

When was South African history ever postcolonial?

Author(s): PREMESH LALU

Source: *Kronos*, No. 34, Making Histories (NOVEMBER 2008), pp. 267-281

Published by: [University of Western Cape](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41056610>

Accessed: 01/09/2011 06:24

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Western Cape is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Kronos*.

When was South African history ever postcolonial?

PREMESH LALU

Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape

There is a belief among some historians that South African history is, for all intents and purposes, already postcolonial because it has been analytically decolonized.¹ The claim, it seems, is made in relation to the rise of social history in analyses of the South African social formation, especially the way in which it supposedly exceeded the constraints of colonialism, segregation and apartheid on questions of subjectivity.² By focusing on social forces and class consciousness this 1980s critique effectively redirected the liberal/Marxist preoccupations with subjective interpellation towards a less determinate narrative of historical change.

Lurking within this claim to a postcolonial history which arguably emerged at the height of apartheid is the undertow of the 'native question'. It tugs at the very constellation of South African history and, perhaps, explains why the postapartheid present has been rendered in such a way as to suggest that it signals a rupture with the past. Such a presentation of the postapartheid necessarily runs the risk of obscuring the foundational presuppositions of South African history and allows South African historians to forge ahead as if those knowledge projects, such as social history, that arose in opposition to apartheid can simply be transposed to give meaning to the postapartheid. Other than to define itself as oppositional, the nostalgic renderings of agency and a re-reading of the community as spatially local, social history cannot, it seems, account for its own historicity. Despite the effort by Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius in the introduction to a collection of essays on 'alternative visions and practices', published in 1990, to locate South African social history in a longer tradition of radical historiography and as an indispensable agent of change,³ this project seemingly operates within the same normative subject categories that emerged in the struggle against apartheid.

In this article I argue that what enabled affiliation to the larger political project against apartheid was precisely the production of a subject that was always, and necessarily, threaded through a structure of racial capitalism. This hinders the emergence of a history of colonialism and nationalism that theorises and historicises the relations of knowledge and power. In what I am calling a postcolonial

1 Belinda Bozzoli, 'Intellectuals, audiences, and histories: South African experiences 1978-1988', *Radical History Review* 46/7, 1990, 237-263 cited in H. Stolten, 'History in the new South Africa' in H. Stolten, ed., *History Making and Present Day Politics: The meaning of collective memory in South Africa* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2007), 47; C. Saunders, 'Four decades of South African academic historical writing: A personal perspective', Stolten, ed., *History Making*, 287.

2 I am thinking of the way that Francois Cusset deploys Bourdieu's notion of 'structural misunderstanding' to examine the American reception of French Theory. See Cusset *French Theory*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 5.

3 A special edition of *Radical History Review*, issue 46/7, 1990, on South African history, was re-published as J Brown et al. eds., *History from South Africa: Alternative Visions and Practices* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991). The essay by Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius referred to is 'Radical history and South African society'. Further citations are to the essay as it appeared in the *Radical History Review*.

critique of apartheid, I make explicit the way the question of knowledge and power was often exchanged for historicist constructions of historical change, especially in relation to the transition from the apartheid to the postapartheid. Tangential to my argument is a reminder of the way the native question in the first half of the twentieth-century produced a disciplinary upheaval in South African knowledge projects by combining the impulses drawn from colonial discourse and nationalist anti-colonial narration. Herein we might encounter the problem of South African radical historiography, and its concomitant constructions of the postapartheid.

I have, over the past few years, argued for a postcolonial critique of apartheid which dispels the argument about decolonised knowledge. Much of this claim is contained in my book, *The Deaths of Hintsa: Postapartheid South Africa and the Shape of Recurring Pasts*.⁴ Briefly, the book argues that we may have to renew a critique of apartheid if we are to make better sense of the emergence of the post-apartheid. Two proposals guide my attempt to rework the concept of apartheid so that the postapartheid does not merely emerge as a development on apartheid. The first is to stage an argument in terms of an event that is, so to speak, resonant with the event of a transition. In this way I set out to challenge formulations that specify the meanings of colonialism, segregation, apartheid, postapartheid and post-colonialism in a developmental linear sequencing. The second is to turn to the discursiveness that defines apartheid. This is necessary to enable an investigation of how it is cut of the same epistemic cloth that defined the subjection of agency that is intrinsic to the modes of evidence of the colonial archive. That history which set itself the task of becoming meaningful and usable in opposition to apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s actually repressed the burden of an earlier discursive inheritance.

