Everyone, we moderns believe(d), has a history, though not everyone has historiography. The West developed a tradition of history writing: the Muslim world and the Chinese are admitted to have had such a tradition, albeit in an underdeveloped form; but most cultures had myths and religious epics instead of history writing, even if they sometimes confused the former for the latter. But because everyone nonetheless had a history, that history could be narrated in the terms of a rational historiography that would redescribe this past in terms alien to those whose past it was. Their own forms of recording and relating to the past—be they myths, legends, religious epics, or other—could serve, at best, as (rather unreliable) raw materials in the reconstruction of this past. This did not occasion any discomfort, for these indigenous intellectual traditions were held to have demonstrated that they were unequal to the task of recording and narrating their history by mixing myth with reality, wish with fact, gods with men. And the epistemic commitments that suggested that these were people incapable of representing their own past were the same as those which further suggested that these people were backward. Or vice versa: that these people still belonged to the past was indicated, among other things, by their inability to properly represent their past.

Let us call this complex of attitudes *Reason*, or more accurately, the commitment to an idea of a Reason that is singular and universal. Let us note that although this Reason has not been dethroned, under the combined but variegated assaults of feminism, queer theory, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and other intellectual currents, it is nonetheless (to switch metaphors) tottering on its pedestal. But the nature of the challenges raised by these currents, and the movements that have often provided their conditions of emergence, differ. It is an important argument (if by now a commonplace one) that the very idea of Reason was constituted in part through a series of exclusions—of madness, of woman, and so on. One strategy for problematizing Reason is therefore to demonstrate the contingencies and exclusions that went into its making.

The case of the non-West is somewhat different. For unlike Woman, say, the savage and the Oriental were not so much the excluded Other of Reason as something that fell short of it. Historicism, the idea that the savage and the Oriental were backward and belonged to a time past, even as...
they inhabited the present, was the main mode by and through which the reason of the non-West was declared to be lesser. Suppose “we” were to reject such historicism (the “we” in question, let it be noted, is not an essentialist “we,” and certainly not a particular race or peoples; this essay is written by an Indian who works within the Western intellectual tradition and teaches aspects of this tradition in Australia, to students of mostly European origin): reject the notion that different intellectual traditions and the ways of being that sustain them can be plotted on the same (temporal) grid, such that non-Western intellectual traditions are revealed to be inadequate approximations of Reason, mere steps on the way to Reason. Two implications would follow. First, Reason itself would no longer appear as singular—it would clearly be someone’s reason.1 And second, once Reason was pluralized, there would be no easy way to compare intellectual traditions, let alone declare one superior to all others. This, not in the name of some flabby liberal tolerance that declares everything equal and nothing subject to criticism, but rather because there would be no Archimedean point, a point outside any tradition from which one could adjudge which traditions are better and truer.

If we had to learn to think not of Reason in the upper case, but rather in terms of traditions of reasoning, this would have great implications for history writing. The remainder of this essay explores, and makes an argument for, some of these implications. In the first part I outline what I take to be the circumstances in which it has become necessary to entertain the possibility of including the understandings of those whose histories we write in those histories; of finding a way to reconcile Clio with Siva. The second part argues that where historicism seems to attend to difference, it does so only by recuperating this within a wider sameness. History is a code, I argue; and it is incapable of coding non-Western pasts. The concluding section suggests that while we will of course go on writing history, we need to reconceive what exactly it is we are doing when we write the past of others in terms very different from their own; we need to think of history not in an imperial vein, as the application of Reason to the past, but rather as a dialogue between different traditions of reasoning.

Clio and Siva

Historicism, Dipesh Chakrabarty has recently reminded us, “is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but as something which became global over time, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it.” And just as European modernity was enshrined as the future of everyone, so too non-Western intellectual traditions were
inferior anticipations of the universal Reason that might, one day, be theirs. But because it was not theirs yet, such peoples were not yet ready to taste the fruits of democracy and self-rule; for as Chakrabarty also reminds us, “historicism . . . came to non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody’s way of saying ‘not yet’ to somebody else.” Historicism was what allowed a liberal like John Stuart Mill to aver—in the middle of an argument championing liberty and representative government—that many peoples were not yet fit for democracy, and required an extended period of British rule and its civilizing effects before they would become so.

