

The Romance of the State and the Fate of
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History's Forgotten Doubles

However odd this might sound to contemporary historians, millions of people still live outside 'history'. They *do* have theories of the past; they *do* believe that the past is important and shapes the present and the future, but they also recognize, confront and live with a past different from the one constructed by historians and historical consciousness. They even have a different way of arriving at the past.

Some historians and societies have a term and a theory for such people. To them, those who live outside history are 'ahistorical', and though the theory has contradictory components, it does have a powerful stochastic thrust. One might even say that the historians' history of the ahistorical—when grounded in a 'proper' historical consciousness, as defined by the European Enlightenment—is usually a history of the pre-historical, the primitive, and the pre-scientific. By way of transformative politics or cultural intervention, that history basically keeps open only one option—that of bringing the ahistoricals into history.

There is a weak alternative—some would say response—to this position. According to their modern historians, the idea of history is not entirely unknown to some older civilizations like China and India. It is claimed that these civilizations have occasionally produced quasi- or proto-historical works during their long tenure on earth, evidently to defy being labelled as wholly ahistorical and to protect the self-respect of their modern historians. These days the historian's construction of ahistoric societies often includes the plea to rediscover this repressed historical self.¹

¹A creative variation on the same response is found in works like Gananath Obeyesekere's *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton: Princeton

The élites of the defeated societies are usually all too eager to heed this plea. They sense that the dominant ideology of the state and their own privileged access to the state apparatus are both sanctioned by the idea of history. Many of their subjects too, though disenfranchised and oppressed by history, believe that their plight—especially their inability to organize effective resistance—should be blamed on their inadequate knowledge of history. In some countries of the South today, these subjects have been left with nothing to sell to the ubiquitous global market except their pasts and, to be saleable, these pasts have to be, they now suspect, packaged as history. They have, therefore, accepted history as a handy language for negotiating the modern world. They talk history with tourists, visiting dignitaries, ethnographers, museologists, and even with human-rights activists fighting their cause. When such subjects are not embarrassed about their ahistorical constructions of the past, they accept the tacit modern consensus that these constructions are meant for private or secret use or for use as forms of fantasy useful in the creative arts.

On this plane, historical consciousness is very nearly a totalizing one, for both the moderns and those aspiring to their exalted status; once you own history, it also begins to own you. You can, if you are an artist or a mystic, occasionally break the shackles of history in your creative or meditative moments. (However, even then you might be all too aware of the history of your own art, if you happen to be that kind of an artist, or the history of mysticism, if you happen to be that kind of practitioner of mysticism.) The best you can hope to do, by way of exercising your autonomy, is to live outside history for short spans of time. For instance, when you opt for certain forms of artistic or spiritual exercises, perhaps even when you are deliriously happy or shattered by a personal tragedy. But these are moments of 'freedom' from history, involving transient phases or small areas of life.

University Press, 1992). Obeyesekere argues that history can be part-mythic and myths part-historic, that is, there is no clear discontinuity between the two. His narrative, however, seems to suggest that he dislikes the mythic-in-history and likes the historical-in-myths.

Shail Mayaram pushes Obeyesekere's argument to its logical conclusion in her 'Oral and Written Discourses: An Enquiry Into the Meo Mythic Tradition', report to the Indian Council of Social Science Research, Delhi 1994, p. 6: 'No civilization is really ahistorical. In a sense, every individual is historical and uses his/her memory to organize the past. ... The dichotomy between history and myth is an artificial one. History and myth are not exclusive modes of representation.'

Here I reject formulations that impose the category of history on all constructions of the past or sanction the reduction of all myths to history. I am also uncomfortable with formulations that do not acknowledge the special political status of myths as the preferred language of a significant proportion of threatened or victimized cultures.

At one time not long ago, historical consciousness had to co-exist with other modes of experiencing and constructing the past even within the modern world. The conquest of the past through history was still incomplete in the late nineteenth century, as was the conquest of space through the railways. The historically-minded then lived with the conviction that they were an enlightened but threatened minority, that they were dissenters to whom the future belonged. So at least it seems to me, looking back upon the intellectual culture of nineteenth-century Europe from outside the West. Dissent probably survives better when its targets are optimally powerful, when they are neither too monolithic or steam-rolling nor too weak to be convincing as a malevolent authority. As long as the non-historical modes thrived, history remained viable as a baseline for radical social criticism. That is perhaps why the great dissenters of the nineteenth century were the most aggressively historical.

