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## Macaulay's bastard children

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Interview by José Neves

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## Macaulay's bastard children

A conversation with Sanjay Seth on the Code of History,  
Post-colonialism and Marxism.

Interview by José Neves

Once he completed his education in Sydney and Canberra, Professor Sanjay Seth held positions at Sydney University and La Trobe University, where he became one of the founding co-editors of the Journal *Postcolonial Studies*. He also held a Fellowship at Tokyo University. Then he moved to Goldsmiths College, University of London, in 2007, to take up the Chair in Politics and the directorship of the Center for Postcolonial Studies. He has published in the fields of modern Indian history, political and social theory, postcolonial theory and international relations. As he explains in the following pages, he is particularly interested in how modern European ideologies, and modern Western knowledge more generally, 'travelled' to the non-Western world. His work is trying to grasp what effects this had both on the non-Western world, and on modern Western knowledge (see his *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007). The following conversation was held when Professor Sanjay Seth was visiting the New University of Lisbon. José Neves conducted most of the conversation, trying to range from Seth's first works on politics (*Marxist Theory and Nationalist Politics: The Case of Colonial India*, New Delhi, Sage, 1995) to his more recent interventions on the epistemological, cultural and political aspects of the writing of history. In the final part of the conversation, students and colleagues who were listening to the interview also addressed questions to Professor Seth.

**José Neves** – I will start with some personal questions... Let me quote parts of the last paragraph of your book *Subject Lessons*: “Western knowledge arrived in India through the coercive agency of colonialism. We were told, most forthrightly by Macaulay, that this knowledge was true and that our own knowledges, like our gods, were false. (...) Nonetheless, that knowledge has now become global. There is no easy point outside it, no escape from it other than by engaging with and through it. (...) But if those who were once ‘subject to pedagogy’ can, long after they are gone, be studied in a fashion that subjects modern western knowledge to critical scrutiny, there is a pleasing irony in the thought that Macaulay’s bastard children will have contributed to the critical appropriation of a knowledge that was once imposed upon them.” We will surely return to this book as our conversation develops, but I would start by asking you to reflect about your childhood as a subject of western knowledge pedagogy...

**Sanjay Seth** –Let me begin firstly by thanking you and my hosts for inviting me and giving me the chance to speak to you all, and for your hospitality. I have to apologize to you for the fact that I do not speak in Portuguese and you are having to make all the effort to follow me in another language.

It has always struck me as odd that many people in India – but this is not uniquely an Indian phenomenon, it’s a much wider story than that – grew up in two worlds: one the world of formal knowledge, where they learnt science, rationality, etc., etc.; but also a world (this was sometimes represented or embodied by women in the family) of modes of being and of affect that were not secular, scientific, and so on. So – and this is not unique in India, and many of you probably have this experience –we inhabited two worlds, which however never really came together. Now, if we follow the logic of what I learnt at school and so on, some of the people around me, whom I cared deeply about, belonged to a world of superstition, or unreason, or irrationality... And yet, this world was all around me, this was not some minor remnant of a time past that had somehow survived into the twentieth century. So,

at some point, much, much later – I mean, obviously as a child I didn't think of any of this – I became interested in how it was that so many of us managed to inhabit these different worlds without ever using one to reflect upon the other; it was if we kept them separated.

But that came much later. In fact, my earlier work – the book you referred to on Marxist theory and nationalist politics – was my PhD. dissertation, which I undertook when I was a member of the Communist Party in Australia and active on the left. And it began as the project of a militant; I was going to come up with really big answers to big questions – I was going to find the solution to what the Indian communist movement should have done and what it could now do. The arrogance of youth! But as it proceeded, it became a very different sort of enterprise. By the end of that project, which later became a book, some of the presumptions that I began with had now actually become problematic for me. And what I argue in that book is that the way Marxism in the colonies made itself relevant to countries where capitalist enterprise was not highly developed, where the proletariat was very small in numbers, and where otherwise Marxism really should have been irrelevant – was through the development of an analysis of imperialism. Lenin argued that there is a global capitalist system, but it is not one that requires that all the elements of that system themselves be highly developed or capitalist. It was a brilliant analysis, and I think in many important ways, right. But one of its consequences politically was that what the Communist movement in the colonies, and certainly in India, ended up doing, was assuming that nationalism was progressive in a twofold sense: it was politically progressive because it would be a blow against imperialism, and therefore would weaken capitalism globally; and it was historically progressive because nationalism represented bourgeois democracy, which is historically more advanced than feudalism. And the assumption here was that these two different senses of 'progressive' were isomorphic – they mapped onto each other. So, the anticolonial nationalist movement was progressive because it was anti-imperialist, and it was progressive because it was bound to be carried by historically progressive social forces. By the end of that book,

I saw that this assumption that the two mapped on to each other was wrong, or at least, needed to be fundamentally rethought.

