

Reason and the Critique of Historicism

SCHOLARS contemplating the subject called "Indian history" have often relived, as it were, the old passions of the "the struggle of the Enlightenment with superstition" that Hegel writes about in his *Phenomenology*.¹ They have assumed that for India to function as a nation based on the institutions of science, democracy, citizenship, and social justice, "reason" had to prevail over all that was "irrational" and "superstitious" among its citizens. Historicism has been a very close ally of such thought. For instance, peasants' lives, including their politics, are replete with practices that could seem "superstitious" to the rational and secular observer. How would history, the rational-secular discipline, understand and represent such practices? Where would the polytheism that marks everyday life in the subcontinent find its place in such a frame of thought? Depending on the political dispositions of their authors, historicist narratives by secular and rational scholars have produced either harshly judgmental or sympathetic accounts of subaltern social groups' tendency to treat gods, spirits, and other supernatural entities as agential beings in the worlds of humans. But, sympathetic or not, these accounts all foreground a separation—a subject-object distinction—between the academic observer-subject and the "superstitious" persons serving as the objects of study.

There is an honored tradition, both in Europe and elsewhere, of regarding "rational outlook," the "spirit of science" and of "free enquiry" as constituting the "progressive" aspects of modernity. Secular and Marxist Indian intellectuals have long held this view.² Soon after the war, some leading Bengali academic intellectuals of left-liberal persuasion organized a series of lectures in Calcutta to discuss the nature of modernity in India. Their deliberations were published in 1950 as a collection of essays, *Modern Age and India*.³ One of the authors, Tripurari Chakravarti, typically connected modernity with European developments: "the Modern Age all over the world undeniably stem[med] from modern European history."⁴ The physicist Satyendranath Bose characterized science as knowledge that "was obliged to oppose religion whenever religion [presumed to] speak about things on this earth."⁵ The recent memory of the atom bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki muted to some degree what could have been

otherwise an unqualified enthusiasm for science on the part of the contributors to this book (see the essays by Satyendranath Bose and Nareshchandra Sen Gupta, in particular). But a faith in the capacity of scientific spirit to deliver humankind from all terrestrial problems and superstitious attitudes ran intact through the entire volume.

This tendency to identify reason and rational argumentation as a modernist weapon against “premodern” superstition ends up overdrawing the boundary between the modern and the premodern. For the question of pitting “reason” against that which seems irrational was not just an issue in the battle between the educated and the peasant classes in Bengali modernity. Reason has found other objects of domination besides the peasant. Gender relations in the middle classes, for instance, have as often borne the brunt of this history as has the supposedly superstitious peasant. In his personal reminiscences, the Bengali intellectual Dilipkumar Ray recounts the story of his conversion to rationalism in his youth early in this century. The story is common enough—many of my own generation went through similar stages in their conversion to a rationalist and atheist Marxism—but it is also a sad and comic story. As in the lives of many Bengali men before and after him, Ray’s conversion to rationalism and atheism in his teens was accompanied by his immediate discovery that the women of the household—his aunt and his grandmother in particular—were the “irrational” people whose company he needed to avoid.⁶ Ray’s misogyny is typical of the history of the “scientific temper” in modern Bengal.

I do not mean to suggest that reason as such is elitist. Reason becomes elitist whenever we allow unreason and superstition to stand in for backwardness, that is to say, when reason colludes with the logic of historicist thought. For then we see our “superstitious” contemporaries as examples of an “earlier type,” as human embodiments of the principle of anachronism. In the awakening of this sense of anachronism lies the beginning of modern historical consciousness. Indeed, anachronism is regarded as the hallmark of such a consciousness.⁷ Historical evidence (the archive) is produced by our capacity to see something that is contemporaneous with us—ranging from practices, humans, institutions, and stone-inscriptions to documents—as a relic of another time or place. The person gifted with historical consciousness sees these objects as things that once belonged to their historical context and now exist in the observer’s time as a “bit” of that past. A particular past thus becomes objectified in the observer’s time. If such an object continues to have effects on the present, then the histori-

cally minded person sees that as the effect of the past. It is through such objectification—predicated on the principle of anachronism—that the eye of the participant is converted into the eye of the witness. This is how a participant in an historical “event” becomes an “eyewitness” for the historian, affirming the “rule of evidence” of historiography. Ethnographic observation, similarly, is based on the ethnographer himself or herself shuttling between the two distinct roles of the participant and the observer, but here also analysis entails the conversion of the participant’s involved and engaged eye into the distant and disinterested eye of the observer.

If historical or anthropological consciousness is seen as the work of a rational outlook, it can only “objectify”—and thus deny—the *lived* relations the observing subject already has with that which he or she identifies as belonging to a historical or ethnographic time and space separate from the ones he or she occupies as the analyst. In other words, the method does not allow the investigating subject to recognize himself or herself as also the figure he or she is investigating. It stops the subject from seeing his or her own present as discontinuous with itself.⁸ We shall see that what blocks the path of this thought is the idea that the analytical gives us some kind of x-ray vision into the social, that it gives us access to a level of reality somehow deeper than the everyday. This epistemological primacy routinely assigned in social science thought to one’s analytical relationships to the world (Heidegger’s “present-at-hand”) over lived, preanalytical ones (the “ready-to-hand” in Heideggerian terms) produces, in Marxist and liberal histories, versions of the “uneven development” thesis.⁹ Some relations of everyday transactions can now take on the character of “unvanquished remnants” of the past (to recall Marx’s phrase). But that only reproduces ultimately, as we have already discussed in the first part of this book, the useful but empty and homogeneous chronology of historicism.¹⁰

In drawing this book to a close, I want to raise the question of how we might find a form of social thought that embraces analytical reason in pursuit of social justice but does not allow it to erase the question of heterotemporality from the history of the modern subject. To do this, however, I want to begin by identifying certain common analytical strategies in the social sciences that seek to hide from view the fragmentary nature of the “now” the investigating subject inhabits. For this purpose, I shall draw on the writings of three intellectuals important for postcolonial thinking: Jomo Kenyatta, Anthony Appiah, and D. D. Kosambi.