Everyone knows, for instance, that Karl Marx thought Asiatic and African societies were ahistorical. Few know that he considered Latin Europe, and under its influence the whole of Some America, to be ahistorical, too. Johan Galtung once told me that he had found, from the correspondence of Marx and Engels, that they considered all Slavic cultures to be ahistorical and the Scandinavians to be no better. If I remember Galtung correctly, one of them also added, somewhat gratuitously, that the Scandinavians could be nothing but ahistorical, given that they bathed infrequently and drank too much. After banishing so many races and cultures from the realm of history, the great revolutionary was left with only a few who lived in history—Germany, where he was born, Britain, where he spent much of his later life, and the Low Countries through which, one presumes, he travelled from Germany to England.

Times have changed. Historical consciousness now owns the globe. Even in societies known as historical, timeless or eternal—India for example—the politically powerful now live in and with history. Ahistoricity survives at the peripheries and interstices of such societies. Though millions of people continue to stay outside history, millions have, since the days of Marx, dutifully migrated to the empire of history to become its loyal subjects. The historical worldview is now triumphant globally; the ahistoricals have become the dissenting minority.

Does this triumph impose new responsibilities on the victorious? Now that the irrational savages, living in timelessness or in cyclical or other forms of disreputable non-linear times, have been finally subjugated, should our public and intellectual awareness include a new sensitivity

to the cultural priorities, psychological skills, and perhaps even the ethical concerns represented by the societies or communities that in different ways are still cussed enough to choose to live outside history? Are they protecting or holding in trust parts of our disowned selves that we have dismissed as worthless or dangerous? Is ahistoricity also a form of wilderness that needs to be protected in these environmentally conscious times, lest, once destroyed, it is lost forever as a 'cultural gene pool' in case the historical vision exhausts itself while fighting our profligate ways and we are forced to retrace our steps? Before we make up our minds and answer the question, let me draw attention to what seem to be two of the defining features of ahistorical societies.

This is not an easy task. It is my suspicion that, broadly speaking, cultures tend to be historical in only one way, whereas each ahistorical culture is so in its own unique style. It is not easy to identify the common threads of ahistoricity: I choose two that look like being relatively more common to illustrate my point. The task is made even more difficult for me because I want to argue the case of ahistoricity not on the grounds of pragmatism or instrumentality, of the kind that would require me to give a long list of useful things that ahistoricity could do for us. I wish to argue the case on the grounds of diversity being a moral value in itself, especially when its locus lies in the worldview of the victims.

The major difference between those living in history and those living outside it, especially in societies where myths are the predominant mode of organizing experiences of the past, is what I have elsewhere called the principle of principled forgetfulness. All myths are morality tales. Mythologization is also moralization; it involves a refusal to separate the remembered past from its ethical meaning in the present. For this refusal, it is often important *not* to remember the past, objectively, clearly, or in its entirety. Mythic societies sense the power of myths and the nature of human frailties; they are more fearful than the modern ones—forgive the anthropomorphism—of the perils of mythic use of amoral certitudes about the past.

Historical consciousness cannot take seriously the principle of forgetfulness. It rejects the principle as irrational, retrogressive, unnatural, and fundamentally incompatible with historical sensitivities. Remembering, history assumes, is definitionally superior to forgetting. Unwitting forgetfulness, which helps a person to reconcile with and live in this world, is seen as natural and, to that extent, acceptable. Adaptive forgetfulness is also seen as human; human beings just cannot afford to remember everything and non-essential memories have to be discarded both by individuals and societies.

The moderns are willing to go further. Since the days of Sigmund Freud and Marx, they recognize that forgetfulness is not random, that there are elaborate internal screening devices, the defences of the ego or the principles of ideology, which shape our forgetfulness along particular lines. As understandable is unprincipled forgetfulness, the kind Freud saw as part of a person's normal adaptive repertoire, even though he chose to classify it under the *psychopathologies* of everyday life, presumably because of the non-creative use of psychic energy it involved.

But principled forgetfulness? That seems directed against the heart of the enterprise called history. For historians, the aim ultimately is nothing less than to bare the past completely, on the basis of a neatly articulated frame of reference that implicitly involves a degree of demystification or demythologization. The frame of reference is important: history must order its data in terms of something like a theme of return (invoking the idea of cultural continuity or recovery), progress (invoking the principle of massive, sometimes justifiably coercive, irreversible intervention in society) or stages (invoking the sense of certitude and mastery over the self, as expressed in an evolutionary sequencing of it). The aim is to unravel the secular processes and the order that underlie the manifest realities of past times, available in readymade or raw forms as historical data-textual and graphic records, public or private memories that are often the stuff of oral history, and a wide variety of artefacts.²

²Speaking of the Partition of British India and the birth of India and Pakistan, Gyanendra Pandey ('Partition, History and the Making of Nations', presented at the conference on State and Nationalism in India, Pakistan and Germany, Colombo, 26–8 February 1994) asks: 'Why have historians of India (and Pakistan and Bangladesh) failed to produce richly layered, challenging histories of Partition of a kind that would compare with their sophisticated histories of peasant insurrection; working class consciousness; the onset of capitalist relations in agriculture; the construction of new notions of caste, community, and religion. ... and, indeed, the writing of women's autobiographies ...? Or, to ask the question in another way, why is there such a chasm between the historian's history of Partition and the popular reconstruction of the event, which is to such a large extent built around the fact of violence?'