Soon after I finished that book, I also began to become more critical of each element of that argument, not just the assumption that they mapped onto each other, and this (with the benefit of hindsight) was the beginning of my move from Marxism to post-colonialism<sup>1</sup> (which is not a term in which I have a great investment - it just represents a space from which to think), albeit a post-colonialism that remains indebted to Marx and conceives itself as part of the Left. More and more I became interested in critiques of the nation-state and critiques of nationalism in the colonies - not just the common leftist position that bourgeois nationalism is not radical enough in its nationalism, that it compromises with the imperialists, etc. - but critiques of the nation-state itself, and not just the insufficient realization of it. And the historicist narrative, which thought the bourgeois modern was better than the so-called feudal, and therefore that the bourgeoisie and the proletariat were historically progressive classes, and the peasantry, even if it could be politically mobilized, was somehow the repository of something that was already part of the historical past, and destined to be consigned to the dustbin of history... This too now seemed to me extremely problematic. These doubts and questions led me to reflect upon the categories and the knowledge through which we encounter and understand the world, and much later (there's a long gap between those two books) become central to my *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India*, in which I address the issue of our forms of knowledge and their universality.

There's another way of describing my intellectual trajectory, which is retrospective: that is, it does not describe what I was thinking as these changes took place. But a lot of our recounting of our lives is retrospective, and all history writing is retrospective; it's from where

<sup>1</sup> On this 'journey' see Sanjay Seth, "Modernity Without Prometheus: On Re-reading Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*," *Third World Quarterly* 33:7 (July 2012): 1377-86; published in Spanish translation as "Modernidad sin Prometeo," in *De Ruinas y Horizontes: La Modernidad y sus Paradojas*, ed. Jorge E. Brenna B. and Francisco Carballo. (Cidade do México: Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana, 2014), 105-21.

you are now that you look backwards and construct a coherent narrative in which things link up in some sort of intelligible fashion. So the other way I could tell the story of my intellectual trajectory, and sometimes tell it to myself of my own work, is that what I was doing all along, without knowing it, was looking at how knowledges born in Europe travelled to the non-western world, first in the form of systematic ideologies, like Marxism (first book) and then, in a more general and a more ambitious sense, to look at how the whole corpus of modern western knowledge travels to the non-western world (in this case India) and what happened to it, as it travelled, what happened to the places that it travelled to, what the consequences of all this were.

### **From the critique of eurocentrism to the limits of history**

**JN** – Part of your project, in a sense, participates in a general movement of critique of Eurocentric perspectives, namely historiographical Eurocentric accounts of the non-western world, or of the history of Europe itself. And, of course, postcolonial theory or postcolonial theories – if we say it in the plural – actively participate in this critique. But, as you were mentioning, the problems that you were – at a certain point at least – facing... It was not just the problem that Eurocentrism poses to knowledge, but whether knowledge is in itself condemned to be somehow ethnocentric, or parochial, or provincial, as your colleague Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it. This makes a clear difference regarding several other contributions to the critique of Eurocentrism, some of which want to achieve a “better science”, as you put in your article “Historical Sociology and Postcolonial Theory: Two Strategies for Challenging Eurocentrism”.<sup>2</sup> How do you look at these different types of critique of Eurocentrism?

**SS** – The article you refer to is deliberately very short, and partly because it's short, it's very stylized and exaggerated; you know... in two

<sup>2</sup> *International Political Sociology*, 3:3 (September 2009): 334-38. Translated into Portuguese as “Sociologia Histórica e Teoria Pós-Colonial: duas estratégias para desafiar o eurocentrismo,” *Expedições: Teoria da História e Historiografia* 7:1 (2016): 263-70.

thousand words you make stark distinctions, and in this case I make a stark distinction between a historical sociological way of being anti-Eurocentric and a theoretical-philosophical way of being anti-Eurocentric, and I declare my preference for the latter. Nonetheless I am sympathetic to historical sociology. It seems to me an important enterprise to contest the conventional narrative about the making of the modern world, according to which capitalism and modernity first developed in western Europe and then spread outward. And a lot of recent work, some of which I admire, has sought to contest that by showing that the discovery of the Americas was absolutely essential to the emergence of capitalism and modernity, and that Africa and Asia were not simply the recipients of a modernity that came with gunboats and goods and colonialism, but were actually involved in its production, albeit unwittingly and under highly unequal, coercive and exploitative relations. It seems to me that work of this sort in historical sociology, which of course varies in quality, is extremely important.

However, to the degree that such work is driven by the desire to undermine Eurocentrism, I think it's hostage to empirical fortune, because it's essentially an empirical argument. And, you know, one day I was talking to a colleague and I asked myself: what if someone could definitively show that the Eurocentric account was true? It's never going to happen, because in such complex stories, there will always be endless room for argument. But, in principle, it could happen: there could be an overwhelming empirical case for showing that the conventional story is right. Would we then give up our anti-Eurocentrism? Is it only dependent upon empirical data? It seems to me not, and it seems to me that it is important that we recognize that political and ethical desire is invested in our contestations of Eurocentrism. So, an empirical account might not be the best way of achieving the end that one is seeking to achieve. But a second and more important reason for being critical of anti-Eurocentric historical sociology was the one you alluded to, namely that I became more and more interested in the limits of our knowledge systems, and it seemed to me that anti-Eurocentric historical sociology was trying to correct what it saw as biased or

problematic explanations by producing 'better' explanations. But these better explanations still accept the fundamental categorical grounds of the Social Sciences. A lot of my work, especially the more recent work, for at least the last decade, if not more, has been interested in what the limits of those categories are...