READING KENYATTA, APPIAH, AND KOSAMBI

Consider the question of superstition and magic as it comes up in the Kenyan nationalist leader Jomo Kenyatta's classic book *Facing Mount Kenya*. Long before he trained in anthropology in London, Kenyatta had developed an intimate relationship to practices that early European anthropological thought classified as "magical" and "superstitious." His was truly a participant's eye that was called upon to "witness," as well. Mixing the two modes of relating to the "object"—as an "apprentice" and as a "witness"—Kenyatta writes: "As for magic, I have *witnessed* the performance of magic rites in my own home and elsewhere. My grandfather was a seer and a magician, and in travelling about with him and in carrying his bag of equipment I served a kind of *apprenticeship* in the principles of the art."¹¹

Yet the mixing of the two modes in a context where Kenyatta's lived, preanalytical involvement in the world of "magic" constantly cut across the lines of the objectifying gaze of the anthropologist in the end produced a consciousness that was inherently double. The practices of his grandfather to whom he had served as kind of apprentice could never be a completely objectified past for him. Yet he was distant enough to seek a justification for them in terms his grandfather would not have needed. The doubling of his voice is clear in these lines he wrote on the subject of magic:

From personal experience . . . in various branches of magical treatment, it can be safely said that this is one way of transmitting thoughts telepathically from one mind to another. . . . [T]he magician's suggestions are easily transmitted by means of vibrations to the brain, and thence to the mind. If the functions and the methods of magic are studied carefully and scientifically, it will most probably be proved that there is something in it which can be classified as occultism, and, as such, cannot be dismissed as mere superstition.¹²

This passage actually caused great embarrassment to the anthropologist Malinowski, Kenyatta's professor in London, whom Kenyatta had invited to write an introduction to the book. Malinowski obliged, but the tension around the subject of "magic"—between Kenyatta, the "native-turned-anthropologist" and Malinowski, the intellectual with no (acknowledged) lived relationship to the object of study—is palpable from

the way Malinowski's introduction and Kenyatta's own preface to the book diverge from one another. The doubling of the voice in Kenyatta contrasts strongly with the single voice of disapproval with which Malinowski expressed his sense of discomfiture. "Some anthropologists," he wrote, maintaining a critical but polite distance from the text he had been accorded the honor of introducing, "may question here the reinterpretation of the real processes which underlie magic. . . . Mr. Kenyatta would still have to supply some evidence as to how these 'vibrations' are produced, how they act on the brain, and thence on the mind." It was in Kenyatta's reference to "occultism," a European practice, that Malinowski finally found a way out of his discomfiture of having to criticize an African anthropologist and a former student whom he had generously agreed to introduce to the reader. "For indeed," he said, "how can *we* [Europeans] criticise Mr. Kenyatta for believing in . . . occultism" when "Europe is as deeply immersed" in it? Malinowski could now make his criticism seem fair by saying that "superstition, blind faith and complete disorientation are as dangerous a canker in the heart of our Western civilisation as in Africa."¹³ The closer one gets to Malinowski's end of things, the more the language of social science obliterates the plural ways of being human that are contained in the very different orientations to the world—the "worlding" of the earth, in Heidegger's language—that "participation" and "observation" connote.

The doubling of the "voice" is almost inaudible but not quite silenced, for instance, in Kwame Anthony Appiah's discussion of some Asante practices that resembled what Kenyatta called "communion with ancestors."¹⁴ "When a man opens a bottle of gin," writes Appiah, "he will pour a little on the earth, asking his ancestors to drink a little and to protect the family and its doings." Appiah, again, had some kind of lived relationship to this practice. For it was a practice of his father, he says, to casually pour "a few drops from top of a newly opened bottle of Scotch onto the carpet" as offering to ancestors. Appiah had grown up around this practice as a child. This was how a certain way of being-in-the-world, an Asante way, came into the formation of the modern, cosmopolitan, formally educated Appiah. However, a child's sense of being around a repeated set of practices is converted into a statement of the anthropologist in Appiah's text that converts the participant's eye into that of the eyewitness: "All my life, I have seen and heard ceremonies [that involve] . . . ritual appeal to unseen spirits." Unlike Kenyatta's text, the phenomenology of Appiah's having been in a preanalytic relation to the practice under

observation, long before he had learned to be an observer of it, is thoroughly written over by the voice of the anthropologist, a voice amplified in this case by a reference to Tylor. "If I am right," writes Appiah, in a move to "explain" his father's habit of offering scotch to ancestors, "it is (as Tylor claimed) a commitment to disembodied agency that crucially defines the religious beliefs that underlie rituals like the one I have described," and so on.¹⁵ Needless to say, the giveaway word "belief" is what takes the Asante Appiah and his father out of lived, preanalytical relationships and inserts them here into an objectifying relationship of social science within which the son and father face each other as the subject and the object.

