

## Subaltern Histories and Post-Enlightenment Rationalism

Yes, I know all that. I should be modern.  
Marry again. See strippers at the Tease.  
Touch Africa. Go to the Movies.

Impale a six-inch spider  
under a lens. Join the Test-  
ban, or become The Outsider.

Or pay to shake my fist  
(or whatever-you-call-it) at a psychoanalyst.  
And when I burn

I should smile, dry-eyed,  
and nurse martinis like the Marginal Man.  
But sorry, I cannot unlearn

conventions of despair.  
They have their pride.  
I must seek and will find

my particular hell only in my Hindu mind:  
must translate and turn  
till I blister and roast.

A. K. Ramanujan, "Conventions of Despair"

In the 1990s, *Subaltern Studies* came in for a substantial amount of hostile criticism, particularly in India, on the grounds that the Marxist critique that informed the earlier volumes in the series had been replaced by a critique of the rationalism that marked the European Enlightenment. In an essay on the "fascist" nature of the Hindu Right, the eminent Indian historian Sumit Sarkar spelled out why a critique of Enlightenment rationalism is dangerous in India today. His propositions can be arranged as follows: (1) "Fascist ideology in Europe . . . owed something to a general turn-of-the-century move away from what were felt to be the sterile rigidities of Enlightenment rationalism." (2) "Not dissimilar ideas have become current intellectual coin in the West, and by extension, they have started to influence Indian academic life." (3) It has "already become evident" that these "current academic fashions" (Sarkar mentions "postmodernism") "can reduce the resistance of intellectuals to the ideas of Hindutva [Hinduness]." Sarkar is critical of the kind of social analysis that came out of, for instance, the "History of Consciousness" program at the University of California, Santa Cruz: "The 'critique of colonial discourse' . . . has stimulated forms of indigenism not easy to distinguish from the standard Sangh parivar [a collection of organizations belonging to the Hindu Right] argument . . . that Hindutva is superior to Islam and Christianity (and by extension to the creations of the modern West like science, democracy or Marxism) because of its allegedly unique roots." He warns that "an uncritical cult of the 'popular' or 'subaltern,' particularly when combined with the rejection of Enlightenment rationalism . . . can lead even radical historians down strange paths" that, for him, bear "ominous" resemblance to Mussolini's condemnation of the "teleological" idea of progress and to Hitler's exaltation of the German *volk* over hairsplitting intelligence.<sup>1</sup>

Gautum Bhadra and I, identified as two "members of the *Subaltern Studies* editorial team," are Sarkar's examples of historians who have been led down "strange paths" by their "uncritical adulation of the subaltern" and their "rejection of Enlightenment rationalism."<sup>2</sup> Similar points have been made against other *Subaltern Studies* scholars in recent times.<sup>3</sup> The accusations are not unique to the Indian situation. Readers may be reminded of Christopher Norris's *The Truth of Postmodernism*, which argued that postmodernist critiques of universalism and Enlightenment rationalism preached, in effect, a form of cultural relativism that was at least politically irresponsible, if not downright dangerous.<sup>4</sup> Maintaining a critical position with respect to the legacies of the European Enlightenment does not, however, entail a wholesale rejection of the tradition of rational argumentation or of rationalism itself. Responding to Sar-

kar's charges allows me to demonstrate why a critical take on the legacies of the Enlightenment may, in fact, be part of the contemporary struggle to democratize historiography.

#### HYPERRATIONALISM AND THE COLONIAL MODERN

At stake in this Indian debate is an important question about how and in what terms one may, in writing subaltern histories, see the subaltern classes as political actors. Theoretical conceptions of the political are always secular. But political action by peasants during and after the nationalist movement often involved the agency of gods and spirits. Is this necessarily an undesirable form of political imagination? Should the peasant be educated out of this tendency? The constitution makers of India accepted the need for a separation of religious and political institutions. By talking about Hinduness and the Hindu heritage, the new Hindu Right appears to mix politics with religion. But what is religion? The idea of a personal religion—the freedom to pursue religion as part of one's rights of citizenship—is guaranteed by the Indian constitution. But what of religious practices that do not base themselves on the idea of a personal or spiritual preference or quest? Most Hindu religious festivals and rituals having to do with different deities are of that nature. What happens when these particular gods come into the sphere of the modern political?

There has been since colonial times an intellectual tradition in India that has often equated idolatry with the practices of the superstitious. Intellectuals of the Left belong, on the whole, to that tradition. Basing political action on sentiments having to do with the birthplace of the mythical god-king Ram and inciting anti-Muslim and anti-Christian feelings in the name of Hinduness—as the Hindu Right has done—have been, for them, examples of the irrational in political life. They have sought to secure Indian secularism in the cultivation of a rational outlook. Subaltern histories that appeared to emphasize and endorse political imaginations in which gods have agency have, therefore, incurred the wrath of the Indian old Left.