So, in summary, while I think that the distinction I make in the short article is real, it's perfectly possible – for instance as a teacher – to combine the two forms of anti-Eurocentrism. When I teach my undergraduates, I make available to them a historical-sociological literature which contests the conventional account of the development of modernity; at the same time, I try to push them in a sort of theoretical, post-colonial direction.

**JN** – You were mentioning that you need to problematize the categories we use while analysing past realities – that kind of work is a work without which you could not even imagine doing history nowadays. I mean, it's as if there is no distinction between your theoretical reflection on what is the practice of history and the practice of history itself. And you gave an example on your first answer regarding your personal account of your past: the case of religion. How do we, secular intellectuals – if not in our private life, in our public activity – engage with religion as an object of study, and the difficulties it raises? The case of religion could also be made referring to magic, myth or even memories, of course...

**SS** – Can I start with religion? Because the problem with religion is, as you say, how do we deal with the fact that the academy, the social sciences, are scientific, secular, etc and yet very large numbers of people are not... How do we, as historians for instance, write about those whose world is not like that? The question has been very well raised by my friend Dipesh Chakrabarty. But the problem is not simply that our categories are secular and yet the subjects we study are not always so, but that even the category of religion is a problematic one. We assume

that there is something called religion, a genus of which Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc. are the different species. Now, I want to suggest to you, drawing upon the work of Talal Asad, Jonathan Z. Smith, Peter Harrison and many others, that the very category of religion is, in some important ways, actually a Christian category, because the construction of the idea of religion as something which is universal but then particularized rested upon the idea that religion is essentially a matter of belief. On the basis of this understanding of religion you could catalogue Hindus as those who believe this, Buddhists as those who believe that, and so on and so forth. But the idea that religion consists of 'beliefs' is itself a product of the Protestant Reformation and its aftermath, as Peter Harrison has shown. And there are parts of the world, even today, where religion is simply not a matter of belief, and where therefore the category of 'religion' is a deeply problematic one. I'll give an example, one that comes from the horse's mouth. Max Müller, who is often called the founding father of comparative religion, and who was a brilliant Indologist, worked in Oxford. Müller never went to India, because he felt that the India of the nineteenth century would disappoint him bitterly, it would be dirty and dusty and hot; he preferred his India of ancient grandeur and of Sanskrit texts. When the first generation of Indians began to go to Oxford and Cambridge - these were elite Indians who hoped to sit the Indian civil service exams when they went back - Müller was very excited, because he could now actually ask contemporary Indians about their religion. In a revealing footnote to one of his books he describes how he ran after these young men to ask them questions. (In my mind's eye I imagine these poor young men, first subjected to the appalling weather and the appalling food of England, already suffering culture shock, and then, on top of that, confronted by this professor who runs after them to ask them questions!) Müller himself describes how when he asked them "What do you believe?", they would look at him puzzled and say: "We don't understand your question." Because for them Hinduism was not a matter of 'beliefs', in the same way that Japanese people today can go to a Shinto shrine and to a Buddhist temple even on the same day, and

they see no contradiction between these two activities; because these are *practices*, not just 'beliefs' happening in our heads. So, the category of religion is a prime example of one of those modern categories deeply imbedded in our history, so thoroughly naturalized that we all use it - me too! But actually it won't serve its purpose, it's not a universal category.<sup>3</sup> Sorry, there is a second part to your question, which I forgot...

**JN** – We can return to the second part, because you also mentioned a problem with another category, which is the category of belief. In some of your texts, you argue that actually one thing that historical practice entails is that there is something that is a subject that produces knowledge and that gets to know something due to that production – something that is exalted as an object... Differently from this, mythological accounts do not stress this division between what we are speaking about and what is being discoursed, represented, in the sense that there is no clear division between representation and reality. When you state that we are never studying something that is beyond our research agenda, our perspectives, doesn't that come close to the ways myth develops?

**SS** – You are quite right that some of the things I am working on now are in part about this question. I gave religion as an example of a specific category just now. The past and the ways we represent it is another example, at a higher level of abstraction. History-writing mobilizes all these categories: religion, civil society, state, etc. And I think history as a category also needs to be interrogated. I think that it too, like 'religion' and 'belief', has built into a series of presumptions, of which one of the most important, as you've just pointed out - one which is a presumption of all of what I call 'modern, western knowledge' - is that knowledge is a relation between a knowing subject and an object. Now, again, this is so deeply imbedded in us, myself included, that these are

<sup>3</sup> See Sanjay Seth, *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 62-69.

not just things we believe, these are almost part of our muscle memory, I mean, these have been part of our way of inhabiting the world. So it's very hard to get the critical distance from it, to even see that this is a presumption, not a fact about the world. One way we could do that is to know that there are other people in the world, some from times past, some our contemporaries, who do not make this presumption. The point is not initially whether we are right or whether they are right, it's just to be able to relativize ourselves in the sense of being able to see ourselves as particular and not universal... to see our knowledge as "our knowledge", and not as Knowledge as such, with a capital letter.

