

E D I T O R S

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POSTCOLONIAL THOUGHT  
AND HISTORICAL DIFFERENCE

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## CHAPTER 3

## Translating Life-Worlds into Labor and History

In truth, the historian can never get away from the question of time in history: time sticks to his thinking like soil to a gardener's spade.

(*Fernand Braudel*)

The vulgar representation of time as a precise and homogeneous continuum has . . . diluted the Marxist concept of history.

(*Giorgio Agamben*)

A SECULAR SUBJECT like history faces certain problems in handling practices in which gods, spirits, or the supernatural have agency in the world. My central examples concern the history of work in South Asia. Labor, the activity of producing, is seldom a completely secular activity in India; it often entails, through rituals big and small, the invocation of divine or superhuman presence. Secular histories are usually produced by ignoring the signs of these presences. Such histories represent a meeting of two systems of thought, one in which the world is ultimately, that is, in the final analysis, disenchanted, and the other in which humans are not the only meaningful agents. For the purpose of writing history, the first system, the secular one, translates the second into itself. It is this translation—its methods and problems—that interests me here as part of a broader effort to situate the question of subaltern history within a postcolonial critique of modernity and of history itself.

This critique has to issue from within a dilemma: writing subaltern history, that is, documenting resistance to oppression and exploitation, must be part of a larger effort to make the world more socially just. To wrench subaltern studies away from the keen sense of social justice that gave rise to the project would violate the spirit that gives this project its sense of commitment and intellectual energy. Indeed, it may be said that it would violate the history of realist prose in India, for it may legitimately be argued that the administration of justice by modern institutions requires us to imagine the world through the languages of the social sciences, that is, as disenchanted.

## THE TIME OF HISTORY

History's own time is godless, continuous and, to follow Benjamin, empty and homogeneous. By this I mean that in employing modern historical consciousness (whether in academic writing or outside of it), we think of a world that, in Weber's description, is already disenchanted. Gods, spirits, and other "supernatural" forces can claim no agency in our narratives. Further, this time is empty because it acts as a bottomless sack: any number of events can be put inside it; and it is homogeneous because it is not affected by any particular events; its existence is independent of such events and in a sense it exists prior to them. Events happen in time but time is not affected by them. The time of human history—as any popular book on the evolution of this universe will show—merges with the time of prehistory, of evolutionary and geological changes that go back to the beginning of the universe. It is part of nature. This is what allowed J.B.S. Haldane once to write a book with the title *Everything Has a History*.<sup>1</sup> Hence the time of Newtonian science is no different from the time historians automatically assume to provide the ontological justification of their work. Things may move faster or slower in this time; that is simply the problem of speed. And the time may be cyclical or linear—the weeks belong to cyclical time, the English years go in hundred-year cycles, while the procession of years is a line. And historians may with justification talk about different regions of time: domestic time, work time, the time of the state, and so on. But all these times, whether cyclical or linear, fast or slow, are normally treated not as parts of a system of conventions, a cultural code of representation, but as something more objective, something belonging to "nature" itself. This nature/culture division becomes clear when we look at nineteenth-century uses of archaeology, for instance, in dating histories that provided no easy arrangements of chronology.

It is not that historians and philosophers of history are unaware of such a commonplace as the claim that modern historical consciousness, or for that matter academic history, are genres of recent origin (as indeed are the imaginations of the modern sciences). Nor have they been slow to acknowledge the changes these genres have undergone since their inception.<sup>2</sup> The naturalism of historical time, however, lies in the belief that *everything* can be historicized. So although the non-naturalness of the discipline of history is granted, the assumed universal applicability of its method entails the further assumption that it is always possible to assign people, places, and objects to a naturally existing, continuous flow of

historical time.<sup>3</sup> Thus, irrespective of a society's own understanding of temporality, a historian will always be able to produce a time line for the globe, in which for any given span of time, the events in areas X, Y, and Z can be named. It does not matter if any of these areas were inhabited by peoples such as the Hawaiians or the Hindus who, some would say, did not have a "sense of chronological history"—as distinct from other forms of memories and understandings of historicity—before European arrival. Contrary to whatever they themselves may have thought and however they may have organized their memories, the historian has the capacity to put them into a time we are all supposed to have shared, consciously or not. History as a code thus invokes a natural, homogeneous, secular, calendrical time without which the story of human evolution/civilization—a single human history, that is—cannot be told. In other words, the code of the secular calendar that frames historical explanations has this claim built into it: that independent of culture or consciousness, people exist in historical time. That is why it is always possible to discover "history" (say, after European contact) even if you were not aware of its existence in the past. History is supposed to exist in the same way as the earth.

I begin with the assumption that, to the contrary, this time, the basic code of history, does not belong to nature, that is, it is not completely independent of human systems of representation. It stands for a particular formation of the modern subject. This is not to say that this understanding of time is false or that it can be given up at will. But clearly the kind of correspondence that exists between our sensory worlds and the Newtonian imagination of the universe, between our experience of secular time and the time of physics, breaks down in many post-Einsteinian constructions. In the Newtonian universe, as in historical imagination, events are more or less separable from their descriptions: what is factual is seen as translatable from mathematics into prose or between different languages. Thus an elementary book on Newtonian physics can be written completely in the Bengali alphabet and numerals, using a minimum of mathematical signs. But not so with post-Einsteinian physics: language strains wildly when trying to convey in prose the mathematical imagination contained in an expression like "curved space" (for, thinking commonsensically, in what would such a space exist if not in space itself?). In this second case, one might say that the assumption of translatability does not quite hold, that really the imagination of Einsteinian physics is best learned through the language of its mathematics—for we are speaking of a universe of events in which the events cannot be separated from their

descriptions. Modern physics, one might say, took the linguistic turn early in this century. Post-Einsteinian cosmology, as the physicist Paul Davis puts it, makes even mathematical sense only so long as we do not try to take "a God's-eye-view" of the universe (that is, so long as one does not try to totalize or to view a "whole.") "I have grown used to dealing with the weird and wonderful world of relativity," writes Davis. "The ideas of space-warps, distortions in time and space and multiple universes have become everyday tools in the strange trade of the theoretical physics. . . . I believe that the reality exposed by modern physics is fundamentally alien to the human mind, and defies all power of direct visualization."<sup>4</sup>

Historians writing after the so-called linguistic turn may not any longer think that events are completely accessible by language, but the more sober among them would strive to avoid lunacy by resorting to weaker versions of this position. As put in the recent book *Telling the Truth about History*, historians, writing in the aftermath of postmodernism, would work toward an ideal of "workable truths," approximations of facts that can be agreed to by all even after it is granted that language and representations always form a (thin?) film between us and the world (in the same way as we can mostly ignore the insights of Einsteinian or quantum physics in negotiating our everyday movements in practical life). The higher ideal of translatability between different languages—thus Vietnamese history into Bengali—remains worth striving for even if language always foils the effort. This ideal—a modified Newtonianism—is, in their view, the historian's protection against the sheer madness of postmodernist and cultural-relativist talk about "untranslatability," "incommensurability," and all that.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike the world of the physicist Paul Davis, then, in the discipline of history the imagination of reality is dependent on the capacities of "the human mind," its powers of visualization. The use of the definite article—"the human mind"—is critical here, for this reality aspires to achieve a status of transparency with regard to particular human languages, an ideal of objectivity entertained by Newtonian science in which translation between different languages is mediated by the higher language of science itself. Thus *pani* in Hindi and "water" in English can both be mediated by H<sub>2</sub>O. Needless to say, it is only the higher language that is capable of appreciating, if not expressing, the capacities of "the human mind." I would suggest that the idea of a godless, continuous, empty, and homogeneous time, which history shares with the other social sciences and modern political philosophy as a basic building block, belongs to this model of a higher, overarching language. It represents a structure of generality,

an aspiration toward the scientific, that is built into conversations that take the modern historical consciousness for granted.