The common-place serial usage in African studies, which sees the post-colonial as a temporal signifier for post-independence Africa, needs to be reworked and redirected towards a discursive reading of apartheid. *The Deaths of Hintsa* asks what it might mean to appropriate the terms and concepts from another discourse, that of subaltern studies in Latin America and South Asia, and place it in a critical reading of our modernity. What might it mean to undertake such a move as theoretically enabling and intellectually productive for establishing a postcolonial critique of apartheid?

Productive formulations for the term postcolonial are widely available in contemporary critical theory. One approach is offered by Stuart Hall's succinct but nevertheless astute reworking of the term postcolonial in which he suggests that the postcolonial does not lend itself to the limited temporal signification that has confounded the question of event in history. In fact, Hall would rather have us approach the question of the postcolonial as a strategy of 'thinking at the limit', perhaps of late capitalism and its formidable social and cultural effects.⁵ Certainly,

4 Premesh Lalu *The Deaths of Hintsa: Postapartheid South Africa and the Shape of Recurring Pasts* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2008).

5 See for example Stuart Hall, 'When was the post-colonial? Thinking at the limit' in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, eds., *The Post-colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996).

in all the ways we wish to ask the postcolonial question of South African history, we may take our cue from Hall and ask when South African history was *ever* post-colonial?

Subaltern studies is not social history

Perhaps, the best known effort to test the implications of postcolonial critique is that produced by the Subaltern Studies Collective in South Asia. One of the very few moments when this work entered into a substantial dialogue with the South African academy was at a conference held in 1997 at the University of Cape Town titled *Problematising History and Agency: From Nationalism to Subalternity*. Shamil Jeppie's review of the conference highlights a crucial misunderstanding of the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective. It is a misunderstanding, I would argue, that results in a conflation of the work of Subaltern Studies with social history. In it, Jeppie refers to a debate amongst the Indian historians who attended the conference.

The Indian scholars brought a distinctive richness to the conference. The subaltern studies group, plus a former member but now a critic of this group, explored the emergence of an approach to history which questioned the entrenched premises of Indian nationalist historiography. But whereas they were initially very much oriented to the labouring classes, as is characterized by their very name, they were accused of moving away from class analysis to an explicitly 'culturalist' reading of the Indian past and its present. In their current form, they were criticized by some historians, for having adopted too much post-modernism by attending to 'fragments' and seemingly regional or marginal issues while spurning all meta-narratives, and by turning to 'aesthetic' questions of representation and narrative. But Gyan Pandey and Partha Chatterjee, the chief proponents of the subaltern approach at the meeting, elegantly defended their prevailing biases – questioning the category of History itself as it is understood in the academy, and not privileging class in historical analysis because of its 'normalisation' in late capitalism. Pandey asked: 'How do we know, from the start, that particular activities and development do so count [as History] – except in terms laid down by political victors.'⁶

As Jeppie points out, for Pandey and Chatterjee, subaltern studies was not a culturalist response to social history with its overriding emphasis on class consciousness. Instead they insisted that it was a critique of disciplinary reason in which the subject is forged. Its critique is directed specifically at an apparatus

6 Shamil Jeppie, 'Report: "Problematising history and agency: From nationalism to subalternity"', Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, 22-24 October 1997', *Kronos* 25, 1998/99, 321.

consisting of archive, discipline and subjection and with historicist renderings of the subject in emancipatory discourses.

In contrast to approaches that have emerged out of the Subaltern Studies Collective, the project of History that dominates academic history writing pursues a subject whose rationality is decided by way of the experience of negotiating the complex social arrangements that are bequeathed, acted upon or substantially altered. In South African history such an emancipatory ideal has been best served by a return to the speaking subject (primarily through oral history methodologies) and in the selective appropriation of the national popular by social history. This does not mean that the nascent social history of the 1980s slavishly followed the logic of popular struggles nor that it simply abided by the nationalist interpellation of the popular. In an oblique, often understated, way it was marking a critical position from within Marxism that offered new vantage points to glean the dynamic histories of race, class and gender. Social history sought to avoid the implications of nationalism in the struggle against apartheid while remaining acutely aware of the way understanding the experience and agency of the underclasses in defining and, at times, exceeding nationalist constructions. The subject of resistance to apartheid and capitalism, introduced through the medium of social history, also illuminated the structural conditions that that subject was intended to change.