He continues, 'The answer lies, it seems to me, in our fear of facing ... this history as our own: the fear of reopening old wounds. ... It lies also in the difficulty that all social science has faced in writing the history of violence and pain. But, in addition, it inheres ... in the very character of historian's history as "national" history and a history of "progress".'

Could Pandey have added that, when faced with a trauma of this magnitude, when the survival of communities and fundamental human values are at stake, popular memories of Partition have to organize themselves differently, employing principles that are ahistorical but not amoral? Do the historians of South Asia have a tacit awareness that they are in no position to supplant memories which seek to protect the dignity of the one million or so who died in the violence and the approximately sixteen million who were uprooted? Are popular memories obligated to protect normal life and basic human values?

Because as the authentic progeny of seventeenth-century Europe, history fears ambiguity.³ The ultimate metaphor for history is not the *double entendre*; it is synecdoche: the historical past stands for all past because it is presumed to be the only past. Hence the tenuous legitimacy of psychological history as a subdiscipline of history. Psychoanalysis at its best is a game of *double entendre* loaded in favour of the victims of personal history—the pun is intended—but it has to be sold to the historically minded as a technology of analysis that removes the ambiguities human subjectivity introduces into history.

The enterprise is not essentially different from that of Giambattista Vico's idea of science as a form of practice. There is nothing surprising about this, for the modern historical enterprise is modelled on the modern scientific enterprise, whether the historian admits it or not. This is not the scientization that leads to the use of experimental methods or mathematization—though even that has happened in a few cases—but to an attempt to make history conform to the spirit of modern science (as captured more accurately, I am told, by the German word *wissenschaftlich*). I know that the idea of scientific history has acquired a certain ambivalent load ever since the great liberator of our times, Joseph Stalin, sent twenty million of his compatriots marching to their death in its name, with a significant proportion of the historically-minded intelligentsia applauding it all the way as a necessary sacrifice for the onward march of history. But it is also true that to the savages, not enamoured of the emancipatory vision of the Enlightenment, the orthodox Marxist vision of history was never very distinct from that of its liberal opponents, at least as far as the molar philosophical assumptions of its methodology went. These assumptions owed much to the ideas of certitude, reliable and valid knowledge, and the disenchantment of nature to which Francis Bacon gave respectability. (It is the same concept of knowledge that made history in the nineteenth century a theory of the future masquerading as a theory of the past. More about that later.)

In recent decades, there has been much talk about history being primarily a hermeneutic exercise. It is now fairly commonplace to say that there can be no true or objective past; that there are only competing

constructions of the past, with various levels and kinds of empirical support. The works of a number of philosophers of science, notably that of Paul Feyerabend, have in recent years contributed to the growing self-confidence of those opposing or fighting objectivism and scientism in history.⁴ Contributions to the same process have also been made by some of the structuralists and post-modernists, Louis Althusser being the one who perhaps tried the hardest to bypass history. The anti-historical stance of post-modernism, not being associated with the ahistoricity of the older civilizations, has even acquired certain respectability.⁵

There have also been attempts to popularize other modes of time perception built on some of the new developments in science, especially in quantum mechanics and biological theory. Attempts have also been made to base such modes on the rediscovery of some of the older modes of knowledge acquisition, such as Zen and Yoga, and on theories of transcendence celebrated in deep ecology and ecofeminism. As important has been the growing awareness in many working at the frontiers of the knowledge industry—though it is yet to contaminate the historians—that the historical concept of time is only one kind of time with which contemporary knowledge operates, that most sciences and now even a few of the social sciences work with more plural constructions of time.

Many will see all this as an exercise in self-correction, as an attempt to correct the excesses of what could be called a history modelled on the Baconian concept of science. Some will identify this as an effort to incorporate into the historical consciousness crucial components of the moral universe of the ahistorical. (Both are implied in the work of a number of psychologists venturing new psychological utopias—eupsychias, Abraham Maslow used to call them—in the wake of the breakdown of some of the post-war certitudes in the late 1960s.) A few cynical ones though will continue to say that the effort is nothing less than an effort to capture, for preservation, what according to the moderns are the necessary or valuable components of the worldview of those living outside the post-seventeenth-century concept of history. So that the people

⁴For instance Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (London: Verso, 1978); and *Science in a Free Society* (London: NLB, 1978).

