

# Inside the Romanticist Episteme

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Poststructuralism and deconstruction have subverted the theoretical languages and objects of study within the social sciences and have led to a growing recognition of the historical situatedness and constructed character of objects and categories. This has, however, often incurred a certain cost: the eloquence has often been obtained by essentialising and simplifying a 'theoretical Other' into caricatures written in capital letters: Reason, Enlightenment, Modernity, the West, etc. The eagerly projected *ambience* of a radical rupture with the past that pervades this wave, has been obtained by partially obscuring the philosophical antecedents and deep structures upon which a major part of the unquestionable post structuralist insights are built. To put it polemically, post structuralist practise in e.g. anthropology, development studies and sociology often bears the marks of an ideological intervention: construction of an Other, reduction of complexity, dissimulation of historical plurality, flawed reflexivity *vis-a-vis* its own origins, etc.

Foucault's project was always polemic. He never aimed at a full account of Western intellectual history, but ventured to subvert the dominant epistemology and recuperate the suppressed margins of history. He wanted to historicise History, to dissolve an ordered meta-history into the myriad of smaller, unruly histories of which it is made. In so doing, however, he tended to equate Enlightenment reason with modernity as such, rendering an image of modernity as a relatively coherent project: an emerging and irresistible will to order, to explanation, to taxonomisation and to discipline embodied in scientific discourses and state institutions. This tendency towards construction of a theoretical Other as a caricature has become even more pronounced in the still more popular combination within for instance sociology and anthropology of otherwise disparate theoretical languages of hermeneutics and deconstruction; a combination only held toget-

her by an ostensibly common denominator, namely the critique of "modernity-as-universalist reason".

The argument I wish to make in this paper is that critiques of "modernity-as-universalist reason" inadvertently tend to move in an already densely structured field of historical discourses and philosophical traditions, notably romanticist philosophies of language and culture, which opposed and in many ways constructed the notion of "modernity-as-universalist reason" already from the latter half of the 18th century. One may somewhat polemically argue that if Western intellectual history is marked by an emergent episteme bent on universalist reason, the same history is also marked, and enriched, by the existence of another, though weaker, romanticist episteme. This episteme posits knowledge and meaning as being culturally differentiated, as always mediated by a specific language, as always situated in a unique historical setting. It presupposes a fundamental culturalist ontology, positing human beings as, first and foremost, cultural beings. The romanticist episteme marks in a certain way the final breakthrough of modernity as a cultural system as it for the first time posits *originality* and notions of *autonomy* and *self grounding* of human beings, cultures and social forms as marks of the highest cultural and political value. If modernity as a cultural system of secularised thought fundamentally is characterised by its antropocentrism and celebration of a break with the past, the romanticist celebration of human will, autonomy, of an emerging human spirit, the mystique of the artistic self-creation and individual genius etc., marks the consummation of modernity. The romanticist celebration of the self grounded and irreducible expression of human creativity has in innumerable guises been the constant critical companion of positivist, materialist, teleological and other universalist schemes.<sup>1</sup> Hence, I venture that current debates always-

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<sup>1</sup> The continuity between e.g. Foucault and earlier critiques of Enlightenment is both obvious and explicit *qua* Foucault's indebtedness to Nietzsche, who in turn was influenced by the Romanticist philosopher Schopenhauer's concept of Will as a driving force in human history. Peter Murphy has recently noted that the construction of 'radical otherness' is the main contribution of romanticism to modern culture: "The age of modernity has been, in equal parts, fearful of the other, because the other always represents another kind of law, heteronomy, and desirous of being radically other, because that is testament to one's autonomy" (Murphy, 1993:42). Romanticism's quest for origins and roots was a critique of the preceding classicist and baroque epoch of mimesis, searching for similarities, order and taxonomies. The eighteenth century was marked by a fascination of the mimetic and eclectic Roman culture, while the nineteenth century romanticism saw the celebration of Greek culture, regarded as auctonomous, that is self-born, self-grounded (ibid, 1993:43-5). It is noteworthy that Foucault in the second volume of the *History of Sexuality* explores sexual habits

already are posited upon the tension between these two traditions which constitutes the intellectual deep structure of modern Western thought.

## **Intellectual Deep Structures**

In his admirable work *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* the German philosopher of history Hans Blumenberg proposes to see the ostensible continuities in intellectual history across otherwise radical ruptures in the socio-historical fabric as the effect of the inheritance of already structured problematics (Blumenberg, 1983). Every epoch invents a set of dominant discourses which, Blumenberg argues, does not simply evaporate as the socio-historical world changes. They remain in intellectual history as traces, as problematics, as intellectual positions - maybe left vacant as older beliefs or ideologies lose validity - but still present as "a mortgage of prescribed questions that cannot simply be set aside or left unoccupied. ... The modern age's readiness to accept as its own obligation to pay off goes a long way towards explaining its intellectual history" (Blumenberg, 1983:65). Blumenberg terms this movement towards answering the questions posited by a previous generation or age as "re-occupations" of the vacant positions in the intellectual landscape.