Yet, however unhappy the category may be, religion is a major and enduring fact of Indian political life. Political sentiments in the subcontinent are replete with elements that could be regarded as religious, at least in origin. But Indian historians—the best of whom today are of a Marxist or Left-liberal persuasion—have never been able to develop any framework capable of comprehending the phenomenon. Sarkar's own handling of it in the past reflects this shared failure. His *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, a study of the nationalist movement that broke out

in Bengal around the year 1905 against the British decision to partition Bengal, is undoubtedly one of the most important monographs of modern Indian history.<sup>5</sup> Yet there is a remarkable failure of the intellect in this book every time it is a question of interpreting or explaining the role that religion played in this political movement.

The Swadeshi movement was, as Sarkar himself so carefully documents, *absolutely full of Hindu religious sentiments and imagination*. It was this movement that, more than any other phase in modern Bengali history, helped bring to life and immortalize, for both Muslims and Hindus, the image of Bengal as a mother goddess demanding love and sacrifice from her children. But Sarkar's understanding of this religious imagination remains wholly instrumentalist. He is willing to grant that a *modern political movement may have to use religion as a means to a political end* (and particularly so in a peasant society), but he can only disapprove of moments when, for the historical actors involved, religion looked like becoming an end in itself. He writes:

What seems indisputable is that the other-worldly pull of religion tended to assert itself particularly at moments of strain and frustration. *Religion cultivated at first as a means to the end of mass contact and stimulation of morale, could all too easily become an end in itself*. The process of inversion is reflected clearly in Aurobindo's [a nationalist leader] famous Uttarpara speech . . . "I spoke once before with this force in me and I said then that this movement is not a political movement and that nationalism is not politics but a religion, a creed, a faith. I say it again today, but I put it in another way. I say no longer that nationalism is a creed, a religion, a faith; I say that it is the Sanatan Dharma which for us is nationalism." (emphasis added)<sup>6</sup>

The pull of Hindu gods and goddesses is hardly of a kind that one could call *otherworldly*. But, even setting that point to one side, it is clear that, while religion as a means is acceptable to Sarkar, religion as an end in itself is not. For him, the political as a domain necessarily remains separate from the religious. He never considers the possibility that a religious sensibility might also use a political structure and a political vocabulary as means to achieve an end or in the interest of an imagined life form in which the political could not be told apart from the religious. For that is indeed the burden of Aurobindo's speech, from which Sarkar seems to have his ear turned away.

Why does this happen? Why does one of our most capable and knowledgeable historians fail to give us any insight into moments in the history of our political and public life when the European distinction between

the sacred and the secular appears to collapse? The answer is not far to seek. It is because Sarkar looks on history as the story of a perpetual struggle between the forces of reason and humanism, on the one side, and those of emotion and faith, on the other, and we are left in no doubt as to which side Sarkar himself is on. Of the Swadeshi movement, he writes in a manner that also discloses to us his view of this ideological battleground on which he positions himself: "[An] . . . important . . . theme [of the Swadeshi movement] is the ideological conflict between modernism and traditionalism—between an attitude which broadly speaking demands social reforms, tries to evaluate things and ideas by the criteria of reason and present-day utility, and bases itself on a humanism seeking to transcend limits of caste and religion; and a logically opposite trend which defends and justifies existing social mores in the name of immemorial tradition and the glorious past, and which tends to substitute emotion and faith for reason."<sup>7</sup>

This strong split between emotion and reason, I suggest, is part of the story of colonialism in India. Scientific rationalism, or the spirit of scientific inquiry, was introduced into colonial India from the very beginning as an antidote to (Indian) religion, particularly Hinduism, which was seen—both by missionaries and by administrators, and in spite of the Orientalists—as a bundle of superstition and magic. Hinduism, wrote the Scottish missionary Alexander Duff in 1839, is "a stupendous system of error."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, early missionary-founded schools in Bengal were more liberal and secular in their curricula than were their counterparts in England. Missionaries did not perceive much contradiction between rationalism and the precepts of Christianity and assumed that an awakening to reason, rather than the more provocative strategy of direct conversion, would itself lead to the undermining of the superstitions that made up Hinduism. As Michael Laird writes of the period: "Apart from a genuine desire to advance learning for its own sake, the missionaries also believed that western science would undermine belief in the Hindu scriptures; the new geography, for example, could hardly be reconciled with the *Puranas*. . . [They] thus acted as instigators of an intellectual awakening, or even revolution, . . . [and their] schools were obvious agents of such a Christian Enlightenment. There is incidentally an instructive contrast with contemporary England, where the wide curriculum that was beginning to appear in Bengal was still very unusual in elementary schools." Even the very act of mastering English, wrote Alexander Duff, must make "the student . . . *tenfold less* the child of Pantheism, idolatry and superstition than before."<sup>9</sup>