A proposition of radical untranslatability therefore comes as a problem to the universal categories that sustain the historian's enterprise. But it is also a false problem created by the very nature of the universal itself, which aims to function as a supervening general construction mediating between all the particulars on the ground. The secular code of historical and humanist time—that is, a time bereft gods and spirits—is one such universal. Claims about agency on behalf of the religious, the supernatural, the divine, and the ghostly have to be mediated in terms of this universal. The social scientist-historian assumes that contexts explain particular gods: if we could all have the same context, then we would all have the same gods. But there is a problem. Although the sameness of our sciences can be guaranteed all the world over, the sameness of our gods and spirits could not be proved in the same objective manner (notwithstanding the protestations of the well-meaning that all religions speak of the same God). So it could be said that although the sciences signify some kind of sameness in our understanding of the world across cultures, the gods signify differences (bracketing for the moment the history of conversion, which I touch on very briefly in a later section). Writing about the presence of gods and spirits in the secular language of history or sociology would therefore be like translating into a universal language that which belongs to a field of differences.

The history of work in South Asia provides an interesting example of this problem. "Work" or "labor" are words deeply implicated in the production of universal sociologies. Labor is one of the key categories in the imagination of capitalism itself. In the same way that we think of capitalism as coming into being in all sorts of contexts, we also imagine the modern category "work" or "labor" as emerging in all kinds of histories. This is what makes possible studies in the familiar genre of "history of work in . . .". In this sense, labor or work has the same status in my posing of the problem as does H<sub>2</sub>O in the relation between "water" and *pani*. Yet the fact is that the modern word "labor," as every historian of labor in India would know, translates into a general category a whole host of words and practices with divergent and different associations. What complicates the story further is the fact that in a society such as the Indian, human activity (including what one would, sociologically speaking, regard as labor) is often associated with the presence and agency of gods or spirits in the very process of labor. *Hathiyar puja* or the "worship of tools," for example, is a common and familiar festival in many north

Indian factories. How do we—and I mean narrators of the pasts of the subaltern classes in India—handle this problem of the presence of the divine or the supernatural in the history of labor as we render this enchanted world into our disenchanted prose—a rendering required, let us say, in the interest of social justice? And how do we, in doing this, retain the subaltern (in whose activity gods or spirits present themselves) as the subjects of their histories? I shall go over this question by examining the work of three *Subaltern Studies* historians who have produced fragments of histories of work in the context of "capitalist transition" in India: Gyan Prakash, Gyan Pandey, and myself. I hope that my discussion will have something to say about the historian's enterprise in general.

#### RENDERING ACTIVITY INTO "LABOR"

Let me begin with an example from my own research in labor history. Consider the following description from the 1930s of a particular festival (still quite common in India) that entails the worshiping of machinery by workers: "In some of the jute mills near Calcutta the mechanics often sacrifice goats at this time [autumn]. A separate alter is erected by the mechanics. . . . Various tools and other emblems are placed upon it. . . . Incense is burnt. . . . Towards evening a male goat is thoroughly washed . . . and prepared for a . . . final sacrifice. . . . The animal is decapitated at one stroke . . . [and] the head is deposited in the . . . sacred Ganges."<sup>6</sup> This particular festival is celebrated in many parts of north India as a public holiday for the working class, on a day named after the engineer god Vishvakarma.<sup>7</sup> How do we read it? To the extent that this day has now become a public holiday in India, it has obviously been subjected to a process of bargaining between employers, workers, and the state. One could also argue that insofar as the ideas of recreation and leisure belong to a discourse of what makes labor efficient and productive, this "religious" holiday itself belongs to the process through which labor is managed and disciplined, and is hence a part of the history of emergence of abstract labor in commodity form. The very public nature of the holiday shows that it has been written into an emergent national, secular calendar of production. We could thus produce a secular narrative that would apply to any working-class religious holiday anywhere. Christmas or the Muslim festival Id could be seen in the same light. The difference between Vishvakarma *puja* (worship) and Christmas or Id would then be explained anthropologically, that is, by holding another master code—"cul-

ture” or “religion”—constant and universal. The differences between religions are by definition incapable of bringing the master category “culture” or “religion” into any kind of crisis. We know that these categories are problematic, that not all people have what is called “culture” or “religion” in the English senses of these words, but we have to operate as though this limitation was not of any great moment. This was exactly how I treated this episode in my own book. The eruption of Vishvakarma *puja* interrupting the rhythm of production, was no threat to my Marxism or secularism. Like many of my colleagues in labor history, I interpreted worshipping machinery—an everyday fact of life in India, from taxis to scooter-rickshaws, minibuses and lathe machines—as “insurance policy” against accidents and contingencies. That in the so-called religious imagination (as in language), redundancy—the huge and, from a strictly functionalist point of view, unnecessarily elaborate panoply of iconography and rituals—proved the poverty of a purely functionalist approach never deterred my secular narrative. The question of whether or not the workers had a conscious or doctrinal belief in gods and spirits was also wide of the mark; after all, gods are as real as ideology is—that is to say, they are embedded in practices.<sup>8</sup> More often than not, their presence is collectively invoked by rituals rather than by conscious belief.

The history of weaving in colonial Uttar Pradesh that Gyanendra Pandey examines in his book *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* offers us another example of this tension between the general secular time of history and the singular times of gods and spirits.<sup>9</sup> Pandey’s work deals with the history of a group of north Indian Muslim weavers called the Julahas, and constitutes an imaginative and radical reexamination of the stereotype of religious fanatics through which the British colonial officials saw them. The Julahas, Pandey shows, faced increasing displacement from their craft as a consequence of colonial economic policies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and this had much to do with the history of their cultural practices in this period. Pandey’s text, however, reveals problems of translation of specific life-worlds into universal sociological categories similar to those implicit in my work on labor. On the one hand, he has recourse to a general figure, that of the weaver-in-general during early industrialization. This figure underlies his comparativist gestures toward European history. The sentence that opens the chapter on “The Weavers” in *The Making of the English Working Class*—“The history of the weavers in the nineteenth century is haunted by the legend of better days”—and a generalizing quote from Marx act as the framing devices for Pandey’s chapter. “[B]ecause of the nature of

their occupation,” writes Pandey, “weavers *everywhere* [emphasis added] have been commonly dependent on money lenders and other middlemen and vulnerable to the play of the market forces, all the more so in the era of the advance of industrial capitalism.” He adds a few pages later, “The history of the north Indian weavers in the nineteenth century is, in E. P. Thompson’s phrase from another context, ‘haunted by the legend of better days.’”<sup>10</sup> Further on, he writes in a Thompsonian vein of the weavers’ “fight to preserve . . . their economic and social status” and of “their memories and pride” that fueled this fight.<sup>11</sup>