Although Blumenberg's main concern is to explain more precisely how Christian eschatology and cosmology continues to structure current ideological discourses, I believe his logic can be applied to the intellectual trajectory of modern philosophy and epistemology in the social sciences.

Modernity was never a coherent project, nor was Enlightenment rationalism ever uncontested. Modernity was split from the outset in two competing epistemological systems, partially overlapping, feeding upon each other, while simultaneously hardening each others stances. The field of oppositions developing between the rationalist, universalist Enlightenment episteme determined to explain the world (*Erklären*), and the historicising romanticist episteme looking for deeper meanings and cultural configurations and striving to understand the world (*Verstehen*), is the fertile field upon which all substantial contributions in the social sciences are premised.

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and personal ethics in ancient Greece, and here unequivocally celebrates the self-groundedness and autonomy of the Greek *polis*, as opposed to the obedient conformism and mimetic practice of modern disciplined individuals (Foucault, 1986: esp. 26-91) .

Alvin Gouldner has traced how major contributions to the social sciences draw on this split philosophical heritage. Gouldner argues that romanticism constitutes a constant source of opposition to the pressure for objectivation and systematisation of the social world launched by the dominant rationalist episteme along the Cartesian separation of the subject and the object. Romanticism was, Gouldner argues, both emancipatory, non-conformist and individualist while its inherent essentialism, as it became clear in this century, also contained potential justifications for xenophobic nationalism and totalitarian thought.<sup>2</sup>

The Romantics lived in a twilight world of transition, between an unsatisfactory present and an un-workable past... Living in a world in which the conventional social maps had lost their effectiveness, but in which acceptable new ones had not yet been formulated, it was to the individual self as the maker of meanings that they turned rather than to the traditional rules. Living in a world where received cultural categories and conventional social identities no longer made social reality meaningful, they came to see social reality as possessed of intrinsic vagueness ... they saw objects blending into one another rather than as well demarcated boundaries. (Romanticism's) basic problematic revolves on the relationship between a knowing "Subject" and a known "Object", and it regarded this very distinction as false consciousness of the Subject, since the Object, rather than being that which was not the Subject, was actually unconsciously created by it. (Gouldner, 1973:328)

Romantic poetry was fascinated by twilight, boundary dissolving mystery, the grotesque, the sublime, the inward-looking and unique individual experience; Idealist philosophy was trying to "re-enchant" the human world by insisting on the centrality of agency (e.g. Fichte's and Schopenhauer's emphasis on *Wille*), of the centrality of human search for individual and cultural originality<sup>3</sup>, of imagination and spirit (*Geist*) in the self-grounded crea-

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<sup>2</sup> Elie Kedourie's classical work on nationalism (Kedourie, 1960) traces the genesis of cultural nationalism in German romanticism. The same genealogy is described in great detail by Hans Kohn (Kohn, 1944), and more recently by Greenfeld in his comparative study of nationalism and modernity (Greenfeld, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> As Charles Taylor has recently argued, the philosophical articulation of the notion of authenticity came from Herder's reformulation of Rousseau's idea of the innate capacity of individuals for making their own moral judgements, to an idea of the uniqueness and inner original essence of individuals and cultures: "Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, which is something only I

tion and reception of the social world; and the inheritors of Herder's theory of natural languages and organic culture strove to install language, culture and history as central categories in the study of human societies, notably in the powerful German tradition of *Kulturwissenschaft*. The contemporary prominence of ethnography, history and anthropology - in their subject and main intellectual debts always heavily indebted to the romanticist notions of autonomy and self-groundedness - testifies to their historical success.

Romanticist philosophy had profound effects in the field of epistemology and methodology. The romanticist philosopher and linguist Schleiermacher founded modern hermeneutics as he reworked the notion of the uniqueness and individuality of inner spiritual experiences he had inherited from Protestant theology. Along with the development of hermeneutics in the nineteenth and twentieth century evolved a still more systematic methodology: the importance of fieldwork, of first hand understanding, of letting oneself be immersed in the mysterious, popular and exotic, of deep and differentiated meanings, of psychological factors in reception of discourses, etc.

The entire inventory of present-day fashionable methodological tool kits: the case study, context, unstructured interviews, qualitative method, discourse analysis, etc. all have romanticist genealogies, while the rigour and systematic fashion in which they often are applied at the same time have roots in more objectivist and rationalist scientific traditions.

