spread like a dark death-inducing disease through Historyland, seem extreme, for the discipline is still securely tied to the positivist impulses of modern bureaucracies, judiciary and to the instruments of governmentality.<sup>16</sup> Minority histories, if they are going to be about inserting hitherto neglected identities into the game of social justice, must also be good, and not subversive, histories, for history here speaks to forms of representative democracy and social justice that liberalism or Marxism—in their significantly different ways—have already made familiar.

But minority histories can do more than that. The task of producing 'minority' histories has, under the pressure precisely of a deepening demand for democracy, become a double task. I may put it thus: 'good' minority history is about expanding the scope of social justice and representative democracy, but the talk about the 'limits of history', on the other hand, is about struggling, or even groping, for non-statist forms of democracy that we cannot yet either completely understand or envisage. This is so because in the mode of being attentive to the 'minor-ity' of subaltern pasts, we stay with heterogeneities without seeking to reduce them to any overarching principle that speaks for an already-given whole. There is no third voice which can assimilate into itself the two different voices of Guha and the Santal leader, we have to stay with both, and with the gap between them that signals an irreducible plurality in our own experiences of historicity.

Let me say a word or two more to explain the question of heterogeneity as I see it. We can—and we do usually in writing history—treat the Santal of the nineteenth century to doses of historicism and anthropology. We can, in other words, treat him as a signifier of other times and societies. This gesture maintains a subject-object relationship between the historian and his evidence. In this gesture, the past remains genuinely dead; the historian brings it 'alive' by his or her telling of the story.<sup>17</sup> But the Santal with his statement 'I did as my god told me to do' also faces us as a way of being in this world, and we could ask ourselves: Is that way of being a possibility for our own lives and for what we define as our present? Does the Santal help us to understand a principle by which we also live in certain instances? This question does not historicise or anthropologise the Santal, for the illustrative power of the Santal as an example

of a present possibility does not depend on the particular period or society from which the illustration is drawn. In this mode of understanding the Santal stands as our contemporary and the subject–object relationship that normally defines the historian’s relationship to his/her archives is dissolved in this gesture. This gesture, as I think of it, is akin to the one Kierkegaard developed in critiquing explanations that looked on the Biblical story of Abraham’s sacrifice of his son Isaac either as deserving an historical or psychological explanation or as a metaphor or allegory but never as a possibility for action open today to s/he who had faith. ‘[W]hy bother to remember a past’, asked Kierkegaard in this connection, ‘that cannot be made into a present?’<sup>18</sup> To stay with the heterogeneity of the moment when the historian meets with the Santal, the peasant, is then to stay with the difference between these two gestures: one, that of historicising the Santal in the interest of a history of social justice and democracy, and the other, that of refusing to historicise and of seeing the Santal instead as a figure throwing light on a possibility for the present. When seen as the latter, the Santal puts us in touch with the heterogeneities, the plural ways of being, that make up our own present. The archives thus help bring to view the disjointed nature of our own times. That is the function of subaltern pasts. A necessary penumbra of shadow to the area of the past that the method of history successfully illuminates, they make visible at one and the same time what historicising can do and what its limits are.

Attending to this heterogeneity could take many different forms. Some scholars now *perform* the limits of history by fictionalising the past, by experimenting to see how films and history might intersect in the new discipline of cultural studies, by studying memory rather than just history, by playing around with forms of writing, and by similar other means. Such experiments are welcome, but the fact that there are subaltern pasts, unassimilable to the secular narratives of the historian, allows us to see the complex understanding of time—treated as invisible in most historian’s writing—that must underlie and indeed make possible the secular chronology of historical narratives, the construction of before–after relationships without which there cannot be any historical explanation.