A similar privileging of the analytical over the lived tames the radical potential of the Indian historian D. D. Kosambi's magnificently imaginative attempts to write Indian history out of the material practices of everyday life. Kosambi, for instance, pondered the historical significance of something so ubiquitous and familiar in the context of the kitchen in South Asian homes as the saddle-quern, the stone implement commonly used to grind spices. It intrigued Kosambi that such an ancient-looking object should exist in the same space that was also occupied by the electric stove, a veritable symbol of modernization in India of the 1950s. Not only was the saddle-quern in everyday use in the kitchen, Kosambi reports that around it had developed "rituals" in which the women and babies of Brahmin families such as Kosambi's participated. He writes: "With the implement [saddle-quern] . . . is performed a ceremony in force even among brahmins, yet without sanction in any of the brahminical scriptures which prescribe rites from birth to death. Before or on the name-day of a child, . . . the top roller stone is dressed up, passed around the cradle containing the child and finally deposited at the foot of the infant in the cradle. The theory given is that of sympathetic magic, namely that the child would grow up as strong and unblemished as the stone, to be as long-lived and free from infirmity."¹⁶

Kosambi thus extracted an interesting social fact from this stone object, a fact that actually surprised him. His sense of surprise is contained in the expression "even among brahmins"—for the saddle-quern had found use in rituals not authorized by any sacred texts. Kosambi's historicizing instincts told him that there must have been some interesting social history going on here. But what did it mean for Kosambi's own sense of the present when he wrote his book in the 1950s? He is not describing some dead practice from the past; he is writing about his own class, about "magical"

practices in the lives of women from the educated middle classes, the users of modern technology. For all one knows, Kosambi himself may have helped in the organization of these rites. The saddle-quern of Kosambi's description belongs, therefore, in our terms, to the problem of entangled times, to what I have called the "timeknot."¹⁷ It is made of stone, it resembles stone-age implements and therefore may have had a relationship to another period, and yet it shares in the time of the electric or kerosene stove as well. Moreover, it mediates in the relationship between upper and lower castes and locates them in some shared practices: "The implication is that a stone-age ceremony has come down with the implement, and has been borrowed by the brahmin families from the surrounding population."¹⁸ His historicism makes Kosambi blind to the problem of temporality posed by the saddle-quern. He could see the implement only as something that "developed with the first agriculture before the end of the stone age." The relationship between the cooking stove and the saddle-quern, for him, could then be only that of a one-way flow of time.

With hindsight, one can see that Kenyatta's relationship to his grandfather's magic, Appiah's relationship to his father's habit of offering scotch to ancestors, and Kosambi's relationship to the saddle-quern all point to the same problem. They refer us to the plurality that inheres in the "now," the lack of totality, the constant fragmentariness, that constitutes one's present. Over against this stands our capacity to deploy the historicist or ethnographic mode of viewing that involves the use of a sense of anachronism in order to convert objects, institutions, and practices with which we have lived relationships into relics of other times. As we have already said, this capacity to construct a single historical context for everything is the enabling condition of modern historical consciousness, the capacity to see the past as gone and reified into an object of investigation. It is this ability to see the past as genuinely dead, as separate from the time of the observer, that has given rise to the utopian and hermeneutic (but nevertheless ethical) struggles of the modern historical imagination—to try to get inside the skin of the past, to try to see it "as it really was," to try and reenact it in the historian's mind, and so on. I do not mean to devalue this struggle or the intense sense of craftsmanship to which it gives rise.¹⁹ But it is also true—as I hope my examples have demonstrated—that the modern sense of "anachronism" stops us from confronting the problem of the temporal heterogeneity of the "now" in thinking about history. We need to consider why we find anachronism productive.

WHAT IS INVESTED IN ANACHRONISM?

Because I do not wish to suggest that “anachronism” is a simple error of the mind, the question arises: What is invested in the practice of anachronism that allows us to reify the past into an object of study? Let me offer a very general answer. If the rise of the modern historical consciousness speaks of the coming of a certain modern and political way of inhabiting the world, I suggest that it also speaks of a very particular relation to the past. This is the desire on the part of the subject of political modernity both to create the past as amenable to objectification and to be at the same time free of this object called “history.” In fact, one can argue that the attempt to objectify the past is an expression of the desire to be free of the past, the desire to create what Paul de Man once called “the true present.” What is the “true present?” The “‘full power of the idea of modernity,’ ” writes Marshall Berman quoting de Man, “lay in a ‘desire to wipe out whatever came earlier,’ so as to achieve a ‘a radically new departure, a point that could be a true present.’ ”²⁰ The true present is what is produced when we act as if we could reduce the past to a nullity. It is a kind of a zero point in history—the pastless time, for example, of a *tabula rasa*, the *terra nullius*, or the blueprint. It reflects the desire of the modern political subject to practice, in pursuit of the goal of social justice, a certain degree of freedom with respect to the past.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, embracing political modernity has posed a number of anxious questions about the past to socially radical Indian intellectuals. Are “modernity” and the realization of “reason” possibilities inherent in our history? Or are they grounded in something outside of histories that are specific to any time or place, for example, in the “moral disposition” or the “communicative competence” of the human? How does one comport oneself toward those “unjust” social practices that are often justified in the name of tradition, custom, or indeed the past itself? Caste, *sati*, untouchability, religious conflicts—examples abound. Indeed, from what position does the modern intellectual contemplate the past?