It is this simultaneous coding of (Western) knowledge itself as rational and Hinduism as something that was both a religion and a bundle of

superstitions that launched the career of a certain kind of colonial hyper-rationalism among Indian intellectuals who self-consciously came to regard themselves as modern. Of course, there have been important Indian intellectuals both before British rule and after—Rammohun Roy and Swami Dayanand Saraswati and even the nationalist scientist J. C. Bose would fall into this category—who strove, not unlike many intellectuals in European history, to develop dialogues between science and religion.<sup>10</sup> But research on how these heritages have influenced the nature of modern academic knowledge formations in India is still in its early stages. The self-image of modern Indian secular scholarship, particularly the strands that flowed into Marxist social history writing, not only partakes of the social sciences' view of the world as "disenchanted," but even displays antipathy to anything that smacks of the religious. The result has been a certain kind of paralysis of imagination, remarkable for a country whose people have never shown any sense of embarrassment about being able to imagine the supernatural in a variety of forms.

To be sure, these developments in India shared something of the spirit of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in Europe to the extent that, for all its internal diversity, the Enlightenment "meant repudiation of the irrational and the superstitious": "Insofar as it was concerned with social and political questions, the 18th century Enlightenment . . . produced a great variety of mutually incompatible ideas. . . For all this, nevertheless, there were points on which people with any claim to being enlightened were agreed in every country. Particularly, Enlightenment meant the repudiation of the irrational and the superstitious. . . To be superstitious was to believe in the supernatural."<sup>11</sup>

Historians today are generally more sensitive to the diversity within the Enlightenment. Nor would they be unaware of the many connections forged in Europe between science and religion. But what propagated itself among modern Indian intellectuals was something like—to take Preserved Smith's expression somewhat out of context—"the propaganda of Reason," which equated modernity with the possession of the scientific outlook and ignorance with superstition—as, indeed, Smith himself did in his own book on the Enlightenment.<sup>12</sup> The secular rationalism of the Indian intellectual carried with it an aggressively hostile attitude toward religion and everything that the practices of Hinduism—whether in the context of kinship, life-cycle rituals, or public life—seemed to sanctify.<sup>13</sup>

Why this came to be so is a long, involved, and, on the whole, unresearched story. The problem is not the so-called alienation of the secular intellectual in India from the country's religious elements. The Hindu Right often makes this criticism of the Left, and Sarkar is quite right to

reject it.<sup>14</sup> The problem is, rather, that we do not have analytic categories in our aggressively secular academic discourse that do justice to the real, everyday, and multiple connections that we have to what we, in becoming modern, have come to see as nonrational. Tradition/modernity, rational/nonrational, intellect/emotion—these untenable and problematic binaries have haunted our self-representations in social-science language since the nineteenth century.

Andrew Sartori's work on the nineteenth-century Bengali Orientalist and Indologist Rajendralal Mitra has recently drawn our attention to this problem. As Sartori shows, the split between the analytic and the affective is something that is itself produced by the colonial discourse and that marks forever the speech of the colonized intellectual. Sartori has given us a telling example of this phenomenon from the colonial period. He quotes Mitra, writing in the 1870s, on the custom of "blood sacrifice" in ancient India. The Orientalist in Mitra no doubt saw this custom as barbaric and uncivilized. However, this ancient practice was in no sense antiquated in Mitra's own times. And Mitra himself had had some personal exposure to it. Yet he categorized his own, lived connection to the ritual as part of his affective, rather than rational or reasoning, self. In a memorable passage at the end of an essay discussing the custom, he wrote: "The offering of one's blood to the goddess [Kali] is a medieval and modern rite. . . . The last time I saw the ceremony was six years ago when my late revered parent, tottering with age, made the offering for my recovery from a dangerous and long-protracted attack of pleurisy. Whatever may be thought of it by persons brought up under a creed different from that of the Indo-Aryans, I cannot recall to memory the fact *without feeling the deepest emotion for the boundless affection which prompted it*" (emphasis added).<sup>15</sup>

This strong spirit of hostility between the rational and the affective, or between reason and emotion, characteristic of our colonial hyperrationalism, has generally afflicted Indian Marxist historians' attempt to understand the place of the religious in Indian public and political life. What else is this but an unreflexive (re)statement of the struggle of the Enlightenment with superstition? Reason and truth on the side of democracy and humanism, faith—a "tissue of superstitions, prejudices and errors," as a famous philosopher of the Enlightenment put it—on the side of tyranny.<sup>16</sup>

This conflict, for Sarkar, structures the whole narrative of Bengali modernity. He traces it "right through the nineteenth century from the days of the Atmiya Sabha and the Dharma Sabha [the 1820s]" and sees it "continu[ing] at the heart of the Swadeshi movement just as in the [Bengal] 'renaissance' which had preceded and prepared the way for it":