The developments that were a direct political refutation of such historicism—the anticolonial insistence on the right now, ultimately victorious against the colonizer’s “not yet”—should have brought this historicism into crisis. With nationalism and decolonization the Third World, that repository of backwardness and anachronism, is part of our present; and within that Third World, the peasant and the tribal has (sometimes) become a citizen, become a part of political modernity. That which was previously historicized as the premodern, the survival, the fragment of a past continuing into the present (and at times this included whole societies), now also participates in the rituals and practices of the modern—statehood and nationhood, citizenship, and so on. That “denial of coevalness” which anthropology and historicism presumed and authorized is now, or should be, deeply problematic. The non-Western world, and within it the peasant, has now become our contemporary.

But there have always been many, quite possibly a majority, of the world’s population whose world is peopled by gods who act in and on the world and whose agency must be registered in any account of the world, just as there are people whose temporality as it is lived allows for their dead ancestors to directly intervene in their affairs. It is certainly the case in India that the world of the peasant is populated not only by humans but also by gods and spirits. If we can no longer relegate the peasant’s time to a time-past, does this not require that we also try to find a place in history for peasants and their gods?

But how do we do so, how can we find a place for gods and spirits in modern historical consciousness and history writing? One possible method is a nominalist one, and here we can look to the law for precedents. An interesting example is that of how contemporary British law found a place for the Indian god Siva. Richard Davis recounts this story in his Lives of Indian Images. In 1976 a landless laborer in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu discovered a number of buried icons. One of these was a twelfth-century bronze Nataraja, an image of the god Siva in his pose as Lord of Dance,
alternately dancing the cosmos into creation and into destruction. The finder
sold the statue, which, through the operations of the international market in
"art objects," ended up in London in the British Museum. Concerned at
the large numbers of such objects being smuggled out of India, the Indian
government made this a test case, engaging in a lengthy and expensive legal
battle in British courts that eventually resulted in the statue being repatriated
to India. The Indian government funded the case (India v. Bumper),
but for technical reasons, it did not qualify as a plaintiff. The Indian side
therefore nominated as plaintiffs the state of Tamil Nadu, the Visvanathas-
vami temple where the Siva statue had once resided, the executive officer of
the temple, and later added a fourth plaintiff—the god Siva, who laid claim
to the icon that had originally resided in his temple. The British judge
accepted the claim that as a "juristic personality" the god Siva was party
to the case (the defense argued in appeal that as the U.K. was a Christian
kingdom, this should have precluded foreign gods from bringing suit).
Siva and the other plaintiffs won the case, which caused some consterna-
tion in international art markets, with one dealer warning that potential
buyers would have to consider the risk of a "writ from Siva." The god
returned to India, where he was to be restored to his temple and resume his
life as an image of worship. (Postscript—sadly, his crumbling temple was
not fit to receive him, and plans to rebuild and reconsecrate it never mate-
rialized; the Nataraja ended up in the government-maintained Icon Center
at Tiruvarur, safe from art thieves, but unworshipped, and "in danger of
suffocation and heatstroke.")

It is of course true that recognizing Siva as a juristic personality is not
quite the same thing as treating him as a historical actor. It is also true that
the law provides only limited parallels with, and thus guidance for, the
writing of history—despite the fact that history writing borrows so many
of its guiding metaphors from the law. But perhaps this little episode is
instructive, nonetheless? Perhaps the nominalist option is a feasible one—
if a British court could make room for Siva as a juristic subject, can we
not find a place for him in the tribunal of history? Is it not possible for
Clio to dance with Siva?

