

Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts

RECENT STRUGGLES and debates around the rather tentative concept of multiculturalism in Western democracies have often fueled discussions of minority histories. As the writing of history has increasingly become entangled with the so-called “politics and production of identity” after the Second World War, the question has arisen in all democracies of whether to include in the history of the nation histories of previously excluded groups. In the 1960s, this list usually contained names of subaltern social groups and classes, such as, former slaves, working classes, convicts, and women. This mode of writing history came to be known in the seventies as history from below. Under pressure from growing demands for democratizing further the discipline of history, this list was expanded in the seventies and eighties to include the so-called ethnic groups, the indigenous peoples, children and the old, and gays, lesbians, and other minorities. The expression “minority histories” has come to refer to all those pasts on whose behalf democratically minded historians have fought the exclusions and omissions of mainstream narratives of the nation. Official or officially blessed accounts of the nation’s past have been challenged in many countries by the champions of minority histories. Postmodern critiques of “grand narratives” have been used to question single narratives of the nation. Minority histories, one may say, in part express the struggle for inclusion and representation that are characteristic of liberal and representative democracies.

Minority histories as such do not have to raise any fundamental questions about the discipline of history. Practicing academic historians are often more concerned with the distinction between good and bad histories than with the question of who might own a particular piece of the past. Bad histories, it is assumed sometimes, give rise to bad politics. As Eric Hobsbawm says in a recent article, “bad history is not harmless history. It is dangerous.”¹ “Good histories,” on the other hand, are supposed to enrich the subject matter of history and make it more representative of society as a whole. Begun in an oppositional mode, “minority histories” can indeed end up as additional instances of “good history.” The transfor-

mation of once-oppositional, minority histories into “good histories” illustrate how the mechanism of incorporation works in the discipline of history.

MINORITY HISTORIES: ASSIMILATION AND RESISTANCE

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

Consider for a moment the results of incorporating into the discourse of history the pasts of major groups such as the working classes and women. History has not been the same since Thompson and Hobsbawm took up their pens to make the working classes look like major actors in society. Feminist interventions of the last two decades have also had an unquestionable impact on contemporary historical imagination. Does the incorporation of these radical moves into the mainstream of the discipline change the nature of historical discourse? Of course it does. But the answer to the question, Did such incorporation call the discipline into any kind of crisis? is more complicated. In mastering the problems of telling the stories of groups hitherto overlooked—particularly under circum-

stances in which the usual archives do not exist—the discipline of history renews and maintains itself. This inclusion appeals to the sense of democracy that impels the discipline ever outward from its core.

The point that historical narratives require a certain minimum investment in rationality has recently been made in the book *Telling the Truth about History*.² The question of the relationship between postmodernism, minority histories, and postwar democracies is at the heart of this book authored jointly by three leading feminist historians of the United States. To the extent that the authors see in postmodernism the possibility of multiple narratives and multiple ways of crafting these narratives, they welcome its influence. However, the book registers a strong degree of discomfiture when the authors encounter arguments that in effect use the idea of multiplicity of narratives to question any idea of truth or facts. If minority histories go to the extent of questioning the very idea of fact or evidence, then, the authors ask, how would one find ways of adjudicating between competing claims in public life? Would not the absence of a certain minimum agreement about what constitutes fact and evidence seriously fragment the body politic in the United States of America, and would not that in turn impair the capacity of the nation to function as a whole? Hence the authors recommend a pragmatic idea of “workable truths,” which would be based on a shared, rational understanding of historical facts and evidence. For a nation to function effectively even while eschewing any claims to a superior, overarching grand narrative, these truths must be maintained in order for institutions and groups to be able to adjudicate between conflicting stories and interpretations.

