
INTRODUCTION

The Idea of Provincializing Europe

Europe . . . since 1914 has become provincialized, . . .
only the natural sciences are able to call forth a
quick international echo.

(Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1977)

The West is a name for a subject which gathers itself in
discourse but is also an object constituted discursively;
it is, evidently, a name always associating itself with
those regions, communities, and peoples that appear
politically or economically superior to other regions,
communities, and peoples. Basically, it is just like the
name “Japan,” . . . it claims that it is capable of
sustaining, if not actually transcending, an impulse to
transcend all the particularizations.

(Naoki Sakai, 1998)

PROVINCIALIZING EUROPE is not a book about the region of the world we call “Europe.” That Europe, one could say, has already been provincialized by history itself. Historians have long acknowledged that the so-called “European age” in modern history began to yield place to other regional and global configurations toward the middle of the twentieth century.¹ European history is no longer seen as embodying anything like a “universal human history.”² No major Western thinker, for instance, has publicly shared Francis Fukuyama’s “vulgarized Hegelian historicism” that saw in the fall of the Berlin wall a common end for the history of all human beings.³ The contrast with the past seems sharp when one remembers the cautious but warm note of approval with which Kant once detected in the French Revolution a “moral disposition in the human race” or Hegel saw the imprimatur of the “world spirit” in the momentousness of that event.⁴

I am by training a historian of modern South Asia, which forms my archive and is my site of analysis. The Europe I seek to provincialize or

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decenter is an imaginary figure that remains deeply embedded in *clichéd and shorthand forms* in some everyday habits of thought that invariably subtend attempts in the social sciences to address questions of political modernity in South Asia.⁵ The phenomenon of “political modernity”—namely, the rule by modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy, and capitalist enterprise—is impossible to *think* of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe.⁶ Concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality, and so on all bear the burden of European thought and history. One simply cannot think of political modernity without these and other related concepts that found a climactic form in the course of the European Enlightenment and the nineteenth century.

These concepts entail an unavoidable—and in a sense indispensable—universal and secular vision of the human. The European colonizer of the nineteenth century both preached this Enlightenment humanism at the colonized and at the same time denied it in practice. But the vision has been powerful in its effects. It has historically provided a strong foundation on which to erect—both in Europe and outside—critiques of socially unjust practices. Marxist and liberal thought are legatees of this intellectual heritage. This heritage is now global. The modern Bengali educated middle classes—to which I belong and fragments of whose history I recount later in the book—have been characterized by Tapan Raychaudhuri as the “the first Asian social group of any size whose mental world was transformed through its interactions with the West.”⁷ A long series of illustrious members of this social group—from Raja Rammohun Roy, sometimes called “the father of modern India,” to Manabendranath Roy, who argued with Lenin in the Comintern—warmly embraced the themes of rationalism, science, equality, and human rights that the European Enlightenment promulgated.⁸ Modern social critiques of caste, oppressions of women, the lack of rights for laboring and subaltern classes in India, and so on—and, in fact, the very critique of colonialism itself—are unthinkable except as a legacy, partially, of how Enlightenment Europe was appropriated in the subcontinent. The Indian constitution tellingly begins by repeating certain universal Enlightenment themes celebrated, say, in the American constitution. And it is salutary to remember that the writ-

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ings of the most trenchant critic of the institution of “untouchability” in British India refer us back to some originally European ideas about liberty and human equality.⁹

I too write from within this inheritance. Postcolonial scholarship is committed, almost by definition, to engaging the universals—such as the abstract figure of the human or that of Reason—that were forged in eighteenth-century Europe and that underlie the human sciences. This engagement marks, for instance, the writing of the Tunisian philosopher and historian Hichem Djait, who accuses imperialist Europe of “deny[ing] its own vision of man.”¹⁰ Fanon’s struggle to hold on to the Enlightenment idea of the human—even when he knew that European imperialism had reduced that idea to the figure of the settler-colonial white man—is now itself a part of the global heritage of all postcolonial thinkers.¹¹ The struggle ensues because there is no easy way of dispensing with these universals in the condition of political modernity. Without them there would be no social science that addresses issues of modern social justice.

This engagement with European thought is also called forth by the fact that today the so-called European intellectual tradition is the only one alive in the social science departments of most, if not all, modern universities. I use the word “alive” in a particular sense. It is only within some very particular traditions of thinking that we treat fundamental thinkers who are long dead and gone not only as people belonging to their own times but also as though they were our own contemporaries. In the social sciences, these are invariably thinkers one encounters within the tradition that has come to call itself “European” or “Western.” I am aware that an entity called “the European intellectual tradition” stretching back to the ancient Greeks is a fabrication of relatively recent European history. Martin Bernal, Samir Amin, and others have justly criticized the claim of European thinkers that such an unbroken tradition ever existed or that it could even properly be called “European.”¹² The point, however, is that, fabrication or not, this is the genealogy of thought in which social scientists find themselves inserted. Faced with the task of analyzing developments or social practices in modern India, few if any Indian social scientists or social scientists of India would argue seriously with, say, the thirteenth-century logician Gangesa or with the grammarian and linguistic philosopher Bartrihari (fifth to sixth centuries), or with the tenth- or eleventh-century aesthetician Abhinavagupta. Sad though it is, one result of European colonial rule in South Asia is that the intellectual traditions once unbroken and alive in Sanskrit or Persian or Arabic are now only