The possibility is an intriguing one, but the answer must be a blunt
no. For modern history writing, and the historical consciousness it pro-
duces and is produced by, is connected to some phenomena—the emer-
gence of the modern nation-state, progress, the sharp separation between
past and present, scientific rationality—and not others, such as magic
and the gods, which it in fact was defined against. History writing is born
of certain fundamental separations that constituted it as a rational prac-
tice, and these disallow the possibility of writing a history with gods and
goddesses playing an active part in it. The historian in writing history can
register the fact that people believe gods exist and are active in the world (note that to cast the issue in terms of "belief" is already to situate it within human consciousness and is thus to effectively exorcise the world of gods and spirits), but the historian cannot write history as if these gods and spirits were in fact active historical actors. To produce a history that included Siva would be incoherent; it would correspond to no one's tradition and appeal to no one's sensibility.

An obvious objection to the argument so far is that if it is belief in gods and their agency that is taken as the marker of that which cannot be coded in history, this does not serve to distinguish West from non-West. God may now have been privatized in the West, but once there, he too strode the world stage, performing miracles and intervening in the world He had created. And thus writing the history of the Christian world before, say, the seventeenth century might also be problematic within the rational, secular code of history. Michel de Certeau thinks that this is exactly so, that the very enterprise of representing religion within the rational(ist) code of history is a curious one. Seeking to comprehend religious phenomena historically, he writes, "is tantamount to repeatedly asking something else of them than what they meant to say . . . taking as a representation of the society what, from their point of view, founded that society."

This paradox is only an extreme case, according to Certeau, of what history writing necessarily involves. To constitute an object as an object of historical investigation involves dividing it from our present, marking it off as different, definitively separated from the present; and the practices and protocols by which we do so are always those of the present (what else could they be?). But the procedures and categories and protocols of the present are themselves (sometimes) connected to the past that is being objectified. When Western historians write of "their" past, they encounter those who believed in witches, and sometimes even burned them, and those who believed in a God who intervened directly in human affairs. But this undeniable part of the past is (seen as) part of the same past that then gave up belief in witches, and that withdrew from God his agency in history. That is, this was part of the same past that subsequently disenchanted and desacralized the world (not the same thing, note, as secularization), and engaged in rational practices like writing history. And so the historian's past included both the fact of witches and God(s), but also their decline. In Certeau's words, "Just as the 'model' of religious sociology implies, among other things, the new status of practice or of knowledge in the seventeenth century, so do current methods—erased as events and transformed into codes or problematic issues of research—bear evidence of former structurings and forgotten histories. Thus founded on the rupture between a past that is its object, and a present that is the place of
its practice, history endlessly finds the present in its object and the past in its practice.”10 But that is precisely what it cannot do in the case of the non-Western world. Here history continues “to find the present in its object,” but it does not find “the past in its practice,” for the past of non-Western countries is not history’s past.

We are back to where we started, then. The rejection of historicism that is implied by decolonization and the entry of peasants into political life requires us to at least entertain the possibility of taking their own views of their world into account when describing their history. However, the attempt to do so founders, because history writing is constituted by a rejection of the agency of gods; it can register the fact of belief in them, it can attempt to make sense of this belief, but it cannot include the gods. It is true that this is also the case for European history, before that point when God was stripped of historical agency. The seventeenth-century transformation of an opposition between the spiritual and the temporal into the (quite different) separation between the political and religious is what makes it possible for the historian of Europe to write of religion in the rationalist code of history, objectifying it, treating as representations or beliefs, what Christians regarded as facts about the world. Often this will mean that the historian will project into the past a category that is inadequate to it; but the fact that this category is nonetheless itself a product of this past (thus bearing “evidence of former structurings and forgotten histories”) gives some warrant for this anachronism. And in this way history writing can perform one of its most important social functions: that of enacting or performing a society’s continuity, “affirm[ing] our consciousness of a shared experience over generations of an external and real world.”11

The same is not true of the Indian subcontinent; its human inhabitants have shared this part of the world, and many continue to share it, with their God or with their numerous gods and goddesses. If history writing cannot find a place for these actors in its script, then that marks the distance of rational practices such as history writing from this world and its pasts; here history does not secure a society’s continuity with its past, but rather registers a profound break in that continuity.