Pandey’s own sensitivity and his acute sense of responsibility to the evidence, on the other hand, present the question of historical difference—already hinted at in his gesture of assigning the Thompson quote to a “different context”—in such a forceful manner that the comparativist stance is rendered problematic. The “legend of better days” in Thompson’s account is entirely secular. It refers to a “golden age” made up of stories about “personal and . . . close” relations between “small masters and their men,” about “strongly organized trade societies,” relative material prosperity, and the weavers’ “deep attachment to the values of independence.”<sup>12</sup> A Wesleyan church in the village community marked, if anything, the physical and existential distance between the loom and God, and the weavers, as Thompson says, were often critical of the “parish-church pa’son’s.”<sup>13</sup> God, on the other hand, is ever present in the phenomenology of weaving in north India as Pandey explains it, and it is a god quite different from Thompson’s. Indeed, as Pandey makes clear, work and worship were two inseparable activities to the Julahas, so inseparable, in fact, that one could ask whether it makes sense to ascribe to them the identity that only in the secular and overlapping languages of the census, administration, and sociology becomes the name of their “occupation”: weaving.

As Pandey explains, his weavers called themselves *nurbaf* or “weavers of light.” Drawing on Deepak Mehta’s study of “Muslim weavers in two villages of Bara Banki district,” Pandey notes “the intimate connection between work and worship in the lives of the weavers, and the centrality of the weavers’ major religious text (or *kitab*), the *Mufid-ul-Mominin* in the practice of both.” The *Mufid-ul-Mominin*, Pandey adds, “relates how the practice of weaving came into the world at its very beginning” (by a version of the Adam, Hawwa [Eve], and Jabril [Gabriel] story), and “lists nineteen supplicatory prayers to be uttered in the different stages of weaving.”<sup>14</sup> During the initiation of novices, notes Pandey, “all the prayers associated with the loom are recited. . . . The male head-weaver, in whose

household this initiation takes place, reads out all of Adam's questions and Jabril's answers from the *kitab* during the first six days of the month when both the loom and the *karkhana* [workshop or work loom] are ritually cleaned." When the loom is passed on from father to son, again, "the entire conversation between Adam and Jabril is read out once by a holy man."<sup>15</sup> This was nothing like an enactment of some memory of times past, nor a nostalgia, as Thompson puts it, haunted by the "legend of better days." The *Mufid-ul-Mominin* is not a book that has come down to present-day Julahas from a hoary antiquity. Deepak Mehta expressed the view to Pandey that it "may well date from the post-Independence period." Pandey himself is of the opinion that "it is more than likely that the *Mufid-ul-Mominin* came to occupy this place as *the* "book" of the weavers fairly recently—not before the late nineteenth or the early twentieth century, in any case—for it is only from that time that the name "Momin" (the faithful) was claimed as their own by the weavers.<sup>16</sup>

So Pandey's Julahas are actually both like and unlike Thompson's weavers, and it is their difference that allows us to raise the question of how one may narrate the specificity of their life-world as it was increasingly being subordinated to the globalizing urges of capital. Was their god the same as the god of Thompson's Wesleyans? How would one translate into the other? Can we take this translation through some idea of a universal and freely exchangeable God, an icon of our humanism? I cannot answer the question because of my ignorance—I have no intimate knowledge of the Julahas' god—but Richard Eaton's study of Islamic mysticism in the Deccan in India gives us some further insights into what I might crudely call nonsecular and phenomenological histories of labor.<sup>17</sup>

Eaton quotes from seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and early nineteenth-century Sufi manuscripts songs that Muslim women in the Deccan sang while engaged in such tasks as spinning, grinding millet, and rocking children to sleep. They all reveal, as Eaton puts it, "the ontological link between God, the Prophet, the *pir* [the Sufi teacher], and [work]."<sup>18</sup> "As the *chakki* [grindstone] turns, so we find God," Eaton quotes an early eighteenth-century song: "it shows its life in turning as we do in breathing." Divinity is sometimes brought to presence through analogy, as in:

The *chakki*'s handle resembles *alif*, which means Allah;  
And the axle is Muhammad . . .

and sometimes in ways that make the bodily labor of work and worship absolutely inseparable experiences, as is suggested by this song sung at the spinning wheel:

As you take the cotton, you should do *zikhri jali* [*zikhri*: mention of God].  
As you separate the cotton, you should do *zikhri qalbi*,  
And as you spool the thread you should do *zikhri 'aini*.  
*Zikhri* should be uttered from the stomach through the chest,  
And threaded through the throat.  
The threads of breath should be counted one by one, oh sister,  
Up to twenty-four thousand.  
Do this day and night,  
And offer it to your *pir* as a gift.<sup>19</sup>

Straining further toward the imaginative richness of this phenomenology of turning the *chakki* would require us to explore the differences between the different kinds of *zikhri*s mentioned in this song and to enter imaginatively the "mysticism" (once again, a generalizing name!) that envelops them. But on what grounds do we assume, ahead of any investigation, that this divine presence invoked at every turn of the *chakki* will translate neatly into a secular history of labor so that—transferring the argument back to the context of the tool-worshipping factory workers—the human beings collected in modern industries may indeed appear as the subjects of a metanarrative of Marxism, socialism, or even democracy?

Gyan Prakash's monograph on the history of "bonded" labor in Bihar in colonial India contains an imaginative discussion of *bhuts* (spirits) that are thought to have supernatural power over humans, although they do not belong to the pantheon of divinity. Prakash documents how these *bhuts* intercede in the relations of agrarian production in Gaya, particularly a special category of *bhut* called *malik devata* (spirits of dead landlords). But Prakash's monograph, at the same time, is part of a conversation in academia, as all good historical work has to be, for that is the condition of its production. This conversation is an inherent part of the process through which books and ideas express their own commodified character; they all participate in a general economy of exchange made possible through the emergence of abstract, generalizing categories. It is instructive, therefore, to see how the protocols of that conversation necessarily structure Prakash's explanatory framework and thereby obliterate from view some of the tensions of irreducible plurality I am trying to visualize in the history of labor itself. Prakash writes: "In such fantastic images, the *malik*'s [landlord's] power was reconstructed. Like Tio, the devil worshipped by the miners in Bolivia, the *malik* represented subordination of the *Bhuinyas* [laborers] by landlords. But whereas Tio expressed the alienation of miners from capitalist production, as Michael Taussig

so eloquently argues, the *malik devata* of colonial Gaya echoed the power of the landlords over *kamiyas*, based on land control."<sup>20</sup>

Now, Prakash is not wrong in any simple sense; his sensitivity to the "logic of ritual practice" is, in fact, exemplary. It is just that I am reading this passage to understand the conditions for intertextuality that govern its structure and allow a conversation to emerge between Prakash's study, located in colonial Bihar in India, and Taussig's study of labor in the Bolivian tin mines. How do the specific and the general come together in this play of intertextuality, as we try to think our way to the art of "holding apart" that which coalesces *within* the process of this "coming together" of disparate histories?