The broad statement that the Santal had a past in which events could belong to the order of the supernatural does not appear as something completely beyond our own experience—it is not something like a possible statement from a Martian. Why? Because the principle is not completely strange to us. We have a pretheoretical, everyday understanding of it precisely because the supernatural or the divine, as principles, have not disappeared from the practices of the modern. Wilhelm von Humboldt put the point well in his 1821 address ‘On the Task of the Historian’ delivered to the Berlin Academy of Sciences:

Where two beings are separated by a total gap, no bridge of understanding extends from one to the other; in order to understand one another, they must have in another sense, already understood each other.<sup>19</sup>

We are not the same as the nineteenth century Santal. One does not have to reduce the nineteenth century Santal to the one statement quoted here. Empirical

and historical Santals would have also had other relationships to modernity that I have not considered here. One could even easily assume that the Santal today would be very different from what they were in the nineteenth century, that they would inhabit a very different set of social circumstances. The modern Santal would have the benefit of secular education and may even produce their own professional historians. No one would deny these historical changes. But astrological columns in the newspapers (in spite of Adorno's frustrations with them), the practices of 'superstition' that surround the lives and activities of sports-fans, for example—practices we are sometimes too embarrassed to admit in public—not to speak of all the deliberately 'cultic' expressions of religiosity that have never gone away—go to show that we are all, in principle, capable of participating in supernatural events and the sense of the past they help create. The nineteenth century Santal—and indeed, if my argument is right, humans from any other period and regions—are in a peculiar way always already our contemporaries: that would have to be the condition under which we can even begin to treat them as intelligible to us. Thus the writing of history must implicitly assume a plurality of times existing together, a disjuncture of the present with itself. Making visible this disjuncture is what 'subaltern pasts' allow us to do.

An argument such as this is actually at the heart of modern historiography itself. One could argue, for instance, that the writing of 'medieval history' for Europe depends on this assumed contemporaneity of the medieval, or what is the same thing, the non-contemporaneity of the present with itself. The medieval in Europe is often strongly associated with the supernatural and the magical. But what makes the historicising of it at all possible is the fact that its basic characteristics are not completely foreign to us as moderns (which is not to deny the historical changes that separate the two). Historians of medieval Europe do not always consciously or explicitly make this point but it is not difficult to see this operating as an assumption in their method (in the same way as anthropologists may refer to examples more familiar to their readers in order to explain that which seems strange at first). In the writings of Aron Gurevich, for example, the modern makes its pact with the medieval through the use of anthropology—ie in the use of contemporary anthropological evidence from outside of Europe to make sense of the past of Europe. The strict separation of the medieval from the modern is here belied by their global contemporaneity suggested by this connection between history and anthropology. Peter Burke comments on this intellectual traffic between medieval Europe and contemporary anthropological evidence in introducing Gurevich's work. Gurevich, writes Burke, 'could already have been described in the 1960s as a historical anthropologist, and he did indeed draw inspiration from anthropology, most obviously from the economic anthropology of Bronislaw Malinowski and Marcel Mauss, who had begun his famous essay on the gift with a quotation from a medieval Scandinavian poem, the *Edda*'.<sup>20</sup>

Similar double moves—both of historicising the medieval and of seeing it at the same time as contemporary with the present—can be seen at work in the following lines from Jacques Le Goff. Le Goff is seeking to explain here an aspect of the European-medieval:

People today, even those who consult seers and fortune-tellers, call spirits to floating tables, or participate in black masses, recognize a frontier between the visible and the invisible, the natural and the supernatural. This was not true of medieval man. Not only was the visible for him merely the trace of the invisible; the supernatural overflowed into daily life at every turn.<sup>21</sup>