Now, in a moment I'll get to history, which is the big category... But let me give you an illustration of how I came to problematize the subject/object distinction in a very concrete way. It comes from *Subject Lessons*, from the first chapter, on cramming. I collected a lot of historical material on how the British and many Indian educators, public officials, colonial officials, etc., complained all the time that Indian students, having been provided with modern knowledge in schools and universities, chose to pass their exams by cramming, by which the complainants meant rote learning - memorizing everything. And this is a persistent complaint across 150 years. Educators and others tear their hair out in frustration as they voice this lament: "We finally provided these people with the right way to know the world, and what do they do? They do exactly what they did with their traditional knowledges, namely learn it all off, memorize what we teach them, and then they regurgitate it in the exams, and to make matters even worse, sometimes they regurgitate it quite well, and they get good marks in their exams! But we are failing in what we set out to do, which is to educate them, to actually engage and know the world in a new way, not in their old ways." Now, it took me a very long time - I'm embarrassed now how long it took me - to ask what is the most fundamental question: namely, what presumptions do you have to make to see rote learning as a failure of knowledge rather than a form of knowledge? Rote learning has a long history, not only in the non-western world but also in the western world. You know, Thomas Aquinas was greatly admired

because he had committed hundreds of texts to memory. Why and when did we start thinking that to memorize something is a failure of knowledge rather than a form of it? And once I asked this question, and it took me an embarrassingly long time to realize this was the real question, then my work was easier, because then I could see that built into our conception of knowledge is an almost Romantic subject, who must encounter the world and make the knowledge of it his or her own. It's only genuinely knowledge if, as it were, it wells up from inside us. If it's simply a repetition of something else, then it's not genuinely acquired. Now that, it seems to me, is a very fine illustration of how the subject-object relation defines what we understand to be knowledge, so that when we encounter any other form of knowledge, it only seems to us like a failed form of knowledge.

As a teacher in a modern university, I tell my students: "do not rote learn". So my point is not to say "return to rote learning"; the point is to recognize the historical and cultural specificities of our forms of knowing. And I think that applies to history writing as well.

**JN** – But what about the category of history itself?

**SS** – Ok, let me be provocative and say we normally assume that history has a very long genealogy: there were the great Greek historians, some great Roman historians, then a not-so-great period for a very, very long time – most of the medieval period – and then we get to the Renaissance, and so on. I want to suggest to you that history writing, as we understand it, is actually a quite modern invention, and that the genealogy that we normally give it is largely fictional. We should all read Herodotus, but the idea that this is the precursor to history seems to me utterly fanciful. And Thucydides makes up the speeches of many of his historical actors; the famous Melian dialogue is in Thucydides' words, not anyone else's words. It seems to me that we academics construct these elaborate genealogies for ourselves in order to endow our present activities with a dignity that goes back thousands of years.

So, if it's true that history is a modern practice, no more than a few hundred years old, and in its academic and professionalised form, even less, then it seems to me it's also true that history as a practice has a series of presumptions built into it. One of these is that the past is dead; one of the most important presumptions of modern history writing is that the past is dead, you can't resurrect it, you can't bring it back to life... You know the famous quote from Ranke, that everyone quotes, that the task of history is to represent what really happened? This is endlessly quoted as the charter of objectivity, and nowadays people proceed to criticize it, because objectivity is considered impossible, the facts don't speak for themselves, etc. I think what's often missed, and what seems to me more important, is that Ranke is saying that history is a cognitive enterprise; it has nothing to say morally, ethically, theologically etc. Why is it a cognitive enterprise? It's a cognitive enterprise because the past is dead; we can only know it, nothing else.

Now, all peoples have a sense of historicity. I think a sense of historicity is universal. But not all people think of the past as dead, as we do. Now we get to your question: what privileges our sense of history over theirs? I'm asking myself that question and increasingly it seems to me that I am not sure that our sense of historicity is privileged in relation to that of others. That doesn't mean we should stop doing it. We can't stop doing it; it's a feature of our culture, of our institutions and collective practices, etc. But I think it would be useful to start thinking about the limits of our knowledge forms rather than constantly assuming their inevitable superiority, and assuming that they lie at the *telos* of a development where modern history writing is superior to and supersedes all the other forms of historicity that have characterized human life.

### **Subaltern Studies and Maoism**

**JN** – As you were saying, almost all historians nowadays would recognize that our historical accounts of the past are accounts that depend on a certain point of view, which is our present point of view; what

they perhaps do not accept is the inexistence of the past as something objective, as something that is not only the cause but also the effect of a specific sense of historicity. Still, I was wondering if we can find within the debates among historians some indications of the past as something presumed by historians and not simply a fact of the world. For instance, all the critiques that medieval or early modern historians make against modern, contemporary historians, saying that they actually don't study the past, but that they study the present, that their objectivity is less accurate because they actually are studying the period they are living within. Even if cunningly, this suggests the subjectivity of the division between present and past. And another indication can be seen on the debates on memory, which you know much better than me. For instance, the concept of 'trauma' is a concept that we, as historians, are often available to accept and that encompasses the idea that there is a past that has not yet passed. So, perhaps even modern western history opens the door for some of the arguments you are making.