"Insofar as the Swadeshi age saw a determined though not entirely successful effort to give the national movement a solid mass basis, the period can be regarded as a sort of test for the relevance of these opposed ideological trends in the work of national awakening."<sup>17</sup> This is Enlightenment rationalism, indeed, but now (re)visiting the history of the colonized as a modernist dogma and wreaking intellectual havoc in its trail. Sarkar's failure to give us any insights into the religious that constantly erupts into the political in Indian modernity is not a personal failure. It is a failure of hyperrationalism, a failure that marks the intellect of the colonial modern. It occurs within a paradigm that sees science and religion as ultimately, and irrevocably, opposed to each other.

It is no wonder, then, that, to Sarkar and many other secular historians of India, modernity in India has seemed "grievously incomplete."<sup>18</sup> The 1970s Marxist critique of colonial India argued, as one respected historian put it, that "alien rule and modernity are never compatible" and deduced, therefore, that what India had received as a legacy of the colonial period could be characterized only as "enclaves" of modernity:

There were indeed variances in western European early modern developments . . . on a comparative scale. Yet each particular pattern in western Europe was clearer and more spontaneous, and where foreign interference could be resisted, more *secular* and *rational* than conditions in the previous period. . . . What is normally described as modernity represents the superstructure of a given culture, whose economic base is the emergence of capitalism. It is unrealistic to define a superstructure without its base, to expect the fruits of modernity without the uneven development and hardheaded exploitative practices of a European modernity which often [in places like India] came to terms with feudal remnants . . . and which took to colonialism for maintaining progress in its capitalist development.<sup>19</sup>

This language of a "base and superstructure" Marxism was representative of what would have passed for common sense in Indian Marxist historiography of the 1970s. For the purpose of this discussion, however, I wish to highlight what this statement shares with Sarkar's understanding of what it meant to be modern. True, modernity born in Europe had been productive of colonialism in India, but it still had a discernable "progressive content" that was diluted in the colony because of underdevelopment (remember that this was also the period of dependency theory). This progressive content had in part to do with "the rational outlook," "the spirit of science," "free inquiry," etc. "It is possible," wrote Barun De, "that some future historians . . . might put the

19th and early 20th centuries at the end of a medieval period of uncertainty, instead of the beginning of the modern period, which still awaits us in the third world."<sup>20</sup>

"Modernity still awaits us"—this is the refrain of the hyperrational colonial modern. Why should modernity still await us in India, more than two hundred years after its career was launched in India by European imperialism? How long does it take for an Indian to become modern? This historiography never entertained the possibility that what we had, warts and all, was, indeed, our modernity. Historians were prone to think that what India possessed as a result of colonial modernization was only a bad version of something that, in itself, was an unmixed good. The blame, it was decided, lay with colonialism. Colonialism stopped us from being fully modern. Scholars would repeat Barun De's lament: we are incompletely modern. Sumit Sarkar would open his *Modern India*, published a decade after Barun De's essay, on this elegiac note: India's is a story of a "bourgeois modernity" that is "grievously incomplete."<sup>21</sup> The mourning will speak through Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha's impressive and sensitively edited collection *Women Writing in India*:

Scholars who have questioned . . . a linear or progressive understanding of history claim that the liberal ideals of reformers [of women's condition] could not have been realised under the economic and political conditions of colonial rule, and warn against applying such simple, linear narratives of progress to the study of nineteenth century India. What appears as retrogressive in nationalism was not a conservative backlash, but the logical limits of reformist programmes in a colonial situation that would never, as Sumit Sarkar writes, allow more than a "weak and distorted" caricature of "full blooded" bourgeois modernity, either for women or for men.<sup>22</sup>

The Enlightenment's story of the struggle of science/rationalism against faith/religion—which in Europe produces all kinds of hybrid solutions—gets repeated in India without attention to the process of translation and the resultant hybridities.<sup>23</sup> For both sides of the equation are violated in translating them from the European context into our past and present practices. The history of our hyperrationalism is not the same as that of Enlightenment rationalism, and the practices that we gather under the name *religion* do not repeat the history of that European category of thought. Such translations are by definition hybrid or incomplete. It may precisely be an irony of any modernist understanding of modernity that we are constantly called on to study with the purest of categories that which is necessarily impure and hybrid, to treat transla-

tions that are necessarily incomplete as though their incompleteness is nothing but a hurtful betrayal of history.

An attitude of incredulity toward the metanarratives of the European Enlightenment, however, moves us from the register of lament to that of irony. But, while that is only the first step, it prepares us for opening up our histories to other possibilities, some of which I will consider in the final section of this essay.