Historians, regardless of their ideological moorings, display a remarkable consensus when it comes to defending history’s methodological ties to a certain understanding of rationality. Georg Iggers’s recent textbook on twentieth-century historiography emphasizes this connection between facticity and rationality in determining what may or may not constitute historical evidence: “Peter Novick has in my opinion rightly maintained that objectivity is unattainable in history; the historian can hope for nothing more than plausibility. But plausibility obviously rests not on the arbitrary invention of an historical account but involves *rational* strategies of determining what in fact is plausible.”³ Hobsbawm echoes sentiments not dissimilar to those expressed by others in the profession: “The fashion for what (at least in Anglo-Saxon academic discourse) is known by the vague term ‘postmodernism’ has fortunately not gained as much ground among historians as among literary and cultural theorists and social anthropologists, even in the USA. . . . [I]t [‘postmodernism’] throws doubt

on the distinction between fact and fiction, objective reality and conceptual discourse. It is profoundly relativist.”⁴

What these historians oppose in postmodernism is the latter’s failure, at least in their eyes, to meet the condition of rationality for incorporating narratives into the discipline of history. *Telling the Truth about History* thus demonstrates the continuing relevance of the two conditions that sustain history’s connection to public life: democracy requires hitherto neglected groups to tell their histories, and these different histories come together in accepting shared rational and evidentiary rules. Successfully incorporated “minority histories” may then be likened to yesterday’s revolutionaries who become today’s gentlemen. Their success helps routinize innovation.

FROM MINORITY HISTORIES TO SUBALTERN PASTS

But this is not the only fate possible. The debate about minority histories allows for alternative understandings of the expression “minority” itself. Minority and majority are, as we know, not natural entities; they are constructions. The popular meanings of the words “majority” and “minority” are statistical. But the semantic fields of the words contain another idea: of being a “minor” or a “major” figure in a given context. For example, the Europeans, numerically speaking, are a minority in the total pool of humanity today and have been so for a long while; yet their colonialism in the nineteenth century was based on certain ideas about major and minor. For example, they often assumed that their histories contained the majority instances of norms that every other human society should aspire to; compared to them, others were still the “minors” for whom they, the “adults” of the world, had to take charge, and so on. So numerical advantage by itself is no guarantor of a major/majority status. Sometimes, you can be a larger group than the dominant one, but your history would still qualify as “minor/minority history.”

The problem of minority histories thus leads us to the question of what may be called the “minority” of some particular pasts. Some constructions and experiences of the past stay “minor” in the sense that their very incorporation into historical narratives converts them into pasts “of lesser importance” vis-à-vis dominant understandings of what constitutes fact and evidence (and hence vis-à-vis the underlying principle of rationality) in the practices of professional history. Such “minor” pasts are those expe-

riences of the past that always have to be assigned to an “inferior” or “marginal” position as they are translated into the academic historian’s language. These are pasts that are treated, to use an expression of Kant’s, as instances of human “immaturity,” pasts that do not prepare us for either democracy or citizenly practices because they are not based on the deployment of reason in public life.⁵

My use of the word “minor” then does not quite reproduce the nuances of the way the word has been used in literary theory following Deleuze and Guattari’s interpretation of Kafka, but there is some similarity between the two uses. Just as the “minor” in literature implies “a critique of narratives of identity” and refuses “to represent the attainment of autonomous subjectivity that is the ultimate aim of the major narrative,” the “minor” in my use similarly functions to cast doubt on the “major.”⁶ For me, it describes relationships to the past that the “rationality” of the historian’s methods necessarily makes “minor” or “inferior,” as something “nonrational” in the course of, and as a result of, its own operation. And yet these relations return, I argue, as an implicit element of the conditions that make it possible for us to historicize. To anticipate my conclusion, I will try to show how the capacity (of the modern person) to historicize actually depends on his or her ability to participate in nonmodern relationships to the past that are made subordinate in the moment of historicization. History writing assumes plural ways of being in the world.