There is no single answer to this question. In the Lockean fable of the fraternal contract underlying civil-political society, political freedom itself was freedom from the rule of the past. The father, insofar as he represents a part of the history of the sons’ childhood, is to be honored but has no “power of command” over his sons who, when they attain adulthood and reason, enjoy the “liberty of acting according to [their] own will.” Their

freedom is grounded in their reason.²¹ Reason here is external to history, and its attainment signals a freedom from any political authority of the past (embodied in the father). On the cessation of childhood, a Lockean individual begins life from this zero point in history. He constantly seeks to bring into being the “true present.” Historical possibilities now are created by reason alone. Likewise, the modern individual is not bound by the past. Custom has no “power to command” or punish him. John Locke’s fable about the fraternal contract that underlies the modern civil-political society has been justly described as nonhistorical or antihistorical.²²

In Marxist and social-science historiography, on the other hand, the possibilities one fights for are seen as emerging out of the conflicts of history. They are not completely external to it, but they are not completely determined by it, either. In this framework, the undecidable question of how much power the past possesses could produce an extreme degree of ambivalence in the modern individual. For in this mode of thinking, the past could appear to be both an enabling resource and a disabling constraint. Marx himself exemplified this ambivalence when he wrote: “The tradition of all the dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” Why “nightmare”? Why such an anxiety-ridden description of the dead generations? The anxiety arises because the modern individual in Marx’s position is never as completely free of the past as are the brothers in Locke’s theory of civil-political rule. Marxian modernity is caught in a contradiction with respect to the past. On the one hand, the revolutionary in every modern person desires to exceed and excise the past, to create “something that has never existed.” Yet the new can be imagined and expressed only through a language made out of the languages already available. Political action is thus loaded with the risk that what was meant to be a break with the past—“something that has never existed”—could end up looking like a return of the dead. The uncertainty of this break is what makes the voice of the modern in Marx’s text sound anxious. As Marx wrote, “And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.”²³

In their debate in the 1930s on the “caste system” in India, Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar, the leader of the so-called “untouchables,”

both reproduced—for all their well-publicized disagreements—elements of the two positions outlined above. They both saw their pursuit of social justice as creating possibilities that were independent of the past. Gandhi, for instance, made it clear that his criticisms of caste had very little to do with the history of the practice. “Caste,” he said, “has nothing to do with religion. It is a custom whose origin I do not know and *do not need to know* for the satisfaction of my spiritual hunger. But I do know that it is harmful both to spiritual and national growth.”²⁴ And Ambedkar recommended a complete overhaul of Hinduism to bring it in line “with Democracy.” He called for a “complete change in the fundamental notions of life,” in “outlook and attitude towards men and things,” for the “annihilation of caste,” and for Indian society to be entirely rebuilt on the basis of the three principles of “*Liberty, Equality and Fraternity*.”²⁵

This very sense of freedom with regard to the past that both Ambedkar and Gandhi articulated suggested, however, another possible relationship to it. Freedom from the past could also mean that the past could be treated as though it were a pool of resources, a standing reserve, on which the subject of political modernity could draw as needed in the struggle for social justice. Gandhi’s attitude to the scriptures contained this sense of freedom. “The scriptures, properly so called,” wrote Gandhi, “can only be concerned with internal verities and must appeal to any conscience. . . . Nothing can be accepted as the word of God which cannot be tested by reason or be capable of being spiritually experienced.” He argued that one had a choice in the matter of religion: “A religion has to be judged not by its worst specimen but by the best it might have produced. For that and that alone can be used as the standard to aspire to, if not to improve upon.”²⁶

Ambedkar in his turn quoted John Dewey—“my teacher and to whom I owe so much”—to say: “Every society gets encumbered with what is trivial, with dead wood from the past, and with what is positively perverse.” The task of an “enlightened” society was “*not* to conserve and transmit the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society.” The Hindus, therefore,

must consider whether they must not cease to worship the past as supplying [their] ideals. . . . Prof. Dewey . . . says: “An individual can live only in the present. The present is not just something which comes after the past; much less something produced by it.” . . . The Hindus must consider whether the time has not come for them to recognize that there is nothing fixed, nothing eternal, nothing *sanatan*; that everything is

changing . . . there must be a constant revolution of values and the Hindus must realize that if there must be standards to measure the acts of men there must also be a readiness to revise those standards.²⁷

There are, then, two kinds of relationship to the past being professed in these passages. One is historicism, the idea that to get a grip on things we need to know their histories, the process of development they have undergone in order to become what they are. Historicism itself promises to the human subject a certain degree of autonomy with respect to history. The idea is that once one knows the causal structures that operate in history, one may also gain a certain mastery of them. The other relationship to the past professed here is what I would call a “decisionist” relationship. By “decisionism,” I mean a disposition that allows the critic to talk about the future and the past as though there were concrete, value-laden choices or decisions to be made with regard to both. There is no talk of historical laws here. The critic is guided by his or her values to choose the most desirable, sane, and wise future for humanity, and looks to the past as a warehouse of resources on which to draw as needed. This relationship to the past incorporates the revolutionary-modernist position in which the reformer seeks to bring (a particular) history to nullity in order to build up society from scratch. Decisionism, however, does not have to connote an iconoclastic attitude to the past. It allows one to entertain a variety of attitudes toward the past—from respect to disgust—and yet not be bound by it. It uses “tradition,” but the use is guided by a critique of the present. It thus represents a freedom from history as well as a freedom to respect the aspects of “tradition” considered useful to building the desired future.