Another example is the question of language. While the linguistic turn in philosophy often is ascribed to not least Wittgenstein's powerful interventions, the fact remains that already Herder and later Schlegel developed a philosophy of the link between language, culture and social being which Charles Taylor aptly has characterised as "expressivism" (Taylor, 1975:11-21) and Louis Dumont has called "individualist holism" (Dumont, 1983). The romanticist theories of language were framed as critiques of

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can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity (...) Herder applied this conception of originality not only to the individual person among other persons, but also to the culture-bearing people among other peoples. Just like individuals, a *Volk* should be true to itself, that is, its own culture. Germans should not try to be derivative and (inevitably) second-rate Frenchmen (...) Slavic peoples had to find their own path. And European colonialism ought to be rolled back to give the peoples we now call the Third World their chance to be themselves unimpeded. We can recognize here the seminal ideal of modern nationalism, in both benign and malign forms" (Taylor, 1994:78).

objectivist and empiricist epistemologies in the Cartesian mould which separated the observer from his gaze, so to speak, and postulated the transparency of objects insofar as they were observable. The objective world, argued the German idealists, only exists as a social fact through its expression by human beings in spirit and language. Languages did not merely represent the world, they expressed the world. The romanticists also argued that any linguistically mediated action, meaning or social phenomenon only could be properly understood if it was seen as an expression of the cultural and social totality at a given time<sup>4</sup>. Herder argued that the structures of meaning endowing a totality with a determinate meaning was to be found in language. A language determines what can be thought, and in which style it can be thought. Hence, language endows humans with consciousness, and since there are multiple languages, there exists multiple culturally determined forms of consciousness, that is multiple culturally specific epistemologies. Also here the romanticist discomfort with mimesis and mixture of cultural elements was central. There were, argued Schlegel, basically two types of languages and cultures, the dynamic and the non-dynamic: the dynamic languages were the original and self grounded (Sanskrit, German, Celtic) and possessed *qua* this self grounding supreme capacities for cultural creativity; while the non-dynamic languages born out of cultural mixtures (Latin languages, English, etc.) were 'dead' and mechanical. The deep interconnectedness between romanticism and cultural nationalism were, and remains, unmistakable. The contemporary axiom of the discursive construction of the social world and the primacy of epistemology in determining ontological presuppositions is, in other words, not altogether new, though currently posited in a more radical fashion which refutes the essentialism and celebration of authenticity and cultural superiority of

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor gives in his classical Hegel-study (Taylor, 1975) a condensed account of the philosophical currents and debates in the *Sturm und Drang* period in late eighteenth century Germany, especially the influence of Herder and Fichte. While Herder remained within a discourse of organicism and cultural determinism, the notion of will and human creativity in moulding the human spirit plays a key role in Fichte's idealism. To Fichte, the central notion was that moulding the human mind and will could wrestle the human spirit out of its mute historical contingency and create a sublime 'synthetic spirit'. (see e.g. Finsen, 1994) This figure received its most universal and sophisticated formulation in Hegel's notion of negativity and *Aufhebung*.

dynamic and pure languages which marked Herder's and Schlegel's classical formulations.<sup>5</sup>

## **The Return of Romanticism?**

Where does this "deconstruction of deconstruction", this "historicism of historicism" lead? First and foremost towards a sharpened awareness of the intellectual corollaries and historical predicaments of any epistemological and methodological choice. Intellectual labour takes place on a historically structured terrain in which new ideas, critiques and attempts to create new ground always are premised on a terrain of "positions" not of one's own choice. To speak with Blumenberg, while breaking with the past one may very well, and maybe unconsciously, perform the task of re-occupying earlier positions.

Poststructuralism tends, in other words, to be structured by earlier romanticist critiques of "modernity-as-universalist reason", the epistemological Other created by the German Idealists. This is even clearer in the case of contemporary hermeneutics, not least as it is practised in anthropology and development studies, where the theme of the irretrievably lost authenticity, the originality and self groundedness of cultures, of 'deep' meanings, and of the unbridgeable gulf of understanding between the observer and the observed, evokes and reactivates the entire connotative domain and epistemological inventory of romanticism.

I will in the following try to show the predicament and compulsions of the prestructured intellectual field of opposition to Enlightenment rationalism, and the contradictions and ambiguities which political projects of identity and emancipation can engender when employing the ambiguous conceptual inventory of current progressive phraseology.