Social history also sought to relate the history of an emancipatory subject to the specific history of capitalism in the region, especially since it elaborated upon earlier critiques of apartheid that attended to the particular configurations of capitalist organisation. The rationalist presuppositions that attended to the subject in the writing of social historians is necessarily pegged to the question of agency in a historiographical battle that sought to exceed the frameworks of constraint and, possibly, determinacy posed by Marxist structuralist historians who had emphasized the articulation of modes of production and apparatuses of the state. As Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius were to comment on the shift from structuralism to social history, 'it became clear that structuralism was incapable of transcending a vision which froze the social order at particular points in time, and sought to map the relationship between one structured 'mode of production' and another'.⁷ In the interstices of this admittedly caricatured depiction of a shift in the emphases of scholarship was the pressure of what Bozzoli and Delius refer to as the 'national question'⁸ with the resurgence of mass political mobilization in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the uneasy relation between 'workerist' and 'nationalist' political tendencies. As they put it, this was a moment of 'possibility and creativity'.⁹ In some ways, argue Bozzoli and Delius, nationalist undercurrents in popular consciousness had a definite consequence on more inflexible notions of class held by intellectuals at the time, allowing for the articulation of social history in the academy and in what was conceived of as 'popular formats'.

7 Bozzoli and Delius, 'Radical history', 31.

8 Bozzoli and Delius, 'Radical history', 27.

9 Bozzoli and Delius, 'Radical history', 28

To establish the centrality of the selective appropriation of nationalist narration to the larger framework of radical social history, I propose that we consider the contribution of Tom Lodge on ANC historiography in the same collection that drew together a semblance of radical scholarship in South Africa in 1990. Lodge's essay echoes the themes related to the encounter between social history and nationalism, or the 'national question', referred to in Bozzoli and Delius's essay. It tackles the problem of the neglect of nationalism and, later, the selective appropriation by social history of its more popular expression in the analysis of the category of class. Lodge offers a reading of the forms of historical production that are discernable in what he calls 'ANC historiography'. He argues that one component of the ANC historiography is to be found in works that contain a sense of historical testament.

First there is a series of fairly substantial works of biography, historical fiction, and social reportage which come from the earliest phase of the ANC's development, when the organisation and the men who led it were still rooted in a rural culture. This is followed by a rich vein of autobiography produced mainly in the milieu of 1950s townships and locations, some of it written by people who were active in Congress or close to it. A third category is represented by a succession of more analytical books written by 1940s and 1950s participants in the affairs of the Communist Party as well as the Congress Alliance. The final contribution is from a more recent generation of ANC historians whose academic training and intellectual formation have been influenced by the circumstances of exile.¹⁰

This mapping by Lodge of 'ANC historiography', in at least a metaphorical sense, mimics the larger claim of the collection of essays. It narrates the story of the neglect of nationalism and the selective appropriation of its popular expressions. Lodge narrates how an early tendency to reify the precolonial in these works gave way to a nativist or Africanist strand and an emergent focus on the 'ordinary life of people'.¹¹ In this a split was discernable between the pre-Second World War intellectual currents in the ANC and the later post 1960s efforts to grasp the modernist underpinnings of liberation struggles against Apartheid. The story of ANC historiography, as narrated by Lodge, is the gradual insertion of the popular factor in its history from the 1960s and through which its initial class and racial/ethnic claims were increasingly displaced. Quoting Bernard Magubane's contribution to this later strand of ANC historiography, Lodge notes that for Magubane 'any of the campaigns the ANC waged in the decade 1949-1960 must be looked upon as part of an overall attempt to arouse a radical political consciousness among the masses of the African people'.¹² Lodge has registered a shift in ANC historiography from

10 Tom Lodge, 'ANC historiography', in *Radical History Review*, 46/7, 1990, 163.

11 Tom Lodge, 'ANC historiography', 183.

12 Tom Lodge, 'ANC historiography', 177.

the ANC organising around different South African 'nations' struggling against apartheid to that premised on the notion of 'the people'.

It was perhaps this impulse to foregrounding 'the people' that also marked the work of social historians as they liberally borrowed from this nationalist script to lend more nuanced conceptions to the race, class and gender dynamics of South African society. An ambivalent appropriation of nationalist narrative invariably leads to the question of what that process discards as a source of effective history, and to what ends. In this way nationalism is increasingly rendered by social history as a modernist project and its critique consequently based upon nationalism's supposed attachment to a precolonial register and its monopoly to speak in the voice of the oppressed. What is crucial though is to understand how this contradiction at the core of nationalist narration compositely animates the history of the African present. Social history selects from nationalism's multiple narratives, places itself in a relation of solidarity with the underlying political claims of those narratives but without attending to the networks of insertion into and exchange with disciplinary discourses.