But I anticipate. Implicit in these remarks is the presumption that history is not a fact of the world that is more (in rational historiography) or less (in myth and epic) accurately represented, but rather that it is but one way for a society to constitute the past and establish a relation with it. The problematization of Reason that is part of our current intellectual climate makes it possible to raise such questions, but I have not yet established that there is good reason for regarding history writing as just one possible way to represent the past. I seek to do so in the next section.
Historicism and Its Critique

It is often pointed out that *history* is unusual in that the term for the discipline simultaneously designates its object. Underlying this happy coincidence—it has also been pointed out—is an epistemological naïveté, one in which history, unlike other disciplines, has no need to think its object, because its object simply is. History-as-fact simply happens, and history-as-discipline is the attempt to re-create that happening to the degree that its documents allow us to do so. The result, as Louis Althusser points out, is that the discipline of history takes methodology for its theory, and historiographical debates are more often than not methodological debates, debates over the craft of history.

But in fact this naïveté cannot obscure the fact that history as a discipline is not so innocent of preconditions. The past is not forever available to the present, a mute entity waiting for the historian to give it voice. History writing is not simply a "craft" that is applied to a preexistent, natural object, but rather, like any discipline, it conceives and constructs its object. This manner of constituting its object is labeled a "code" by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who goes on to argue, "the distinctive features of historical knowledge are due not to the absence of a code, which is illusory, but rather to its particular nature: the code consists in a chronology." Dates are history's code, or rather, classes of dates; for these dates are not natural or given, part of the inevitable flow of time, but rather selected by the historian, who groups or classes them into series, sometimes short or "hot" chronologies (where the relevant classes of dates are years, or even dates within a year), at other times "cold" chronologies (where the relevant classes of dates are centuries, even millennia). The important point is that these dates are not given in advance, as it appears to the unreflective historian, so that the task is "to define relations (of simple causality, of circular determination, of antagonism, of expression): between facts or dated events: the series being known. . . . [it is] simply a question of defining the position of each element in relation to other elements in the series." Rather, the series is not known; it is history as code that constitutes the series. The times of history are discontinuous and multiple, rather than continuous and singular; they are constituted by history as a code, not given in advance and simply broken up into smaller segments by historians for reasons of convenience in practicing their craft.

If the general point is true—namely that history-as-fact is not a natural category that history-as-discipline simply finds and then asks questions of, but rather something that comes to historians as already worked, constituted (one need not concur with Lévi-Strauss on the details of what constitutes the code of history); nor is it my argument that historians are
It is not that there is Man, who makes possible and authorizes History; rather, the idea of history helps produce and secure humanism. If this is so—if historicism generates an illusion where effect is mistaken for cause, such that Man is taken as the ground of history when in fact he is an effect of representational practices, including history writing—then the Man of humanism must in fact be a particular man, and history writing someone's code. And so it is: the Man of this humanism, and this anthropology, is white or Western Man, whence Derrida’s description of metaphysics (and the history it underpins) as “white mythology”—“the white man takes his own mythology . . . his own logos, that is, the mythos of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason.”

It is often said that exactly the reverse is true: unlike the abstract Reason of the Enlightenment, historicism is attentive to the particular, the unique, the different. The founder of the “historical school of law” claimed that unlike the invariant and universal categories of natural law and the Enlightenment, “the historical spirit . . . is the only protection against a species of self-delusion . . . namely, the holding of that which is peculiar to ourselves to be common to human nature in general . . . see[ing] our thoughts in the false light of universality. . . . There is only the historical sense to protect us against this.” In light of the above arguments, however, we might wonder whether claiming that everyone has a history, but a different one, is not to attend to difference but rather to universalize a particular way of conceiving, relating to, and recording the past. Could it be that when it comes to recognizing and representing difference, historicism is part of the problem, rather than the solution?
Baudrillard offers a telling critique of one of the most potent historicisms of our age, that of Marx. In one possible reading of his work, Marx historicized categories that bourgeois political economy treated as eternal. Thus, for instance, behind the forms of production characteristic of capitalist society, Marx finds man producing differently in different ages, including even producing himself as “man” differently in different ages. A radical historicism indeed, but also one, argues Baudrillard, which in historicizing the categories of political economy (labor and production) also and unwarrantedly makes these universal anthropological postulates. In fact, “productivity is not primarily a generic dimension, a human and social kernel of all wealth to be extracted from the husk of capitalist relations of production”; rather, “the abstract and generalized development of productivity [in bourgeois society] is what makes the concept of production itself appear as man’s movement and generic end. . . . in other words, the system of political economy . . . produces the very conception of labor power as the fundamental human potential.”24 Thus to criticize political economy from such a historicist viewpoint is at the same time to generalize it.25 And once we start by assuming the existence and importance of production, other societies are “illuminated only in terms of this model and not in their specificity or even, as . . . in the case of primitive societies, in their irreducibility to production.”26 The last point is the critical one; it is not that labor and production in some societies are historically different, even that they come “mixed up” with religion and the gift; it is that the very categories of labor and production may be inadequate to their object.