### **Difference as Authenticity**

The notion of authenticity seems to prevail in the current debates on recuperation of popular cultural identities from the combined hegemony of colonial history and institutionalised nationalist historiography in South Asia. In much of the fertile and innovative literature coming out of e.g. the Subaltern Studies attempt to create a historiography 'from below', these localised and mar-

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the best discussions of Herder's work can be found in Isaiah Berlins classical study (Berlin, 1976) and in Reinhold Ergang's older intellectual biography of Herder (Ergang, 1931).

ginal identities are defined as dispersed, fragmented and popular. Yet, they are also, by implication, claimed to be somewhat more authentic than the identities constructed by official nationalism or Orientalist knowledge, exactly because they are indigenous and popular and thus belonging to a sphere less penetrated and organised by colonial and Western discourse. The posited authenticity of such marginal/suppressed identities as a 'radical difference', as an epistemological device producing an original history, and as an ontological position, revealing a radically different type of reality subverting the dominant images of reality, seems to be an inevitable effect of polemical equations of essentialised images of the West with modernity and Enlightenment: as the Western Other articulated through the postcolonial state is declared alien, non-authentic and outside, the inside, that is the popular and subordinated, becomes by implication both authentic and original.

This discursive operation is particularly evident in Partha Chatterjee's recent work on the construction of the Indian nation which posits a fundamental antagonism between, on the one hand, the colonial and postcolonial discourses and, on the other hand, subaltern consciousness and communities.

The notion of community and *Gemeinschaft* has historically been reproduced over and over again in widely different political and social environments, as a constant romanticist critique and companion to the dominant belief in the superiority of reason<sup>6</sup>. This persistent notion of community as the basis for social action and a model for larger solidarities presupposes communities as spontaneous, pre-conscious entities persisting through emotional ties. Community denotes, true to its romanticist genealogy, a mode of social organisation and interaction which is 'deeper', self grounded and more *authentic* than the elective association of indi-

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<sup>6</sup> Communitarianism has always been politically ambiguous in relation to the Left-Right dichotomy, though in Europe predominantly articulated by conservatives and right-wing populists as *Gemeinschaft* in conjunction with cultural nationalism, celebration of nature, historical authenticity, family, cultural values, etc. - always in opposition to 'immoral' liberalism, or the radical modernism and constructionism articulated by the Left. There was always on the Left a celebration of the spontaneous solidarity-community among workers, labourers and the wretched, but this was seen as emerging out of a common subordination and nakedness, a common deprivation and liberation from older ties, and not out of *Gemeinschaft*. This distribution of stances was blurred by the co-articulation of the natural, authentic with the vitalist and dynamic in Fascism. In the last few decades the reversal of poles is quite clear: the Left defends community, culture, history and the popular, while the liberal-conservative stance today predominantly is marked by free market optimism, and the rationalist universalism which the old left used to represent.



viduals depicted by the liberal-individualist paradigm. This authenticity derives from the emotional investment, the almost pre-linguistic affinities, the unspoken, in brief, from the effects of human love, which communitarians see as antinomical to *Gesellschaft* and the project of control and discipline of the modern state.

Partha Chatterjee, deriving his communitarianism from Gramsci and Ranajit Guha's interpretation of peasant insurgency in India, traces in Hegel a 'suppressed narrative of community, flowing through the substratum of liberal capitalist society, which those who celebrate the absolute and natural sovereignty of the individual will refuse to recognise' (Chatterjee, 1993:231). Liberal individualism, the argument goes, seeks to conceal the fundamentally social and socialised nature of human life, and seeks to discipline the fundamental impulse of love and affection among human beings which continues to subvert the rational purity of action: 'I will read this as a narrative that continues to unfold to this day *against the grain* of that other narrative of bourgeois individualism'. (ibid, 1993:232)

Community, in this reading, sees the historically suppressed *Gemeinschaft* as a 'return of the suppressed'; as a persistent human urge to form communities, which in effect emerges as a constant immanent critique of modernity and capitalism. Community is in this post-structuralist reading the 'radical outside' - a human element that defies and limits hegemonisation. Historically, the colonial world constituted this 'outside'. In the post colonial states, the persistence of community and more or less spontaneous protests and defiances emanating from subaltern consciousness constitutes a major problem in the implementation of developmental schemes, disciplinary institutions and the grid of the nation-state designed to erase and subsume smaller communities into a corporate, unified nation (ibid, 1993:234-9). However, the notion of community as an immanent critique of modernity has been impoverished by its origin in Europe where older communities effectively have been demolished by capitalism and modernity, argues Chatterjee. Only when the full complexity and stubborn resistance of community-forms in India is explored will we discover the subversive power of community also in the universe of social sciences:

If the day comes when the vast storehouse of Indian social history will become comprehensible to the scientific consciousness, we will have achieved along the way a fundamental

restructuring of the edifice of European social philosophy as it exists today. (Chatterjee, 1993:169)