Decisionism and historicism may initially seem opposed to each other. The noted Indian critic Ashis Nandy, for example, has sometimes powerfully opposed historicism positions that in my terms are “decisionist.” In a recent essay entitled “History’s Forgotten Doubles,” Nandy criticizes history’s methods. Unlike the subjects of anthropology, “the subjects of history almost never rebel, for they are mostly dead.”²⁸ What fundamentally troubles Nandy is the nondialogical nature of the “conversation” between the past and the present that goes on in the texts of the historian. He advocates instead the idea of “principled forgetfulness and silences.” In explaining what he means by this, Nandy comes close to what I have described as the decisionist position. Desirable constructions of the past, he says, “are primarily *responsible to the present* and to the future; they are meant neither for the archivist nor for the archaeologist. They try

to expand human options by reconfiguring the past and transcending it through *creative improvisations*. . . . [T]he past shapes the present and future but the present and the future also shape the past. Some scholars . . . are . . . willing to redefine, perhaps even transfigure, the past to open up the future. The *choice* is not cognitive, but moral and political, in the best sense of the terms.²⁹

Presenting the past as a matter of “moral and political” choice to the modern subject is what makes Nandy’s position decisionist. He clearly deploys it in opposition to what may be called social-science history, which sees historical processes as setting limits to human freedom. He writes: “One wonders if some vague awareness of this asymmetry between the subjects and the objects [in the discipline of history], and between the knowers and the known, prompted Gandhi to reject history as a guide to moral action and derive such guidance from his reading of texts and myths. . . . Gandhi, like Blake and Thoreau before him, defied this new fatalism [that is, the idea of historical laws] of our times.”³⁰

Although in some kind of tension with each other, in particular over the question of historical evidence, decisionism and historicism are not mutually exclusive options for the subject of political modernity. As the quotes from Ambedkar show, he coupled his decisionist attitude to the past with the modern view that history as a discipline was primarily about explaining the processes and origins of social change. He stood for scraping the caste-ridden past of India; in that, he was a decisionist. But the modern person in Ambedkar was not against the discipline of history. Everything changes, he said. Nothing is “fixed” or “eternal.” The main task of the historical sciences is to answer “why.” This understanding of history was historicist. In an early essay on “Castes in India,” read before the “Anthropology seminar of Dr. A. A. Goldenweizer of Columbia University” in 1916, he deplored the absence of proper histories of the practices of *sati*, “enforced widowhood,” and “girl marriage” in India. “We have plenty of philosophy to tell us why these customs were honoured, but nothing to tell us the *causes of their origin* and existence.”³¹

Decisionism thus cannot constitute a fundamental critique of historicism. They are both invested in the modernist dream of the “true present” that always looks to, and is in turn determined by, the blueprint of a desirable future. Anachronism is an integral part of the historicist sensibility that accompanies such a political program. It accompanies our search for social justice. But historicism and the accompanying idea of anachronism also produce a problem for what we have called the project of provincializing Europe. Historicism can circulate only in a mood of frustra-

tion, despair, and resentment.³² For so long as we have historicism in place, the task of conceptualizing the nature of political modernity in colonial and postcolonial India baffles us. The peasant as citizen keeps looking like a relic of another time, although we know that he belongs squarely to the same present as that of the modern citizen. The challenge is to reconceptualize the present. To redefine our project as seeking to go beyond resentment toward European thought, we need to think beyond historicism. To do this is not to reject reason but to see it as one among many ways of being in the world. The following section elaborates on this point.

BEYOND HISTORICISM

To critique historicism in all its varieties is to unlearn to think of history as a developmental process in which that which is possible becomes actual by tending to a future that is singular. Or, to put it differently, it is to learn to think the present—the “now” that we inhabit as we speak—as irreducibly not-one. To take that step is to rethink the problem of historical time and to review the relationship between the possible and the actual. The following thoughts derive from the discussion presented in the second division of Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. At the core of this exercise is a concern about how one might think about the past and the future in a nontotalizing manner.

Usually—Heidegger reminds us—we think of the possible as an unrealized actual. However, to see the present as radically not-one and thus plural is to see its “now” as a state of partial disclosedness, without the suggestion or promise of any principles—such as *dharma*, capital, or citizenship—that can or will override this heterogeneity and incompleteness and eventually constitute a totality. Such plural possibilities therefore cannot be considered to be merely waiting to become actual—like the possibility of ripening inherent in a fruit. Nor can the plurality of possibilities be captured by the thought of “lack” or “incompleteness” that assumes an additive view of totality. We can see something as “merely incomplete” if we subscribe to the principle of a totality that can be brought into view by the addition of certain elements in the chronological time that follows the “now.” We have encountered such thought before in certain Marxist versions of Indian history that speak of “incomplete transitions” to capitalism and modernity.³³ To think of the “not yet,” of the “now,” as a form of “unrealized actual” would be to remain trapped entirely within

historicism. For a possibility to be neither that which is waiting to become actual nor that which is merely incomplete, the possible has to be thought of as that which already actually *is* but is present only as the “not yet” of the actual. In other words, it is what makes not-being-a-totality a constitutional characteristic of the “now.” It is in this radical sense of never being a totality that the “now” is “constantly fragmentary” and not-one.³⁴

Heidegger also helps us to see how the problem of the past cannot be thought about until we think about the question of the future as well. A human being simply cannot avoid being oriented toward the future. Yet the fact of having been there already—what Heidegger calls “I am as having been”—is also beyond the control of the human. All our pasts are therefore futural in orientation. They help us make the unavoidable journey into the future. There is, in this sense, no “desire for going back,” no “pathological” nostalgia that is also not futural as well. Being futural is something that is with us, at every moment, in every action that the human being undertakes.³⁵

