

Whose History? What Theory?: A Postcolonial Response

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Kleinberg, Scott, and Wilder's call for a closer relationship between critical thinking and history-writing (III.1-III.10) so closely resonates with my own training in postcolonial Delhi and Jawaharlal Nehru Universities in India that I feel impelled to engage the essayists even though the audiences the authors address are very different from mine.

Let me begin with a caveat. The contextualization that the essayists distance themselves from is perhaps ever more necessary for this essay to make sense to readers who may not share the space that I inhabit. This space-time is that of northern India in 1984-85. A political party had reorganized itself in the 1970s and begun to offer nationalist/racist interpretations of events of the fifteenth century that had transpired in the subcontinent. The party began a campaign demanding the demolition of a fifteenth-century mosque built by a Mughal emperor in northern India on the ground that it was built on the site of a destroyed Hindu temple. The claim impinged directly on the interpretation of archaeological and architectural evidence, the very materials of history-writing. The political party in question read all matter through a colonially devised pre-fabricated frame in which the Mughals were both 'Muslim' and 'aliens' in the fifteenth century. By a mode of genealogical reasoning that troubled critical Indians, this position about the past implied that ordinary Indian citizens of the twentieth century, who happened to be Muslims, were to be treated as 'aliens' despite all evidence to the contrary. A group of Indian historians sought to combat this messaging by activating the protocols of empirical research and investigating such claims about the fifteenth-century past. However, what the historians lacked was a massive and sophisticated political machinery that could outmaneuver the party activists. The fifteenth-century building was demolished in December, 1992. The party that led that campaign has governed India since 2014.

Historians in training at the time learned a twofold lesson. The first was that the entanglement of matter and meaning was always already predicated in particular kinds of ethical and electoral *political* programs with which academics were largely out of touch. The practice of empirical research was not the problem here: a racist political program was. Furthermore, the terms in which the nation was constructed as a homogenous Hindu majority itself showed the long-lasting nature of colonial constructions of the subcontinent's past. Under these conditions, if there was to be a decolonization at all, it had to be simultaneously of the public's 'commonsense' as well as of the professionals' concepts and practices. It made professional historians draw closer to the study of pluralist, non-puritanical and syncretist ethics articulated in the vernacular languages of the subcontinent since the fourteenth century. It also made such historians wary of periodization schemes – such as that of antiquity, medieval, and modernity - inherited from their colonial textbooks. All of these lessons in turn led some to rethink their inheritance of European critical theories, or to revise them with reference to South Asian materials. I certainly date to this moment my willingness to reframe Foucauldian 'governmentality' in the light of South Asian historical evidence, my reading in non-dualist philosophies (such as Tibetan Buddhism) and to thinking with the New Materialists in order to grapple with the multiple interactive and coeval pasts in the subcontinent.

Given this experience, I would prefer that all graduate students, and not just in History, be exposed to a full range of co-existing philosophies in the course of their graduate training. Only then can the cadet historian i

in either hemisphere successfully interrogate the first principles of time, space, agency, and causality which s/he brings to her craft and her questions. Such a wide-ranging training is especially necessary to hold up before those historians who have to contend with archives, governments, and states flattened by the hammer of monotheist puritanical regimes. Decolonizing historians working in such archives may not wish to treat as 'real' the ontologies posited by and in the colonial archives, but they need to construct an alternative philosophical perch from which to examine the colonial epistemological-ontological, as well as construct alternative meanings of those ontologies described and acted upon by colonial officials. Keeping non-dualist concepts available to such historians enables them to reckon with the differences that dualist thought made. Furthermore, as the New Materialist philosopher Rosi Braidotti puts it, a non-dualist philosophical perspective requires the researching subject to see herself as imbricated in the very structures she seeks to deconstruct or oppose. These conceptual tools disrupt the ability of the researcher to stand above and outside the very processes and things she seeks to understand. They make mastery impossible. Above all, they foreground considerations of the ethical bases of all entanglements of Ontology, Epistemology and Agency.

To sum up then, the critical decolonization of historical writing requires a greater range of philosophical reference points, the willingness to treat time in non-linear fashion, to amplify and diversify the archive rather than to abjure it, and to abandon the thirst for mastery of data that was driven into some of us to the point of silencing critique. But, if we are to free ourselves of fear, all of us require equitable and secure working conditions for the production of original narratives and historical analyses. That is ultimately what keeps us all, and not just in the American academe, from being decolonial historians.