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matters of historical research for most—perhaps all—modern social scientists in the region.¹³ They treat these traditions as truly dead, as history. Although categories that were once subject to detailed theoretical contemplation and inquiry now exist as practical concepts, bereft of any theoretical lineage, embedded in quotidian practices in South Asia, contemporary social scientists of South Asia seldom have the training that would enable them to make these concepts into resources for critical thought for the present.¹⁴ And yet past European thinkers and their categories are never quite dead for us in the same way. South Asian(ist) social scientists would argue passionately with a Marx or a Weber without feeling any need to historicize them or to place them in their European intellectual contexts. Sometimes—though this is rather rare—they would even argue with the ancient or medieval or early-modern predecessors of these European theorists.

Yet the very history of politicization of the population, or the coming of political modernity, in countries outside of the Western capitalist democracies of the world produces a deep irony in the history of the political. This history challenges us to rethink two conceptual gifts of nineteenth-century Europe, concepts integral to the idea of modernity. One is historicism—the idea that to understand anything it has to be seen both as a unity and in its historical development—and the other is the very idea of the political. What historically enables a project such as that of “provincializing Europe” is the experience of political modernity in a country like India. European thought has a contradictory relationship to such an instance of political modernity. It is both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the various life practices that constitute the political and the historical in India. Exploring—on both theoretical and factual registers—this simultaneous indispensability and inadequacy of social science thought is the task this book has set itself.

THE POLITICS OF HISTORICISM

Writings by poststructuralist philosophers such as Michel Foucault have undoubtedly given a fillip to global critiques of historicism.¹⁵ But it would be wrong to think of postcolonial critiques of historicism (or of the political) as simply deriving from critiques already elaborated by postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers of the West. In fact, to think this way would itself be to practice historicism, for such a thought would merely repeat the temporal structure of the statement, “first in the West, and then elsewhere.” In saying this, I do not mean to take away from the recent discus-

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sions of historicism by critics who see its decline in the West as resulting from what Jameson has imaginatively named “the cultural logic of late-capitalism.”¹⁶ The cultural studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg has pointedly questioned whether history itself is not endangered by consumerist practices of contemporary capitalism. How do you produce historical observation and analysis, Grossberg asks, “when every event is potentially evidence, potentially determining, and at the same time, changing too quickly to allow the comfortable leisure of academic criticism?”¹⁷ But these arguments, although valuable, still bypass the histories of political modernity in the third world. From Mandel to Jameson, nobody sees “late capitalism” as a system whose driving engine may be in the third world. The word “late” has very different connotations when applied to the developed countries and to those seen as still “developing.” “Late capitalism” is properly the name of a phenomenon that is understood as belonging primarily to the developed capitalist world, though its impact on the rest of the globe is never denied.¹⁸

Western critiques of historicism that base themselves on some characterization of “late capitalism” overlook the deep ties that bind together historicism as a mode of thought and the formation of political modernity in the erstwhile European colonies. Historicism enabled European domination of the world in the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Crudely, one might say that it was one important form that the ideology of progress or “development” took from the nineteenth century on. Historicism is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global *over time*, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it. This “first in Europe, then elsewhere” structure of global historical time was historicist; different non-Western nationalisms would later produce local versions of the same narrative, replacing “Europe” by some locally constructed center. It was historicism that allowed Marx to say that the “country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.”²⁰ It is also what leads prominent historians such as Phyllis Deane to describe the coming of industries in England as the *first* industrial revolution.²¹ Historicism thus posited historical time as a measure of the cultural distance (at least in institutional development) that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West.²² In the colonies, it legitimated the idea of civilization.²³ In Europe itself, it made possible completely internalist histories of Europe in which Europe was described as the site of the first occurrence of capitalism, modernity, or Enlightenment.²⁴ These “events” in turn are all explained mainly with respect to “events” within the geographical confines of Europe (however fuzzy its exact boundaries may have been). The

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inhabitants of the colonies, on the other hand, were assigned a place “elsewhere” in the “first in Europe and then elsewhere” structure of time. This move of historicism is what Johannes Fabian has called “the denial of co-evalness.”²⁵

Historicism—and even the modern, European idea of history—one might say, came to non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody’s way of saying “not yet” to somebody else.²⁶ Consider the classic liberal but historicist essays by John Stuart Mill, “On Liberty” and “On Representative Government,” both of which proclaimed self-rule as the highest form of government and yet argued against giving Indians or Africans self-rule on grounds that were indeed historicist. According to Mill, Indians or Africans were *not yet* civilized enough to rule themselves. Some historical time of development and civilization (colonial rule and education, to be precise) had to elapse before they could be considered prepared for such a task.²⁷ Mill’s historicist argument thus consigned Indians, Africans, and other “rude” nations to an imaginary waiting room of history. In doing so, it converted history itself into a version of this waiting room. We were all headed for the same destination, Mill averred, but some people were to arrive earlier than others. That was what historicist consciousness was: a recommendation to the colonized to wait. Acquiring a historical consciousness, acquiring the public spirit that Mill thought absolutely necessary for the art of self-government, was also to learn this art of waiting. This waiting was the realization of the “not yet” of historicism.