But one has to make a distinction between the conscious thought of “a future” that we address in our pursuit of social justice and the futurity that laces every moment of human existence. The first kind of “future” is what both the historicist and the decisionist address. Recall Nandy’s words: “such constructions [of the past] are primarily responsible to the present and the future.”³⁶ This is a future of which we know at least the constitutive principles, even if we do not have a blueprint for it. Let us call this future, the future that “will be.” This is different from the futurity that already *is* in our actions at every moment. This other futurity we could refer to as the futures that already “are.”³⁷

The future that “will be” aligns itself with what I called History 1 in my chapter on “The Two Histories of Capital.” This is the universal and necessary history posited by the logic of capital. In this history inhere the Enlightenment universals. As moderns desirous of social justice and its attendant institutions, we, whether decisionist or historicist, cannot but have a shared commitment to it (in spite of all the disagreements between liberalism and Marxism). It is through this commitment that is already built into our lives that our jousting with European thought begins. The project of “provincializing Europe” arises from this commitment. But this beginning does not define the project. The project has to be defined with reference to other pasts, that is to say, with reference to History 2s—pasts “encountered by capital as antecedents but not as belonging to its own life-process.”

Futures that already *are* there, the futurity that humans cannot avoid aligning themselves with, are what I have called History 2. These futures are plural and do not illustrate any idea of the whole or one. They are what makes it impossible to sum up a present through any totalizing principle. They make the “now” constantly fragmentary, but the fragments are not additive; they do not suggest a totality or a whole. The constant and open-ended modification of the future that “will be” by the futures that “are” parallels the ongoing modification of History 1 by History 2s, as argued in Chapter 2.

These futures that already “are” do not necessarily look to the future that “will be,” which forms itself in the calculations and the desires of the subject of political modernity. The futures that “are” are plural, do not lend themselves to being represented by a totalizing principle, and are not even always amenable to the objectifying procedures of history writing. For my “I am as having been” includes pasts that exist in ways that I cannot see or figure out—or can do so sometimes only retrospectively. Pasts *are* there in taste, in practices of embodiment, in the cultural training the senses have received over generations. They are there in practices I sometimes do not even know I engage in. This is how the archaic comes into the modern, not as a remnant of another time but as something constitutive of the present. Whatever the nature of these pasts that already “are,” they are always oriented to futures that also already “are.” They exist without my being decisionist about them. The modern Bengali poet Arunkumar Sarkar writes, for instance, of his childhood: “Ever since I was a child, I was attracted to [the] sound [of language], and it was this attraction that gave rise to the desire to write poetry. My mother used to recite different kinds of poems, my father Sanskrit verses of praise [to deities], and my grandmother the hundred and eight names of [the god] Krishna. I did not understand their meanings but I felt absorbed in the sounds.”³⁸

Arun Sarkar’s statement nicely captures the nondecisionist aspect of his relationship to both the past and future within which the “now” of his “writing poetry” moves. The “having been” of his mother’s recitation of poetry, his father’s of Sanskrit verses, and his grandmother’s of the names of the Hindu god Krishna is (re)collected here in a movement of existence whose direction is futural. The futural direction of the movement is indicated by the phrase “the desire to write poetry.” It is within this futurity that Arun Sarkar’s poetry writing happens.

As against this plurality of the futures that already “are,” there is the future of the politically modern position. This is the future that “will be.”

This future posits a “now” where we are required to see the present as capable of yielding a principle of totalization. This in turn calls on us to be decisionist and/or objectifying about the past. This is the unavoidable gesture of the modern political subject. There is no reason to reject it as such. But we have to recognize the limitations of such methods in matters of thinking about the past. The past, for reasons adduced above, is never completely amenable to the objectifying protocols of historiography. To say this, incidentally, is not to deny the heuristic value of class, patriarchy, or technology in social-critical analysis of the past. But the clarity of the model is not the same as the clarity in the object for which the model stands.

We always have, in Heideggerian terms, a fore-conception of the fact that we live amid “futures” that already are and that cut across the future, which is cast in the mold of a “will be.” Ultimately, this is the question of the diverse ways the human finds of being-in-the-world. Of these many modes of being, the “objectifying” one is simply one, albeit a globally dominant one at present. A problem arises when the demand is made that the objectifying relationship to the past be our only relationship, for then any return of other relationships seem like a “nightmare of the dead,” as Marx put it. For those who give themselves over completely to objectifying modes of thought, the past retains a power to haunt and deliver the shock of the uncanny.³⁹ Listen, for instance, to the French Marxist-theorist Henri Lefebvre’s thoughts and experience—ironic in the case of this trenchant critic of capitalist objectification—when he visited a little church near Navarrenx (his “native country-town”), a church that belonged to his childhood: “I know what I shall find: an empty, echoing space, with hidden recesses crammed with hundreds of objects, each uttering the silent cry that makes it a sign. What a strange power! I know I cannot fail to understand their ‘meanings’ because they were explained to me years ago. It is impossible to close your eyes and ears to these symbols. . . . It is impossible to free myself from it.” The “having been’s” that create this “now” for Lefebvre in the church orient that “now” toward the future that his childhood once was. His Marxism, however, enjoins him to close off this moment and the plurality of it. Instead he wants to be consumed by a future that “will be,” the future called “socialism.” So a struggle ensues in Lefebvre’s text at this point: “But precisely because I feel this obscure emotion I can begin to understand its obscure causes. So I must not despair, the fight goes on . . . religion . . . is a reactionary destructive critique. Marxism offers an effective, constructive critique of life. And Marxism alone!”⁴⁰