This politics by association has meant that the critique of nationalism's (seemingly unattainable) postcolonial longing is never dealt with nor is the possibility of developing a history of the African present, by which I mean a project that attends to nationalism's interpellation and forms of subjection. Social history in South Africa seems either not willing or is indifferent to address the problem of the interpellation of the subject in nationalist discourse and its concomitant public institutions and spheres. What nationalism obscures is the way in which knowledge in South Africa is indelibly marked by the disciplinary upheaval caused by the 'native question' that the segregationist state introduced in the first part of the twentieth century. The disciplinary upheaval caused by this question traversed political and academic discourses, and can be seen in the discussion in the Communist Party of the Native Republic Thesis, in the uneasy and contested attitudes towards participation in 'native administration', in the vanishing cultures discourse of some anthropologists, 'Bantu studies', and in the capitalist modernisation narratives of liberal historians. Nationalist discourse punctuated these disciplinary projects, often in selective ways that ultimately contributed to the subjection of agency rather than unsettling its formation and articulation.

In one sense I am arguing that the critique of structuralism in South African studies would have been better served by a postcolonial critique of apartheid rather than social history. This may have saved history from an all too easy dismissal and reluctance to tackle nationalism as a problem of history. The question, to put it somewhat ironically, is whether it is even possible to conceive of radical history without an accommodation of nationalism - even that nationalism which purportedly opposed apartheid and the programme of which founds the modern democratic state in South Africa. The usable past is mostly an *abusable* past: in this sense social history, given its political orientations, is perhaps not irredeemably and automatically postcolonial if we take into account how it operates in the normative terms of a discourse of domination.

One basis to sustain this rather bald statement is to place social history in South Africa in the larger synthesis of a critique of African history by a scholar of

Central Africa, Bogumil Jewsiewicki. While not beyond criticism, Jewsiewicki's argument about the enduring legacies of modes of production narratives in African history may help to underscore elements of my own critique of social history in South Africa. In an article published in 1989 Bogumil Jewsiewicki bemoaned the manner in which an initial interest in transition in African societies was modularized into static structural states.¹³ From Jewsiewicki's assessment, the expectations of theory called for in the 1970s only ever achieved the status of a radical paradigm in which the work of history was taken as a strategy of political advocacy. Crucial to the reassessment offered here is that the study of Africa had little consequence to the altering of the epistemologies of the nineteenth century that had placed Africa in the position of colonial object in the first place. The reason for this apparent neglect of epistemological alteration was not only to be viewed in terms of structure and institution but in the very position of social actors in the wider frameworks of the radical paradigm. Jewsiewicki notes for example:

Since Marxist historians of colonial transformations assumed that a social actor is Africa is an universal rational person, they failed to address the question of specificity of the social actor taking into account his/her own culture, identity, self-knowledge and social goals. Their, largely uncontested with the exception of substantivist anthropologists, assumption was that in the social and political universe of capitalist expansion and transformation, any actor facing primitive accumulation, became a 'rational' one. As their main interest was rather in primitive accumulation or class formation, they took for granted that the transforming power of capitalist relations cannot be significantly altered by local background. It still could be, rather hopelessly, resisted. The outcome of the encounter between capital and technology on one hand and social and political specificity on the other cannot but be proletarianisation, urbanization and pauperization. Primitive accumulation was conceived as 'production' of culturally deprived, but 'rational' (in the struggle for survival), human beings.¹⁴

This preoccupation with the subject of change that Jewsiewicki points to is that it leaves very little room for understanding how the African subject has taken up a position and expressed an attitude in relation to various emancipatory narratives that have also formed the core of the paradigm of African studies. The reason for this steadfast commitment is seemingly that African studies, and history more specifically, seems grounded in the supposedly empty homogenous time of capital. It is no wonder that African scholars see the endeavours of African studies in the west, again according to Jewsiewicki, as a continuation of missionary activity.¹⁵

13 Bogumil Jewsiewicki, 'African historical studies: Academic knowledge as 'usable past' and radical scholarship', in *African Studies Review*, Vol. 32 (3), December 1989, 34.

14 Bogumil Jewsiewicki, 'African historical studies', 34.

15 Bogumil Jewsiewicki, 'African historical studies', 36.

Jewsiewicki drives home the point that the subject of African history may in fact be a historian is his/her own right, given the political meaning accorded to the study of history in Africa. According to him it is only with this rendering of the production of history that something like a paradigm shift may be effected in African history. To this end, Jewsiewicki identifies a crucial difficulty in the rise of social history through the History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand. In arguing that the historian's struggle is also about the very idea of history and the right to write history, Jewsiewicki finds in the History Workshop grounds for making the argument for a paradigm shift:

It is taking a long time for radical historians of Africa to leave the realm of mainly theoretical debate and to become involved in the struggle about the 'present past.' Even in South Africa, the so-called New School tried to impose itself by virtue of its knowledge instead of engaging in the local struggle for writing history that could be of 'popular' use. Today inside South Africa, the history workshop movement is studying history as consciousness and political discourse of black South Africans. The history workshop movement creates history along class lines when other historians investigate urban dwellers' lives and their protest. Some look into rural unrest in order to 'prevent rural South Africans from being ignored or short-changed when power and wealth are fundamentally redistributed in a transformed society'.