The intertextuality of the passage from Prakash is based on the simultaneous assertion of likeness and dissimilarity between *malik devata* and Tio: witness the contradictory moves made by the two phrases, "like Tio" and "whereas Tio." They are similar in that they have similar relationship to "power": they both "express" and "echo" it. Their difference, however, is absorbed in a larger theoretic-universal difference between two different kinds of power, capitalist production and "land control." Pressed to the extreme, "power" itself must emerge as a last-ditch universal-sociological category (as indeed happens in texts that look for sociology in Foucault). But this "difference" already belongs to the sphere of the general.

Normally, the condition for conversation between historians and social scientists working on disparate sites is a structure of generality within which specificities and differences are contained. Paul Veyne's distinction between "specificity" and "singularity" is relevant here. As Veyne puts it: "History is interested in individualized events . . . but it is not interested in their individuality; it seeks to understand them—that is, to find among them a kind of generality or, more precisely, of specificity. It is the same with natural history; its curiosity is inexhaustible, all the species matter to it and none is superfluous, but it does not propose the enjoyment of their singularity in the manner of the bestiary of the Middle Ages, in which one could read descriptions of noble, beautiful, strange or cruel animals."<sup>21</sup>

The very conception of the "specific" as it obtains in the discipline of history, in other words, belongs to the structure of a general that necessarily occludes our view of the singular. Of course, nothing exists out there as a "singular-in-itself." Singularity is a matter of viewing. It comes into being as that which resists our attempt to see something as a particular instance of a general idea or category. Philosophically, it is a limiting

concept, since language itself mostly speaks of the general. Facing the singular might be a question of straining against language itself; it could, for example, involve the consideration of the manner in which the world, after all, remains opaque to the generalities inherent in language. Here, however, I am using a slightly weaker version of the idea. By "singular" I mean that which defies the generalizing impulse of the sociological imagination. To indicate what the struggle to view the singular might entail in the case of writing history, let us begin from a seemingly absurd position and see what happens to our intertextual conversation if we reverse the propositions of Prakash (and Taussig) to claim first, that the "alienation of [Bolivian] miners from capitalist production" expressed the spirit of Tio, and second, that "the power of the landlord over [Bihari] *kamiyas*" "echoed" the power of the *malik devata*. The conversation stalls. Why? Because we do not know what the relationship is between *malik devata* and Tio. They do not belong to structures of generalities, nor is there any guarantee that a relationship could exist between the two without the mediation of the language of social science. Between "capitalist production" and the "power of the landlord," however, the relationship is known—or at least we think we know it—thanks to all the grand narratives of transition from precapital to capital. The relationship is always at least implicit in our sociologies that permeate the very language of social-science writing.

## TWO MODELS OF TRANSLATION

Let me make it clear that the raging Medusa of cultural relativism is not rearing her ugly head in my discussion at this point. To allow for plurality, signified by the plurality of gods, is to think in terms of singularities. To think in terms of singularities, however—and this I must make clear since so many scholars these days are prone to see parochialism, essentialism, or cultural relativism in every claim of non-Western difference—is *not* to make a claim against the demonstrable and documentable permeability of cultures and languages. It is, in fact, to appeal to models of cross-cultural and cross-categorical translations that do not take a universal middle term for granted. The Hindi *pani* may be translated into the English "water" without having to go through the superior positivity of H<sub>2</sub>O. In this, at least in India but perhaps elsewhere as well, we have something to learn from nonmodern instances of cross-categorical translation.

I give an example here of the translation of Hindu gods into expressions of Islamic divinity that was performed in an eighteenth-century Bengali religious text called *Shunya-puran*. (The evidence belongs to the “history of conversion” to Islam in Bengal.) This text has a description, well known to students of Bengali literature, of Islamic wrath falling upon a group of oppressive Brahmins. As part of this description, it gives the following account of an exchange of identities between individual Hindu deities and their Islamic counterparts. What is of interest here is the way this translation of divinities works:

Dharma who resided in Baikuntha was grieved to see all this [Brahminic misconduct]. He came to the world as a Muhammadan . . . [and] was called Khoda. . . . Brahma incarnated himself as Muhammad, Visnu as Paigambar and Civa became Adamfa (Adam). Ganesa came as a Gazi, Kartika as a Kazi, Narada became a Sekha and Indra a Moulana. The Risis of heaven became Fakirs. . . . The goddess Chandi incarnated herself as Haya Bibi [the wife of the original man] and Padmavati became Bibi Nur [Nur = light].<sup>22</sup>

Eaton’s recent study of Islam in Bengal gives many more such instances of translation of gods. Consider the case of an Arabic-Sanskrit bilingual inscription from a thirteenth-century mosque in coastal Gujarat that Eaton cites in his discussion. The Arabic part of this inscription, dated 1264, “refers to the deity worshiped in the mosque as Allah” while, as Eaton puts it, “the Sanskrit text of the same inscription addresses the supreme god by the names Visvanatha (‘lord of the universe’), Sunyarupa (‘one whose form is of the void’), and Visvarupa (‘having various forms’).”<sup>23</sup> Further on, Eaton gives another example: “The sixteenth-century poet Haji Muhammad identified the Arabic Allah with Gosai (Skt. ‘Master’), Saiyid Murtaza identified the Prophet’s daughter Fatima with Jagat-janani (Skt. ‘Mother of the World’), and Saiyid Sultan identified the God of Adam, Abraham, and Moses with Prabhu (Skt. ‘Lord’).”<sup>24</sup>

In a similar vein, Carl W. Ernst’s study of South Asian Sufism mentions a coin issued by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (c. 1018 C.E.) that contained “a Sanskrit translation of the Islamic profession of faith.” One side of the coin had an Arabic inscription whereas the other side said, in Sanskrit: *avyaktam ekam muhamadah avatarah nrpati mahamuda* (which Ernst translates as, “There is One unlimited [unmanifest?], Muhammad is the *avatar*, the king is Mahmud”). Ernst comments, expressing a sensibility that is no doubt modern: “The selection of the term *avatar* to translate the Arabic *rasul*, ‘messenger,’ is striking, since *avatar* is a term reserved

in Indian thought for the descent of the god Vishnu into earthly form. . . . It is hard to do more than wonder at the theological originality of equating the Prophet with the *avatar* of Vishnu.”<sup>25</sup>