⁵For a pithy critique of post-modernism's anti-history from the point of view of the non-West, see the series of essays by Ziauddin Sardar: 'Surviving the Terminator: The Post-Modern Mental Condition', *Futures*, March 1990, 22(2), pp. 203–10; 'Total Recall: Aliens, "Others" and Amnesia in Post-Modernist Thought', *Futures*, March 1991, 23(2), pp. 189–203; 'Terminator 2: Modernity, Post-Modernism and the "Other"', *Futures*, June 1992, 24(6), pp. 493–506; and 'Do Not Adjust Your mind: Post-Modernism, Reality and the Other', *Futures*, October 1993, 25(10), pp. 877–94.

³On the fear of ambiguity as a gift of the Enlightenment, see Donald N. Levine, *The Flight from Ambiguity: Essays in Social and Cultural Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985). On the psychological and cultural correlates of ambiguity, once a popular subject of research in psychology, see for instance, Anthony Davids, 'Psychodynamic and Sociocultural Factors Related to Intolerance of Ambiguity', in Robert W. White (ed.), *The Study of Lives: Essays in Honour of Henry A. Murray* (New York: Atherton Press, 1963), pp. 160–78.

who have kept alive the art of living outside history all these centuries can be safely dumped into the dustbins of history, as obsolete or as superfluous.

The second major difference between the historically minded and their ahistorical others is the scepticism and the fuzzy boundaries the latter usually work with when constructing the past. There is one thing the historical consciousness cannot do, without dismantling the historian's self-definition and threatening the entire philosophical edifice of modern history: it cannot admit that the historical consciousness itself can be demystified or unmasked and that an element of self-destructiveness could be introduced into that consciousness to make it more humane and less impersonal.⁶ In other words, while the historical consciousness can grant, as the sciences do, that historical truths are only contingent, it also assumes that the idea of history itself cannot be relativized or contextualized beyond a point. History can recognize gaps in historical data; it can admit that history includes mythic elements and that theory terms and data terms are never clearly separable in practice, that large areas of human experience and reality remain untouched by existing historical knowledge. It can even admit the idea of reversals in history. But it cannot accept that history can be dealt with from outside history; the entire Enlightenment worldview militates against such a proposition. As a result, when historians historicize history, which itself is rare, they do so according to the strict rules of historiography. It reminds me of one of the fantasies Freud considered universal, that of one's immortality. The human mind, Freud believed, was unable to fantasize itself as dead; all such fantasies ended up by postulating an observer/self that witnessed the self as dead. All critiques of history from within the modern worldview have also been ultimately historical.

Part of the hostility of the historically minded towards the ahistorical can be traced to the way the myths, legends, and epics of the latter are intertwined with what look like transcendental theories of the past. Historians have cultivated over the last two hundred and fifty years a fear of theories of transcendence. And in recent centuries, what was once avoidance of the sacred and apotheosization of the secular has increasingly become an open fear of those who reject or undervalue the secular or who choose to use the idiom of the sacred. This fear is particularly

⁶Actually, history has thrived on such impersonality—according to some a core value of modernity. On the role of impersonality in modern knowledge systems, see Tariq Banuri, 'Modernization and Its Discontents: A Cultural Perspective on Theories of Development', in Frédérique Apffel Marglin and Stephen Marglin (ed.), *Dominating knowledge: Development, Culture and Resistance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, pp. 73–101.

pronounced in societies where the idiom of the sacred is conspicuously present in the public sphere. As some of the major political ideologies have re-entered the political arena in the guise of faiths, posing a threat to the modern nation-state system globally, the nervousness about anything that smacks of faith has taken the form of an epidemic in territories where history reigns supreme. Confronted with the use, or misuse, of theories of transcendence in the public sphere, historical consciousness has either tried to fit in the experience within a psychiatric framework, within which all transcendence, even the use of the language of transcendence, acquires perfect 'clarity' as a language of insanity; or it has reread what look like transcendent theories of the past as a hidden language of *realpolitik* in which all transcendence is merely a complex, only apparently ahistorical, political ploy.

Why have historians till now not seriously tried to critique the idea of history itself? After all, such self-reflexibility is not unknown in contemporary social knowledge. Sociology has produced Alvin Gouldner and Stanislaw Andreski; psychology Rollo May, Abraham Maslow, Ronald Laing and Thomas Szasz.⁷ Even economists, usually defensively self-certain, include in their ranks N. Georgescu-Roegen and Joseph Schumacher; and amongst philosophers, there are enthusiasts of philosophical silence and the end of philosophy.⁸ Some of the self-explorations have turned out to be decisive to the disciplines concerned, others less so; some are exciting, others tame; some are explicit, others implicit. But they are there.⁹

⁷Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1971); Stanislaw Andreski, *Social Sciences as Sorcery* (London: André Deutsch, 1972); Rollo May, *Psychology and the Human Dilemma* (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand, 1962); Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1968); Roland Laing, *The Divided Self: A Study of Sanity and Madness* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1970); Thomas S. Szasz, *The Manufacture of Madness* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971); and *The Myth of Mental Illness* (London: Paladin, 1972).