Let me call these subordinated relations to the past “subaltern” pasts. They are marginalized not because of any conscious intentions but because they represent moments or points at which the archive that the historian mines develops a degree of intractability with respect to the aims of professional history. In other words, these are pasts that resist historicization, just as there may be moments in ethnographic research that resist the doing of ethnography.⁷ Subaltern pasts, in my sense of the term, do not belong exclusively to socially subordinate or subaltern groups, nor to minority identities alone. Elite and dominant groups can also have subaltern pasts to the extent that they participate in life-worlds subordinated by the “major” narratives of the dominant institutions. I illustrate my proposition with a particular instance of subaltern pasts, which comes from an essay by the founder of the Subaltern Studies group, Ranajit Guha. Since Guha and the group have been my teachers in many ways, I offer my remarks not in a hostile spirit of criticism but in a spirit of self-examination, for my aim is to understand what historicizing the past does and does not do. With that caveat, let me proceed.

SUBALTERN PASTS: AN EXAMPLE

As is well known, an explicit aim of *Subaltern Studies* was to write the subaltern classes into the history of nationalism and the nation, and to combat all elitist biases in the writing of history. To make the subaltern the sovereign subject of history, to listen to their voices, to take their experiences and thought (and not just their material circumstances) seriously—these were goals we had deliberately and publicly set ourselves. These original intellectual ambitions and the desire to enact them were political in that they were connected to modern understandings of democratic public life. They did not necessarily come from the lives of the subaltern classes themselves, though one of our objectives, as in the British tradition of history from below, was to ground the struggle for democracy in India in the facts of subaltern history. Looking back, however, I see the problem of subaltern pasts dogging the enterprise of *Subaltern Studies* from the very outset. Indeed, it is arguable that what differentiates the *Subaltern Studies* project from the older tradition of history from below is the self-critical awareness of this problem in the writings of the historians associated with this group.

Ranjit Guha's celebrated and brilliant essay, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," was published in an early volume of *Subaltern Studies* and is now justly considered a classic of the genre. A certain paradox that results precisely from the historian's attempt to bring the histories of the subaltern classes into the mainstream of the discourse of history, it seems to me, haunts the exercise Guha undertakes in this essay. A principal aim of Guha's essay was to use the 1855 rebellion of the Santals to demonstrate a cardinal principle of subaltern history: making the insurgent's consciousness the mainstay of a narrative about rebellion. (The Santals were a tribal group in Bengal and Bihar who rebelled against both the British and nonlocal Indians in 1855.) As Guha put it in words that capture the spirit of early *Subaltern Studies*: "Yet this consciousness [the consciousness of the rebellious peasant] seems to have received little notice in the literature on the subject. Historiography has been content to deal with the peasant rebel merely as an empirical person or a member of a class, but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion. . . . [I]nsurgency is regarded as *external* to the peasant's consciousness and Cause is made to stand in as a phantom surrogate for Reason, the logic of that consciousness."⁸

The critical phrase here is “the logic of that consciousness,” which marks the analytical distance Guha, the historian, has to take from the object of his research, which is this consciousness itself. For in pursuing the history of the Santal rebellion of 1855, Guha unsurprisingly came across a phenomenon common in the lives of the peasants: the agency of supernatural beings. Santal leaders explained the rebellion in supernatural terms, as an act carried out at the behest of the Santal god Thakur. Guha draws our attention to the evidence and underscores how important this understanding was to the rebels themselves. The leaders of the rebellion, Sidhu and Kanu, said that Thakur had assured them that British bullets would not harm the devotee-rebels. Guha takes care to avoid any instrumental or elitist reading of these statements. He writes: “These were not public pronouncements meant to impress their followers. . . . [T]hese were words of captives facing execution. Addressed to hostile interrogators in military encampments they could have little use as propaganda. Uttered by men of a tribe which, according to all accounts had not yet learnt to lie, these represented the truth and nothing but the truth for their speakers.”⁹

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

Guha’s strategy for negotiating this dilemma unfolds in the following manner. His first move, against practices common in secular or Marxist historiography, is to resist analyses that see religion simply as a displaced manifestation of human relationships that are in themselves secular and worldly (class, power, economy, and so on). Guha was conscious that his was not a simple exercise in demystification:

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

But in spite of Guha's desire to listen to the rebel voice seriously, his analysis cannot offer the Thakur the same place of agency in the story of the rebellion that the Santals' statements had given him. A narrative strategy that is rationally defensible in the modern understanding of what constitutes public life—and the historians speak in the public sphere—cannot be based on a relationship that allows the divine or the supernatural a direct hand in the affairs of the world. The Santal leaders' own understanding of the rebellion does not directly serve the historical cause of democracy or citizenship or socialism. It needs to be reinterpreted. Historians will grant the supernatural a place in somebody's belief system or ritual practices, but to ascribe to it any real agency in historical events will be go against the rules of evidence that gives historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past.