**SS** – Absolutely! Look, I would be mortified if anyone here thought I was claiming that I had come up with all these reflections solely by myself ... Like all of us, I've learnt so much from others. So, the point is not originality; I'm absorbing like a sponge... So, I'm very much indebted to Hayden White, Ranajit Guha, perhaps above all, to my friend Dipesh Chakrabarty, and to many others. And I'm engaging with and drawing upon modern western knowledge, not opposing it. You began by quoting from the end of *Subject Lessons*, where I describe myself as one of "Macaulay's bastard children". I teach in a university, and a university, by definition, is an institution of modern western knowledge. So, I'm not against this knowledge, I'm trying to think through it; its possibilities and also its limitations.

On the first part of your question, you're right... to the degree that anything is ever settled in the human sciences, I think that is settled. Today, very few historians would claim, in a Rankean mode, that history is objective. So, that is sort of largely finished.

We all agree that there is a past. I'm not saying pasts are made up. But, as I will be arguing on Friday, there isn't a past that we just stumble upon, there isn't a past in the sense that there are rocks or there are trees. The past is an object that has to be constituted. This is a point made by Lévi-Strauss, by Louis Althusser, and many others. And 'pastness' is constituted in different ways. I give an example in one of my essays:<sup>4</sup> in India, people of my class get horrified that 'ordinary' people will walk up to the wall of a historic monument and piss. Middle-class Indians with a historical sensibility are always horrified: "What's wrong with these people? Don't they realize that this is part of our glorious national past... and here they are, pissing on it!" But it's not that these people are stupid, it's not that they don't have a sense of pastness, for they have myths, epics, legends... they very much have a sense of pastness, but it's not constituted on similar thoughts or grounds as ours. So, I think there is a past, but we never encounter a past in the raw, we always construct it in advance. And I think modern history writing is one way of both constructing the past and constructing a relation with it. And I think epic, for instance, is another way of doing that.

Pastness, I think, is a human universal. So my argument is not that there are people without a past; I think there are people without a sense of modern history, but they have other relations with their past.

**JN** – Let me just insist on this, but now trying to move to a different place... One of the major problems you have been working on is how modern western knowledge – and you make a strong argument on the need of defining it both as modern and western, that is, giving it a time and a space – encounters or disencounters itself from non-western pasts. At the same time, you also mention that this kind of disagreement between the code of history, the code of modern western knowledge, and the pasts it's trying to grasp happens as well when modern

<sup>4</sup> "Reason or Reasoning, Clio or Siva?," *Social Text* 78 (2004): 85-101; translated into Portuguese as "Razão ou Raciocínio? Clio ou Shiva?," *História da Historiografia*, 11 (April 2013): 173-90.

western knowledge faces pre-modern (even if western) pasts. There's a text you wrote where you quote Michel de Certeau when he refers to the ways we, modern European intellectuals, fail to engage or to analyse our pre-modern ancestors in relation to religion or other matters. But then sometimes you also say that there is a specificity on the disagreement between western knowledge and non-western pasts, that there is a kind of more deep disagreement, I would put it like this. Why the distinction?

**SS** – There is a wonderful quote from Michel de Certeau, who addresses this question. He says something like: “The modern French historian writing about seventeenth-century France, can encounter in his subject, or the text he is studying, someone who attributes agency to the Christian god. So this person, or this text, is explaining certain historical events as a consequence of God’s agency”. And Certeau says, what history-writing does is reverse the order of explanation. He uses the apt metaphor of castling – I don’t know if any of you play chess, but in chess there is a moment when you can ‘castle’ the rook with the king, that is, swap them over. Similarly, when the text explains things as an effect of God, the modern historian explains belief in God as an effect of the world. The text says: the social is to be explained in terms of God; we say: God is to be explained in terms of the social. Now, this is an example of how the modern historian of Europe confronts the same problem as the modern historian of India, or Africa, or anywhere else. I think the difference is that for the historian writing about Europe (and it doesn’t matter whether the historian is European or not, for this is not about identity; it’s the knowledge form that matters, not the person doing it) can presume that that text of the seventeenth century has some sort of historical continuity with the now, with our knowledge systems now. In other words, in Gadamerian terms you can say: “There can be no fusion of horizons between me and this text because we cannot agree on God as an agent. However, in encountering this seventeenth-century text, I encountered an earlier moment in my own tradition, a tradition which I now re-appropriate and revivify, which I keep alive through changing it.”