This new vision of history often leads to violent but necessary confrontations with Afrikaner historical discourse, mainly a post-World War II phenomenon, and with Anglo-Saxon liberal historiography. With black South Africans becoming no more satisfied to be oral data 'librarians' but becoming historians claiming the right to affirm what history is about and what the relevant past is, the struggle turns from academic to political.¹⁶

While I disagree with Jewsiewicki's assessment of the achievements of the Wits History Workshop, and the reluctance to historicise social history in South Africa, he nevertheless directs our attention to the conundrum about what the legitimate subject of history is. In his view the subject of history now wants to be an historian. I would argue that this is not achievable in a social history paradigm which requires a subject in a specific relation to power as the source of 'history from below'. I am sympathetic to Jewsiewicki's argument for an African studies that disavows the missionary qualities of earlier theoretical and empirical projects. I suggest that one way to respond to his wager is for scholars in Africa to help reconstitute the paradigm of African history.

To experiment with histories in these provocative directions suggested by Jewsiewicki is to understand the limits of a historiography built on the temporali-

16 Bogumil Jewsiewicki, 'African historical studies', 11.

ties and structural concerns of radical history in Africa. Such a project in South Africa would have to be concerned with a postcolonial critique of apartheid. By this I mean not a search for the return of the marginal and marginalized subject of history into the rational orders of resistance and advocacy but one that purports to introduce a process of thinking at the limit proposed by Stuart Hall. Nor is this a call to merely search out the domains of research that has defined cultural studies. Cultural studies might reproduce the conditions by which a vernacular nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s was translated as the very grounds for attending to the state sponsored 'native question'. Rather what I am calling for is a renewed critique of apartheid that brackets a reliance on the speaking subject and introduces a structural misunderstanding through a deployment of a relational term of subalternity that has found resonance in Latin America and South Asia. In producing such a concept we might formulate the terms of a history after apartheid that will seek out the unifying themes that may enable new directions in historical research.

Raising the stakes in the critique of apartheid: Towards a study of the subjection of agency

A postcolonial critique of apartheid, rather than representing a decolonized sphere, is an effort at inquiring into the implications of power in knowledge and its effect on the formation of subaltern subjectivity. The rise of the figure of the subaltern – a subject that is always also out of 'sync' with the empty homogenous time of capital – has contributed to unfolding a strategy of *parabasis* – being outside while at once inside the play or argument of history. By putting the subaltern into play in the discourse of history the Subaltern Studies Collective has also realigned the principal disciplinary distinction between history and historiography that defines the historian's craft. In so doing it has called into question unilinear temporal theories of change that dominate the discourse of history and the political effects of the specific histories they give rise to.

It is possible to discern in the different works of the Subaltern Studies Collective a fundamental disagreement with Marx's famous essay, 'On India', in which he proposed that colonialism was a troublesome but necessary event in the history of capital. The Subaltern Studies Collective sought to call into question the very limits of dialectical thinking. Guha, one of the originators of the project, notes:

From the point of view of those left out of World-history this... amounts to condoning precisely such 'world historical deeds' – the rape of continents, the destruction of cultures, the poisoning of the environment – as helped 'the great men who [were] the individuals of world history' to build empires and trap their subject populations in what the pseudo-historical language of imperialism could describe as Prehistory.¹⁷

17 Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-history* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 4.

The response from ‘those left out of World History’ as articulated by Guha and others in the Subaltern Studies Collective, however, was not merely to write a social history from below, one that was additive of those who were cast as Europe’s people without history. Instead, by elaborating on the concept *subaltern*, a categorical crisis was exposed when history’s relation to power was specifically refracted through the prism of postcolonial criticism. As such, the subaltern marked a necessary limit in the composition of power. For Gyan Prakash, subalternity erupts within the system of dominance and marks its limits from within: that its externality to dominant systems of knowledge and power surfaces inside the system of dominance, but only as an intimation, as a trace of that which eludes the dominant discourse.¹⁸ The term ‘subaltern’ conveys a sense of categorical distinction and a shift from the recuperative project surrounding the preordained subject of history to a reading of the traces of subalternity in hegemonic discourses. The question, it seems, is one about the concepts of difference that a subaltern studies entertains and whether these may indeed help to activate a postcolonial critique of apartheid.