Twentieth-century anticolonial democratic demands for self-rule, on the contrary, harped insistently on a “now” as the temporal horizon of action. From about the time of First World War to the decolonization movements of the fifties and sixties, anticolonial nationalisms were predicated on this urgency of the “now.” Historicism has not disappeared from the world, but its “not yet” exists today in tension with this global insistence on the “now” that marks all popular movements toward democracy. This had to be so, for in their search for a mass base, anticolonial nationalist movements introduced classes and groups into the sphere of the political that, by the standards of nineteenth-century European liberalism, could only look ever so unprepared to assume the political responsibility of self-government. These were the peasants, tribals, semi- or unskilled industrial workers in non-Western cities, men and women from the subordinate social groups—in short, the subaltern classes of the third world.

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A critique of historicism therefore goes to the heart of the question of political modernity in non-Western societies. As I shall argue in more detail later, it was through recourse to some version of a stagist theory of history—ranging from simple evolutionary schemas to sophisticated understandings of “uneven development”—that European political and social thought made room for the political modernity of the subaltern classes. This was not, as such, an unreasonable theoretical claim. If “political modernity” was to be a bounded and definable phenomenon, it was not unreasonable to use its definition as a measuring rod for social progress. Within this thought, it could always be said with reason that some people were less modern than others, and that the former needed a period of preparation and waiting before they could be recognized as full participants in political modernity. But this was precisely the argument of the colonizer—the “not yet” to which the colonized nationalist opposed his or her “now.” The achievement of political modernity in the third world could only take place through a contradictory relationship to European social and political thought. It is true that nationalist elites often rehearsed to their own subaltern classes—and still do if and when the political structures permit—the stagist theory of history on which European ideas of political modernity were based. However, there were two necessary developments in nationalist struggles that would produce at least a practical, if not theoretical, rejection of any stagist, historicist distinctions between the premodern or the nonmodern and the modern. One was the nationalist elite’s own rejection of the “waiting-room” version of history when faced with the Europeans’ use of it as a justification for denial of “self-government” to the colonized. The other was the twentieth-century phenomenon of the peasant as full participant in the political life of the nation (that is, first in the nationalist movement and then as a citizen of the independent nation), long before he or she could be formally educated into the doctrinal or conceptual aspects of citizenship.

A dramatic example of this nationalist rejection of historicist history is the Indian decision taken immediately after the attainment of independence to base Indian democracy on universal adult franchise. This was directly in violation of Mill’s prescription. “Universal teaching,” Mill said in the essay “On Representative Government,” “must precede universal enfranchisement.”²⁸ Even the Indian Franchise Committee of 1931, which had several Indian members, stuck to a position that was a modified version of Mill’s argument. The members of the committee agreed that although universal adult franchise would be the ideal goal for India, the general lack of literacy in the country posed a very large obstacle to its

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implementation.²⁹ And yet in less than two decades, India opted for universal adult suffrage for a population that was still predominantly nonliterate. In defending the new constitution and the idea of “popular sovereignty” before the nation’s Constituent Assembly on the eve of formal independence, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, later to be the first vice president of India, argued against the idea that Indians as a people were not yet ready to rule themselves. As far as he was concerned, Indians, literate or illiterate, were always suited for self-rule. He said: “We cannot say that the republican tradition is foreign to the genius of this country. We have had it from the beginning of our history.”³⁰ What else was this position if not a national gesture of abolishing the imaginary waiting room in which Indians had been placed by European historicist thought? Needless to say, historicism remains alive and strong today in all the developmentalist practices and imaginations of the Indian state.³¹ Much of the institutional activity of governing in India is premised on a day-to-day practice of historicism; there is a strong sense in which the peasant is still being educated and developed into the citizen. But every time there is a populist/political mobilization of the people on the streets of the country and a version of “mass democracy” becomes visible in India, historicist time is put in temporary suspension. And once every five years—or more frequently, as seems to be the case these days—the nation produces a political performance of electoral democracy that sets aside all assumptions of the historicist imagination of time. On the day of the election, every Indian adult is treated practically and theoretically as someone already endowed with the skills of a making major citizenly choice, education or no education.

The history and nature of political modernity in an excolonial country such as India thus generates a tension between the two aspects of the subaltern or peasant as citizen. One is the peasant who has to be educated into the citizen and who therefore belongs to the time of historicism; the other is the peasant who, despite his or her lack of formal education, is already a citizen. This tension is akin to the tension between the two aspects of nationalism that Homi Bhabha has usefully identified as the pedagogic and the performative.³² Nationalist historiography in the pedagogic mode portrays the peasant’s world, with its emphasis on kinship, gods, and the so-called supernatural, as anachronistic. But the “nation” and the political are also *performed* in the carnivalesque aspects of democracy: in rebellions, protest marches, sporting events, and in universal adult franchise. The question is: How do we *think* the political at these moments when the peasant or the subaltern emerges in the modern sphere of politics, in his or her own right, as a member of the nationalist movement

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against British rule or as a full-fledged member of the body politic, without having had to do any “preparatory” work in order to qualify as the “bourgeois-citizen”?