#### UNREASONABLE ORIGINS OF REASON

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* contains a subplot that illustrates how the problem of force or coercion may arise in the conversation between the so-called modern and the nonmodern and, indeed, how strategies of domination emerge as a necessary move to bring to a close arguments in this conversation that cannot be settled through purely rational procedures. It is significant that the subaltern of this particular narrative of modernity should be a woman.

Adam Aziz, the European-returned medical doctor who is also the grandfather of the narrator, Saleem Sinai, inaugurates a nationalist project in his domestic life when he marries Naseem Ghani. As a modern person, Aziz knows that women in Islam/tradition have been confined/unfree. He instructs his wife "to come out of purdah" and, as a demonstration of his will, burns her veils, saying: "Forget about being a good Kashmiri girl. Start thinking about being a modern Indian woman." Naseem, later the Reverend Mother of Saleem Sinai's description, the daughter of a Muslim landlord, is from the beginning portrayed as tradition herself.

Readers of the novel will recall that, when Adam Aziz first encountered her as a patient in a conservative/traditional Muslim family, she could be examined only through a seven-inch hole in a bedsheet held over her body with only the relevant part of her body made visible. The doctor fell in love with this fragmented body and discovered only after their wedding the formidably traditional heart that beat within it. Their mutual incomprehension starts with their lovemaking, when, on their second night, Aziz asks her "to move a little": "Move where?" she asked. "Move how?" He became awkward and said, "Only move. I mean, like a woman . . ." She shrieked in horror. "My God what have I married? I know you European-returned men. You find terrible women and then you try to make us girls be like them! Listen Doctor Sahib, husband or no husband, I am not . . . any bad woman."<sup>24</sup>

The battle continues throughout their marriage, Aziz conducting it from the position of the knowing, willing, and judging subject of

modernity. His modernizing political will sometimes expresses itself in the form of physical force. He physically throws out of the house the Muslim *maulvi* (a religious teacher) whom the Reverend Mother had appointed for their children's religious education, the only element in the children's education that was her choice. The reason he gives to his wife in defense of his action will probably warm the heart of every "secular-rationalist" Indian: "He was teaching them [the children] to hate, wife. He tells them to hate Hindus and Buddhists and Jains and Sikhs and who knows what other vegetarians."<sup>25</sup>

The Reverend Mother is in the position of the classic subaltern of many modernist narratives. The reasonableness of the doctor's position is never self-evident to her. So the battle goes on in the lives of the Reverend Mother and her husband, a battle organized around mutual incomprehension. This mutual incomprehension is what, one could argue in Aziz's defense, drives both the good doctor and his wife to their respective desperate measures.

If I were to read this part of the novel as an allegory of the history of modernity, historians would object. It would be said that this allegory, powerful because it ran such a strong black-and-white binary of tradition/modernity right through the story line, was not true to the complexities of real history (which historians are fond of picturing in the color gray). A historical narrative could have gone differently and might not have been structured by such a strong opposition between the modernizer and the yet to be modernized. In such possible alternative accounts, the Reverend Mother might, in fact, have needed Aziz as an ally against other patriarchal authorities, her father, or a possible mother-in-law and could have been more amenable to his suggestions. Similarly, the peasants held down by tyrants might seek out the help of the modern in their own struggles. And what if, through their own agency, the subaltern discovered the pleasures of the modern: of the autonomous self, of interiority, of science, of technology, of post-Enlightenment rationalism itself? In such historical recall, the coming of Enlightenment rationalism would not be a story of domination. Have not the critics of the modern state had it said to them that the people actually want the state or the critics of modern medicine that the people, once introduced to modern medicine, actually want it?

Granted, but then what is the relation between Rushdie's story and the history of modernity? Rushdie's is an allegory of the *origins* of modernity. It tells us about the beginnings of the historical process through which women in the Aziz family became modern. This process was not benign, and that is not an unfamiliar tale to historians of modernity, even in the homeland of the Enlightenment, Western Europe. The

door by which one enters citizenship or a nationality always has a *durwan* (gatekeeper)—himself usually only partially admitted to the rites of equality—posted outside. His job is to be mean, to abuse, bully, insult, and exclude, or to humiliate—even when he lets you in. The fact that one is often ushered into modernity as much through violence as through persuasion is recognized by European historians and intellectuals. The violence of the discourse of public health in nineteenth-century England directed itself against the poor and the working classes.<sup>26</sup> The process by which rural France was modernized in the nineteenth century was described by Eugen Weber as something akin to "internal colonization."<sup>27</sup>