The interesting point, for our purpose and in our language, is how the translations in these passages take for their model of exchange barter rather than the generalized exchange of commodities, which always needs the mediation of a universal, homogenizing middle term (such as, in Marxism, abstract labor). The translations here are based on very local, particular, one-for-one exchanges, guided in part, no doubt—at least in the case of *Shunya-puran*—by the poetic requirements of alliterations, meter, rhetorical conventions, and so on. There are surely rules in these exchanges, but the point is that even if I cannot decipher them all—and even if they are not all decipherable, that is to say, even if the processes of translation contain a degree of opacity—it can be safely asserted that these rules cannot and would not claim to have the “universal” character of the rules that sustain conversations between social scientists working on disparate sites of the world. As Gautam Bhadra has written: “One of the major features of these types of cultural interaction [between Hindus and Muslims] is to be seen at the linguistic level. Here, recourse is often had to the consonance of sounds or images to transform one god into another, a procedure that appeals more . . . to popular responses to alliteration, rhyming and other rhetorical devices—rather than to any elaborate structure of reason and argument.”<sup>26</sup>

One critical aspect of this mode of translation is that it makes no appeal to any of the implicit universals that inhere in the sociological imagination. When it is claimed, for instance, by persons belonging to devotional traditions (*bhakti*) that “the Hindu’s Ram is the same as the Muslim’s Rahim,” the contention is not that some third category expresses the attributes of Ram or Rahim better than either of these two terms and thus mediates in the relationship between the two. Yet such claim is precisely what would mark an act of translation modeled on Newtonian science. The claim there would be that not only do H<sub>2</sub>O, water, and *pani* refer to the same entity or substance but that H<sub>2</sub>O best expresses or captures the attributes, the constitutional properties, of this substance. “God” became such an item of universal equivalence in the nineteenth century, but this is not characteristic of the kind of cross-categorical translations we are dealing with here.

Consider the additional example Ernst provides of such nonmodern translation of gods. He mentions “a fifteenth century Sanskrit text written in Gujarati for guidance of Indian architects employed to build mosques.



In it, the god Visvakarma says of the mosque, 'There is no image and there they worship, through *dhyana*, . . . the formless, attributeless, all-pervading Supreme God whom they call Rahamana.'<sup>27</sup> The expression "supreme God" does not function in the manner of a scientific third term, for it has no higher claims of descriptive ability, it does not stand for a truer reality. For, after all, if the supreme One was without attributes, how could one human language claim to have captured the attributes of this divinity better than a word in another language that is also human? These instances of translation do not necessarily suggest peace and harmony between Hindus and Muslims, but they are translations in which codes are switched locally, without going through a universal set of rules. There are no overarching censoring/limiting/defining systems of thought that neutralize and relegate differences to the margins, nothing like an overarching category of "religion" that is supposed to remain unaffected by differences between the entities it seeks to name and thereby contain. The very obscurity of the translation process allows the incorporation of that which remains untranslatable.

#### HISTORICAL TIME AND THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION

It is obvious that this nonsociological mode of translation lends itself more easily to fiction, particularly of the nonrealist or magic-realist variety practiced today, than to the secular and realist prose of sociology or history. In these fictive narratives, gods and spirits can indeed be agents. But then what of history? What of its abiding allegiance to secular, continuous, empty, homogenous time? And what of the project of Marxist-subaltern history in which this work participates? Mine is not a postmodern argument announcing the death of history and recommending fiction writing as a career for all historians. For, the question of personal talents apart, there is a good reason why the training of the mind in modern historical consciousness is justified even from the point of view of the subaltern, and this has to do with the intermeshing of the logic of secular human sciences with that of bureaucracies. One cannot argue with modern bureaucracies and other instruments of governmentality without recourse to the secular time and narratives of history and sociology. The subaltern classes need this knowledge in order to fight their battles for social justice. It would therefore be unethical not to make historical consciousness available to everybody, in particular the subaltern classes.

Yet historicism carries with it, precisely because of its association with the logic of bureaucratic decision making, an inherent modernist elitism that silently lodges itself in our everyday consciousness.<sup>28</sup> Eaton begins the last chapter of his meticulously researched book on Bengali Islam with a historicist sentence that aims to appeal to the trained aesthetic sensibility of all historians: "Like the strata of a geologic fossil record, place names covering the surface of a map silently testify to past historical processes."<sup>29</sup> However, the point at issue is not how individual historians think about historical time, for it is not the self-regarding attitude of historians that make history, the subject, important in the world outside academia. History is important as a form of consciousness in modernity (historians may want to see themselves as its arbiters and custodians, but that is a different question). Let me explain, therefore, with the help of an ordinary, casual example, how a certain sense of historical time works in the everyday speech of public life in modern societies.

Consider the following statement in a newspaper article by the cultural-studies specialist Simon During in an issue of the Melbourne daily *Age* (19 June 1993): "thinking about movies like *Of Mice and Men* and *The Last of the Mohicans* allows us to see more clearly where contemporary culture is going."<sup>30</sup> During is not the target of my comments. My remarks pertain to a certain habit of thought that the statement illustrates: the imagination of historical time that is built into this use of the word "contemporary." Clearly, the word involves the double gesture of both inclusion and exclusion, and an implicit acceptance of this gesture is the condition that enables the sentence to communicate its point. On the one hand, "contemporary" refers to all that belongs to a culture at a particular point on the (secular) calendar that the author and the intended reader of this statement inhabit. In that sense, everybody is part of the "contemporary." Yet, surely, it is not being claimed that every element in the culture is moving toward the destination that the author has identified in the films mentioned. What about, for instance, the peasants of Greece, if we could imagine them migrating to the "now" of the speaker? (I mention the Greeks because they constitute one of the largest groups of European immigrants into Australia.) They may inhabit the speaker's "now" and yet may not be going in the direction that *The Last of the Mohicans* suggests.<sup>31</sup> The implicit claim of the speaker is not that these people are not moving but that whatever futures these others may be building for themselves will soon be swamped and overwhelmed by the future the author divines on the basis of his evidence. That is the gesture of exclusion built into this use of the word "contemporary."

If this sounds like too strong a claim, try the following thought experiment. Suppose we argue that the contemporary is actually plural, so radically plural that it is not possible for any particular aspect or element to claim to represent the whole in any way (even as a possible future). Under these conditions, a statement such as During's would be impossible to make. We would instead have to say that "contemporary culture," being plural and there being equality within plurality, was going many different places at the same time (I have problems with "at the same time," but let's stay with it for the present). Then there would be no way of talking about the "cutting edge," the avant-garde, the latest that represents the future, the most modern, and so on. Without such a rhetoric and a vocabulary and the sentiments that go with them, however, many of our everyday political strategies in the scramble for material resources would be impossible to pursue. How would you get government backing, research funding, institutional approval for an idea if you could not claim on its behalf that it represents the "dynamic" part of the contemporary, which thus is pictured as always split into two, one part rushing headlong into the future, and another passing away into the past, something like the living dead in our midst?

A certain kind of historicism, the metanarrative of progress, is thus deeply embedded in our institutional lives however much we may develop, as individual intellectuals, an attitude of incredulity toward such metanarratives. (Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* actually concedes this point.)<sup>32</sup> This we need to develop critiques of institutions on their own terms, secular critiques for secular institutions of government. Marx's thoughts, still the most effective secular critique of "capital," remain indispensable to our engagement with the question of social justice in capitalist societies. But my point is that what is indispensable remains inadequate, for we still have to translate into the time of history and the universal and secular narrative of "labor" stories about being human that incorporate agency on the part of gods and spirits.