This is a complex passage. On the surface of it, it is about what separates the medieval from the modern. Yet this difference is what makes the medieval an ever-present possibility that haunts the practices of the modern—if only we, the moderns, could forget the ‘frontier’ between the visible and the invisible in Le Goff’s description, we would be on the other side of that frontier. The people who consult seers today are modern in spite of themselves, for they engage in ‘medieval’ practices but are not able to overcome the habits of the modern. Yet the opening expression ‘even today’ contains a reference to the sense of surprise one feels at their anachronism, as if we did not expect to find such practices today, as if the very existence of these practices today opens up a hiatus in the continuity of the present by inserting into it something that is medieval-like and yet not quite so. It makes the present look like as though it were non-contemporaneous with itself. Le Goff rescues the present by saying that even in the practice of these people, something irreducibly modern lingers—their distinction between the visible and the invisible. But it lingers only as a border, as something that defines the difference between the medieval and the modern. And since difference is always the name of a relationship, for it separates just as much as it connects as indeed does a border, one could argue that alongside the present or the modern the medieval must linger as well if only as that which exists as the limit or the border to activities that define the modern.

Subaltern pasts are signposts of this border. With them we reach the limits of the discourse of history. The reason for this, as I have said, is that subaltern pasts do not give the historian any principle of narration that can be rationally-defended in modern public life. Going a step further, one can see that this requirement for a rational principle, in turn, marks the deep connections that exist between modern constructions of public life and projects of social justice. That is why a Marxist scholar like Fredric Jameson begins his book *The Political Unconscious* with the injunction: ‘Always historicize!’ ‘This slogan’, writes Jameson, ‘the one absolute and we may even say “transhistorical” imperative of all dialectical thought—will unsurprisingly turn out to be the moral of *The Political Unconscious* as well’.<sup>22</sup> If my point is right, then historicising is not the problematic part of the injunction, the troubling term is ‘always’. For the assumption of a continuous, homogeneous, infinitely-stretched out time which makes possible the imagination of an ‘always’, is put to question by subaltern pasts that makes the present, as Derrida says, ‘out of joint’, non-continuous with itself.<sup>23</sup>

One historicises only in so far as one belongs to a mode of being in the world which is aligned with the principle of ‘disenchantment of the universe’ that underlies knowledge in the social sciences (and I distinguish knowledge from practice).<sup>24</sup> It is not accidental that a Marxist would exhort us to ‘always historicise’, for historicising is tied to the search for justice in public life. This

is why one welcomes ‘minority histories’, be they of ethnic groups, gay rights activists, or of subaltern social classes. Here the historical discipline enriches itself by incorporating these histories but its very methodological dominations create what I have called subaltern pasts.

For the ‘disenchantment of the world’ is not the only principle by which we world the earth. There are other modes of being in the world—and they are not necessarily private, the superstitious acts of sports fans, for example, being often public. The supernatural can inhabit the world in these other modes and not always as a problem or result of conscious belief or ideas. Here I am reminded of an Irish story concerning the poet WB Yeats, whose interest in fairies and other non-human beings of Irish folk tales is well known. I tell the story as it has been told to me by my friend, David Lloyd:

One day, in the period of his extensive researches on Irish folklore in rural Connemara, William Butler Yeats discovered a treasure. The treasure was a certain Mrs Connolly who had the most magnificent repertoire of fairy stories that WB had ever come across. He sat with her in her little cottage from morning to dusk, listening and recording her stories, her proverbs and her lore. As twilight drew on, he had to leave and he stood up, still dazed by all that he had heard. Mrs Connolly stood at the door as he left, and just as he reached the gate he turned back to her and said quietly, ‘One more question Mrs Connolly, if I may. Do you believe in the fairies?’ Mrs Connolly threw her head back and laughed. ‘Oh, not at all Mr Yeats, not at all.’ WB paused, turned away and slouched off down the lane. Then he heard Mrs Connolly’s voice coming after him down the lane: ‘But they’re there, Mr Yeats, they’re there.’<sup>25</sup>

As old Mrs Connolly knew, and as we social scientists often forget, gods and spirits are not dependent on human beliefs for their own existence, what brings them to presence are our practices. They are parts of the different ways of being through which we make the present manifold; it is precisely the disjunctures in the present that allow us to be with them. These other ways of being are not without questions of power or justice but these questions are raised—to the extent that modern public institutions allow them space, for they do cut across one another—on terms other than those of the political-modern.