I should clarify that in my usage the word “peasant” refers to more than the sociologist’s figure of the peasant. I intend that particular meaning, but I load the word with an extended meaning as well. The “peasant” acts here as a shorthand for all the seemingly nonmodern, rural, nonsecular relationships and life practices that constantly leave their imprint on the lives of even the elites in India and on their institutions of government. The peasant stands for all that is not bourgeois (in a European sense) in Indian capitalism and modernity. The next section elaborates on this idea.

SUBALTERN STUDIES AND THE CRITIQUE OF HISTORICISM

This problem of how to conceptualize the historical and the political in a context where the peasant was already part of the political was indeed one of the key questions that drove the historiographic project of *Subaltern Studies*.³³ My extended interpretation of the word “peasant” follows from some of the founding statements Ranajit Guha made when he and his colleagues attempted to democratize the writing of Indian history by looking on subordinate social groups as the makers of their own destiny. I find it significant, for example, that *Subaltern Studies* should have begun its career by registering a deep sense of unease with the very idea of the “political” as it had been deployed in the received traditions of English-language Marxist historiography. Nowhere is this more visible than in Ranajit Guha’s criticism of the British historian Eric Hobsbawm’s category “prepolitical” in his 1983 book *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*.³⁴

Hobsbawm’s category “prepolitical” revealed the limits of how far historicist Marxist thought could go in responding to the challenge posed to European political thought by the entry of the peasant into the modern sphere of politics. Hobsbawm recognized what was special to political modernity in the third world. He readily admitted that it was the “acquisition of political consciousness” by peasants that “made our century the most revolutionary in history.” Yet he missed the implications of this observation for the historicism that already underlay his own analysis. Peasants’ actions, organized—more often than not—along the axes of kinship, religion, and caste, and involving gods, spirits, and supernatural agents as actors alongside humans, remained for him symptomatic of a con-

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sciousness that had not quite come to terms with the secular-institutional logic of the political.³⁵ He called peasants “pre-political people who have not yet found, or only begun to find, a specific language in which to express themselves. [Capitalism] comes to them from outside, insidiously by the operation of economic forces which they do not understand.” In Hobsbawm’s historicist language, the social movements of the peasants of the twentieth century remained “archaic.”³⁶

The analytical impulse of Hobsbawm’s study belongs to a variety of historicism that Western Marxism has cultivated since its inception. Marxist intellectuals of the West and their followers elsewhere have developed a diverse set of sophisticated strategies that allow them to acknowledge the evidence of “incompleteness” of capitalist transformation in Europe and other places while retaining the idea of a general historical movement from a premodern stage to that of modernity. These strategies include, first, the old and now discredited evolutionist paradigms of the nineteenth century—the language of “survivals” and “remnants”—sometimes found in Marx’s own prose. But there are other strategies as well, and they are all variations on the theme of “uneven development”—itself derived, as Neil Smith shows, from Marx’s use of the idea of “uneven rates of development” in his *Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and from Lenin’s and Trotsky’s later use of the concept.³⁷ The point is, whether they speak of “uneven development,” or Ernst Bloch’s “synchronicity of the non-synchronous,” or Althusserian “structural causality,” these strategies all retain elements of historicism in the direction of their thought (in spite of Althusser’s explicit opposition to historicism). They all ascribe at least an underlying structural unity (if not an expressive totality) to historical process and time that makes it possible to identify certain elements in the present as “anachronistic.”³⁸ The thesis of “uneven development,” as James Chandler has perceptively observed in his recent study of Romanticism, goes “hand in hand” with the “dated grid of an homogenous empty time.”³⁹

By explicitly critiquing the idea of peasant consciousness as “prepolitical,” Guha was prepared to suggest that the nature of collective action by peasants in modern India was such that it effectively stretched the category of the “political” far beyond the boundaries assigned to it in European political thought.⁴⁰ The political sphere in which the peasant and his masters participated was modern—for what else could nationalism be but a modern political movement for self-government?—and yet it did not follow the logic of secular-rational calculations inherent the modern conception of the political. This peasant-but-modern political sphere was not

bereft of the agency of gods, spirits, and other supernatural beings.⁴¹ Social scientists may classify such agencies under the rubric of “peasant beliefs,” but the peasant-as-citizen did not partake of the ontological assumptions that the social sciences take for granted. Guha’s statement recognized this subject as modern, however, and hence refused to call the peasants’ political behavior or consciousness “prepolitical.” He insisted that instead of being an anachronism in a modernizing colonial world, the peasant was a real contemporary of colonialism, a fundamental part of the modernity that colonial rule brought to in India. Theirs was not a “backward” consciousness—a mentality left over from the past, a consciousness baffled by modern political and economic institutions and yet resistant to them. Peasants’ readings of the relations of power that they confronted in the world, Guha argued, were by no means unrealistic or backward-looking.