Derrida discusses the same problem from within the experience of being French. "As you know," he writes, "in many countries, in the past and in the present, one founding violence of the law or of the imposition of the state law has consisted in imposing a language on national or ethnic minorities regrouped by the state. This was the case in France on at least two occasions, first, when the Villers-Cotteret decree consolidated the unity of the monarchic state by imposing French as the juridico-administrative language and by forbidding . . . Latin. . . . The second major moment of imposition was that of the French Revolution, when linguistic unification took the most repressive pedagogical turn." Derrida distinguishes between "two kinds of violence in law, in relation to law . . . : the founding violence, the one that institutes and positions law . . . and the violence that conserves, the one that maintains, confirms, insures the permanence and enforceability of law."<sup>28</sup>

These are known facts and are probably features of the history of modernity anywhere. The question is, What is our relation, as intellectuals, to these two kinds of violence in Indian modernity? It is easy to see that an intellectual's attitude to the first kind of violence—the founding one—is determined largely by his or her relation to the second. For Eugen Weber, for instance, the fact that something like an "internal colonization" was needed to make peasants into Frenchmen arouses no ire, for the end result has been good for everybody. "The past," he writes, "was a time of misery and barbarism, the present a time of unexampled comfort and security, of machines and schooling and services, of all the wonders that are translated into civilization."<sup>29</sup> Beginnings, however ugly, do not matter for Weber—they cannot act as a site from which to develop a critique of the present (as Foucault teaches us to do with his genealogical method)—for he tells, and believes in, a story of progress. His teleology saves him from having to be critical. The pain of the nineteenth-century peasant is not his own. It is a wound over which time has formed a scab; it does not bleed anymore.

Where can we, historians of a Third World country like India, where the distinction between the founding and the preserving modes of violence in the functioning of the law is hard to sustain, anchor such facile optimism?<sup>30</sup> The process of making *peasants* or individuals into *Indians* takes place every day before our eyes. It is not a process with a single or simple characteristic, nor is it without any material benefits to the people involved. But, were we to convert particular benefits, which often do create problems in their turn, into some kind of a grand narrative of progress, it would leave us with a few important and nagging problems. If a certain kind of colonizing drive is inherent to the civilizing-modernizing project, and if one were, in one's point of view, to side uncritically with this project, how would one erect a critique of imperialism? Weber's solution to this problem does not solve anything: he says, in effect, that it may be all right to practice colonialism on one's own people if the process brings in its train prosperity for all. But that is getting the story back to front, for the assumed purpose of this colonialism, in Weber's schema, was to make real the category *one's own people*. One cannot assume into existence at the beginning of a process what the process is meant to produce as its outcome. If Weber's sentiment has any political validity in France today, it means only that the colonizing process succeeded in achieving this end, popularizing the story of progress (although that would be taking a Whiggish view of that history).

Let me repeat my point once more: if it is true that Enlightenment rationalism requires as its vehicle the modern state and its accompanying institutions—the instruments of governmentality, in Foucault's terms—and if this entails a certain kind of colonizing violence anyway (however justifiable the violence might be from a retrospective point of view), then one cannot uncritically welcome this violence and at the same time maintain a critique of European imperialism in India except on some kind of essentialistic and indigenist ground (e.g., only Indians have the right to colonize themselves in the interest of modernity). In the 1970s, Marxist historians in India and elsewhere—seeing themselves as inheritors of the European Enlightenment yet wanting to distance themselves from the fact of European colonialism—tried out another solution. By fusing Marxism with dependency theory, they sought to fetishize colonialism into a distinct socioeconomic formation, inherently productive of underdevelopment. The demise of dependency theory has robbed us of that ground. Frankly, if Enlightenment rationalism is the only way in which human societies can humanize themselves, then we ought to be grateful that the Europeans set out to dominate the world and spread its message. Will our self-proclaimed rationalist and secularist historians say that?

## HISTORY AS DEMOCRATIC DIALOGUE WITH THE SUBALTERN

The task is not to reject ideas of democracy, development, or justice. The task is to think of forms and philosophies of history that will contribute to struggles that aim to make the very process of achieving these outcomes as democratic as possible. How do we make the subalterns genuinely the subjects of their history? Surely not by assuming a position in which the ideal nature and shape of modernity is decided from the very beginning by historians or philosophers as intellectuals. That would be inviting the subaltern to a dialogue in which his position was secondary from the very beginning. I come now to what to me is the hardest part of my argument, not least because I myself have not practiced what I am about to preach. I am trying to think my way toward a subaltern historiography that actually tries to learn from the subaltern. And I am also trying to transcend the position that the early *Subaltern Studies* project took as its point of departure.

Let me go back to one of the fundamental premises of this essay. I do not deny the immense practical utility of Left-liberal political philosophies. One cannot perform effectively in the context of modern bureaucracies—and, therefore, one cannot access the benefits that these institutions are capable of delivering—if one is not able to mobilize one's own identity, personal or collective, through the languages, skills, and practices that these philosophies make possible. The very idea of distributive justice requires that these languages and competencies—of citizenship, of democracy, of welfare—be made available to all classes, particularly those subordinated and oppressed. It means that, whenever we, members of the privileged classes, write subaltern histories—whether we write them as citizens (i.e., on behalf of the idea of democratic rights) or as socialists (desiring radical social change)—a certain pedagogical drive comes into play. We write, ultimately, as part of a collective effort to help teach the oppressed of today how to be the democratic subject of tomorrow.