The “constantly fragmentary” and irreducibly plural nature of the “now” is a problem to a social science that formulates human future as a project in which reason is realized in some form or other (more democracy, liberalism, rights, socialism, and so on). This in turn makes the life practices we do not approve of—practices that seem superstitious or that ascribe agency to gods and spirits—seem anachronistic if not reactionary. This happens, as we have seen, even when the investigating subject has lived an everyday relationship to these practices. Reason here assumes the form of a totalizing principle with the help of which the social-science investigator can only create an anthropologizing relationship, even to that with which he or she may have a connection prior to, during, and after the process of the investigation.

Interestingly, practicing Indian scientists—and I suppose scientists elsewhere as well—often have not felt any intellectual or social obligation to find one single overarching framework within which to contain the diversity of their own life practices (as distinct from their practices as scientists). In other words, the practice of “science” does not necessarily call on the researcher to develop a “scientific temper” beyond the practice of science itself. A. K. Ramanujan, the folklorist, once wrote about his astronomer father who had no difficulty being an astrologer as well:

He was a mathematician, an astronomer. But he was also a Sanskrit scholar, an expert astrologer. He had two kinds of exotic visitors: American and English mathematicians who called on him when they were on a visit to India, and local astrologers, orthodox pundits who wore splendid gold-embroidered shawls dowered by the Maharajah. I had just been converted by Russell to the “scientific attitude.” I . . . was troubled by his holding together in one brain both astronomy and astrology; I looked for consistency in him, a consistency he did not seem to care about, or even think about. When I asked him what the discovery of Neptune and Pluto did to his archaic nine-planet astrology, he said, “You make the necessary corrections, that’s all.” Or, in answer to how he could read the Gita religiously having bathed and . . . later talk appreciatively about Bertrand Russell and even Ingersoll, he said, “. . . don’t you know, the brain has two lobes?”⁴¹

Ramanujan’s father’s strategy for living precisely in a “now” that lacked totality—his metaphor of the two contradictory lobes effectively reduced the unity of the brain to merely an empty, contingent shell—was apparently also practiced by the Indian Nobel laureate physicist C. V.

Raman. Raman, it is said, would rush home from his laboratory in Calcutta in the 1930s to “take a ritual bath ahead of a solar eclipse.” When questioned about this, the physicist is reported to have simply quipped, “The Nobel Prize? That was science, a solar eclipse is personal.”⁴²

We do not have to accept these two anecdotes about two Indian scientists as perfectly true. But these possibly apocryphal stories about Ramanujan’s father and Sir C. V. Raman help me to imagine an alternative location for “reason” as we think about the subject of “Indian history.” These stories suggest, in Heideggerian sense, a fore-conception of how we might provincialize the Europe of our desire to be modern by giving reason a place different from the one assigned to it in historicist and modernist thought. The senior Ramanujan and Raman were both serious scientists. Yet they did not need to totalize through the outlook of science all the different life-practices within which they found themselves and to which they felt called. These stories—even if they are not true of the individuals named—speak of possible thought practices in which the future that “will be” never completely swamps the futures that already “are.”

To provincialize Europe in historical thought is to struggle to hold in a state of permanent tension a dialogue between two contradictory points of view. On one side is the indispensable and universal narrative of capital—History 1, as I have called it. This narrative both gives us a critique of capitalist imperialism and affords elusive but necessarily energizing glimpses of the Enlightenment promise of an abstract, universal but never-to-be-realized humanity. Without such elusive glimpses, as I have said before, there is no political modernity. On the other side is thought about diverse ways of being human, the infinite incommensurabilities through which we struggle—perennially, precariously, but unavoidably—to “world the earth” in order to live within our different senses of ontic belonging. These are the struggles that become—when in contact with capital—the History 2s that in practice always modify and interrupt the totalizing thrusts of History 1.

Although this book is not committed to either Marx or Heidegger in any doctrinaire or dogmatic sense, the spirit of their thinking and their guiding concepts preside over the two poles of thought that direct the movements of this book. As I said at the beginning, Marx and Heidegger represent for me two contradictory but profoundly connected tendencies that coexist within modern European social thought. One is the analytical heritage, the practice of abstraction that helps us to universalize. We need universals to produce critical readings of social injustices. Yet the universal and the analytical produce forms of thought that ultimately evacuate

the place of the local. It does not matter if this is done in an empirical idiom, for the empirical can often be a result of the universal, just as the particular follows from the general. Such thought fundamentally tends to sever the relationship between thought and modes of human belonging. The other European heritage is the hermeneutic tradition that tends to reinstitute within thought itself this relationship between thought and dwelling. My attempt in this book has been to write some very particular ways of being-in-the-world—I call them Bengali only in a provisional manner—into some of the universal, abstract, and European categories of capitalist/political modernity. For me, provincializing Europe has been a question of how we create conjoined and disjunctive genealogies for European categories of political modernity as we contemplate the necessarily fragmentary histories of human belonging that never constitute a one or a whole.

As I hope is obvious from what has been said, provincializing Europe cannot ever be a project of shunning European thought. For at the end of European imperialism, European thought is a gift to us all. We can talk of provincializing it only in an anticolonial spirit of gratitude.⁴³

Epilogue

Reason and the Critique of Historicism

1. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 329–349.