Now, what happened in India and in many colonial countries is that, instead of a continuity, there was an absolutely sharp break, a caesura. Sanskrit knowledge forms and vernacular knowledge forms were alive and flourishing at one point, and then suddenly there's a cut-off, an abrupt end. So for the historian of India, I think there's a deeper problem. He or she has the same problem as the historian of France, but with the addition that he or she cannot even assume the historical continuity which will 'redeem' the anachronism that the European historian also faces. And this is because of that sharp line dividing us from past traditions of thinking. In Europe you can read Renaissance texts or medieval texts and, even if they sound strange to you, they're not purely or not necessarily purely of historical interest, right? People can read them as if they were in some way alive. The striking thing in India, the one place I know a little bit about, is that hardly any scholar reads earlier texts as if they spoke to the present. They've become the subject of annotated editions. The only approach you can have to them is a historical approach. In Europe you can read Aristotle or Aquinas as if they were interlocutors, part of an ongoing tradition (it does not matter for present purposes that this tradition might be constructed); but there is nothing in our past which still has that status (at the level of formal knowledge - it is very different in the 'popular' domain), because the break has been so profound.

**JN** – Let me make one final question. The move we were discussing some minutes ago, that is, from a critique of Eurocentrism to a critique of the limits of Social Sciences, can also be identified with the trajectory of the Subaltern Studies group. In this case there was also a first attempt to provide an alternative and better history ... And then, from the mid-80s on, there was a turn from this kind of Marxist scientific approach to a more post-structuralist, postmodern (if we can use this word) approach. Is this correct? Your work is actually much more engaged with this second kind of Subaltern Studies approaches, close to Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, to quote what is perhaps the most relevant – for us, historians – of many other titles. Could you

talk a bit about your relation to the Subaltern Studies group. I know Ranajit Guha was your PhD supervisor...

**SS** – I should say, first of all, that I was never a member of Subaltern Studies. But it is true that in some ways intellectually it was very important for me. I was influenced by Subaltern Studies, very much so.

Now to answer your question, I agree with your distinction, but I'd introduce one qualification: I don't think Subaltern Studies ever, even in its beginning, sought to be scientific. Ranajit Guha, who was such a decisive influence, especially but not only over the early volumes of Subaltern Studies, was certainly a Marxist, and was influenced by Maoism, but he never aspired to scientific socialism, and least of all the kind that came from Eastern Europe. But it is true that there was a change, partway through the project. This also split the group to some degree – one of its very important members, and a friend and teacher of mine, Sumit Sarkar, became a very vocal critic of the group that he once belonged to, on the grounds that it had missed its vocation by becoming a form of culturalism and being hijacked by postmodernism, when it should have stayed resolute, should have remained an intelligent and critical form of Marxism.

I think that the change, however, actually arose out of the logic of the project itself. In the programmatic statement that opens volume one, Ranajit Guha says something about the 'failure of the nation to come into its own'. And what was present in that remark was the idea and the desire that the nation could come into its own; that the problem with the Indian nationalist movement was that it was, in some sense, insufficiently radical. I think a few years later many members of the group are beginning to think: "Well, that may be true. But there is a problem with the nation-form in itself, whether in its radical version or in its non-radical version". Similarly, I think the project in its early stages had a sense that somehow you could recuperate a subaltern consciousness and agency. And I think that along the way – again partly because of external influences, post-structuralism, certainly the

interventions of Gayatri Spivak and others – some people in the group began to think that the aim should not be to recuperate an insurgent subject, but to problematize the idea of subjectivity itself. So, I think there was without a doubt a change in the group, but I think it was partly driven by its own earlier presumptions coming under critical examination by those who were using them. But that was an uneven process: some people did that more than others and, you know, one of the striking things about *Subaltern Studies*, and I say this as someone who was not a member of it, is that the earlier volumes had a greater thematic unity, because there was a shared sense of a project, and later on there are still many interesting articles, but it's clear that there is no common project any more.

**JN** – You mentioned also the relation between Maoism, as a political movement and ideology, and *Subaltern Studies*. Could you just develop that a little bit?

**SS** – I've written about it, arguing that *Subaltern Studies* could not have been possible without a short-lived Maoist uprising in India in the late 60s.<sup>5</sup> This was short-lived, was decisively crushed and, in the big screen of history, it looks like a tiny little blip. But I think for cultural and intellectual politics it was quite important. And the reasons... well, I would have to rehearse a long argument, which I won't do. But I think one of the consequences of that uprising was that a section of the left, instead of desiring modernity in the form of the socialist modern, became more willing to interrogate the premises and promises of modernity. Instead of wanting a more genuinely emancipated Indian nation-state that would be free of imperialism and colonialism and comprador elements, it started to ask questions about whether the nation-state could ever be an adequate vehicle for expressing the aspirations and desires of a very large place with all sorts of diverse people.

<sup>5</sup> "Revolution and History: Maoism and *Subaltern Studies*," *Storia della Storiografia* 62:2 (2012): 131-49.

In other words, I think that Maoism as it played out in India (and not so much Mao per se) actually somehow unleashed other critical energies and became important. And I think Subaltern Studies tapped into and was partly shaped by those critical energies. There were of course also biographical connections. Ranajit Guha was in India - I think it was at the later part of that insurgency - and wrote about it. Dipesh Chakrabarty was in a minor way involved in it. But not for me, I was six years old when the revolt in Naxalbari happened, so...