This is a tall claim which conveniently 'flattens' European history to utilitarian/rational Enlightenment, conceals the origins of the communitarian discourse in Western romanticism and populism, and instead renders the heroic task of subverting the foundations of Western social science to those researching the suppressed popular dimensions of Indian social history, as for example the Subaltern Studies. This claim must be understood against the backdrop of the overall project of the Subaltern studies group that in crucial ways inform Chatterjee's work. Ranajit Guha, the nestor of the Subaltern perspective, has in various works explored the modalities of community and peasant insurgency in colonial India (Guha, 1983) and the structure of colonial domination (Guha, 1989). Guha's thesis is that colonialism was 'domination without hegemony': colonial rule revealed the limits and double standards of Western universalism and colonialism and the post colonial state has never fully hegemonised indigenous popular perceptions and communities. Colonialism was always dominant but never hegemonic. The historiography of colonial India must, therefore, be re-shaped towards an 'autonomous historiography ... (depicting) the originality of Indian culture of the colonial era and why it defies understanding either as a replication of liberal bourgeois culture of nineteenth century Britain or as the mere survival of an antecedent pre-capitalist culture'. (Guha, 1989:308)

Guha's and Chatterjee's invocation of the 'popular' and communities are thus directed against both the dominant nationalist historiography of India, and against the colonial depictions of the British Raj saving India from her own anarchic implosion and re-integrating her into world history. This endeavour has produced a range of very interesting detailed studies of hitherto unknown historical material, and has excavated a long history of peasant disobedience, protest and local conflict far beyond the knowledge and horizon of the urban, nationalist middle classes. Yet, I believe this programme of generation of an indigenous social science tends to overestimate the coherence of Western universalism and to conceal its own indebtedness to a romanticist communitarian discourse born in the West. It is my contention, that this happens as the Subalternist positions seeks to construct a credible claim of a persistent 'popular' authenticity which is constitutively *different*, i.e. negating colonialism and 'Western categories'. Hence the need to reduce historical complexity and produce images of a simpli-

fied rational West, a brutal, 'external' colonial power, and a constitutive opposition between foreign bureaucracy and capital bent on 'universal Reason', versus indigenous, selfgrounded authentic communities.

Marx argued within a Hegelian figure of the synthetic *Aufhebung* of essences to self-consciousness, that classes existing *an sich* only could acquire self-consciousness regarding their true being-as-classes *für sich* through negation and conflict. An identical 'expressivist' Hegelian figure is employed in the Subalternist view regarding the movement in peasant consciousness in periods of insurgency from pure negativity to a notion of community, the principle which, according to Chatterjee, 'gives to all these specific aspects their fundamental constitutive character as the purposive acts of a collective consciousness' (ibid, 1993:163). But this consciousness of community arising out of insurgency, Guha and Chatterjee maintain, is merely the expression of an immanent essence: the derivation of individual identity from the community, that is the constitutive primacy of community as it is lived through the structured subordination, division of labour, endogamy, maintenance of caste-boundaries. Hence, peasant consciousness has its 'own paradigmatic form' which is no less than 'the other of bourgeois consciousness', which, however, cannot be concretely identified in the *mélange* of everyday interactions. The consciousness of the immanent and emerging 'peasant community' lies in the 'cultural apparatus - languages in the broadest sense' which enable this consciousness both 'to understand', 'to act' etc. (ibid, 1993:164).

Peasant consciousness is in this rendition a truly Hegelian essence moving through history, manifesting itself at various points and being a constant negation of bourgeois free wills, rationality or social structures of domination. This communitarian consciousness resides in the never fully colonised minds of the peasants. Chatterjee even identifies in the rapidly fluctuating votes at elections in India in the last decades, a contemporary manifestation of this subaltern, peasant consciousness. Somewhat unsurprisingly, Chatterjee suggests that this 'community spirit' sets India apart from other societies and render standard methods of political analysis impotent in India. Only those in possession of the magical key to peasant consciousness may, it seems, get access to the social world of India<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> 'The Indian history of peasant struggle is a history that will educate those of us who claim to be their educators. Indeed, an Indian history of peasant struggle is a fundamental part of the real history of our people, the task is for the Indian

It may, however, be helpful to see this subalternist approach as a part of the ongoing contested production of the Indian people. As nationalist imagination evolved in late nineteenth century India the production of the people became after some time a paramount concern. There was only a short way from the colonial and Orientalist depiction of India as a *mélange* of cultural communities to what was to become a dominant nationalist production and representation of the 'Indian people' in corporate community terms. The Indian people thus came to know itself, and be known among educated strata, through a dual discourse and a dual structure of representation : on the one hand as caste-communities, religious communities, villages, linguistic groups, etc., represented through associations, religious reform societies, educational institutions and patron-client structures, and, on the other hand, as a larger abstract entity 'the Indian people' opposed to the British Raj, represented by the political parties, first and foremost Indian National Congress.