Of course, this was not all said at once and with anything like the clarity one can achieve with hindsight. There are, for example, passages in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* in which Guha follows the tendencies general to European Marxist or liberal scholarship. He sometimes reads undemocratic relationships—issues of direct “domination and subordination” that involve the so-called “religious” or the supernatural—as survivals of a precapitalist era, as not quite modern, and hence as indicative of problems of transition to capitalism.⁴² Such narratives often make an appearance in the early volumes of *Subaltern Studies*, as well. But these statements, I submit, do not adequately represent the radical potential of Guha’s critique of the category “prepolitical.” For if they were a valid framework for analyzing Indian modernity, one could indeed argue in favor of Hobsbawm and his category “prepolitical.” One could point out—in accordance with European political thought—that the category “political” was inappropriate for analyzing peasant protest, for the sphere of the political hardly ever abstracted itself from the spheres of religion and kinship in precapitalist relations of domination. The everyday relations of power that involve kinship, gods, and spirits that the peasant dramatically exemplified could then with justice be called “prepolitical.” The persisting world of the peasant in India could be legitimately read as a mark of the incompleteness of India’s transition to capitalism, and the peasant himself seen rightly as an “earlier type,” active no doubt in nationalism but really working under world-historical notice of extinction.

What I build on here, however, is the opposite tendency of thought that is signaled by Guha’s unease with the category “prepolitical.” Peasant

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insurgency in modern India, Guha wrote, “was a *political* struggle.”⁴³ I have emphasized the word “political” in this quote to highlight a creative tension between the Marxist lineage of *Subaltern Studies* and the more challenging questions it raised from the very beginning about the nature of the political in the colonial modernity of India. Examining, for instance, over a hundred known cases of peasant rebellions in British India between 1783 and 1900, Guha showed that practices which called upon gods, spirits, and other spectral and divine beings were part of the network of power and prestige within which both the subaltern and elite operated in South Asia. These presences were not merely symbolic of some of deeper and “more real” secular reality.⁴⁴

South Asian political modernity, Guha argued, brings together two noncommensurable logics of power, both modern. One is the logic of the quasi-liberal legal and institutional frameworks that European rule introduced into the country, which in many ways were desired by both elite and subaltern classes. I do not mean to understate the importance of this development. Braided with this, however, is the logic of another set of relationships in which both the elites and the subalterns are also involved. These are relations that articulate hierarchy through practices of direct and explicit subordination of the less powerful by the more powerful. The first logic is secular. In other words, it derives from the secularized forms of Christianity that mark modernity in the West, and shows a similar tendency toward first making a “religion” out of a medley of Hindu practices and then secularizing forms of that religion in the life of modern institutions in India.⁴⁵ The second has no necessary secularism about it; it is what continually brings gods and spirits into the domain of the political. (This is to be distinguished from the secular-calculative use of “religion” that many contemporary political parties make in the subcontinent.) To read these practices as a survival of an earlier mode of production would inexorably lead us to stagist and elitist conceptions of history; it would take us back to a historicist framework. Within that framework, historiography has no other way of responding to the challenge presented to political thought and philosophy by involvement of the peasants in twentieth-century nationalisms, and by their emergence after independence as full-fledged citizens of a modern nation-state.

Guha’s critique of the category “prepolitical,” I suggest, fundamentally pluralizes the history of power in global modernity and separates it from any universalist narratives of capital. Subaltern historiography questions the assumption that capitalism necessarily brings bourgeois relations of power to a position of hegemony.⁴⁶ If Indian modernity places the bour-

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geois in juxtaposition with that which seems prebourgeois, if the nonsecular supernatural exists in proximity to the secular, and if both are to be found in the sphere of the political, it is not because capitalism or political modernity in India has remained “incomplete.” Guha does not deny the connections of colonial India to the global forces of capitalism. His point is that what seemed “traditional” in this modernity were “traditional only in so far as [their] roots could be traced back to pre-colonial times, but [they were] by no means archaic in the sense of being outmoded.”⁴⁷ This was a political modernity that would eventually give rise to a thriving electoral democracy, even when “vast areas in the life and consciousness of the people” escaped any kind of “[bourgeois] hegemony.”⁴⁸

The pressure of this observation introduces into the *Subaltern Studies* project a necessary—though sometimes incipient—critique of both historicism and the idea of the political. My argument for provincializing Europe follows directly from my involvement in this project. A history of political modernity in India could not be written as a simple application of the analytics of capital and nationalism available to Western Marxism. One could not, in the manner of some nationalist historians, pit the story of a regressive colonialism against an account of a robust nationalist movement seeking to establish a bourgeois outlook throughout society.⁴⁹ For, in Guha’s terms, there was no class in South Asia comparable to the European bourgeoisie of Marxist metanarratives, a class able to fabricate a hegemonic ideology that made its own interests look and feel like the interests of all. The “Indian culture of the colonial era,” Guha argued in a later essay, defied understanding “either as a replication of the liberal-bourgeois culture of nineteenth-century Britain or as the mere survival of an antecedent pre-capitalist culture.”⁵⁰ This was capitalism indeed, but without bourgeois relations that attain a position of unchallenged hegemony; it was a capitalist dominance without a hegemonic bourgeois culture—or, in Guha’s famous terms, “dominance without hegemony.”