At this point I want to acknowledge and learn from the modes of translation that I have called nonmodern, the barterlike term-for-term exchanges that bypass all the implicit sociologies of our narratives of capitalism. This mode of translation is antisociology and for that reason has no obligation to be secular. The past is pure narration, no matter who has agency in it. Fiction and films, as I have said, are the best modern media for handling this mode. But this option is not open to the historian writing in search of social justice and equity. Criticism in the historical mode, even when it does not institute a human subject at the center of history,

seeks to dispel and demystify gods and spirits as so many ploys of secular relationships of power. The moment we think of the world as disenchanted, however, we set limits to the ways the past can be narrated. As a practicing historian, one has to take these limits seriously. For instance, there are cases of peasant revolts in India in which the peasants claimed to have been inspired to rebellion by the exhortations of their gods. For a historian, this statement would never do as an explanation, and one would feel obliged to translate the peasants' claim into some kind of context of understandable (that is, secular) causes animating the rebellion. I assume that such translation is both inevitable and unavoidable (for we do not write for the peasants). The question is: How do we conduct these translations in such a manner as to make visible all the problems of translating diverse and enchanted worlds into the universal and disenchanted language of sociology?

Here I have learned from Vincente Raphael's and Gayatri Spivak's discussions of the politics of translation.<sup>33</sup> We know that given the plurality of gods, the translation from godly time into the time of secular labor could proceed along a variety of paths. But whatever the nature of the path, this translation, to borrow from Spivak's and Rafael's handling of the question, must possess something of the "uncanny" about it. An ambiguity must mark the translation of the tool-worshiping jute worker's labor into the universal category "labor": it must be enough like the secular category "labor" to make sense, yet the presence and plurality of gods and spirits in it must also make it "enough unlike to shock."<sup>34</sup> There remains something of a "scandal"—of the shocking—in every translation, and it is only through a relationship of intimacy to both languages that we are aware of the degree of this scandal.

This property of translation—that we become more aware of the scandalous aspects of a translation process only if we know both of the languages intimately—has been well expressed by Michael Gelven:

If an English-speaking student . . . sets out to learn German, he first looks up in a lexicon or vocabulary list a few basic German words. At this point, however, these German words are not German at all. They are merely sounds substituted for English meanings. They are, in a very real sense, English words. This means that they take their contextual significance from the . . . totality of the English language. . . . If a novice in German language picked up a copy of Schopenhauer's book and wondered what *Vorstellung* meant in the title, he would probably look the term up in the lexicon, and find such suggestions as "placing before."

And although he might think it strange to title a book "The World as Will and Placing Before," he would nevertheless have some idea of the meaning of that remarkable work. But as this novice worked himself through the language, and became familiar with the many uses of the term *Vorstellung* and actually used it himself . . . [h]e might, to his own surprise, realize that although he knew what the term meant, he could not translate the German term back into his own language—an obvious indication that the reference of meaning was no longer English as in his first encounter with it.<sup>35</sup>

Usually, or at least in South Asian studies, the Marxist or secular scholar who is translating the divine is in the place of the student who knows well only one of the two languages he is working with. It is all the more imperative, therefore, that we read our secular universals in such a way as to keep them open to their own finitude, so that the scandalous aspects of our unavoidable translations, instead of being made inaudible, actually reverberate through what we write in subaltern studies. To recognize the existence of this "scandal" in the very formation of our sociological categories is the first step we can take toward working the universalist and global archives of capital in such a way as to "blast . . . out of the homogeneous course of history" times that produce cracks in the structure of that homogeneity.<sup>36</sup>

#### LABOR AS A HISTORY OF DIFFERENCE IN THE TRANSLATION INTO CAPITALISM

In this concluding section I will try to show, by reading Marx with the help of the Derridean notion of the trace, how one may hold one's categories open in translating and producing, out of the pasts of the subaltern classes, what is undeniably a universal history of labor in the capitalist mode of production.<sup>37</sup>

Looking back at my own work on Indian "working-class" history a few years ago, I seem to have only half thought through the problem. I documented a history whose narrative(s) produced several points of friction with the teleologies of "capital." In my study of the jute-mill workers of colonial Bengal, I tried to show how the production relations in these mills were structured from the inside, as it were, by a whole series of relations that could only be considered precapitalist. The coming of capital and commodity did not appear to lead to the politics of equal rights

that Marx saw as internal to these categories. I refer here in particular to the critical distinction Marx draws between "real" and "abstract" labor in explaining the production and the form of the commodity. These distinctions refer to a question in Marx's thought that we may now recognize as the question of the politics of difference. The question for Marx was: If human beings are individually different from one another in their capacity to labor, how does capital produce out of this field of difference an abstract, homogeneous measure of labor that makes the generalized production of commodities possible?

This is how I then read the distinction between real and abstract labor (with enormous debt to Michel Henry and I. I. Rubin):<sup>38</sup>

Marx places the question of subjectivity right at the heart of his category "capital" when he posits the conflict between "real labour" and "abstract labour" as one of its central contradictions. "Real labour" refers to the labor power of the actual individual, labor power "as it exists in the personality of the labourer"—that is, as it exists in the "immediate exclusive individuality" of the individual. Just as personalities differ, similarly the labor power of one individual is different from that of another. "Real labour" refers to the essential heterogeneity of individual capacities. "Abstract" or general labor, on the other hand, refers to the idea of uniform, homogeneous labor that capitalism imposes on this heterogeneity, the notion of a general labor that underlies "exchange value." It is what makes labor measurable and makes possible the generalized exchange of commodities. It expresses itself . . . in capitalist discipline, which has the sole objective of making every individual's concrete labor—by nature heterogeneous—"uniform and homogeneous" through supervision and technology employed in the labor process. . . . Politically, . . . the concept of "abstract labour" is an extension of the bourgeois notion of the "equal rights" of "abstract individuals," whose political life is reflected in the ideals and practice of "citizenship." The politics of "equal rights" is thus precisely the "politics" one can read into the category "capital."<sup>39</sup>

It now seems to me that Marx's category of commodity has a certain built-in openness to difference that I did not fully exploit in my exposition. My reading of the term "precapital" remained, in spite of my efforts, hopelessly historicist, and my narrative never quite escaped the (false) question, Why did the Indian working class fail to sustain a long-term sense of class consciousness? The metaproblem of "failure" arises from

the well-known Marxist tradition of positing the working class as a trans-cultural subject. It is also clear from the above quote that my reading took the ideas of the "individual" and "personality" as unproblematically given, and read the word "real" (in "real labour") to mean something primordially natural (and therefore not social).