The work undertaken in the name of the Subaltern Studies Collective, itself a considerably diverse research agenda bound together by a broad postcolonial intellectual commitment, has resulted, in at least one sense, in a critical deconstruction of historiography – both nationalist and Marxist. In the promise of transition from colonial rule, the figure of the subaltern stood as a ‘demographic differential’, to use Guha’s term, that interrupted the flows of historiographical modalities of social change. Subaltern studies should, however, not be reduced to demographic difference as it may reproduce the legislative tyranny of separate development and racial and ethnic classification. One way to think of the productivity of engaging with subaltern studies is through the more deconstructive edge of the collective which annotates its own failure in recovering subaltern agency as it makes possible a critique of theories of change. The subaltern was always also placed under erasure as a result of the operation of regimes of truth.

As a consequence the project, for all intents and purposes, is better understood as one aimed at deconstructing historiography. Dipesh Chakrabarty provides us with a useful summary of how these strands came together in the work of subaltern studies in India:

With hindsight, it can be said that there were three broad areas in which Subaltern Studies differed from the history-from-below approach of Hobsbawm or Thompson (allowing for differences between these two eminent historians of England and Europe). *Subaltern historiography* necessarily entailed a relative separation of the history of power from any universalist histories of capital, a critique of the nation form, and an interrogation of the relation between power and knowledge (hence

18 Gyan Prakash, ‘The impossibility of Subaltern history’, *Nepantla: Views from the South*, 1(2), 2000, 2.

of the archive itself and of history as a form of knowledge). In these differences, I would argue, lay the beginnings of a new way of theorizing the intellectual agenda for postcolonial histories.¹⁹

My engagement with the Subaltern Studies Collective is premised not so much on the notion of the subaltern as demographic differential but rather on its interruptive strategy for reading theories of change. I am not necessarily interested in comparative histories in the social scientific sense of that term or in the use of the term *subaltern* to denote yet another subject category of multiculturalism. I do not feel that the term 'subaltern' should limit us to a sense of mere categorical distinction. Mine is a more selective, if not modest, proposal for advancing the project of the Subaltern Studies Collective and combining it with an inquiry into theories of change that marks the transition from apartheid to postapartheid South Africa.²⁰ If theories of change are conventionally believed to be marked by historiographical presuppositions, what specific theory of change guides the shift towards the onset of the postapartheid?

The dialogue with the Subaltern Studies Collective that I am proposing is aimed at clearing the ground for the purposes of a more rigorous account of disciplinary reason. The term *subaltern* indirectly allows for a conceptual correlation between subaltern agency and the constraints of identity politics represented by apartheid. This double-bind of agency and constraint is suggestively conveyed by the phrase 'subjection of agency'. It opposes notions of agency that lay claim to the will of the agent, but rather views the formation of the subject's agency as a product of a long-drawn-out discursive event. This combination of the term subaltern with Mowitt's formulation of the 'subjection of agency'²¹ allows for distance between those forms of narration which seek to recover subaltern agency and those that attend to how the reinscription of the subject into the discourse of history produces repetition, and not a markedly different, emancipatory subject. Coupling with the phrase 'subjection of agency' allows subaltern studies to be thought of less as a project of recovery than of tracking subaltern effects in discourse.

One way to proceed, it seems, is to understand apartheid's relation to colonial violence and its archive anew, in terms of the subjection of agency and its related subaltern effects. If the colonial archive did not only precede apartheid but defined it discursively as a system of modernist tyranny, if it is the source of organizing the subjection of agency, then the question we might pose is how does one establish a line of flight not only from the violence of colonialism but also from the tendency for the archive to regulate much of what can be said in its wake? Far from being akin to a superstructure, the colonial archive is a reminder of the possibilities

19 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 8.

20 I am not, of course, the first to call for greater attention in African history to the work of subaltern Studies. See for example, John and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992) p.15, where they suggest that subaltern studies may be crucial to unsettling the categories that enabled colonialism. See also Ivan Karp and D.A. Masolo, *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 3.

21 John Mowitt, *Percussion: Drumming, Beating, Striking* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 52.

of power to code every emergent relation in society, even the resistance to that power.²²

A more discreet strand of postcolonial criticism inaugurated in part by the work of Bernard Cohn and Edward Said simultaneously, draws attention to the vast networks of knowledge and discipline by which the colonial project created the conditions for the exercise of power.²³ Taken together Cohn and Said placed before us a radical revision of the analysis presented in Michel Foucault's *Order of Things* and *Archaeology of Knowledge*.²⁴ They showed at length that Foucault's description of the classical, renaissance or modern episteme was propped up by the vast edifice of Europe's expansionist project.²⁵ What Said, in particular, achieved in his *Orientalism* was to intensify the implications of Foucault's analysis of epistemes and discursive formations by establishing a more definite connection between the disciplinary power and the rise of academic disciplines. The resultant sense of disciplinary reason which Foucault himself would uncover in his *Discipline and Punish* challenged the very colonial logic and premise of the formation of the human sciences. The implicit argument of *Orientalism* is that any effort to oversee the postcolonial critique of apartheid must be accompanied by a commensurate rupture in the systems of knowledge that established the conditions of possibility of colonialism in the first place. In returning to the themes developed in *Orientalism* some years later, Said articulated this aspect of his quest in which he situated his own return to the theme of humanism and the problem of a universalizing historicism:

Along with the greater capacity for dealing with – in Ernst Bloch's phrase – the non-synchronous experiences of Europe's Other has gone a fairly uniform avoidance of the relationship between European imperialism and these variously constituted and articulated knowledges. *What has never taken place is an epistemological critique of the connection between the development of a historicism which has expanded and developed enough to include antithetical attitudes such as ideologies of western imperialism and critiques of imperialism, on the one hand, and, on the other, the actual practice of imperialism by which the accumulation of territories and population, the control of economies, and the incorporation and the homogenization of histories are maintained...* We must, I believe, think in both political and

-
- 22 Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, (London: Penguin, 1978), 92-97. In these pages we find the most profound rephrasing of the repressive hypothesis. I would, however, argue that it be read alongside Gilles Deleuze's arguments about potentiality in writing. See Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 50.
- 23 Bernard S. Cohn 'The command of language and the language of command', in *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 276-329; Edward Said *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
- 24 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989); Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
- 25 See Edward Said, 'Michel Foucault, 1926-1984', in Jonathan Arac, ed., *After Foucault: Humanistic Knowledge, Postmodern Challenges* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 9. Also Michel Foucault *The Order of Things* (London, New York: Routledge, 1989) 335-351.

theoretical terms, locating the main problems in what Frankfurt theory identified as domination and division of labor. We must confront also the problem of the absence of a theoretical, utopian, and libertarian dimension in analysis. We cannot proceed unless we dissipate and redispense the material historicism into radically different pursuits of knowledge, and we cannot do that until we are aware that no new projects of knowledge can be constituted unless they resist the dominance and professionalized particularism of historicist systems and reductive, pragmatic, or functionalist theories.²⁶

This statement not only offers a way to ascertain the complicity of history in sustaining forms of power, but also extends the direction of critique to those histories of change that present themselves as inclusive and radically opposed to imperialism. The desire to seek an inclusionary narrative of world history has unfortunately relinquished the need for a critique of historicism which was part of the selective narrative, and its diabolical consequences, in the first place. Said, instead, is attempting to reroute knowledge that does not amount to merely enacting historicist reversals through supposedly anti-imperialist narratives of change.

In seeking to revisit the relation between apartheid, colonialism and nationalism, I am suggesting that the search for the meaning of the postapartheid may benefit from the postcolonial anticipation of an epistemic rupture. The possibility of a postapartheid that is geared towards deepening democracy is perhaps best dealt with by bringing a postcolonial critique of apartheid to bear on it. This would entail bringing to an end historicist constructions in which colonialism, apartheid and the postapartheid (or, in this instance, the post-apartheid as a temporal rather than conceptual category) are treated as merely sequential rather than connected through the techniques of disciplinary reason.

Rather than reducing the term subaltern to a sign for a subject of marginality, we might think of activating a discourse *against subalternity* through a critique of disciplinary reason.²⁷ The subaltern is not the 'other' of historical discourse, as Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us. Furthermore, the word 'subaltern' does not function merely as a place-keeper of categorical difference but as a subject in/difference, between what can be said and what is actually said. If anything, the subaltern is constitutive of historical discourse, if not its most elided effect. Calling attention to this elided sphere not only highlights the relationship between history and power but also how the subaltern is returned again and again to the position of a subordinate proposition in historical statements.

Three provisional tactical considerations define my response to this overriding question. The first relates to the way the subaltern effect is the mark of difference between what can be said and what is actually said, under conditions in which the modes of evidence of the colonial archive codes the frameworks of history. I would argue that this level of difference essentially helps us to see how the modes

26 Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 210-211. [My emphasis].

27 The distinction between subaltern and subalternity is present in its inaugural use in Gramsci.

of evidence of the colonial archive might serve as the condition of possibility for apartheid as both a system of exclusion and inclusion.

The second tactical consideration relates to the disciplinary formations to which modes of evidence of the archive give rise. I have argued elsewhere, particularly, that the colonial archive produces a second level of distinction at the core of a system of representation by distinguishing history and historiography.²⁸ The distinction functions primarily to once more elide the imaginary structure upon which the discourse of history depends. Even when nationalist anti-colonial narration seeks to strategically invalidate the claims of the colonial archive by setting to work on the imaginary structure, it nevertheless runs up against the constraints posed by the orders of discipline and its insistence that the 'subject' is a source of history and not an historian.