The Protestant theologian-hermeneutist Rudolf Bultmann has written illuminatingly on this problem. "The historical method," says Bultmann, "includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect." By this, Bultmann does not reduce the historical sciences to a mechanical understanding of the world. He qualifies his statement by adding:

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

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

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

Fundamentally, then, the Santal's statement that God was the main instigator of the rebellion has to be anthropologized (that is, converted into somebody's belief or made into an object of anthropological analysis) before it finds a place in the historian's narrative. Guha's position with respect to the Santal's own understanding of the event becomes a combination of the anthropologist's politeness—"I respect your beliefs but they are not mine"—and a Marxist (or modern) tendency to see "religion" in modern public life as a form of alienated or displaced consciousness. "[I]n sum," he writes, "it is not possible to speak of insurgency in this case except as a religious consciousness," and yet hastens to add: "except that is, as a massive demonstration of self-estrangement (to borrow Marx's term for the very essence of religiosity) which made the rebel look upon their project as predicated on a will other than their own."¹²

Here is a case of what I have called subaltern pasts, pasts that cannot ever enter academic history as belonging to the historian's own position. These days one can devise strategies of multivocal histories in which we hear subaltern voices more clearly than we did in the early phase of *Subaltern Studies*. One may even refrain from assimilating these different voices to any one voice and deliberately leave loose ends in one's narrative (as

does Shahid Amin in his *Events, Memory, Metaphor*.¹³ But the point is that the historian, as historian and unlike the Santal, cannot invoke the supernatural in explaining/describing an event.

THE POLITICS OF SUBALTERN PASTS

The act of championing minority histories has resulted in discoveries of subaltern pasts, constructions of historicity that help us see the limits to modes of viewing enshrined in the practices of the discipline of history. Why? Because the discipline of history—as has been argued by many (from Greg Dening to David Cohen in recent times)—is only one among ways of remembering the past.¹⁴ In Guha's essay, the resistance that the "historical evidence" offers to the historian's reading of the past—a Santal god, Thakur, stands between the democratic-Marxist historian and the Santals in the matter of deciding who is the subject of history—produces minor or subaltern pasts in the very process of weaving modern historical narratives. Subaltern pasts are like stubborn knots that stand out and break up the otherwise evenly woven surface of the fabric. When we do minority histories within the democratic project of including all groups and peoples within mainstream history, we both hear and anthropologize the Santal at the same time. We cannot write history from within what we regard as their beliefs. We thus produce "good," not subversive, histories, which conform to the protocols of the discipline.

An appreciation of this problem has led to a series of attempts to craft histories differently, to allow for a certain measure of equality between historians' histories and other constructions of the past. Some scholars now *perform* the limits of history in various ways: by fictionalizing the past, experimenting to see how films and history might intersect in the new discipline of cultural studies, studying memory rather than just history, playing around with forms of writing, and other similar means.¹⁵ The kind of disciplinary consensus around the historian's methods that was once—say, in the sixties—represented (in Anglo-American universities at least) by "theory" or "methods" courses that routinely dished out Collingwood or Carr or Bloch as staple for historians has now begun to be questioned, at least by those involved in writing histories of marginalized groups or non-Western peoples. This does not necessarily mean methodological anarchy (though some feel insecure enough to fear this), or that Collingwood et al. have become irrelevant, but it does mean that E. H.

Carr's question "What is History?" needs to be asked again for our own times. The pressure of pluralism inherent in the languages and moves of minority histories has resulted in methodological and epistemological questioning of what the very business of writing history is all about.