In India as elsewhere, I will argue, communities came to know themselves in a modern sense as communities *für sich* only as the democratic revolution in a vernacularised version laid bare domination as illegitimate, and as the discourse of cultural nationalism constructed objectified notions of 'our culture', the 'people', 'our history' 'our religion' . This enabled Indians to know and construct themselves as discrete, essential, but also abstract and supra local communities of Hindus, Muslims, castes, language groups, etc. The communitarian discourse and the production of communities are in India, like elsewhere, as old as cultural nationalism itself, and inseparable from the production and nationalisation of the people.

Seen in its polemical and political context, the Subalternist communitarianism seems at least partially to fit into Bourdieu's depiction of populism as a compensatory strategy on part of dominated sectors in an intellectual field, *in casu* conflicting forces of global intellectual politics. On part of those invoking the people, their invocations are always 'inseparable from the desire for their own ennoblement' (Bourdieu, 1990:151). The Subaltern variety of communitarianism and many other related theoretical projects emanating in these years from the post colonial world are also inseparable from the fundamental cultural nationalist quest for the production of a real people - an authentic people-nation -

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historian to perceive in this a consciousness of his or her own self' (Chatterjee, 1993:172).

and inseparable from the quest for a genuine recognition of this nation from its significant others.

### **Hybridity and Authenticity**

In a well-written paper on the construction of Punjabi identity, Arvind-pal Singh argues in a Derrida'ean mould that precolonial Punjab, due to its turbulent history of successive invasions and settlements, was an area marked by an extraordinary multiplicity of cultural markers and codes - mostly oral - engaged in a multi-layered and fluid exchange of meanings (Singh, 1994). With colonialism came the Western rationalist episteme which apriori posited *religion* and scripturally authorised language as the central categories around which this sea of difference could be ordered. Through an army of indigenous Western educated bureaucrats and "mimick-men", this "panoptic vision" became dispersed and naturalised in Punjabi society, creating by the end of the 19th century three distinct and competing public spheres, each centred around a religion (Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism) and a script-language (Hindi, Urdu and Gurumukhi) thus thoroughly communalising Punjab. In other words, the advent of the rationalist episteme privileging script, God, the Book, simplified and reified cultural communities and "naturalised" and rationalised cultural differences into larger antagonistic entities. This intellectual and cultural mimicry, Singh argues, has to this day involved a wholesale adoption of the essentialism and objectivation inherent in "Western metaphysics", bent on the desire to be recognised "as almost equal", yet inevitably subjected to *meconnaissance* by the imperial/Western Other:

For each of them (postcolonial nations and diaspora communities, TBH), the postcolonial desire, as the desire for an identity, is articulated through a particular language that can do no other than both mimic and misrecognise, and thus be seen as a shadow of the imperial tongue. (Singh, 1994:16)

This ongoing mimicry - "authenticated by academia and mass produced by media networks" - rendered religious identity widely accepted as *the* primary cultural marker, and organiser, of difference in postcolonial societies (ibid, p. 24). Thus, contemporary cultural struggles over the meaning and significance of religion in postcolonial societies - especially in South Asia - is fought

in the idioms, categories and historical narratives inherited from the West. Singh argues that the official ideology of secularism in e.g. India is nothing but an articulation of Western hegemony:

it is itself a culture in its own right - one that is also based on essentialist metaphysical principles such as Man, Human culture, Universality, and ultimately, therefore, the culture of capitalist techno economics. (ibid, p. 19)

Singh argues that all this boils down to one thing: The problem of translation understood as the process of cultural encounter inevitably rendering disparities between e.g. the traditional language of Indian religions (insofar it has not been totally hijacked by the mimick-men) and Western rationalist discourses.

The main problem, Singh argues in an unmistakable romanticist vein, lies in the alienness of the language employed to describe tradition, religion and contemporary conflicts: Not only is it primarily discussed in academic English (an alien and thus distorting language, according to Singh), but also in the conceptual language of "Western metaphysics" whose categories of purity, boundaries and core definitions are bound to distort the essentially *hybridised culture* of South Asia. The problem is fundamentally, Singh argues with Derrida, that the very character of "Western discourse" - its objectifying "meta language" is so dominant that even subjects in the periphery has no other option but to understand themselves though the structures of this language, and the *descriptions* offered by this meta-language bent on the Jew/Greek/European culture in which cultural differences in the periphery always will appear as "more of the same" - the Other.

The double bind for the Third World writer is that he can write, but what he writes is always through translation of his culture into European. He writes his identity in the hope of retaining purity and originality. ... By the very process of *cultural translation*, the radical alterity of the other is homogenised, made palatable, digestible. It is no different from the process of colonisation. (ibid, p. 25)

Singh's paper ends with a very elegant section on cultural hybridity and hybrid politics in which he, clearly speaking from the Punjabi diaspora community in Britain, argues - again wholly consistent with Derrida - that cultural differences are alterable,

always in a state of flux and never closed systems of signification kept together by privileged markers such as religion or nationality. The whole problem therefore boils down to invent a conceptual language which permits hybridity - and not just the identity allowed by modernist, multiculturalist or traditionalist discourses bent of fixing differences in stable patterns - thus permitting translation without "conceptual violence".