Finally, I suggest that we undertake the task of strategic invalidation by making nationalism's encounter with the limit placed on it by the orders of discipline, the very target of critique. Coupled with an attempt to step out of the shadows of the colonial archive is the demand for an understanding of the disciplinary forms of history and historiography to which it gives rise.

The subaltern effect, when targeted, offers us a brief glimpse of the interweaving of discourses, narratives, ideologies, disciplinary methodologies and languages that reveals our entanglements in history. Unraveling such entanglements is, however, an opportunity to consider how the discourse of history acts as an alibi of power by eroding the very imaginary structure that results in the production of the subaltern as an effect. In this limited structural sense, the subaltern is the mark of difference between the modes of evidence of the colonial archive and imaginary structure.

Why this stress on the reworking of the question of subalternity? I have argued that the figural realism that operates in the discourse of history will only ever produce the figure of the subaltern as a subject. Rather than reproduce this subject in this position, we might see subaltern studies as a limited field of critique that is aimed at forging the beginnings of a postcolonial episteme. Given the long nineteenth and twentieth-centuries of colonial and neo-colonial violence against which it works, subaltern studies does not -nor should it - strive to produce a single monolithic critical agenda. Neither is it merely an effort at pluralism. It takes as a point of possible dialogue the singularity of the effects of an episteme that is founded on colonialism. The work undertaken in India is instructive in the sense that it set forth a possible platform for engagement and places before us the demand for a rigorous understanding of those critical models that have sought to work against domination. Taking Edward Said's spectre that haunts the discourse of postcoloniality seriously, we are bound to make the same mistake twice if we do not see knowledge as integral to the exercise of power.²⁹ Subaltern studies should not strive to constitute a discernable historiographical current that can be taught as an appendage to the graduate introductory class in world history as a sign of the

28 Premesh Lal, *The Deaths of Hints*

29 See Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 198-215.

inclusive benevolence of the master's narrative.³⁰ It is not a school of history but a long-drawn-out effort at creating the conditions for an epistemic rupture of narratives of progress imbued with the legacies of the Cold War that reorient the pursuits of knowledge away from consideration of the forms of power it has hitherto upheld.³¹

The term *subaltern* helps to animate, if not intensify a postcolonial critique of apartheid. It is intended to prompt us in the direction of a critique of disciplinary reason that inheres as the latent possibilities of earlier critiques of apartheid. Disciplinary reason, in John Mowitt's instructive use of the phrase,³² brings together a sense of disciplinary power in the Foucaultian sense and the operation of academic disciplines. One element of the critique of disciplinary reason is that it allows scholars to come to grips with the question of history in the ideological conditions of the Cold War which produced not merely conditions of repression but also the effects of normalized power. The distinction today drawn between nationalist and patriotic history in Zimbabwe, for example, falls short of considering this dual concept of power in my view. Similarly, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa has smoothed over the Cold War conditions of violence by merely calling attention to the repressive techniques of apartheid and not its normalizing, but equally disastrous, operations. We need more histories, of concepts, discourses, representations, narratives and formations of subjectivities that might eventually lead us to towards the rupture that we desire. The effort made to step out of the shadows of the colonial archive is only part of that larger constellation of historiographies, some already underway, that target the predicament of the postapartheid present.

If colonialism inaugurated modes of evidence that later structured not only settler colonial representations but also acted as conditions of constraint on the imaginations of anti-colonial nationalist narrations, then the question of entanglement in the discourse of history needs serious critical scrutiny if not new critical models. I believe a history after apartheid would haunt the discussion of the post-apartheid as long as the underlying consequences of historicism in the formation of subaltern effects are not subjected to critical scrutiny.

What kind of subaltern studies for South African history? Not one that only delineates the subject of racialised exclusion or economic deprivation. These features, it could be argued, are symptomatic of an imbrication of knowledge and power. A South African subaltern studies may take seriously the inauguration of the subject that is produced by disciplinary reason bound to what Adorno once called 'epistemological dogmatism'.³³ We may propose a subaltern studies that targets the process of the subjection of agency as it posits the potential for a critique of disciplinary reason, and in so doing offers a postcolonial critique of apartheid.

30 See for example Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 9.

31 I am deliberately framing these in terms of Cold War narratives and not European narratives, given my sympathetic reading of Slavoj Žižek's, 'A leftist plea for Eurocentrism', *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Winter 2002) 542-566.

32 John Mowitt, *Text: The Genealogy of an Anti-Disciplinary Object* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 24.

33 Theodor Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (California: Stanford University Press, 1995), 67.