But my larger failure lay in my inability to see that if one reads the word "real" not as something that refers to a Rousseauian "natural," that is, the naturally different endowments of different, and ahistorical, individuals but rather as something that questions the nature-culture distinction itself, other possibilities open up, among them that of writing "difference" back into Marx. For the "real" then (in this reading) must refer to different kinds of "social," which could include gods and spirits—and hence to different orders of temporality, as well. It should in principle even allow for the possibility that these temporal horizons are mutually incommensurable. The transition from "real" to "abstract" is thus also a question of transition/translation from many and possibly incommensurable temporalities to the homogeneous time of abstract labor, the transition from nonhistory to history. "Real" labor, the category, itself a universal, must nevertheless have the capacity to refer to that which cannot be enclosed by the sign "commodity" even though what remains unenclosed constantly inheres in the sign itself. In other words, by thinking of the category "commodity" as constituted by a permanent tension between "real" and "abstract" labor, Marx, as it were, builds a memory into this analytical category of that which it can never completely capture. The gap between real and abstract labor and the force ("factory discipline," in Marx's description) constantly needed to close it, are what then introduce the movement of difference into the very constitution of the commodity, and thereby eternally defer the achievement of its true/ideal character.

The sign "commodity," as Marx explains, will always carry as part of its internal structure certain universal emancipatory narratives. If one overlooked the tension Marx situated at the heart of this category, these narratives could indeed produce the standard teleologies one normally encounters in Marxist historicism: that of citizenship, the juridical subject of Enlightenment thought, the subject of political theory of rights, and so on. I have not sought to deny the practical utility of these narratives in modern political structures. The more interesting problem for the Marxist historian, it seems to me, is the problem of temporality that the category "commodity," constituted through the tension and possible noncommensurability between real and abstract labor, invites us to think. If real labor, as we have said, belongs to a world of heterogeneity whose various tempo-

ralities cannot be enclosed in the sign "history,"—Michael Taussig's work on Bolivian tin miners has shown that they are not even all "secular" (that is, bereft of gods and spirits)—then it can find a place in a historical narrative of commodity production only as a Derridean trace of that which cannot be enclosed, an element that constantly challenges from within capital's and commodity's—and by implication, history's—claims to unity and universality.<sup>40</sup>

The prefix *pre* in "precapital," it could be said similarly, is not a reference to what is simply chronologically prior on an ordinal, homogeneous scale of time. "Precapitalist" speaks of a particular relationship to capital marked by the tension of difference in the horizons of time. The "precapitalist," on the basis of this argument, can only be imagined as something that exists within the temporal horizon of capital and that at the same time disrupts the continuity of this time by suggesting another time that is not on the same, secular, homogeneous calendar (which is why what is precapital is not chronologically prior to capital, that is to say, one cannot assign it to a point on the same continuous time line). This is another time that, theoretically, could be entirely immeasurable in terms of the units of the godless, spiritless time of what we call "history," an idea already assumed in the secular concepts of "capital" and "abstract labor."

Subaltern histories, thus conceived in relationship to the question of difference, will have a split running through them. On the one hand, they are "histories" in that they are constructed within the master code of secular history and use the accepted academic codes of history writing (and thereby perforce subordinate to themselves all other forms of memory). On the other hand, they cannot ever afford to grant this master code its claim of being a mode of thought that comes to all human beings naturally, or even to be treated as something that exists in nature itself. Subaltern histories are therefore constructed within a particular kind of historicized memory, one that remembers history itself as an imperious code that accompanied the civilizing process that the European Enlightenment inaugurated in the eighteenth century as a world-historical task. It is not enough to historicize "history," the discipline, for that only uncritically keeps in place the very understanding of time that enables us to historicize in the first place. The point is to ask how this seemingly imperious, all-pervasive code might be deployed or thought about so that we have at least a glimpse of its own finitude, a glimpse of what might constitute an outside to it. To hold history, the discipline, and other forms of memory together so that they can help in the interrogation of each other, to work out the ways these immiscible forms of recalling the past are

juxtaposed in our negotiations of modern institutions, to question the narrative strategies in academic history that allow its secular temporality the appearance of successfully assimilating to itself memories that are, strictly speaking, unassimilable—these are the tasks that subaltern histories are suited to accomplish in a country such as India. For to talk about the violent jolt the imagination has to suffer to be transported from a temporality cohabited by nonhumans and humans to one from which the gods are banished is not to express an incurable nostalgia for a long-lost world. Even for the members of the Indian upper classes, in no sense can this experience of traveling across temporalities be described as merely historical.

Of course, the empirical historians who write these histories are not peasants or tribals themselves. They produce history, as distinct from other forms of memory, precisely because they have been transposed and inserted—in our case, by England's work in India—into the global narratives of citizenship and socialism. They write history, that is, only after the social existence from their own labor has entered the process of being made abstract in the world market for ideational commodities. The subaltern, then, is not the empirical peasant or tribal in any straightforward sense that a populist program of history writing may want to imagine. The figure of the subaltern is necessarily mediated by problems of representation. In terms of the analysis that I have been trying to develop here, one may say that the subaltern fractures from within the very signs that tell of the emergence of abstract labor; the subaltern is that which constantly, from within the narrative of capital, reminds us of other ways of being human than as bearers of the capacity to labor. It is what is gathered under "real labor" in Marx's critique of capital, the figure of difference that governmentality (that is, in Foucault's terms, the pursuit of the goals of modern governments) all over the world has to subjugate and civilize.<sup>41</sup>

There are implications that follow. Subaltern histories written with an eye to difference cannot constitute yet another attempt, in the long and universalistic tradition of "socialist" histories, to help erect the subaltern as the subject of modern democracies, that is, to expand the history of the modern in such a way as to make it more representative of society as a whole. This is a laudable objective on its own terms and has undoubted global relevance. But thought does not have to stop at political democracy or the concept of egalitarian distribution of wealth (though the aim of achieving these ends will legitimately fuel many immediate political struggles). Subaltern histories will engage philosophically with questions of difference that are elided in the dominant traditions of Marxism. At the

same time, however, just as real labor cannot be thought of outside of the problematic of abstract labor, subaltern history cannot be thought of outside of the global narrative of capital—including the narrative of transition to capitalism—though it is not grounded in this narrative. Stories about how this or that group in Asia, Africa, or Latin America resisted the "penetration" of capitalism do not, in this sense, constitute "subaltern" history, for these narratives are predicated on imagining a space that is external to capital—the chronologically "before" of capital—but that is at the same time a part of the historicist, unitary time frame within which both the "before" and the "after" of capitalist production can unfold. The "outside" I am thinking of is different from what is simply imagined as "before or after capital" in historicist prose. This "outside" I think of, following Derrida, as something attached to the category "capital" itself, something that straddles a border zone of temporality, that conforms to the temporal code within which capital comes into being even as it violates that code, something we are able to see only because we can think/theorize capital, but that also always reminds us that other temporalities, other forms of worlding, coexist and are possible. In this sense, subaltern histories do not refer to a resistance prior and exterior to the narrative space created by capital; they cannot therefore be defined without reference to the category "capital." Subaltern studies, as I think of it, can only situate itself theoretically at the juncture where we give up neither Marx nor "difference," for, as I have said, the resistance it speaks of is something that can happen only *within* the time horizon of capital, and yet it has to be thought of as something that disrupts the unity of that time. Unconcealing the tension between real and abstract labor ensures that capital/commodity has heterogeneities and incommensurabilities inscribed in its core.

