Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts

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The relation between 'subaltern pasts' and the practice of historicising is not one of mutual exclusion. Subaltern pasts act as a supplement to the historian's pasts and in fact aid our capacity to historicise. They enable history, the discipline, to be what it is and yet at the same time help to show forth what its limits are.

DEBATES on 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 left out from it. 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 1970s as ‘history from below.’ Under pressure from the debates on multi-culturalism, this list was expanded in the 1970s and 1980s to include the so-called ethnic groups, the indigenous peoples, children, the old and gays and lesbians. The expression 'minority histories' would thus now 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, express the struggle for inclusion and representation that are characteristic of liberal and representative democracies.

Conceived in this way, ‘minority histories’ are oppositional chiefly in the early part of their careers. They are oppositional insofar as they are excluded from mainstream historical narratives; as soon as they are ‘in’, the oppositional stance becomes 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’ end up being additional instances of ‘good history.’ They 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. 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 positive: 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 point about the authorial position being rationally defensible is important. It can be an ideology, a moral position, a political philosophy but, as we shall see, the choices here are not unlimited. A mad man’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). I will return to the issue of rationality. The other question of crafting, however, 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, and these questions, taken together, constitute what I call ‘the question of crafting.’

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. ‘Minority histories’, as such, do not have to be subversive in the long run.

My first case is that of British 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 importance of gender-relations and of the contributions of women to critical social processes. So to the question as to whether or not such incorporation changes the nature of historical discourse itself, the answer is simple: 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 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 post-modernism in the book Telling the Truth about History. 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 post-modernism as allowing for multiple narratives – the possibility of many narratives and multiple ways of crafting these narratives – they welcome the influence of post-modernism and thus align themselves with the democratic cause of minority histories. The idea of multiple narratives challenging any one dominant metanarrative of the nation is easily accepted in the book which promotes the message popular now with most historians with a liberal conscience: Let us have many narratives and hear groups whose histories have not been previously heard, let there not be only the story of Euro-centric America as the grand narrative of the nation. Where the book registers a much stronger degree of discomfiture, however, is where 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 multivocal 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 conflicting claims to the meaning of the words 'majority' and 'minority'? Would not the absence of a certain minimum agreement about what constitutes fact and evidence seriously fragment the body politic in the US of and would not that in turn impair the capacity of the nation to function as a whole? Hence the authors recommend that a pragmatic idea of 'workable truths' – based on a shared, rational understanding of historical facts and evidence – must be maintained in order for institutions and groups to be able to adjudicate between conflicting stories/interpretations and for the nation to function effectively even while eschewing any claims to a superior, overarching grand narrative. What Appleby and her colleagues see as postmodern resistance to the idea of facticity does not thus meet the second condition for incorporation into the discipline of history of other narratives about the past: Can the story be told on the basis of a rationally-defensible principle in public life? The book makes clear that citizenly practices require a certain minimum agreement on such principles as otherwise the clamour of contesting narratives – based on completely arbitrary ideas of historical evidence – would reduce public life in American democracy to a chaos.

I am not criticising *Telling the Truth About History* nor is it my purpose to defend what the book identifies as post-modern positions. The book is important in that it shows the continuing relevance of the two questions about crafting and connections to public life in any situation where the discipline of history hears calls to renew itself. I am simply saying that so long as the two conditions can be met 'minority histories' can change the discourse of the discipline without having to practise any principle of permanent revolution. Successful instances of 'minority 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', one that produces a more enduring sense of discomfort among many professional historians. Minority and majority are, after all, no natural entities; they are constructions, as I said at the outset, of identities made in very particular historical conditions and circumstances. The popular meaning of neuter '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 19th 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 whole worlds were still the 'minor' 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/majority history'. The problem of 'minority histories' thus leads us, one could say, to the question of what may be called the 'minority' of some particular pasts, i.e., constructions and experiences of the past that stay 'minor' in the sense that their very incorporation into historical narratives converts them into parts 'of lesser importance' *vis-a-vis* dominant understandings of what constitutes fact and evidence (and hence *vis-a-vis* the underlying principle of rationality itself) in the practices of professional history. Such 'minor' pasts, one might say, are those experiences of the past which have to be always assigned an '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.¹

Let me call these histories subordinated or 'subaltern' pasts. They are not marginalised 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 defines 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 historicism just as there may be moments in ethnographic research that resist the doing of 'ethnography'.²

'Subaltern pasts', in my sense of the term, do not belong exclusively to socially-subordinate or subaltern groups, nor do 'minority' identities alone. Elite and dominant groups can also have subaltern pasts. Being a historian, however, I argue from a particular instance of it. 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-understanding, 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, 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 tradition of 'history from below', was to ground our own political beings and institutions in history. That is why the early intellectual moves made in *Subaltern Studies* had much in common with the British social-democratic tradition of writing 'history from below'. Looking back, however, I see the problem of 'subaltern pasts' dogging the enterprise of *Subaltern Studies* from the very outset: indeed it is argued 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 Santhal 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.*

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 Santhal rebellion of 1855 – the Santhals 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 Santhal 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 Santhals about 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.7

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 subjectionhood 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 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 subjectionhood in their own history, a status the subaltern’s statement denies?8

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:

Religious discourse, in all accounts, central to the fool (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 (e.g. 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...8