One cannot think of this plural history of power and provide accounts of the modern political subject in India without at the same time radically questioning the nature of historical time. Imaginations of socially just futures for humans usually take the idea of single, homogenous, and secular historical time for granted. Modern politics is often justified as a story of human sovereignty acted out in the context of a ceaseless unfolding of unitary historical time. I argue that this view is not an adequate intellectual resource for thinking about the conditions for political modernity in colonial and postcolonial India. We need to move away from two of the ontological assumptions entailed in secular conceptions of the political

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and the social. The first is that the human exists in a frame of a single and secular historical time that envelops other kinds of time. I argue that the task of conceptualizing practices of social and political modernity in South Asia often requires us to make the opposite assumption: that historical time is not integral, that it is out of joint with itself. The second assumption running through modern European political thought and the social sciences is that the human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end “social facts,” that the social somehow exists prior to them. I try, on the other hand, to think without the assumption of even a logical priority of the social. One empirically knows of no society in which humans have existed without gods and spirits accompanying them. Although the God of monotheism may have taken a few knocks—if not actually “died”—in the nineteenth-century European story of “the disenchantment of the world,” the gods and other agents inhabiting practices of so-called “superstition” have never died anywhere. I take gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human, and think from the assumption that the question of being human involves the question of being with gods and spirits.⁵¹ Being human means, as Ramachandra Gandhi puts it, discovering “the possibility of calling upon God [or gods] without being under an obligation to first establish his [or their] reality.”⁵² And this is one reason why I deliberately do not reproduce any sociology of religion in my analysis.

THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

As should be clear by now, provincializing Europe is not a project of rejecting or discarding European thought. Relating to a body of thought to which one largely owes one’s intellectual existence cannot be a matter of exacting what Leela Gandhi has aptly called “postcolonial revenge.”⁵³ European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought—which is now everybody’s heritage and which affect us all—may be renewed from and for the margins.

But, of course, the margins are as plural and diverse as the centers. Europe appears different when seen from within the experiences of colonization or inferiorization in specific parts of the world. Postcolonial scholars, speaking from their different geographies of colonialism, have spoken of different Europes. The recent critical scholarship of Latin Americanists

or Afro-Caribbeanists and others points to the imperialism of Spain and Portugal—triumphant at the time of the Renaissance and in decline as political powers by the end of the Enlightenment.⁵⁴ The question of post-colonialism itself is given multiple and contested locations in the works of those studying Southeast Asia, East Asia, Africa, and the Pacific.⁵⁵ Yet, however multiple the loci of Europe and however varied colonialisms are, the problem of getting beyond Eurocentric histories remains a shared problem across geographical boundaries.⁵⁶

A key question in the world of postcolonial scholarship will be the following. The problem of capitalist modernity cannot any longer be seen simply as a sociological problem of historical transition (as in the famous “transition debates” in European history) but as a problem of translation, as well. There was a time—before scholarship itself became globalized—when the process of translating diverse forms, practices, and understandings of life into universalist political-theoretical categories of deeply European origin seemed to most social scientists an unproblematic proposition. That which was considered an analytical category (such as capital) was understood to have transcended the fragment of European history in which it may have originated. At most we assumed that a translation acknowledged as “rough” was adequate for the task of comprehension.

The English-language monograph in area studies, for example, was a classic embodiment of this presupposition. A standard, mechanically put together and least-read feature of the monograph in Asian or area studies was a section called the “glossary,” which came at the very end of the book. No reader was ever seriously expected to interrupt their pleasure of reading by having to turn pages frequently to consult the glossary. The glossary reproduced a series of “rough translations” of native terms, often borrowed from the colonialists themselves. These colonial translations were rough not only in being approximate (and thereby inaccurate) but also in that they were meant to fit the rough-and-ready methods of colonial rule. To challenge that model of “rough translation” is to pay critical and unrelenting attention to the very process of translation.

My project therefore turns toward the horizon that many gifted scholars working on the politics of translation have pointed to. They have demonstrated that what translation produces out of seeming “incommensurabilities” is neither an absence of relationship between dominant and dominating forms of knowledge nor equivalents that successfully mediate between differences, but precisely the partly opaque relationship we call “difference.”⁵⁷ To write narratives and analyses that produce this translucence—and not transparency—in the relation between non-Western his-

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tories and European thought and its analytical categories is what I seek to both propose and illustrate in what follows.

This book necessarily turns around—and, if I may say so, seeks to take advantage of—a fault line central to modern European social thought. This is the divide between analytic and hermeneutic traditions in the social sciences. The division is somewhat artificial, no doubt (for most important thinkers belong to both traditions at once), but I underline it here for the purpose of clarifying my own position. Broadly speaking, one may explain the division thus. Analytic social science fundamentally attempts to “demystify” ideology in order to produce a critique that looks toward a more just social order. I take Marx to be a classic exemplar of this tradition. Hermeneutic tradition, on the other hand, produces a loving grasp of detail in search of an understanding of the diversity of human life-worlds. It produces what may be called “affective histories.”⁵⁸ The first tradition tends to evacuate the local by assimilating it to some abstract universal; it does not affect my proposition in the least if this is done in an empirical idiom. The hermeneutic tradition, on the other hand, finds thought intimately tied to places and to particular forms of life. It is innately critical of the nihilism of that which is purely analytic. Heidegger is my icon for this second tradition.