Since pedagogy is a dialogue, even if it is only the teacher's voice that is heard—as Barthes once said, "When the teacher speaks to his audience, the Other is always there, punctuating his discourse"—the subaltern history that is produced in this manner is dialogic.<sup>31</sup> But, by its very structure, this dialogue is not democratic (which is not to say that it is not of use to the subaltern). To be open-ended, I would argue, a dialogue must be genuinely nonteleological; that is, one must not presume, on any a priori basis, that whatever position our political philosophy/ideology suggests as correct will be necessarily vindicated as a result of

this dialogue. For a dialogue can be genuinely open only under one condition: that no party puts itself in a position where it can unilaterally decide the final outcomes of the conversation. This never happens between the modern and the nonmodern because, however noncoercive the conversation between the transcendent academic observer and the subaltern who enters into a historical dialogue with him, this dialogue takes place within a field of possibilities that is already structured from the very beginning in favor of certain outcomes.

In pedagogical histories, it is the subaltern's relation to the world that ultimately calls for improvement. The *Subaltern Studies* series was founded within this gesture. Guha's insurgent peasants, for instance, fall short in their understanding of what is required for a comprehensive reversal of the power relationships in an exploitative society.<sup>32</sup> And this was exactly the position of the man who gave us the category *subaltern*. For Antonio Gramsci, readers will recall, *subaltern* named a political position that, by itself, was incapable of thinking the state; this was a thought to be brought to that position by the revolutionary intellectual. Once the subaltern could imagine/think the state, he transcended, theoretically speaking, the condition of subalternity.

While it is true that Gramsci developed a dialogic Marxism that aimed to take seriously what went on inside the heads of the oppressed, he was clear on what the subaltern lacked. His words bear repetition: "The subaltern classes, by definition, are not united and cannot unite until they are able to become a 'State.' . . . *The history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic.* There undoubtedly does exist a tendency to (at least provisional stages of) unification in the historical activity of these groups, but this tendency is continually interrupted by the activity of the ruling groups. . . . In reality, even when they appear triumphant, the subaltern groups are merely anxious to defend themselves" (emphasis added).<sup>33</sup>

As I have already indicated, histories written in this pedagogical dialogic mode are in fact inescapable. We live in societies structured by the state, and the oppressed need knowledge forms that are tied to that reality. Indeed, this must remain one entirely legitimate mode of producing subaltern histories. Yet the problem of undemocracy remains in the structure of this dialogue. Can we *imagine* another moment of subaltern history, one in which we stay—permanently, not simply as a matter of political tactic—with that which is fragmentary and episodic? *Fragmentary*, not in the sense of fragments that refer to an implicit whole, but in the sense of fragments that challenge, not only the idea of wholeness, but the very idea of the fragment itself (for, if there were not

any wholes, what would fragments be fragments of?).<sup>34</sup> Here, we conceptualize the fragmentary and the episodic as those which do not, and cannot, dream the whole called *the state* and must, therefore, be suggestive of knowledge forms that are not tied to the will that produces the state.

Couched thus, my question sounds utopian. For the subaltern who abjures the imagination of the state does not exist in a pure form in real life. The subaltern classes around us are as invested in the benefits of modern institutions as are any other class, and it is only reasonable for them to be so. Nor would it be realistic to argue that the peasant and other oppressed classes as such are incapable of either comprehending or embracing ideas of a whole such as the state.

I am simply using the quotation from Gramsci to point to a possible and alternative theoretical horizon. Imaginations of the whole, in that quotation, belong to a certain understanding of politics. These are statist understandings, understandings in which the subaltern classes—indeed, their very position of subalternity—are read as such telling figures of misery and privation that the violence and undemocracy of the state looks like a small price to pay for the attainment, ultimately, of a more just social order. The pedagogical drive in histories written out of this position aims to instill or incite in the subaltern class (or its representatives) a desire to participate in this political imagination. But an element of undemocracy remains in that, in the Gramscian formulation at least, the imagination of the state (and other forms of the whole) has to be brought to the subaltern classes from outside themselves, for they are, "by definition," as Gramsci put it, incapable of such imagination, being always kept divided by the ruling classes. How do we make the politics of politicizing the subaltern more democratic?

The quotation from Gramsci suggests one obvious line of thinking. Howsoever divided, the "historical activity" of the subaltern classes always has, Gramsci reminds us, "a tendency to . . . unification." One way toward subaltern forms of democracy would be to foster this tendency and ground the modern state in it. This would be one legitimate line of thinking.