⁸N. Georgescu-Roegen, *Energy and Economic Myths* (New York: Pergamon, 1976); J. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: The Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (New Delhi: Radha Krishna, 1977); and *Roots of Economic Growth* (Varanasi: Gandhian Institute of Studies, 1962); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr. C.K. Ogden and F.P. Ramsay (London: Routledge, and Kegan Paul, 1922); and Richard Rorty, 'The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy', in *Objectivity, Relativity and Truth: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Vol. 1, pp. 175–96; and 'Philosophy as Science, as Metaphor, and as Politics', in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Vol. 2, pp. 9–26.

⁹So much so that in anthropology, I am told, graduate students in some universities are more keen to do cultural critiques of anthropology than empirical studies of other cultures.

Historians have sired no such species. Occasionally, some have tried to stretch the meaning of the term 'history' beyond its conventional definition. One example is William Thompson's *At the Edge of History*, which at least mentions the possibility of using myths as a means of 'thinking wild' about the future by reversing the relationship between myth and history.¹⁰ Usually, however, when historians talk of the end of history, from Karl Marx to Francis Fukuyama, they have in mind the triumph of Hegelian history.

There have also been critics of ideas of history, direct or indirect, from outside history. Ananda Coomaraswamy, philosopher and art historian, is an obvious early example, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (the philosopher of science, who has built on the traditions of Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon and René Guénon) is a more recent one.¹¹ And the present-day structuralists and post-structuralists also can be thought of as critics of the idea of history itself.¹² But there has emerged no radical criticism of history from within the ranks of historians. The histories of scepticism, à la Richard Popkins, have not been accompanied by any scepticism towards history as a mode of world construction. Or at least I do not know of such efforts. Recently, in an elegant introductory text on history, Keith Jenkins sharply distinguishes between history and the past, but refuses to take the next logical step—to acknowledge the possibility that

¹⁰William Irwin Thompson, *At the Edge of History: Speculations on the Transformation of Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 179–85.

¹¹Roger Lipsey (ed.), Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Papers* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), Vols. 1 and 2; Frithjof Schuon, *Language of the Self* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1999); and *Logic and Transcendence*, tr. Peter Townsend (London: Perennial Books, 1984); René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, tr. Lord Northbourne (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin, 1972); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978); and *Islamic Life and Thought* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981).

I hope the rest of this essay will not be now read as a convoluted plea for perennial philosophy, though I have obviously benefitted from the critique of history ventured by such philosophy. Mine is primarily a political-psychological argument that tries to be sensitive to the politics of cultures and knowledge.

¹²For instance, Anthony Giddens, 'Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and the Production of Culture', in Anthony Giddens and Jonathan Turner (ed.), *Social Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp. 194–223 and pp. 212: 'The methodological repression of time in Saussure's conception of language is translated by Levi-Strauss into substantive repression of time involved in the codes organized through myths. ... Foucault's style of writing history does not flow along with chronological time. Nor does it depend upon the narrative description of a sequence of events. ... There is more than an echo of Levi-Strauss in Foucault's view that history is one form of knowledge among others—and of course, like other forms of knowledge, a mode of mobilizing power.'

history might be only one way of constructing the past and that other cultures might have explored other ways.¹³ It is even doubtful if Jenkins himself considers his essay anything more than an intra-mural debate, for all his thirty-five odd references come from mainstream European and North American thought.

There are also papers written by two sensitive young Indian historians who come close to admitting the need for basic critiques of history: Gyan Prakash and Dipesh Chakrabarty. The latter even names his paper 'History as Critique and Critique of History'.¹⁴ On closer scrutiny, however, both turn out to be hesitant steps towards such a critique; at the moment they are powerful pleas for alternative histories, not for alternatives to history. Vinay Lal's two unpublished papers, which explore the entry of modern history into Indian society in the nineteenth century, both as a discipline and as a form of social consciousness, and one of Chakrabarty's more recent papers go further.¹⁵ Lal's paper, 'The Discourse of History and the Crisis at Ayodhya', comes close to being an outsider's account of history in India. And Chakrabarty acknowledges that 'insofar as the academic discipline of history—that is "history" as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university is concerned, "Europe" remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call "Indian", "Chinese", "Kenyan", and so on.' He continues:

So long as one operates within the discourse of 'history' at the institutional site of the university it is not possible simply to walk out of the deep collusion between

¹³Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991). See esp. pp. 5–20.