I will give another example, from my own current work. I am writing a book on pedagogy and subjectivity in colonial India, a book that is in part a history but that also has built into it a reflexive moment which asks what it means to write a “history” of those who have not always lived in history. I have in front of me the draft of a chapter on “cramming.” In this I document a century-long complaint that Indian students crammed, by which was meant not that they studied at the last minute but rather that they learned by rote, indifferent to the meaning of what they were learning. In this chapter I ask what anxiety this complaint testifies to, and also ask what presumptions one must make in order to see cramming as a “failure” of education. My answer (to baldly summarize) is to suggest that cramming is only a failure if we take as our norm a historically specific conception of knowledge, linked to a historically specific conception of the subject. This modern ideal is one of the subject as a self-determining, autonomous agent, the source of meanings and values, who inhabits (and confronts) a nonpurposive world that is itself devoid of meanings and values. The social revolution that creates this subject shifts the locus of gravity from the world, as a meaningful order that one comes to know by
reading it as a text, and coming into harmony with its underlying order, to the subject who confronts it as a set of mechanical laws and regularities, and who to understand it must internalize it. There is a further, romantic or expressivist inflection of this, in which learning is linked with authenticity; only that counts as knowledge truly gained which wells up from inside the subject and which is connected to and in some way articulates that subject's own unique personality. The anxiety over cram expresses the fear that in colonial India modern Western education was failing to create this sort of subject, with this relation to knowledge; indeed, that instead Indian students had bent the new education system to their own strengths, utilizing "traditional" methods of memory learning to commit the new knowledge to memory, thereby subverting its intent.

This is a typically historicist argument, one which derives its intellectual charge from demonstrating the historicity of a central category of analysis and, in thus denaturalizing it, also opens our eyes to other possibilities (in this case, the possibility of another sort of subject, whose relation to knowledge and the world might be radically different). The intellectual gains of such historicizing moves are not insubstantial, but they also come at a (less obviously apparent) cost. The argument I develop in the draft of my chapter and that I have briefly summarized makes, I think, a valuable point, but I am now also troubled by the fact that my historicist move, while refusing the identification of "subject" with modern Europe, achieved this precisely by universalizing the category "subject." Historicism, it seems, does register difference, but only (in a manner that seems resolutely Hegelian—the Hegel who, in Merleau-Ponty's admiring words, "initiated the attempt to explicate the irrational and to integrate it into an enlarged reason") by widening its net so that the difference so recognized is recuperated within a wider sameness.