The most interesting thing about Singh's paper is the technique of its arguments: While the paper at one level basically draws on Derrida's insights regarding the essentialist, reductionist and a-historical onto-theological deep structures in modern Western thought, and on Derrida's early insights into the basic alienation and displacement of meaning inherent in the process of writing (Derrida, 1967), it also continuously engages in exactly these conceptual activities in order to present the case of Punjabi and post colonial identities. In Singh's usage, the West remains an ahistorical, and entirely metaphysical construct. He is essentialising the entire Western history to structures inherent in Western languages, while claiming an authentic Punjabi hybridity, an original hybridity beneath layers of "mimicry". The text, and its writer thus inadvertently lapses back in the romanticist episteme, in search of identity in the face of the lived experience of hybridity on part of the diasporic Punjabi community in Britain, as Singh himself readily admits in the paper.

To speak with Blumenberg, while denouncing the colonial regime as an incarnation of an essentialised West, Singh inadvertently comes to re-occupy the position of self grounded "authenticity". He remains trapped in the writing and metalanguage he criticises: while trying to argue a case for hybridity and for "civilised" translation, he is himself translating Derrida (Western, one must admit) to a Punjabi context, thus in a strict sense inauthenticating both himself and his language. Singh thus posits himself within a romanticist problematic denouncing mimesis and colonial hybridity, which leads him straight into a celebration of a somewhat paradoxical 'original hybridity'.

#### **The Periphery Strikes Back: "Postcolonials against Universalism"**

Similar paradoxes are at work in the emergence of the notion of postcoloniality, a term which has gained much currency especially in the American debate in recent years.

Postcoloniality is a term which seeks to displace the Third World in the sense of a geographical or cultural entity. The term

points to the current global cultural structure as one wherein the periphery is a constituting moment in a global plurality where voices and articulations from the periphery undermine the firm foundations of Western epistemology - even in the heartlands of the West - through representations of heterogeneity, marginality, race, gender, etc.

In the words of one of the leading proponents of the notion of postcoloniality, Gyan Prakash:

...(nowadays) the third world, far from being confined to its assigned space, has penetrated the inner sanctum of the first world in the process of being "third worlded" - arousing, inciting, and affiliating with the subordinated others in the first world. It has reached across boundaries and barriers to connect with the minority voices in the first world: socialists, radicals, feminists, minorities, etc. (Prakash, 1990:403)

But is it this really so? Is there really such a political project rising globally, or are we merely experiencing a rebirth of the good old Third Worldism dressed up as hybridity in the rather Western and universalist idiom of poststructuralism? Firstly, I have difficulties in identifying any actual political project of this type arising. Secondly, I will question the real intellectual advance of a political-intellectual construction like postcoloniality, being made in the name of historicisation, which ultimately ends up with a highly generalising and sweeping statement about the state of the global intellectual-political struggle as structured along clear frontlines : The stubborn, Cartesian modernising elites of the West versus a emancipatory rainbow coalition of hybridised Third World people along with all kinds of metropolitan minorities.

It seems that the validity of the concept of postcoloniality as a global cultural state presupposes a certain essentialisation of the West to a caricature; and that it presupposes a concealment of the romanticist prestructuring of its critique of the West as "modernity-as-universalist-reason". Not only does this notion entail a gross simplification, it also seems to generalise the discourse of diasporic intellectuals into a projection of a common hybridised future on behalf of a coalition of peoples in the postcolonial world. If nothing else, the universalist pretension of this argument certainly militates against the quest for difference on which it is built.



In what comes close to an *ad hominem* argument, the Turkish born American historian Arif Dirkin suggests, that the group of diasporic intellectuals promoting postcoloniality cares little about the people of their former countries, still predominantly bogged down in what to the postcolonial intellectual may seem naive imaginations of a bright modern - i.e. mimicking - future for themselves in their respective states, with all the promotion of industrialisation, education, secularism and other classical Cartesian-modern values this necessarily entails.

According to Dirkin, the notion of postcoloniality denotes nothing but the exhilaration on the part of a handful of South Asian intellectuals, of their new-found power and respectability in the heart of Western academia - US Ivy League universities - extrapolating their own experience of hybridity to the rest of the world (Dirkin, 1994).