¹⁴Gyan Prakash, 'Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Indian Historiography is Good to Think', in Nicholas B. Dirks (ed.), *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), pp. 353–88; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'History as Critique and Critique of History', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 14 September 1991, pp. 2262–8; and D.C., 'Post-coloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for the "Indian" Pasts', *Representations*, Winter 1992, (37), pp. 1–26.

¹⁵Vinay Lal, 'On the Perils of History and Historiography: The Case, Puzzling as usual, of India', *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies*, Fall 1995, 3(1), 79–112; see also his 'The Discourse of History and the Crisis at Ayodhya: Reflections on the Production of Knowledge, Freedom, and the Future of India', *Emergences* (5/6), 1994, pp. 4–44. The latter goes further in its critique of history as a cultural project and its relationship with violence in the context of the Ramjanmabhumi movement in India, something to which I turn towards the end of this essay briefly and from a slightly different point of view.

Is it merely an accident that so many of the critics of history I have mentioned in this essay are South Asians or have a South Asian connection? Is it only a function of my own cultural origins? Or is it possible that, pushed around by powerful traditions both of modern history and the surviving epic cultures in their part of the world, many South Asians are forced to take, sometimes grudgingly, a more sceptical stance towards history?

'history' and the modernizing narratives of citizenship, bourgeois public and private, and the nation-state. 'History' as a knowledge system is firmly embedded in institutional practices that invoke the nation-state at every step.¹⁶

All three historians are exceptions and even they are basically pleading for what Sara Suleri calls 'contraband history'. All three leave one with the hope that some day their kind will reactivate their own cultural memories and bring in an element of radical self-criticism in their own discipline. Radicalism may not lose by beginning at home.

But the question still remains: Why this poor self-reflexivity among historians as a species? I suspect that this denial of the historicity of history is built on two pillars of modern-knowledge systems. First, Enlightenment sensitivities, whether in the West or outside, presume a perfect equivalence between history and the construction of the past; they presume that there is no past independent of history. If there is such a past, it is waiting to be remade into history. To misuse David Lowenthal's imagery, the past is another country only when it cannot be properly historicized and thus conquered.¹⁷ And the regnant concepts of human brotherhood and equality insist that all human settlements must look familiar from the metropolitan centres of knowledge and, ideally, no human past must look more foreign than one's own. On and off I have used the expression 'imperialism of categories' to describe the ability of some conceptual categories to establish such complete hegemony over the domains they cover that alternative concepts related to the domains are literally banished from human consciousness. History has established such a hegemony in our known universe. In that universe, the discipline is no longer merely the best available entry into the past; it now exhausts the idea of the past. In what psychoanalysis might some day call a perfect instance of concretization, it is now *the* past.

Everyone has a right to one's own clichés, C.P. Snow says. So let me give my favourite example of such a hegemony from my own discipline. When intelligence tests were first devised there was much discussion in the psychological literature on the scope and limits of these tests. Scholars acknowledged that the tests were an imperfect measure of human intelligence, that they were sensitive to, and influenced by, personal and social factors; that their reliability and validity were not closed issues. Over the decades, doubts about the reliability and especially the validity

of intelligence tests have declined to nearly zero, though a debate on them raged for a while in the late 1970s.¹⁸ Today, virtually every introductory textbook of psychology defines human intelligence as that which intelligence tests measure. IQ, once a less than perfect measure of intelligence, now defines intelligence. Other such examples are the hegemony of development and modern science over the domains of social change and science respectively. It is almost impossible to criticise development today without being accused of social conservatism of the kind that snatches milk from the mouths of hungry Third-World babies. It is even more difficult to criticize modern science without being seen as a religious fundamentalist or a closet astrologer.

History not only exhausts our idea of the past, it also defines our relationship with our past selves.¹⁹ Those who own the past own the present, George Orwell says. Perhaps those who own the rights to shape the pasts of our selves can also claim part-ownership of our present selves. Historians have now come to crucially shape the selves of the subjects of history, those who live only with history. In the process, they have abridged the right and perhaps even the capacity of citizens to self-define, exactly as the mega-system of modern medicine has taken over our bodies, and the psychiatrists our minds for retooling or renovation. We are now as willing to hand over central components of our self to the historians for engineering purposes as to hand over our bodies to surgeons.

Second, the absence of radical self-reflexivity in history is in part a product of the gradual emergence and spread of the culture of diaspora and the psychology of the exile as a dominant cultural motif of our times.²⁰ The modern world has a plurality of people who have been uprooted—from their pasts, from their cultures, and from less impersonal communities that often ensure the continuity—of traditions. Modern cosmopolitanism is grounded in this uprooting. Not only have state- and nation-formation, empire-building, colonialism, slavery,

¹⁸Paradoxically, that debate, centring around Cyril Burt's ethical lapses, only consolidated the status of the tests as *the* measure and operational definer of intelligence.