2. See, for instance, Barun De, “The Colonial Context of the Bengal Renaissance,” in C. H. Phillips and Mary Doreen Wainwright, eds., *Indian Society and the Beginnings of Modernisation 1830–1850* (London: University of London Press, 1976). My purpose is not to single out Professor De. What he expressed was the “common sense” of Indian Marxism in the 1970s.

3. A. N. Bose, ed., *Modern Age and India* (Calcutta: Left Book Club, 1950).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 144, 148.

6. Dilipkumar Ray, *Smriticharan* (Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing, 1975), pp. 136–141.

7. Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), and J.G.A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

8. Much recent rethinking in anthropology was initiated by James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), and James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986). Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) extends the spirit of self-questioning to radical ends in feminist ethnography. See also Kirin Narayan, "How Native is a Native Anthropologist?" in *American Anthropologist* 95 (1993), pp. 671–686.

9. These basic terms of *Being and Time* have been explained in Chapter 2.

10. See Chapter 2.

11. Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), pp. xix–xx. Emphasis added.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

13. B. Malinowski, "Introduction," *ibid.*, pp. xii–xiii

14. For Kenyatta's expression, *ibid.*, p. 223.

15. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 112–113.

16. D. D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline* (Delhi: Vikas, 1975), p. 48. I can only notice here how Kosambi's texts constantly bring together the "archaic" and "women."

17. See Chapter 3.

18. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilisation*, pp. 47, 48. I have discussed Kosambi's method in more detail in a Bengali essay: "Bharatbarshe adunikatar itihash o shomoy kalpana," *Aitihashik* 6, no. 2 (September 1997), pp. 121–128.

19. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992; first pub. 1954) is still a classic on the subject.

20. Paul de Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity," cited in Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 331.

21. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1978), pp. 146–149.

22. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution*, p. 235.

23. "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), p. 398.

24. M. K. Gandhi, "A Vindication of Caste" (1936), reprinted in B. R. Ambedkar, *The Annihilation of Caste* (Jalandhar: Bheem Patrika Publications, n.d.), p. 137. Emphasis added.

25. B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste" (1936), *ibid.*, pp. 92, 129, 131. For a recent study that skilfully brings out the many complexities—but also the historicism and decisionism—of Ambedkar's political and religious thought, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), chapter 7.

26. Gandhi, "A Vindication," p. 136.

27. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste," pp. 131–132.

28. Ashis Nandy, "History's Forgotten Doubles," *History and Theory* 34 (May 1995), p. 61.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 66. Emphasis added.

30. Ashis Nandy, "From Outside the Imperium," in *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopia: Essays in the Politics of Awareness*, pp. 147–148.

31. Ambedkar, "Caste in India," in *Annihilation of Caste*, pp. 20–21. Emphasis added.

32. The target of my criticism is my essay, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?" *Representations* 37 (Winter 1992) reproduced here as Chapter 1.

33. See Chapter 1 above.

34. This entire discussion is indebted to Heidegger's thoughts on the relationship between the structure of the "not yet" and the nature of Being in the chapter on "Dasein's Possibility of Being-a-Whole and Being-Towards-Death" in Division 2 of *Being and Time*. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), pp. 276–289. Joan Stambaugh's recent translation of *Being and Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 225, replaces the expression "lack of totality" in the Macquarrie and Robinson edition with "constant fragmentariness." I should make it clear, though, that what I have borrowed (and tried to learn) from Heidegger here is a way of thought. My analysis remains at the level of what Heidegger called "historiological."

35. The two relevant chapters are chapters 4 and 5 of Division 2 of *Being and Time*.

36. Nandy, "History's Forgotten Doubles," p. 66.

37. In developing these ideas on futurity I am indebted to Michael Gelven, *A Commentary on Heidegger's "Being and Time"* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), chapters 8 and 9; and E. F. Kaelin, *Heidegger's Being and Time: A Reading for Readers* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1989), chapters 10 and 11.

38. Arunkumar Sarkar, *Tirisher kobita abong parabarti* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1981), p. 2

39. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994). See also Freud on "The Uncanny" (1919) in Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature*, translated under the general editorship of James Strachey, edited by Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), pp. 339–376.

40. Henry Lefebvre, "Notes Written One Sunday in the French Countryside," in his *Critique of Everyday Life*, translated by John Moore (London: Verso, 1991), pp. xxiii, 213–214.

41. A. K. Ramanujan, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay," in McKim Marriott, ed., *India through Hindu Categories* (Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990), pp. 42–43. But see also Fred Dallmayr's critical appreciation of this essay: "Western Thought and Indian Thought: Comments on Ramanujan," *Philosophy East and West* 44, no. 3 (July 1994), pp. 527–542.

42. See John F. Burns, "Science Can't Eclipse a Magic Moment for Millions," *New York Times*, 25 October 1995.

43. As one Indian philosopher wrote: "there is no other way open, to us in the East, but to go along with this Europeanization and to go *through* it. Only through this voyage into the foreign and the strange can we win back our own self-hood; here as elsewhere, the way to what is closest to us is the longest way back." J. L. Mehta, *Martin Heidegger: The Way and the Vision* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1976), p. 466. Mehta echoes late Heidegger in a footnote (n101) in saying that the matter of being at home is always a question of homecoming, that is, of travel and journeying. Martin Heidegger, *Holderlin's Hymn "The Ister,"* translated by William McNeill and Julia Davis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 31–42; Fred Dallmayr, *The Other Heidegger* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 75.