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 Santhal’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 Santhals of the 19th 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 admit of the supernatural except as part of the non-rational (i.e. 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 principles of explanation that the historian employs to explain the Santhal rebellion from the set that the Santhals themselves might use (even after assuming some shared principles, that is). Bultmann’s conclusions in 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. Whereas, 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.9

Fundamentally, then, the Santhal’s statement that God was the main instigator of the rebellion has to be anthropologised (i.e. converted into somebody’s belief) before it finds a place in the historian’s narrative. Guha’s position with respect to the Santhal’s 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. ‘If I 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...10

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. One can these days devise strategies of multivocal histories in which we hear Sidhu and Kanu 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).11 But the point is the historian, as historian, and unlike the Santhal, cannot invoke the supernatural in explaining or 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, it has been argued by many (from Greg Dening to David Cohen in recent times), that the discipline of history is only one particular way of remembering the past. It is one amongst many.13 The resistance that the ‘historical evidence’ offers in Guha’s essay to the historian’s reading of the past – a Santhal god, Thakur, stands between the democratic-Marxist historian and the Santhals 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 even woven surface of the fabric. Between the insistence of the Subaltern Studies historian that the Santhal is the agent or the subject of his own action and the Santhal’s insistence that it was to their god Thakur that such sovereignty belonged, remains a hiatus separating two radically different experiences of historicity, a hiatus that cannot be bridged by an exercise that converts, however understandably from the point of view of the historian, the Santhal’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 Santhal. 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 positivist historians in the 19th 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 the 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.13

This fact has an important implication: it suggests that the kind of disciplinary consensus around the historian’s methods that was once – say, in the 1960s – 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 working on any area of the world, 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 – which, as I have argued, is really the pressure that debates about multi-culturalism put on official or nationalistic histories in the western democracies – 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: Can the discipline of history speak for any kind of experience of the past? 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 a breakout of irrationalism, that some kind of post-modern 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. 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.

Attention to the limits of history is about another realisation: that the task of producing ‘minority’ histories has, under the pressure 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 forms of democracy that we cannot yet either completely understand or envisage. This is so because in the mode of being attentive to the ‘minority’ 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 Santhal 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 Santhal of the 19th 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.14 But the Santhal 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 Santhal help us to understand a principle by which we also live in certain instances? This question does not historicise or anthropologise the Santhal, for the illustrative power of the Santhal 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 Santhal 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 a 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?’ To stay with the heterogeneity of the moment when the historian meets with the Santhal, the peasant, is then to stay with the difference between these two gestures: one, that of historicising the Santhal in the interest of a history of social justice and democracy, and the other, that of refusing to historicise and of seeing the Santhal instead as a figure throwing light on a possibility for the present. When seen as the latter, the Santhal 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 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. While such experiments are welcome, let me conclude with a point about how the fact that there are subaltern pasts, unassimilable to the secular narratives of the historian, allows us to see the complex understandings 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. Let me elucidate.

The broad statement that the Santhal 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 pre-theoretical, 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.18

We are not the same as the 19th century Santhal. One could even easily assume that the Santhal today would be very different from what they were in the 19th century, that they would inhabit a very different set of social circumstances. The modern Santhal 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 sport fans, for example – practices we are sometimes too embarrassed to admit in public – not to speak of all the deliberately ‘cultural’ 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 19th century Santhal – and indeed, if my argument is right, humans from any other period and regions – are in a peculiar way always already our contemporaries: that, I would argue, 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 disjunction of the present with itself. Making visible this disjunction 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 and the modern are 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, that is, 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 anthropology: ‘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’.

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, recognise 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.19

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 certain embarrassment, and at the same time, a certain distance at their anchormanism, 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 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 historicise!’ ‘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.’20 ‘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.21

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 practices).22 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 work the earth. There are other modes of being in the world – and they are not necessarily private, the superstitious acts of sportsfans, for example, being often public. The super-

c- natural 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 W B 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 dazzed 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'.

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 modern public institutions allow them, 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 that 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 some part of the knot (which is we might think of chronology).

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 impenetrable instincts of the discipline – the idea (of Haldane's or Jameson's for example) that everything can be historicised or that one should always historicise – and returns 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.' Subaltern pasts persistently remind us of the truth of this statement.

Notes

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1 The connection between memorialising and the politics of identity receives careful attention in Allan Megill, 'History, Identity, Memory' (forthcoming).

2 Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, Telling the Truth about History, New York, 1994.

3 Cf. George G. Iggers, Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge, Hanover and London, 1987, p 145; 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 involved rational strategies of determining what in fact is plausible.' Emphasis added.


5 A somewhat similar point – with some small differences – is made in Gyan Prakash, 'Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism', American Historical Review, December 1994.

6 Ranajit Guha, 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency' in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (eds), Selected Subaltern Studies, New York, 1988, pp 46-47.

7 Ibid, p 80.

8 Ibid, p 78.


10 Selected Subaltern Studies, p 78.

11 Shahid Amin's book on Events, Memory, Megaphor, Berkeley, 1986. It needs an 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).


13 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 Neumann, Stephen Muise, Christopher Hackett and Paul Acton, Vinay Lal, Jay Skaria, Saurabh Dude, Sunath Ramaswamy, Iain McCalman, Carolyn Hamilton and others.


21 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-precises, between the world-view the social sciences adopt and in which 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 Ranciere, The Archeological Turn' in Michael P Steinberg (ed), Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History, Ithaca and London, 1996, p 118.

22 Personal communication from David Lloyd.

23 I owe the conception of time-knots to Ranajit Guha.