¹⁹The moderns like to build their selfhood on the past that looks empirical and falsifiable. But it can be argued that the unsatiated search for a touch of transcendence in life is, as a result, only pushed into weird psychopathological channels and finds expression in using or living out history with the passions formerly elicited by myths, without the open-endedness and the touch of self-destructiveness associated with myths. Later on in this paper I shall give an example of this from the backwater of Asia, but the reader can easily think up similar examples from his or her surroundings.

²⁰Nikos Papastergiadis, *Exile as Modernity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁷David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

pogroms, the two world wars and ethnic violence, taken their toll, perhaps more than anything else, development combined with large-scale industrialization and urbanization have contributed handsomely to such uprooting. These are the 'historical dislocations' that mark out, according to Robert Lifton, the 'restless context' which 'includes a sense of all the unsettled debts of history that may come "back into play"'.²¹

While direct violence produces identifiable victims and refugees, social processes such as development produce invisible victims and invisible refugees. To give random examples from this century, the United States began as a nation of uprooted immigrants. Just when it began to settle down as a new cultural entity, its farming population came down from more than 60 per cent to something like 5 per cent in about seventy-five years. Likewise, Brazil has acquired a plurality of the uprooted within two decades by going through a massive transfer of population from rural to urban settlements, probably involving as much as 60 per cent of the population of the country. Independent India, which saw colossal communal violence and forced movements of population during its early years, and China, which has seen in this century millions of refugees created by a world war and a series of famines, are going through similar changes at the moment. They are producing invisible refugees of development by the million. The dams, especially the fifteen hundred large dams built in India in the last forty-five years, presumably along with associated major development projects, have by themselves produced nearly twenty-two million refugees.²² As in the case of the environment, the sheer scale of human intervention in social affairs has destroyed cultural elasticities and the capacity of cultures to return to something like their original state after going through a calamity.²³

This massive uprooting has produced a cultural psychology of exile that in turn has led to an unending search for roots, on the one hand, and angry, sometimes self-destructive, assertions of nationality and

²¹Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resistance in an Age of Fragmentation* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 131.

²²Gayatri Singh, 'Displacement and Limits to Legislation', in Raajen Singh (ed.), *Dams and Other Major Projects: Impact on and Response of Indigenous People* (Goa: CCA-URM, 1988), pp. 91-7; see p. 91.

²³Cf. Robert Sinsheimer's certainty principle, which he proposes as the inverse of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, is particularly relevant to this argument. The uncertainty principle has to do with the effect of observation on the observed; the certainty principle with the effect of observation on the observer. Robert Sinsheimer, 'The Presumptions of Science', *Daedalus*, 1978, 107, pp. 23-5.

ethnicity on the other. As the connection with the past has weakened, desperate attempts to re-establish this connection have also grown. Paradoxically, this awareness of losing touch with the past and with primordial collectivities is mainly individual, even though it uses the language of collectivity. It has to use the language of collectivity because the community has in the meanwhile perished for many who are a party to the search. I have in mind something like what Hannah Arendt used to call the search for pseudo-solidarities in European fascism in the 1930s.²⁴

The attempt to give a central place in our personality repertoire to formal history—in its conventional or dissenting sense—has its counterpart in organized efforts to institutionalize history as the only acceptable construction of the past. History manages and tames the past on behalf of the exile, so that the remembered past becomes a submissive presence in the exile's world. The objectivity and empirical stature of history is supposed to give a certitude that alternative constructions of the past—legends, myths and epics—can no longer give. The latter used to give moral certitude, not objective or empirical certitude; history gives moral certitude and guides moral action by paradoxically denying a moral framework and giving an objectivist framework based on supposedly empirical realities. This is what Heinrich Himmler had in mind when he used to exhort the SS to transcend their personal preferences and values, and do the dirty work of history on behalf of European civilization. He had excellent precedents in Europe's history outside Europe. His innovation was the Teutonic thoroughness and self-consistency with which the same historical principles were applied within the confines of Europe.