It will be recalled that something like this is the charge that Derrida levels against *Madness and Civilization*: that Foucault did not (and could not possibly) succeed in writing "a history of madness itself, that is, madness speaking on the basis of its own experience and under its own authority." To write an archaeology of madness, to restore to a silenced madness its speech, even if that "speech" is in fact a silence, is already to situate oneself within Reason, and therefore to reiterate that founding moment (of speech and of historicity) when madness was expelled and interned. Derrida asks, "Is not an archaeology, even of silence, a logic, that is, an organized language, a project, an order, a sentence, a syntax, a work? Would not the archaeology of silence be the most efficacious and subtle restoration, the repetition . . . of the act perpetrated against madness—and be so at the very moment when this act is denounced?" In a similar vein, could it be that to historicize is to give difference its due only
by entangling it all the more securely in History and thus in Reason? So that even the form in which we acknowledge the provincialism of our own master categories is that of recognizing that historicity has a history, and of writing sentences like “the medieval attitude to history is itself a historical phenomenon requiring explanation”?\textsuperscript{31} Even Nietzsche, whose reflections and animadversions on history are one starting point for any attempt to problematize it, can formulate the peculiarity of historical consciousness only in historical terms: “When I view this age with the eyes of a distant age, I can find nothing odder in present-day man than his peculiar virtue and disease called ‘the sense of history’” (emphasis added).\textsuperscript{32} Could it be that once we are in history, the most we can do is recognize that living in history is not inevitable or universal—which does not necessarily equip us to better know those whom we realize are not similarly placed, let alone enable us to get out of history?

The same strictures apply, of course, to my own argument. To seek to problematize history and history writing is not to find the constitutive outside of Reason, and thus better equip oneself to know the Other. In any case, as should be clear, the aim of this essay has not been to make the code of history more adequate to non-Western pasts or to provoke and promote better history writing. It has rather been to show the limits of history writing and in that sense to provide a critique of historical Reason: not by demonstrating what we can and cannot reasonably expect of a singular Reason, but rather by pluralizing Reason.

\textit{Reason or Reasoning?}

It is not the case, as historians often imagine it to be, and as is usually taught in the history departments of universities, that the “fact” of history leads (in societies that are sufficiently literate and “developed”) to history writing and historicism. To live in history, and to wish to write it, is not a universal anthropological postulate (and it most emphatically is not rooted in an existential experience of time),\textsuperscript{33} but is rather a certain way to conceive of and be in the world, at once a tradition of reasoning, a way of being, and a certain practice of subjectivity. The emergence of this orientation to the past and to the self is specific to certain people (societies, classes) and not others. It is connected to some phenomena—the emergence of the modern nation-state, “progress,” scientific rationality—and not others, which it may indeed define itself against (magic, gods).

History writing is one way to conceive of and relate to the past (one that highlights certain things and excludes others, such as the gods). The fact that it is a code, and thus that other codes are possible, is obscured by
the fact that the idea of history presumes, and helps secure, the idea of Man. This humanism anchors the notion that there is a single Man, but many histories of him. To call this humanism into question and to recognize that it is history writing that produces history, rather than the fact of history that produces history writing, is to open thought to new possibilities, including the possibility that what we have is not Man, the Subject of history, who is then pluralized into so many different histories of men, but rather that from the outset we have men, different human societies that conceive of and relate to the past in multiple ways, pasts that are not accessible to them (or us) outside the codes and representational forms we use to represent them.

If it were indeed an ontological fact that there exists a secular, godless time inhabited by all, in which causality operates in certain ways, then of course “our” mode of representing this past, as a “history” constituted through rational protocols of history writing, would be by far the best. But if these are not facts but effects of representational practices, and if pasts are not accessible to us outside the codes and representational forms that we use to represent them, then things begin to appear very differently. If we drop the idea that the past exists independently of our representations of it, then the question becomes, not which way of representing the past is true and which not, but rather, how do peoples constitute different relations to pastness? Myth and epic then appear not as instances of getting one’s history wrong, or as primitive precursors of a proper historical consciousness, but rather as other ways to construe one’s past and one’s present relation with that past.

Of course, it is true that history writing is increasingly imperial in its pretensions to represent all pasts, and that this is not just a matter of arrogance, but a real consequence of the transformations of the world. It is also true that the insistence that everyone has a history has not come just from the West, but perhaps above all from those peoples who were afraid of being categorized as “peoples without history” and who clamorously denied that this was so, insisting that they too had a history, representable in the code of history writing. In India the demand that Indians write their own history was made by Bankimchandra Chatterjee in the nineteenth century, and this demand was echoed—and met—in subsequent decades. Indian nationalism was one of the main vehicles for this—it succeeded both in producing a nation and in producing a history of that nation.