Gramsci's statement, however, also allows us to consider a contra-Gramsci perspective. It helps us ask a question that Gramsci does not ask. What would happen to our political imagination if we did not consider the state of being fragmentary and episodic as merely disabling? If a totalizing mode of thinking is needed for us to imagine the state theoretically, what kind of political imagination and institutions could sustain themselves on the basis of a thought that joyously embraced the idea of



the fragment? If the statist idea of the political defined the mainstream of political thought, then here may be an alternative conceptual pole to it: an idea of the political that did not require us to imagine totalities.

There are difficulties here: most thought about social justice entails the idea of equality in one form or another. The state is often idealized as an instrument for enforcing equality. What kind of (modern) social justice would one envisage as one embraced the fragment? The question is at the same time legitimate (from a perspective committed to notions of equality) and not legitimate (for a radical embracing of the fragment as political-philosophical starting point would mean that we would not answer such questions in an a priori and systematic manner).

I do not pretend to have all the answers to the questions that come up here, but thinking the fragment radically changes the nature of the political agent whom we imagine. The subaltern, on this register, is no longer the citizen in the making. The subaltern here is the *ideal* figure of the person who survives actively, even joyously, on the assumption that the statist instruments of domination will always belong to somebody else and never aspires to them. This is an *ideal* figure. No actual member of the subaltern classes would resemble what I imagine here. The question is, Are there moments in the life practices of the subaltern classes that would allow us to construct such an agent? The Buddhist imagination once saw the possibility of the joyful, renunciate *bhikshu* (monk) in the miserable and deprived image of the *bhikshuk* (beggar). We have not yet learned to see the spectral doubles that may inhabit our Marxism-inspired images of the subaltern.

To go to the subaltern in order to learn to be radically fragmentary and episodic is to move away from the certitudes that operate within the gesture that the knowing, judging, willing subject always already knows what is good for everybody, ahead of any investigation. The investigation, in turn, must be possessed of an openness so radical that I can express it only in Heideggerian terms: the capacity to hear that which one does not already understand.<sup>35</sup> In other words, to allow the subaltern position to challenge our own conceptions of totalities, to be open to the possibility of our thought systems, with all their aspirations to grasp things in their totality, being rendered finite by the presence of the other: such are the utopian horizons to which this other moment of *Subaltern Studies* calls us.<sup>36</sup>

What will history written in this mode look like? I cannot say, for one cannot write this history in a pure form. The languages of the state, of citizenship, of wholes and totalities, the legacy of Enlightenment rationalism, will always cut across it. I was only pointing to a utopian line that may well designate the limit of how we are trained to think. But this does

not mean that this limit does not exist at all. We know about its existence indirectly, when we come across historical evidence that does not easily fit our categories. To open ourselves to such disruptive histories would require us seriously to grant our social life a constant lack of transparency with regard to any one particular way of thinking about it. This is no ground for the rejection of Enlightenment rationalism. It is rather to be secure in the knowledge that investigative procedure embodying this rationality gives us only a partial hold on our lives—and that too through necessary, much-needed, yet inevitably poor translations.

Sarkar's fear that a critical understanding of our intellectual inheritances from the European Enlightenment would only help the "fascist" Hindus is based on some spurious assumptions. Granted that European fascism drew on a certain spirit of disenchantment with post-Enlightenment rationalism, but from this the reverse does not follow. One cannot argue on this basis that every critique of post-Enlightenment rationalism must end up being fascist. If one could, we would have to count strange candidates among our list of reactionaries, and among them would be such different people as Gandhi and Weber and, for our times, not only Michel Foucault but Jürgen Habermas as well. These thinkers remind us that to critique post-Enlightenment rationalism, or even modernity, is not to fall into some kind of irrationalism. As Lydia Liu has recently remarked in her discussion of Chinese history, "The critique of modernity has always been part of the Enlightenment legacy from the Romantics, Nietzsche, Marx and Heidegger to Horkheimer, Adorno, Foucault, Derrida and even Habermas."<sup>37</sup>

It is also true that the experience of fascism has left a certain trauma in leftist intellectuals in the West. They have ceded to the fascists all moments of poetry, mysticism, and the religious and mysterious in the construction of political sentiments and communities (however transient or inoperative). Romanticism now reminds them only of the Nazis. Romantic nationalism in India has left us with another heritage exemplified by the life experiments of such stalwarts as Gandhi and Tagore. It would be sad if we ceded this entire heritage to the Hindu extremists out of a fear that our romanticism must be the same as whatever the Europeans produced under that name in their histories and that our present blunders, whatever these are, must be the same as theirs in the past. What, indeed, could be a greater instance of submission to a Eurocentric imagination than that fear?