It is this that makes history a theory of the future for many, a hidden guide to ethics that need not have anything to do with the morality of individuals and communities. History allows one to identify with its secular trends and give a moral stature to the 'inevitable' in the future. The new justifications for violence have come from this presumed inevitability. In these circumstances, psychology enters the picture not in the sense in which the first generation of psychohistorians believed it would do—as a new dimension of history that would deepen or enrich the historical consciousness, but as a source of defiance of the imperialism of history. A practising historian, Richard Pipes, has come close to acknowledging this possibility, if not in a professional journal, at least in a respectable periodical. Pipes may be a distinguished retired cold-

²⁴Hannah Arendt, Interview with Roger Errera, *New York Review of Books*, 26 October 1978, p. 18.

warrior and a pillar of the establishment, but in this instance at least he has chosen to identify with those uncomfortable with history, both at the centre and in the backwaters of the known world:

History may be meaningless. The proposition merits consideration. Perhaps the time has come, after two world wars, Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot, to abandon the whole notion of history, writ large, as a metaphysical process that leads to a goal of which people are only dimly aware. This concept, invented by German idealist philosophers in the early nineteenth century, has often been described as a surrogate secularized religion in which the will of history replaces the hand of God, and revolution serves as the final judgement. As practitioner of history writ small, I, for one, see only countless ordinary individuals who materialize in contemporary documents desiring nothing more than to live ordinary lives, being dragged against their will to serve as building material for fantastic structures designed by men who know no peace.²⁵

There is just a hint in Pipes' essay that part of the answer to this passion for 'grand history' lies in psychology, perhaps in psychopathology.²⁶

I

In a well-known paper on the crisis of personal identity, psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson, whose name is associated with serious efforts in the once-trendy disciplinary domain called psychohistory, mentions a news report on a 'smart-alecky' youth, fined twenty-five dollars for reckless driving. While in the court, the boy interrupted the judge to say, 'I just want you to know that I'm not a thief.' Provoked by this 'talking back', the judge immediately increased the sentence to six months on a road gang.²⁷ Erikson suggests that the judge here ignored what may have been a 'desperate historical denial', an attempt to claim that an anti-social identity had not been formed. The judge was just not sensitive enough to the reaffirmation of a moral self that transcended in this instance the history of a moral lapse.

Can this story be re-read as a fable that redefines the role of psychology in relation to history? Can we read it as an invitation to ponder if the reaffirmation of a moral self in the present by the young man should or should not have priority over the historical 'truth' of his rash driving?

²⁵Richard Pipes, 'Seventy-Five Years On: The Great October Revolution as a Clandestine Coup d'Etat', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 6 November 1992, pp. 3-4; see p. 4.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁷Erik H. Erikson, 'Youth: Fidelity and Diversity', *Daedalus*, Winter 1962, 91(1), pp. 5-27; see p. 22.

Can his historical denial be read as a defiance of history itself? Does his cognitive defiance have at least as much empirical and objective 'truth' value as the proven history of his bad driving? Is all history only contemporary history, as Benedetto Croce suggested, or is all history psychological history—diverse, essentially conflict-ridden, internally inconsistent constructions of the past that tell more about the present and about the persons and collectivities 'doing' history? Is Erikson even empirically flawed because he cannot, or would not, exercise his hermeneutic or exegetic rights beyond a point? Is the unwillingness to exercise these rights fully or the refusal to share them with other civilizations determined by the same forces that we are usually so keen to invoke when we embark on historical analysis? I shall address these odd questions in a very roundabout way, not necessarily to answer them, but to tell the outlines of a story about history in what was once an unabashedly ahistorical society.

Most Indian epics begin with a prehistory and end, not with a climactic victory or defeat, but with an ambivalent awareness of the end of an era. The conclusion conveys a sense of exhaustion, of the futility of it all. The *Mahabharata*, for instance, does not end with the decisive battle of Kurukshetra; it ends with the painful awareness that an age is about to pass. The victorious are all too aware—in the words of Yudhishthira, who with his brothers has ensured the defeat of the 'ungodly'—that the fratricide that brought them their victory in a just war, has actually been a glorified defeat. Even Lord Krishna, the lord of lords, dies a humble death, his entire clan decimated, his kingdom destroyed.

The first nonwestern psychoanalyst, Girindrasekhar Bose (1886-1953), who happened to be an Indian and a Bengali, wrote among other things a huge commentary on the ancient Indian epics, the *puranas*, which is now entirely forgotten even in his native Bengal.²⁸ On the face of it, the commentary has so little to do with psychoanalysis that even sensitive commentators on Bose, such as Christians Hartnack and Sudhir Kakar, have mostly ignored it.²⁹ The book perhaps looks to them like an attempt to construct a genealogy, which is also what it seemed to me when I first read it.

Reared in the culture of nineteenth-century science, particularly its

²⁸Girindrasekhar Bose, *Purana Pravesha* (Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar, 1934).

²⁹Christiane Hartnack, *Psychoanalysis and Colonialism in British India*, Ph.D. dissertation, Freie Universität, Berlin 1988; Sudhir Kakar, 'Stories From Indian Psychoanalysis: Context and Text', in James W. Stigler, Richard A. Shweder and Gilbert Herdt (ed.), *Cultural Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1990), pp. 427-45.