The more the processes of social transformation do their work, and the more Indian elites succeed in giving us a history—to continue with our chief example, the more the gods are expelled from the world into people’s consciousness—the more capable history writing becomes of coding these pasts and presents. But this process is itself an uneven one,
and we should be wary of assuming that it is a process that is proceeding apace and nearing completion. Some Indians have learned (for example) to regard the Lal Qila (Red Fort) in Delhi as a historic monument, a valuable part of the national past, even a symbol of the syncretism that went into the making of a diverse yet united nation. Others treat it as one more city wall on which one can relieve oneself. That the former group despair at the latter’s lack of civic consciousness, national pride, and so on, goes to show that much is at stake. History and historical consciousness are prized because they are seen as connected to citizenship, patriotism, secularism, certain narratives of social justice, and the like. It may be that for these reasons it is desirable that we all come to live in history; or it may be, as Ashis Nandy for one has eloquently argued, that for everyone to inhabit the world of history would constitute a political and ethical calamity. At any rate, at the moment the process is far from complete, and unless and until it becomes complete, history writing as a code will continue to be inadequate to non-Western pasts.

This is not, of course, to say that we should cease writing histories of India. I am not proposing that historians embrace a self-denying ordinance. Even less am I proposing that we abandon argument and criticism. To pluralize reason is not to abandon reasoning; to deny that there is an Archimedean point from which one can criticize is not to call for an end to criticism. But it is to call for a reconsideration of what we think we are doing when we redescribe the past(s) of peoples in terms that are alien to them. If there is not Reason but traditions of reasoning, not History and its representation in history writing but rather many pasts re-presented in many ways, then we cannot write with any presumption of epistemic privilege. We have to conceive writing history in the Western, modern mode not in an Imperial vein (we are not correcting others’ misperceptions about their pasts) but as a translational exercise (we are translating their self-descriptions in terms that make sense within our intellectual traditions). We do not resile from our traditions—these are what we must begin to reason out of if we are to reason at all—but we do not grant them an a priori epistemic privilege.

As a description this is, I am well aware, wildly utopian. The reason the modern and Western mode of history assumes epistemic privilege is connected to imperialism; Kalahari bushmen do not do anthropologies of the white man, just as Indian pandits do not, by and large, write Puranic “histories” that tell the story of colonialism. But if we take this as a regulative ideal—not a regulative ideal of a singular reason, in the Kantian sense, but as a regulative ideal of how to give reasons when confronting other modes of reasoning—it may serve to make history writing an ethical rather than an imperial practice.
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1. To make the same point with reference to debates over morality and forms of life: Kantian Moralität would now appear not as a placeless universal but as the Sittlichkeit of Western Europe at the beginnings of the modern age, a specific (and in that sense parochial) morality trying to pass itself off as if it were derived from Reason itself.


6. Ibid., 259.

7. Religion is itself an example of a historically and culturally specific category, which has been universalized and used to classify and analyze phenomena that do not easily come under its purview. Talal Asad points out that the anthropologists' understanding of religion “is in fact a view that has a specific Christian history” (Genealogies of Religion [Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993], 42).

8. “The religious history of the seventeenth century . . . implicates a difference between two systems of interpretation, one social (so to speak) and the other religious; that is, between two periods of consciousness, or between two historical types of intelligibility, ours and theirs. . . . we have to wonder what may be the meaning of an enterprise that consists of understanding a time organized as a function of a standard of comprehension other than ours” (Certeau, The Writing of History, trans. Tom Conley [New York: Columbia University Press, 1988], 138).

9. Ibid. And while one might write religious history because one is a Christian, one can no longer write it as a Christian.

10. Ibid., 36.


16. For example, Michael Oakeshott’s characterization of what constitutes history-as-discipline is very different from that of Lévi-Strauss. What they have in common is not an answer, but the fact that they both think it important to ask the question, “How does the discipline of history constitute its object?” They ask this question because they do not accept that the object of history is simply just “there” waiting to be found and written about. Thus Oakeshott begins his exploration of what it is that constitutes a specifically historical “mode of understanding” by observing that “a mode of understanding cannot be specified in terms of a so-called subject matter; here, as always, the conditions of understanding specify what is to be understood” (“On History,” in On History and Other Essays [Oxford: Blackwell, 1983], 5).