Only the future will tell how these questions will resolve themselves, but one thing is clear: the question of including minorities in the history of the nation has turned out to be a much more complex problem than a simple operation of applying some already settled methods to a new set of archives and adding the results to the existing collective wisdom of historiography. The additive, "building-block" approach to knowledge has broken down. What has become an open question is: Are there experiences of the past that cannot be captured by the methods of the discipline, or which at least show the limits of the discipline? Fears that such questioning will lead to an outbreak of irrationalism, that some kind of post-modern madness will spread through Historyland, seem extreme, for the discipline is still securely tied to the positivist impulses of modern bureaucracies, the judiciary, and to the instruments of governmentality. Hobsbawm, for instance, provides some unwitting evidence of history's close ties to law and other instruments of government. He writes: "the procedures of the law court, which insist on the supremacy of evidence as much as historical researchers, and often in much the same manner, demonstrate that difference between historical fact and falsehood is not ideological. . . . When an innocent person is tried for murder, and wishes to prove his or [her] innocence, what is required is the techniques not of the 'post-modern' theorist, but of the old-fashioned historian."¹⁶ This is why Hobsbawm would argue that minority histories must also conform to the protocols of "good history," for history speaks to forms of representative democracy and social justice that liberalism or Marxism—in their significantly different ways—have already made familiar.

But minority histories can do more than that. The task of producing "minority" histories has, under the pressure precisely of a deepening demand for democracy, become a double task. I may put it thus: "good" minority history is about expanding the scope of social justice and representative democracy, but the talk about the "limits of history," on the other hand, is about struggling, or even groping, for nonstatist forms of democracy that we cannot not yet either understand or envisage completely. This is so because in the mode of being attentive to the "minority" of subaltern pasts, we stay with heterogeneities without seeking to reduce them to any overarching principle that speaks for an already given whole.

There is no third voice that can assimilate the two different voices of Guha and the Santal leader; we have to stay with both, and with the gap between them that signals an irreducible plurality in our own experiences of historicity.

PASTS DEAD AND ALIVE

Let me explore a bit more the question of heterogeneity as I see it. We can—and we do usually in writing history—treat the Santal of the nineteenth century to doses of historicism and anthropology. We can, in other words, treat him as a signifier of other times and societies. This gesture maintains a subject-object relationship between the historian and the evidence. In this gesture, the past remains genuinely dead; the historian brings it “alive” by telling the story.¹⁷ But the Santal with his statement “I did as my god told me to do” also faces us as a way of being in this world, and we could ask ourselves: Is that way of being a possibility for our own lives and for what we define as our present? Does the Santal help us to understand a principle by which we also live in certain instances? This question does not historicize or anthropologize the Santal, for the illustrative power of the Santal as an example of a present possibility does not depend on his otherness. Here the Santal stands as our contemporary, and the subject-object relationship that normally defines the historian’s relationship to his or her archives is dissolved in this gesture. This gesture is akin to the one Kierkegaard developed in critiquing explanations that looked on the Biblical story of Abraham’s sacrifice of his son Isaac either as deserving an historical or psychological explanation or as a metaphor or allegory, but never as a possibility for life open today to one who had faith. “[W]hy bother to remember a past,” asked Kierkegaard, “that cannot be made into a present?”¹⁸

To stay with the heterogeneity of the moment when the historian meets with the peasant is, then, to stay with the difference between these two gestures. One is that of historicizing the Santal in the interest of a history of social justice and democracy; and the other, that of refusing to historicize and of seeing the Santal as a figure illuminating a life possibility for the present. Taken together, the two gestures put us in touch with the plural ways of being that make up our own present. The archives thus help bring to view the disjointed nature of any particular “now” one may inhabit; that is the function of subaltern pasts.