However—and I want to conclude by pointing this out—the relation between what I have called ‘subaltern pasts’ and the practice of historicising (that the Marxist in us recommends) is not one of mutual exclusion. It is because we always already have experience of that which makes the present non-contemporaneous with itself that we can actually historicise. Thus what allows medievalist historians to historicise the medieval or the ancient is the very fact these worlds are never completely lost. It is because we live in time-knots that we can, as it were, undertake the exercise of straightening out, as it were, some part of the knot (which is how we might think of chronology).<sup>26</sup> Subaltern pasts—aspects of these time-knots—thus act as a supplement to the historian’s pasts and in fact aid our capacity to historicise. They are supplementary in a Derridean sense—they enable history, the discipline, to be what it is and yet at the same time help to show forth what its limits are. But in calling attention to the limits of historicising, they help us distance ourselves from the imperious instincts of the discipline—the idea (of Haldane or Jameson for example) that

*everything* can be historicised or that one should *always* historicise—and return us to a sense of the limited good that modern historical consciousness is. Gadamer once put the point well in the course of discussing Heidegger’s philosophy. He said: ‘The experience of history, which we ourselves have, is ... covered only to a small degree by that which we would name *historical consciousness*.’<sup>27</sup> Subaltern pasts persistently remind us of the truth of this statement.

They remind us that a relation of contemporaneity between the non modern and the modern, a shared ‘now’, which expresses itself on the historical plane but the character of which is ontological, is what allows historical time to unfold. This ontological ‘now’ precedes the historical gap posited by the historian’s methods between the ‘there-and-then’ and the ‘here-and-now’. There is thus a doubling-up of time which underwrites our very capacity to understand practices that we assign to societies and periods as different from ours. What gives us a point of entry into times very different from the empty, secular and homogenous time of the historical calendar, is that in some form or other they are never completely alien, we inhabit them to begin with. Time, as the expression goes in my language, situates us within the structure of a ‘granthi’; hence the Bengali word *shomoy-granthi*, *shomoy* meaning ‘time’ and *granthi* referring to knots of various kinds, from the complex formations of knuckles on our fingers to the joints on a bamboo-stick. That is why one may have two relationships with the Santal. Firstly, as a historical subject for whom the Santal’s life-world is an object of historical study and explanation. And there is the other relationship which enfolds and makes possible this second-order subject-object orientation between the Santal and the historian. This is the relation formed by the fact that the historian and the Santal both co-inhabit the same human, ontological ‘now’. What have called ‘subaltern pasts’ may be thought of as intimations we receive—while engaged in the specific activity of historicizing—of this ontological ‘now’. This ‘now’ is, I have tried to suggest, what rends the seriality of historical time and makes any particular moment of the historical present out of joint with itself.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The connection between memorialising and the politics of identity receives careful attention in Allan Megill, ‘History, Identity, Memory’ (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Identity history is not enough’ in his *On History*, New York: The New Press, 1997, p 277. South Asian readers of Hobsbawm may find some irony in the fact that even ‘good’ history can be ‘dangerous’ (if we are going to such words). British imperialism in India—and modern European imperialism in many other places of the world—used ‘history’, the practices of the discipline as they were emerging in the nineteenth century, to subjugate peoples who, according to European thinkers, had ‘myths’ but no sense of history.

<sup>3</sup> Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, & Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994.