**JN** - ...So, it's not your fault.

**SS** - Yeah! [laughs]

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**JN** - I now will open the floor for comments, questions, interventions...

**Marcos Cardão** - Thank you very much for such great insights. My question has to do with the first generation of Subaltern Studies. I was wondering if it is so resolutely Marxist because, when we think about peasant revolts, we see that they make a critique of the most common interpretation of western Marxism - seeing peasant revolts as pre-political, peasants always as irrational, superstitious, sustaining that they should make first a transition to capitalism and that only by then could they be explicitly political...

**SS** - Absolutely, and I'm glad you said that. Because when one's talking, one simplifies. They were Marxist but they were already Marxist with a very critical eye, and remember they were at odds with all the Marxist parties of India; they were never party intellectuals. They were already highly critical of the received tradition but, at the same time, seeking to work, kind of within it, while challenging and expand-

ing and improving it. It's also often said that the early volumes of *Subaltern Studies* were the "history from below" of the type pioneered by Hobsbawm, Rudé and others, now belatedly happening in India. And I think that's wrong. I mean, it's certainly true that everyone had read Rudé, Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, and was deeply influenced... all of that is true. But, again, I think when it's happening in India, you can't repeat those moves, because you're at a different place ... So, I think they – Ranajit Guha in particular – were already self-conscious about the differences between what they were doing and the "history from below" that was being written in Europe. So I think you're absolutely right: this was a very critical appropriation of Marxism, rather than simply an application of Marxism; and it had a friendly but critical relation to western Marxism, by which they were certainly influenced, but they were not simply reproducing it for Indian conditions.

**Rui Lopes** – My question has to do with the dichotomy of west" and "non-west" and, in particular, with the risk of essentializing the "west". Usually when you refer to Eurocentric ideas, the centre is not just Europe but specifically an elite within Europe. How can we find ways of pluralizing the different types of so-called reason within western society, since the same imperialist attitude that was applied to the history outside of the west was also applied to social groups within the geographical space of Europe?

**SS** – Thank you, that's a very interesting question. I agree with you entirely that of course there was never an undifferentiated Europe, that imperial and colonialist expansion were not undertaken by 'Europeans', they were undertaken by specific classes and groups, and we must always remember that and register that in our thinking. Moreover, Europe is a historical construct, there hasn't always been a Europe. And so people who generalize about Europe are sometimes told: "Look, it's not just one thing, it's many things". Of course that's true; inasmuch as you make a historical point, you're right. But for the colonized, there's

a sense in which that distinction is not so important, because they were told for a very long period that there was a Europe, that Europe was the fount of reason, freedom, progress, etc. So, as my friend Dipesh puts it, it may be that the Europe we talk about is a hyperreal Europe, but it doesn't make it in one sense any less real for that.

### **Marxism, nationalism and Man**

**Sofia Lisboa** – My question is a bit of a change in the subject. It's much more about your work on Marxist theory and nationalist politics. In the conclusion of your book on these matters, you talk about how Marxism, in this context, became nationalist, and you don't say there is a corruption in the sense of Marxism, it's just that it was the way in which it realized it could achieve the goal for Marxism. So, my question concerns how Marxism had to use the problematic and the form of a national struggle...

**SS** – It's an important question partly because it's still a relevant question in parts of the world. Now, I don't think the desire for national independence was wrong ... I mean, for goodness' sake, the British had to get the hell out of India! This is not up for debate. I think the problem for Marxism, to put it slightly crudely, was that for understandable reasons, it confused the politically progressive and the historically progressive. And I think the unfortunate legacy of that was that Marxism (but not all Marxisms) often became a form of nationalism. And that never went away. In the postcolonial period, it often got worse.

I give you the most depressing proof of all: the fact that today official Marxism is, for instance, amongst the biggest champions of India's nuclear program. Why? Because India's nuclear program is anti-imperialist. What does that mean? It means America disapproves of it. We are fighting our battle for global justice basically by giving the finger to America! Now, frankly, this is the reduction of everything important to absurdity. I don't give a toss that the western world says: "You're abrogating rules". The handful of powers that have the nuclear

bomb have no moral right to lecture anyone else. And the presumption that the United States, the only country to have used the bomb, has the right to lecture anyone else on acquiring the bomb is so outrageous as to defy anything. But that's not the point. The point is: do we need the bomb? Is this a priority for us? And it seems to me that, unambiguously, the answer is no. And I think that the fact that the communist Left is amongst the most resolute supporters of India's nuclear program is one of the proofs of the fact that Communism or Marxism often ended up being a kind of nationalism on steroids, which would rationalize its positions using the language of anti-imperialism. Well, if this is anti-imperialism, frankly it doesn't do us any good. I don't know how this translates into the Middle East, but I can immediately think of at least a few instances in which, again under the guise of anti-imperialism, nationalist positions were legitimated that did not warrant the support of the Left.