The real labor of my mill workers, then—let us say their relationship to their own labor on the day of Vishvakarma *puja*—is obviously a part of the world in which both they and the god Vishvakarma exist in some sense (it would be silly to reduce this coexistence to a question of conscious belief or of psychology). History cannot represent, except through a process of translation and consequent loss of status and signification for the translated, the heterotemporality of that world. History as a code comes into play as this real labor is transformed into the homogeneous, disciplined world of abstract labor, of the generalized world of exchange in which every exchange will be mediated by the sign "commodity." Yet, as the story of the Vishvakarma *puja* in the Calcutta mills shows, "real" labor inheres in the commodity and its secularized biography; its pres-

ence, never direct, leaves its effect in the breach that the stories of godly or ghostly intervention make in history's system of representation. As I have already said, the breach cannot be mended by anthropological cobbling, for that only shifts the methodological problems of secular narratives on to another, cognate territory. In developing Marxist histories after the demise of Communist party Marxisms, our task is to write and think in terms of this breach as we write history (for we cannot avoid writing history). If history is to become a site where pluralities will contend, we need to develop ethics and politics of writing that will show history, this gift of modernity to many peoples, to be constitutionally marked by this breach.

Or, to put it differently, the practice of subaltern history would aim to take history, the code, to its limits in order to make its unworking visible.

## Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts

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

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

Marx's political-economic analysis. Spivak puts it even more strongly by saying that as a category of political economy, use value can appear "only after the appearance of the exchange relation." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Limits and Openings of Marx in Derrida," in her *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 106. Spivak categorically states, rightly I think, that "Marx left the slippery concept of 'use value' untheorized" (p. 97). My point is that Marx's thoughts on use value do not turn toward the question of human belonging or "worlding," for Marx retains a subject-object relationship between man and nature. Nature never escapes its "thingly" character in Marx's analysis.

69. As Marx defines it in the course of discussing Adam Smith's use of the category "productive labor," "only labour which produces capital is productive labour." Unproductive labor is that "which is not exchanged with capital but directly with revenue." He further explains: "An actor, for example, or even a clown, . . . is a productive labourer if he works in the service of a capitalist." Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), pp. 156-157.

70. *Grundrisse*, p. 305. Emphasis in original.

71. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), division I, chapter 3, "The Worldhood of the World," explains these terms. The more recent translation by Joan Stambaugh (*Being and Time* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996]) replaces "ready-to-hand" with "handiness" and "present-at-hand" with the expression "objectively present" (pp. 64, 69).

72. See the classic study on this theme, Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of Malays, Filipinos, and Javanese from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: Frank Cass, 1977). The theme of laziness, however, is a permanent theme within any capitalist structure, national or global. What would repay examination is the business (and business-school) literature on "motivation" in showing how much and how incessantly business wrestles with an unsolvable question: What motivates humans to "work"?

### Chapter 3

#### Translating Life-Worlds into Labor and History

1. J.B.S. Haldane, *Everything Has a History* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1951).

2. See Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London: Edward Arnold, 1970); E. H. Carr's classic *What Is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) is a discussion of how the genre had changed in Carr's own lifetime; R. G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976; first pub. 1936) distinguishes "the modern European idea of history" from other his-

torical sensibilities or the lack thereof; Marc Bloch in his *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1984; first pub. 1954) relates the historian's method to the modern "method of doubt." Fernand Braudel, *On History*, translated by Sarah Matthews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) describes "history" as making up "one single intellectual adventure" in partnership with sociology (p. 69); J.G.A. Pocock's *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; first pub. 1957) gives the modern historical method a specific origin in seventeenth-century juridical thought.

3. An exception is Giorgio Agamben's essay, "Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum," in his *Infancy and History: Essays on the Deconstruction of Experience*, translated by Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993), pp. 89-108.

4. Paul Davis and John Gribbin, *The Matter Myth: Beyond Chaos and Complexity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), pp. 103-104.

5. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacobs, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994).

6. D. H. Buchanan, *The Development of Capitalist Enterprise in India* (New York, 1934), p. 409, quoted in Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 89-90.

7. For an analysis and description of this festival in its present-day form, see Leela Fernandes, *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

8. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), pp. 30-34.

9. Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 74; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 297.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 99, 102.

12. See Thompson, *Making*, pp. 302, 303, 305.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 305, 323.

14. Pandey, *Communalism*, pp. 88, 97-98. Also Deepak Mehta, "The Semiotics of Weaving: A Case Study," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 26, no. 1 (January-June 1992), pp. 77-113.

15. Pandey, *Communalism*, pp. 98-99.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

17. Richard Maxwell Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur 1300-1700: Social Role of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

18. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164.

20. Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 216.

21. Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*, translated by Mina Moore-Rivoluceri (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), p. 56.
22. This translation is by Dinesh Chandra Sen. See his *History of Bengali Language and Literature* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1911), pp. 36–37. The passage is also discussed in Sukumar Sen, *Bangala sahityer itihās* (in Bengali), vol. 1 (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1991), pp. 114–116, and in Gautam Bhadra, “The Mentality of Subalternity: *Kantanama* or *Rajadharma*,” in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 54–91.
23. Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 275.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
25. Carl W. Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 52.
26. Bhadra, “Mentality,” p. 65.
27. Ernst, *Eternal Garden*, pp. 32–33.
28. See the discussion in the preceding chapter.
29. Eaton, *Rise of Islam*, p. 305.
30. Simon During, “Is Literature Dead or Has It Gone to the Movies?” *Age* (Melbourne), 19 June 1993.
31. See Ranajit Guha, “The Migrant’s Time,” *Postcolonial Studies* 1, no. 2 (July 1998).
32. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 31–37.
33. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Politics of Translation,” in her *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 182, and the chapter entitled “Untranslatability and the Terms of Reciprocity” in Vincente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 110–135.
34. Spivak, “Politics of Translation,” p. 182.
35. Michael Gelven, *A Commentary on Heidegger’s “Being and Time”* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), p. 41.
36. The phrase is Benjamin’s. See “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Fontana, 1982), p. 265.
37. Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 72–77, discusses the idea of the “trace.”
38. Michel Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), and I. I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1975).
39. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, pp. 225–226.

40. Michael T. Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).
41. See Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (London: Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 87–104.

#### Chapter 4 Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts

1. Eric Hobsbawm, “Identity History Is Not Enough” in his *On History* (London: Weikensfeld and Nicholson, 1997), p. 277. Hobsbawm unfortunately overlooks the point that modern European imperialism in India and elsewhere used “good history” to justify the subjugation of peoples who, according to European thinkers, had “myths” but no sense of history.
2. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994).
3. Cf. Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, N. H., and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), p. 145. Emphasis added.
4. Hobsbawm, “Identity History,” p. 271.
5. Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” (1784) in Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, translated by Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), pp. 41–48.
6. See David Lloyd, *Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 19–20. Also Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, translated by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), chapter 3.
7. See also Gyan Prakash, “Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism,” *American Historical Review* 99 no. 5 (December 1994), pp. 1,475–1,491.
8. Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 46–47.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
11. Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?” in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, ed., *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 1985), p. 244.
12. Guha and Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies*, p. 78.
13. Shahid Amin, *Events, Memory, Metaphor* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).
14. Greg Denning, “A Poetic for Histories,” in his *Performances* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), pp. 35–63; David Cohen, *The Combing of*