- <sup>4</sup> Cf Georg G Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1997, p 145. Emphasis added.
- <sup>5</sup> Hobsbawm, 'Identity history', p 271.
- <sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'An answer to the question: what is enlightenment?', 1784 in Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1983, pp 41–48.
- <sup>7</sup> A somewhat similar point—with some small differences—is made in Gyan Prakash, 'Subaltern studies as postcolonial criticism', *American Historical Review*, December 1994.
- <sup>8</sup> Ranajit Guha, 'The prose of counter-insurgency' in Ranajit Guha & Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (eds), *Selected Subaltern Studies*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp 46–47.
- <sup>9</sup> *Selected Subaltern Studies*, p 80.
- <sup>10</sup> *Selected Subaltern Studies*, p 78.
- <sup>11</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, 'Is exegesis without presuppositions possible?' in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (ed), *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present*, New York: Continuum, 1985, p 244.
- <sup>12</sup> *Selected Subaltern Studies*, p 78.
- <sup>13</sup> Shahid Amin's book *Events, Memory, Metaphor*, Berkeley: University of California, 1995 is an excellent illustration of the points being made in this essay and shows a self-conscious appreciation of the problems of translating the subaltern's voice into a modern political project (without giving up the socially-necessary attempt to translate).
- <sup>14</sup> See Greg Denning's essay 'The poetics of history' in his *Performances* Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995 and David Cohen's *The Combing of History*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994. Ashis Nandy's essay 'History's forgotten doubles', *History and Theory*, 34, 1995, makes comparable points.
- <sup>15</sup> A sensitivity to the question of alternative pasts is increasingly becoming visible in the work of many historians: my very personal and random list of such scholars would include Klaus Neuman, Stephen Muecke, Christopher Healy, Patricia Limerick, Vinay Lal, Ajay Skaria, Saurabh Dube, Sumathi Ramaswamy, Iain McCalman, Carolyn Hamilton and others.
- <sup>16</sup> Hobsbawm provides some unwitting evidence here of history's close ties to law and other instruments of government. He writes: '... the procedures of the law court, which insist on the supremacy of evidence as much as historical researchers, and often in much the same manner, demonstrate that difference between historical fact and falsehood is not ideological.... When an innocent person is tied for murder, and wishes to prove his or [her] innocence, what is required is the techniques not of the "postmodern" theorist, but of the old-fashioned historian.' Hobsbawm, 'Identity history,' p 272.
- <sup>17</sup> Ashis Nandy develops a critique of the discipline of history along these lines. See his essay 'From outside the Imperium' in his *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopia: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp 147–148 and my discussion of the point in 'The modern Indian intellectual and the problem of the past: an engagement with the thoughts of Ashis Nandy', *Emergences*, 7/8, 1995–96, special issue on Nandy guest edited by Vinay Lal, pp 168–177.
- <sup>18</sup> See Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de silentio*, trans. Alastair Hannay, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985, pp 60.
- <sup>19</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'On the task of the historian' in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (ed), *The Hermeneutics Reader*, p 112.
- <sup>20</sup> Peter Burke, 'Editorial preface' to Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. Janos M Back and Paul A Hollingsworth, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p vii.
- <sup>21</sup> Jacques Le Goff (ed), *The Medieval World*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane, London: Collins & Brown Ltd, 1990, pp 28–29.
- <sup>22</sup> Preface' to Frederick Jamison, Ithaca: Cornell University Press *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, 1981, p 9.
- <sup>23</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York and London: Routledge, 1994.
- <sup>24</sup> In using the idea of 'disenchantment' I am not denying anything of what has been said about the magic of 'commodities' or about the magical aspects of modernity itself. My point remains that of Bultmann, that there is a critical difference, in terms of knowledge-premises, between the world-view the social sciences adopt and one in which what we call the 'supernatural' can be a definitional element of an event. That the so-called moderns can be non-modern in their practices is, of course, something I myself argue—and argue for—in this essay. For a critical discussion of the theme of 'disenchantment', see Jacques Rancière, 'The Archeomodern turn' in Michael P Steinberg (ed), *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996, pp 24–40.
- <sup>25</sup> Personal communication from David Lloyd.
- <sup>26</sup> I owe the conception of time-knots to Ranajit Guha.
- <sup>27</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Kant and the hermeneutical turn' in his *Heidegger's Ways*, trans. John W Stanley, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994, p 58. Emphasis in the original.