17. See, for instance, Lucien Febvre’s programmatic text of 1949, where he declares that history “arranges [facts] in a series” and does so “in accordance with the needs of the present” (“A New Kind of History,” in A New Kind of History and Other Essays: From the Writings of Febvre, ed. Peter Burke, trans. K. Folca [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul], 41). In the case of the Annales school this recognition shaped their historical practice.

18. Thus Febvre, cited above, also argues that the word history be replaced, and suggests as alternatives anthropochronology or ethnochronology (ibid., 35). The dissatisfaction with the word history arises because it has “worn out” its meaning, and because it is equivocal, signifying both event and the science of that event. The alternatives, it will be noticed, embody both his recognition (anticipating Lévi-Strauss) that history is a code, with chronology at its heart, and the continued embrace of the idea that the subject of this code is Man. It would seem that it is easier to recognize the constructedness of the code (the creative historian can turn that to his account, by writing different and better histories, such as histories of the longue durée, and so on), than it is to problematize the humanist philosophical anthropology, which provides this code with its subject.


20. Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, 203.


25. Which is Baudrillard’s conclusion—“having failed to subvert the foundations of political economy, historical materialism results only in reactivating its model at a world-wide level” (ibid., 91).


27. Quoted in Michael Roth, Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth-Century France (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 48. Merleau-Ponty goes on to declare that “this remains the task of our century.”

28. I am grateful to an anonymous reader from Social Text for drawing this point to my attention.

30. Ibid., 35. Driving home the point: “The misfortune of the mad is that their best spokesmen are those who betray them best; which is to say that when one attempts to convey their silence *iself*, one has already passed over to the side of the enemy, the side of order, even if one fights against order from within it. . . . In this sense, I would be tempted [l] to consider Foucault’s book a powerful gesture of protection and internment” (36, 55).


33. Time as people live and experience it has many forms, the more common of which are not historical (e.g., the year my son was born . . . the time the crops failed . . . ). Paul Veyne makes the point well: “History is a bookish, not an existential notion; it is the organization by the intelligence of data relating to a temporality that is not that of Dasein” (*Writing History*, trans. Mina Moore-Rinvolueri [Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1984], 72).


35. In so doing, nationalism produced a rational historiography, a mode of relating to the past altogether different from that embodied in indigenous traditions, including what Guha has labeled the “vernacular pasts” of the subaltern classes. In Guha’s inimitable rendering, “the subaltern in caste, class and gender would continue for a long time yet [i.e., after the rise of a nationalist historiography] to speak of their own pasts . . . in dialects that were conspicuous by indifference to the lingua franca of a monistic nationalism. The writs of these pasts ran within strictly local jurisdictions, beyond the pale of the Raj and the nationalist kingdom—come. The accents, idioms and imageries that characterized them were foreign to the lexicon of a post-Enlightenment Reason that provided historiography and nationalism with much of their distinctive vocabulary. They defied generic incorporation into historical discourse, and were put into words by genealogists, balladeers, story-tellers and wise old people—that is, by the custodians of communal memory—rather than by historians” (“The Authority of Vernacular Pasts,” *Meanjin* [winter 1992]).

36. It was one of the important arguments of the early volumes of *Subaltern Studies* that there were two domains of politics and consciousness in colonial India, an elite one and a subaltern one. See Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” *Subaltern Studies* 1, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982); and Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Invitation to a Dialogue,” *Subaltern Studies* 4, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985). In a somewhat different vein, see Sanjay Seth, “Rewriting Histories of Nationalism: The Politics of ‘Moderate Nationalism’ in India, 1870–1905,” *American Historical Review*, 104.1 (February 1999), 111–12.

38. Though they once did, such as Mrityunjay Vidyalankar’s *Rajabali* (1808), which spans a period from the kings of the *Mahabharata* to early colonial times. Eventually such accounts ceased to be written; “indigenous” history came to mean nationalist history, anticolonial perhaps, but still written in accordance with the protocols of a rationalist historiography.