Though Dirkin's analysis may bring out the social base from where the notion of postcoloniality has emerged, it remains unclear why this group has been so successful in setting political and intellectual agendas. I suggest that the very claims that post coloniality is a new emergent global mental state must be seen as a moment in an emerging global intellectual politics of recognition: The colonial and postcolonial world has for a century been the metaphorical stranger, the third party, standing outside the important antagonisms between great powers in the world, between communism and Western democracies in the cold war, where the Soviet Union played the part of the Other of the West. The Other is feared, recognised and taken seriously, while the stranger is either neglected or brutally exterminated, as Zygmunt Baumann has taught us (Baumann, 1991). Now, in the post cold war scenario the concept of postcoloniality seeks to fill the vacant position of the Other and to install the postcolonial world as the true Other of the West. The notion of postcoloniality signifies, it seems, an intellectual politics striving to bestow on the postcolonial world the dignity of being the Other of the West. This politics of recognition thus paradoxically confirms the true globalised hegemony - or dare one say universalism - of categories and modes of thought originating in the West.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note the virtual competition in current poststructuralist debates regarding which of the major Asian cultures really constitutes the Other of the West. This only testifies to the importance and pervasiveness of the intellectual revolution set in motion by Edward Said's book "Orientalism" (Said, 1978). While e.g. Middle Eastern scholars refer to the century long rivalry between Islam and Christianity, Indian scholars refer to the construction of a counterposition between a hierarchical Hindu society and Western right based

## **The Inauthenticity of Modernity**

The discourses of community, hybridity and postcolonialism may thus, according to the logic I have outlined here, be seen as moments in the process of deterritorialisation of generically Western concepts and theories - in *casu* romanticism and later poststructuralism - and their repatriation and effective globalisation in new contexts. They may also be seen as examples of how ostensible new discourses - new ways of positing a problematic - inadvertently is caught in the deep structures of a hegemonic Western intellectual tradition. Critiques of the intellectual hegemony of generically Western categories are caught in the categories of the romanticist episteme with all the essentialisation of "modernity-as-universal-reason" that entails.<sup>9</sup> It seems that as long the postcolonial critique posits the "West-as-modernity" as a simplified essentialised Other, it becomes, inevitably, posited within a problematic of self grounding and recuperation of authenticity which the romanticist episteme already defined.

The discourse of postcoloniality adopts from poststructuralism the notion of hybridity, but claims hybridity to be an essential feature of postcolonial subjects. This amount, to my mind, to a misreading of the poststructuralist critique of modernity, a misreading which paradoxically installs hybridity as an essence. In my understanding, poststructuralism posits hybridisation, difference and indeterminacy as intrinsic to the modern world; as a part of what modernity always both created and fought - but never recognised in its self-description. As David Kolb notes in the end of his penetrating study of Hegel and Heidegger, modernity was never as coherent or radically self grounded as both its spokes-

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egalitarianism as almost constitutive of the latter, and East Asian scholars refer to the long-standing Western fears of the 'yellow danger', the demonisation of the enigmatic East Asians whose discipline and control of technology produce so much fear and fascination. In all cases, however, a nationalist agenda is lurking beneath, trying to extract a sort of reverse recognition from the systematic cultural misrecognition by the West.

<sup>9</sup> I believe that Roy Boyne has a point when he suggests that deconstruction and poststructuralism as a theoretical project has reached its limits and eclipsed as a philosophical line of inquiry, though it far from has exhausted its potentials within the human and social sciences. Many areas still await the whirlwinds of deconstruction. Boyne argues, that the strength of deconstruction lies in its critique of power and taxonomisation, whereas it is vulnerable in its celebration of difference. Boyne quotes Derrida's unequivocal critique of apartheid and defence of equality as a supreme value, and Foucault's 'Kantian turn' towards personal autonomy and ethics in his late works, as proofs of the recognition by both Foucault and Derrida of the inevitability of ethical foundations in notions of individual sovereignty, equality or other of the both universalist and foundational values they both have criticised so severely (Boyne, 1988:157-60).

men (such as Hegel) and its critics (as Heidegger) claimed. Critiques of modernity do not have to be posited outside modernity, argues Kolb:

If our multiple inhabitations (of modernity (TBH)) are themselves internally multiple and tense, then there is room for freedom and creativity without the need to always be out and ahead". (Kolb, 1986:259)

The predicament of recognising that we are posited within certain modern intellectual deep structures amounts then to that claims of authenticity on the part of the periphery - or anywhere else - may stand forth as internal moments in the romanticist episteme, and as inescapable effects of simplistic critiques of "modernity-as-universalist-reason". Inauthenticity, displacement and non-identity with oneself are fundamental and universal conditions of the global modernity, or rather the multiple modernities proliferating on the globe. No one can escape this condition and all - postcolonials as well as metropolitans - have to live with it. To reduce modernity to a 'provincial' Western condition, as the odd alliance of progressive postcolonials and Western conservatives advocates for rather different reasons, seems to conceal this problem instead of facing it.

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