A plurality of one's own being is a basic assumption in any hermeneutic of understanding that which seems different. Wilhelm von Humboldt put the point well in his 1821 address "On the Task of the Historian" delivered to the Berlin Academy of Sciences: "Where two beings are separated by a total gap, no bridge of understanding extends from one to the other; in order to understand one another, they must have in another sense, already understood each other."¹⁹ We are not the same as the nineteenth-century Santal, and that the Santal is not completely understood in the few statements quoted here. Empirical and historical Santals would also have had other relationships to modernity and capitalism that I have not considered. One could easily assume that the Santal today would be very different from what they were in the nineteenth century, that they would inhabit a very different set of social circumstances. They might even produce professional historians; no one would deny these historical changes. But the nineteenth-century Santal—and indeed, if my argument is right, humans from any other period and region—are always in some sense our contemporaries: that would have to be the condition under which we can even begin to treat them as intelligible to us. Thus the writing of history must implicitly assume a plurality of times existing together, a disjuncture of the present with itself. Making visible this disjuncture is what subaltern pasts allow us to do.

An argument such as this is actually at the heart of modern historiography. One could argue, for instance, that the writing of medieval history for Europe depends on this assumed contemporaneity of the medieval, or what is the same thing, the noncontemporaneity of the present with itself. The medieval in Europe is often strongly associated with the supernatural and the magical. But what makes the historicizing of it possible is the fact that its basic characteristics are not completely foreign to us as moderns (which is not to deny the historical changes that separate the two). Historians of medieval Europe do not always consciously or explicitly make this point, but it is not difficult to see this operating as an assumption in their method. In the writings of Aron Gurevich, for example, the modern makes its pact with the medieval through the use of anthropology—that is, in the use of contemporary anthropological evidence from outside of Europe to make sense of the past of Europe. The strict temporal separation of the medieval from the modern is here belied by global contemporaneity. Peter Burke comments on this intellectual traffic between medieval Europe and contemporary anthropological evidence in introducing Gurevich's work. Gurevich, writes Burke, "could already have been described in the 1960s as a historical anthropologist, and he did indeed draw inspi-

ration from anthropology, most obviously from the economic anthropology of Bronislaw Malinowski and Marcel Mauss, who had begun his famous essay on the gift with a quotation from a medieval Scandinavian poem, the *Edda*.²⁰

Similar double moves—both of historicizing the medieval and of seeing it as contemporary with the present—can be seen at work in the following lines from Jacques Le Goff. Le Goff is seeking to explain here an aspect of the European medieval sensibility: “People today, even those who consult seers and fortune-tellers, call spirits to floating tables, or participate in black masses, recognize a frontier between the visible and the invisible, the natural and the supernatural. This was not true of medieval man. Not only was the visible for him merely the trace of the invisible; the supernatural overflowed into daily life at every turn.”²¹ This is a complex passage. On the surface, it is about what separates the medieval from the modern. Yet this difference is what makes the medieval an ever-present possibility that haunts the practices of the modern—if only we, the moderns, could forget the “frontier” between the visible and the invisible in Le Goff’s description, we would be on the other side of that frontier. The people who consult seers today are modern in spite of themselves, for they engage in “medieval” practices but are not able to overcome the habits of the modern. Yet the opening expression “even today” contains a reference to the sense of surprise one feels at their anachronism, as if the very existence of these practices today opens up a hiatus in the continuity of the present by inserting into it something that is medieval-like and yet not quite so. Le Goff rescues the present by saying that even in the practice of these people, something irreducibly modern lingers—their distinction between the visible and the invisible. But it lingers only as a border, as something that defines the difference between the medieval and the modern. And since difference is always the name of a relationship, for it separates just as much as it connects (as, indeed, does a border), one could argue that alongside the present or the modern the medieval must linger as well, if only as that which exists as the limit or the border to the practices and discourses that define the modern.