The book tries to bring these two important representatives of European thought, Marx and Heidegger, into some kind of conversation with each other in the context of making sense of South Asian political modernity. Marx is critical for the enterprise, as his category “capital” gives us a way of thinking about both history and the secular figure of the human on a global scale, while it also makes history into a critical tool for understanding the globe that capitalism produces. Marx powerfully enables us to confront the ever-present tendency in the West to see European and capitalist expansion as, ultimately, a case of Western altruism. But I try to show in a pivotal chapter on Marx (Chapter 2) that addressing the problem of historicism through Marx actually pushes us toward a double position. On the one hand, we acknowledge the crucial importance of the figure of the abstract human in Marx’s categories as precisely a legacy of Enlightenment thought. This figure is central to Marx’s critique of capital. On the other hand, this abstract human occludes questions of belonging and diversity. I seek to destabilize this abstract figure of the universal human by bringing to bear on my reading of Marx some Heideggerian insights on human belonging and historical difference.

The first part of the book, comprising Chapters 1 to 4, is organized, as it were, under the sign of Marx. I call this part “Historicism and the

Narration of Modernity.” Together, these chapters present certain critical reflections on historicist ideas of history and historical time, and their relationship to narratives of capitalist modernity in colonial India. They also attempt to explicate my critique of historicism by insisting that historical debates about transition to capitalism must also, if they are not to replicate structures of historicist logic, think of such transition as “translational” processes. Chapter 1 reproduces, in an abridged form, a programmatic statement about provincializing Europe that I published in 1992 in the journal *Representations*.⁵⁹ This statement has since received a substantial amount of circulation. *Provincializing Europe* departs from that statement in some important respects, but it also attempts to put into practice much of the program chalked out in that early statement. I have therefore included a version of the statement but added a short postscript to indicate how the present project uses it as a point of departure while deviating from it in significant ways. The other chapters (2–4) revolve around the question of how one might try to open up the Marxist narratives of capitalist modernity to issues of historical difference. Chapters 3 and 4 attempt this with concrete examples, whereas Chapter 2 (“The Two Histories of Capital”) presents the theoretical pivot of the overall argument.

The second part of the book—I call it “Histories of Belonging”—I think of as organized under the sign of Heidegger. It presents some historical explorations of certain themes in the modernity of literate upper-caste Hindu Bengalis. The themes themselves could be considered “universal” to structures of political modernity: the idea of the citizen-subject, “imagination” as a category of analysis, ideas regarding civil society, patriarchal fraternities, public/private distinctions, secular reason, historical time, and so on. These chapters (5–8) work out in detail the historiographic agenda presented in the 1992 statement. I try to demonstrate concretely how the categories and strategies we have learned from European thought (including the strategy of historicizing) are both indispensable and inadequate in representing this particular case of a non-European modernity.

A word is in order about a particular switch of focus that happens in the book between Parts One and Two. The first part draws more from historical and ethnographic studies of peasants and tribals, groups one could call “subaltern” in a straightforward or sociological sense. The second part of the book concentrates on the history of educated Bengalis, a group which, in the context of Indian history, has often been described (sometimes inaccurately) as “elite.” To critics who may ask why a project that arises initially from the histories of the subaltern classes in British India should turn to certain histories of the educated middle classes to

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make its points, I say this. This book elaborates some of the theoretical concerns that have arisen out of my involvement in *Subaltern Studies*, but it is not an attempt to represent the life practices of the subaltern classes. My purpose is to explore the capacities and limitations of certain European social and political categories in conceptualizing political modernity in the context of non-European life-worlds. In demonstrating this, I turn to historical details of particular life-worlds I have known with some degree of intimacy.

The chapters in Part Two are my attempts to begin a move away from what I have earlier described as the principle of “rough translation,” and toward providing plural or conjoined genealogies for our analytical categories. Methodologically, these chapters constitute nothing more than a beginning. Bringing into contemporary relevance the existing archives of life practices in South Asia—to produce self-consciously and with the historian’s methods anything like what Nietzsche called “history for life”—is an enormous task, well beyond the capacity of one individual.⁶⁰ It requires proficiency in several languages at once, and the relevant languages would vary according to the region of South Asia one is looking at. But it cannot be done without paying close and careful attention to languages, practices, and intellectual traditions present in South Asia, at the same time as we explore the genealogies of the guiding concepts of the modern human sciences. The point is not to reject social science categories but to release into the space occupied by particular European histories sedimented in them other normative and theoretical thought enshrined in other existing life practices and their archives. For it is only in this way that we can create plural normative horizons specific to our existence and relevant to the examination of our lives and their possibilities.