**JN** – I also have one question concerning this debate on Marxism and nationalism. It has to do with one of the most relevant issues you address while debating this relation: the identification between progress understood as something that we politically and morally stand for, and progress as a concept of the world itself, that is, a concept of history itself. And the problem with this identification is that it entails a kind of looping effect: science is legitimizing politics and politics is legitimizing science. And this has also something to do with all the debates we were having regarding the writing of history and modern western knowledge, and with the fact that it seems that we always need to ground our own political, ethical and moral options on a scientific basis. So, at the beginning you were saying that we often tend to shape the image we give of our own trajectory in order to give it some kind of coherence, but actually it seems to me that in your PhD thesis we can already see the critical approach to the relation between knowledge and politics that your more recent work has been addressing so clearly... This was not a question, actually....

**SS** – It’s actually a very helpful observation because now I have a third way of re-describing my intellectual trajectory! I think there was a historicist and teleological element in Marxism, which it shares with other Enlightenment derived philosophies, and there was a political element, and they were sutured together. To put it simply, what was historically progressive was equated with what was politically progressive: Marxists declared that bourgeois societies are historically advanced, that a certain form of politics is politically progressive, and then they tried to marry the two. And another way in which I could characterize my intellectual trajectory is that I have been disassociating these elements, as well as questioning them individually. I still believe in politically progressive...I feel like I’m of the Left... not all of my Marxist friends would concur in that judgement, but I think I am! But certainly the teleological historicist narrative that has been part of Marxism I completely disavow, and moreover, I find it morally problematic.<sup>6</sup> Because I think we really have to ask ourselves the question: if we believe in that narrative, what do we do with tribal peoples, with aboriginal peoples, with indigenous peoples? It seems to me that both the Left and the liberal intelligentsia are hypocritical or, at least, very inconsistent on this. They say: “We’ll be nice, we’ll be liberal, we won’t say they’re backward anymore, we won’t call them primitive”; but actually our historicist and teleological intellectual presumptions leave us no choice but to regard such peoples as backward and primitive. I think that’s morally and politically unacceptable, and thus we must abandon the teleological and historicist presumptions that underpin our politics, and live with the undoubtedly problematic – because I don’t want to make it sound like it’s easy – consequences. One of these is that our political positions are no longer secured nicely in some sort of cement, whether scientific or historicist; they now begin to look a little more arbitrary, like the choices that they in fact are. The attraction of Marxism, I presume for all of us, was that it allowed you to have a political

<sup>6</sup> On this, see my “Modernity Without Prometheus: On Re-reading Marshall Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*,” *Third World Quarterly* 33:7 (July 2012); 1377-86, or the Spanish translation; *op cit*.

position with the conviction that this was not just an arbitrary choice but was somehow anchored in the movement of history and in the certainties of science. I still believe in the politics, I'm pretty shaky or sceptical on the science and I absolutely have no conviction in the movement of history.

**JN** – One final question ... You have already mentioned your relation to Marxism as a political and intellectual tradition, specifically your relation to Subaltern Studies. You also mentioned your relation to some relevant authors, like Foucault, De Certeau and others. But there is one specific – I would not call it tradition – set of authors that is not a permanent presence in your work but still seems to play a relevant role for you. I'm referring to the case of the works of Bruno Latour, for instance, as they relate to your critique of Man itself as a historical construct. Can you talk a little bit about that? Because when you mentioned that history is something that does not exist, or the past is something that does not exist as trees exist or as objects exist, we could probably add that not even trees actually exist. And then I recall the problems you deal with in some of your articles related to religion, for instance on your article *Clio or Shiva*, where you give a brief account of this case, in the mid-70s I believe, when the Indian government supports a judicial case against the British Museum and the British court accepts it, considering Shiva 'itself' as a juridical person. Would you say that the problem of considering gods as potential subjects of history, with an agency of their own, is perhaps somehow similar to the problems that Latour is advancing when he demands a "parliament of things"?

**SS** – That's a great question to end this conversation. By the way, the story about Shiva, I should mention - I certainly do in the article - comes from Richard Davis' book *Lives of Indian Images*.

On your question, of course you're right. A very major influence for me, as for certainly many people in this room, is the work of Michel

Foucault, and behind him Nietzsche. I tread lightly on the footnotes for the most part because, you know... the academy is a funny place, it's sometimes a place where people display their knowledge through name-dropping, show they know all the latest trends... and it's tedious; one uses these things because they speak to the questions you are asking, not because they're footnote fodder. But Foucault ... my God, I could not have written anything that I've written had I not read Foucault; he's a looming presence. Bruno Latour not in the same degree, but I think *We Have Never Been Modern* is a wonderful book, and I think everyone should read it. French anti-humanism generally, more recently Latour's work, all of these have been enabling for me... I read these people avidly and I've learnt a lot from some of these figures you mentioned.

There's another dimension to your question which I've now forgotten, I'm sorry. You mentioned those names and you also mentioned something else about... no, now I forgot, sorry.

**JN** – Me too [laughs]. So thank you very much for this conversation. For me it was really interesting.

**SS** – And thank you all for listening.

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