Subaltern pasts are signposts of this border. With them we reach the limits of the discourse of history. The reason for this, as I have said, is that subaltern pasts do not give the historian any principle of narration that can be rationally defended in modern public life. Going a step further, one can see that this requirement for a rational principle, in turn, marks the deep connections that exist between modern constructions of public life and projects of social justice. It is not surprising that the Marxist

scholar Fredric Jameson should begin his book *The Political Unconscious* with the injunction: “Always historicize!” Jameson describes “this slogan” as “the one absolute and we may even say ‘transhistorical’ imperative of all dialectical thought.”²² If my point is right, then historicizing is not the problematic part of the injunction, the troubling term is “always.” For the assumption of a continuous, homogeneous, infinitely stretched out time that makes possible the imagination of an “always” is put to question by subaltern pasts that makes the present, as Derrida says, “out of joint.”²³

ON TIME-KNOTS AND THE WRITING OF HISTORY

One historicizes only insofar as one belongs to a mode of being in the world that is aligned with the principle of “disenchantment of the universe,” which underlies knowledge in the social sciences (and I distinguish knowledge from practice).²⁴ But “disenchantment” is not the only principle by which we world the earth. The supernatural can inhabit the world in these other modes of worlding, and not always as a problem or result of conscious belief or ideas. The point is made in an anecdote about the poet W. B. Yeats, whose interest in fairies and other nonhuman beings of Irish folk tales is well known. I tell the story as it has been told to me by my friend David Lloyd:

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

As old Mrs Connolly knew, and as we social scientists often forget, gods and spirits are not dependent on human beliefs for their own existence; what brings them to presence are our practices.²⁶ They are parts of

the different ways of being through which we make the present manifold; it is precisely the disjunctures in the present that allow us to be with them. These other ways of being are not without questions of power or justice, but these questions are raised—to the extent that modern public institutions allow them space, for they do cut across one another—on terms other than those of the political-modern.

However—and I want to conclude by pointing this out—the relation between what I have called subaltern pasts and the practice of historicizing is not one of mutual exclusion. It is because we already have experience of that which makes the present noncontemporaneous with itself that we can actually historicize. Thus what allows historians to historicize the medieval or the ancient is the very fact these worlds are never completely lost. We inhabit their fragments even when we classify ourselves as modern and secular. It is because we live in time-knots that we can undertake the exercise of straightening out, as it were, some part of the knot (which is how we might think of chronology).²⁷

Time, as the expression goes in my language, situates us within the structure of a *granthi*; hence the Bengali word *shomoy-granthi*, *shomoy* meaning “time” and *granthi* referring to joints of various kinds, from the complex formation of knuckles on our fingers to the joints on a bamboo-stick. That is why one may have two relationships with the Santal. First, we can situate ourselves as a modern subject for whom the Santal’s life-world is an object of historical study and explanation. But we can also look on the Santal as someone illuminating possibilities for our own life-worlds. If my argument is right, then the second relationship is prior to the first one. It is what makes the first relationship possible.

Subaltern pasts thus act as a supplement to the historian’s pasts. They are supplementary in a Derridean sense—they enable history, the discipline, to be what it is and yet at the same time help to show what its limits are. In calling attention to the limits of historicizing, they help us distance ourselves from the imperious instincts of the discipline—the idea that *everything* can be historicized or that one should *always* historicize. Subaltern pasts return us to a sense of the limited good that modern historical consciousness is. Gadamer once put the point well in the course of discussing Heidegger’s philosophy. He said: “The experience of history, which we ourselves have, is . . . covered only to a small degree by that which we would name *historical consciousness*.”²⁸ Subaltern pasts remind us that a relation of contemporaneity between the nonmodern and the modern, a shared and constant “now,” which expresses itself on the historical plane but the character of which is ontological, is what allows

historical time to unfold. This ontological “now” precedes the historical gap that the historian’s methods both assume and posit between the “there-and-then” and the “here-and-now.” Thus what underlies our capacity to historicize is our capacity not to. What gives us a point of entry into the times of gods and spirits—times that are seemingly very different from the empty, secular, and homogeneous time of history—is that they are never completely alien; we inhabit them to begin with.

The historian’s hermeneutic, as Humboldt suggested in 1821, proceeds from an unstated and assumed premise of identification that is later disavowed in the subject-object relationship. What I have called subaltern pasts may be thought of as intimations we receive—while engaged in the specific activity of historicizing—of a shared, unhistoricizable, and ontological now. This now is, I have tried to suggest, what fundamentally rends the seriality of historical time and makes any particular moment of the historical present out of joint with itself.