In pursuing this thought, I switch to Bengali middle-class material in the second part of the book. In order to provide in-depth historical examples for my propositions, I needed to look at a group of people who had been consciously influenced by the universalistic themes of the European Enlightenment: the ideas of rights, citizenship, fraternity, civil society, politics, nationalism, and so on. The task of attending carefully to the problems of cultural and linguistic translation inevitable in histories of political modernity in a non-European context required me to know, in some depth, a non-European language other than English, since English is the language that mediates my access to European thought. Bengali, my first language, has by default supplied that need. Because of the accidents and gaps of my own education, it is only in Bengali—and in a very particular kind of Bengali—that I operate with an everyday sense of the historical

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depth and diversity a language contains. Unfortunately, with no other language in the world (including English) can I do that. I have relied on my intimacy with Bengali to avoid the much-feared academic charges of essentialism, Orientalism, and “monolingualism.” For one of the ironies of attempting to know any kind of language in depth is that the unity of the language is sundered in the process. One becomes aware of how plural a language invariably is, and how it cannot ever be its own rich self except as a hybrid formation of many “other” languages (including, in the case of modern Bengali, English).⁶¹

My use of specific historical material in this book from middle-class Bengali contexts is therefore primarily methodological. I have no exceptionalist or representational claims to make for India, or for that matter Bengal. I cannot even claim to have written the kind of “Bengali middle-class” histories that *Subaltern Studies* scholars are sometimes accused of doing these days. The stories I have retold in Part Two of the book relate to a microscopic minority of Hindu reformers and writers, mostly men, who pioneered political and literary (male) modernity in Bengal. These chapters do not represent the history of the Hindu Bengali middle classes today, for the modernity I discuss expressed the desires of only a minority even among the middle classes. If these desires are still to be found today in obscure niches of Bengali life, they are living well past their “expiration date.” I speak from within what is increasingly—and perhaps inevitably—becoming a minor slice of Bengali middle-class history. I am also very sadly aware of the historical gap between Hindu and Muslim Bengalis, which this book cannot but reproduce. For more than a hundred years, Muslims have constituted for Hindu chroniclers what one historian once memorably called the “forgotten majority.”⁶² I have not been able to transcend that historical limitation, for this forgetting of the Muslim was deeply embedded in the education and upbringing I received in independent India. Indian-Bengali anticolonial nationalism implicitly normalized the “Hindu.” Like many others in my situation, I look forward to the day when the default position in narratives of Bengali modernity will not sound exclusively or even primarily Hindu.

I conclude the book by trying to envisage new principles for thinking about history and futurity. Here my debt to Heidegger is most explicit. I discuss how it may be possible to hold together both secularist-historicist and nonsecularist and nonhistoricist takes on the world by engaging seriously the question of diverse ways of “being-in-the-world.” This chapter seeks to bring to a culmination my overall attempt in the book to attend to a double task: acknowledge the “political” need to think in terms of

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totalities while all the time unsettling totalizing thought by putting into play nontotalizing categories. By drawing upon Heidegger's idea of "fragmentariness" and his interpretation of the expression "not yet" (in Division II of *Being and Time*), I seek to find a home for post-Enlightenment rationalism in the histories of Bengali belonging that I narrate. *Provincializing Europe* both begins and ends by acknowledging the indispensability of European political thought to representations of non-European political modernity, and yet struggles with the problems of representations that this indispensability invariably creates.

A NOTE ON THE TERM "HISTORICISM"

The term "historicism" has a long and complex history. Applied to the writings of a range of scholars who are often as mutually opposed and as different from each another as Hegel and Ranke, it not a term that lends itself to easy and precise definitions. Its current use has also been inflected by the recent revival it has enjoyed through the "new historicist" style of analysis pioneered by Stephen Greenblatt and others.⁶³ Particularly important is a tension between the Rankean insistence on attention to the uniqueness and the individuality of a historical identity or event and the discernment of a general historical trends that the Hegelian-Marxist tradition foregrounds.⁶⁴ This tension is now an inherited part of how we understand the craft and the function of the academic historian. Keeping in mind this complicated history of the term, I try to explicate below my own use of it.

Ian Hacking and Maurice Mandelbaum have provided these following, minimalist definitions for historicism:

[historicism is] the theory that social and cultural phenomena are historically determined and that each period in history has its own values that are not directly applicable to other epochs.⁶⁵(Hacking)

historicism is the belief that an adequate understanding of the nature of any phenomenon and an adequate assessment of its value are to be gained through considering it in terms of the place it occupied and the role which it played within a process of development.⁶⁶(Mandelbaum)

Sifting through these and other definitions, as well as some additional elements highlighted by scholars who have made the study of historicism their specialist concern, we may say that "historicism" is a mode of think-

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ing with the following characteristics. It tells us that in order to understand the nature of anything in this world we must see it as an historically developing entity, that is, first, as an individual and unique whole—as some kind of unity at least in potentia—and, second, as something that develops over time. Historicism typically can allow for complexities and zigzags in this development; it seeks to find the general in the particular, and it does not entail any necessary assumptions of teleology. But the idea of development and the assumption that a certain amount of time elapses in the very process of development are critical to this understanding.⁶⁷ Needless to say, this passage of time that is constitutive of both the narrative and the concept of development is, in the famous words of Walter Benjamin, the secular, empty, and homogenous time of history.⁶⁸ Ideas, old and new, about discontinuities, ruptures, and shifts in the historical process have from time to time challenged the dominance of historicism, but much written history still remains deeply historicist. That is to say, it still takes its object of investigation to be internally unified, and sees it as something developing over time. This is particularly true—for all their differences with classical historicism—of historical narratives underpinned by Marxist or liberal views of the world, and is what underlies descriptions/explanations in the genre “history of”—capitalism, industrialization, nationalism, and so on.