HISTORY WRITING:
New Trends and Methodologies

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Contents

Preface

The Rankean notion that the historian's task was to 'describe what really happened in the past' has, in recent decades, been exploded by theoretical developments which have occurred largely outside the field of history itself. The return or turn to history as past, process, and context, rather than discipline, by a wide range of academic discourses is one of the most striking developments in the intellectual world today. From 'new historicism' in literary theory, to 'ethnohistory' or to 'historical sociology' these new approaches have spawned both increasing numbers of works of historical analysis and a more self-conscious attempt to locate the human sciences in their own histories. Within the discipline of history itself, new models and new practices have emerged in the face of theoretical challenges from critical social theory, literary criticism, and newer disciplinary projects such as feminist studies and cultural studies. History is increasingly understood less as a 'place' - the 'past' - than as a historicizing process where the past is constructed - ie made and made sense of. The universe of the historian has expanded at the same time as it has fragmented. Social history, for example, has splintered into sub-disciplines supported by specialised journals such as labour history, rural history etc.

In a parallel development 'Third World' historians have begun to ask whether it is possible to write post-orientalist histories of the 'Third World' and whether projects of 'provincialising' Europe can be done without falling into the trap of cultural relativism. In Sri Lanka, to name but one example, on the other hand, studies of cultural domination of the west are still being written from a nativist perspective while the vast majority of Sri Lankan historians have until now left epistemological reflections on history to philosophers, social anthropologists or popular writers and

shied away from theory. There seems to be a refusal to accept that historical analysts work at a particular moment in the history of their own theory and practice. The result of their silence has been threefold:

- it has allowed a prodigious number of historical works, devoid of any critical apparatus and ignoring the methodology that typifies a historical work - to be produced by amateur historians and avidly consumed by readers.

- it has led social anthropologists, literature specialists and political theorists conversant with the new developments to confidently venture into the past, a field that was the *domaine reservé* of the historian.

- it has cramped the inventiveness and creativity of new generations of sri lankan historians.

This book is the direct outcome of a lecture course given at the University of Colombo entitled *Trends in Social and Cultural History*. In the course of my teaching I realised that very little material was available for students of history to introduce, simply and clearly, historical methodology and historical approaches except *What is History* by E.H. Carr which, in my view, cannot be considered the last word on the subject. In spite of its evident merits, the book is clearly now out of date. Carr himself did not have the breadth of imagination of the writers of the early Annales tradition nor did he show any inclination for a non-elite type of history as his famous remark about the crossing of the Rubicon suggests. Another weakness of *What is History* is that nowhere does it analyze the processes that historians actually go through in writing a book or an article or even a lecture. For a student of history, seeking an answer as to how history should be 'done',

this famous book will not be sufficient. More recent texts written by eminent foreign specialists are difficult to find in our libraries while their often obtuse language and assumption that the reader has a background in western philosophy and is already well versed in new currents in critical theory, limits their accessibility.

As there is today no kind of agreed-upon manual of historical methods and practice my purpose is not to suggest that traditional ways of writing and thinking about history are worthless but simply to show that there are also other ways. Awareness of these trends should not serve as an encouragement simply to duplicate them, but to think about history using new variables. This book attempts in an introductory manner to chart the terrain of recent ventures in the historicizing enterprise such as New History, Annales, Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial histories in the hope that it will guide the student of history or the general reader should he/she feel the need to venture into new and exciting research areas.

Nira Wickramasinghe

1

Is History A Craft?

A mere collector of supposed facts is as useful as a collector of matchboxes

Lucien Febre

A document is a witness, and like most witnesses it rarely speaks until one begins to question it

Marc Bloch

If you open the centre page of a Sri Lankan daily paper you will be struck by the number of letters to the editor and articles that deal with 'historical matters'. These missives frequently examine important questions which professional historians have been debating for decades... the origins of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka or the impact of colonialism ..the examples are abundant. All are written by non-professional historians - that is people outside the community of academics and researchers. While few laymen and women would venture an opinion about quantum physics or cell biology or the causes of inflation and write about it to the papers the same reserve is not shown when it comes to historical matters. The reason is simple. Writing history, it is popularly believed, requires no particular skills. Anyone can write history.

Nothing is less true in my opinion. History is much more than a game for dilettantes. The historian, as Marc Bloch so beautifully put it, is a craftsman who creates something out of infinite possibilities following a very specific methodology. History writing is a craft.

Facts

Public opinion believes very firmly that in history there are facts and that one ought to know them. History is reduced to a skeleton constituted by dated facts: the 1815 Kandyan Convention, the 1948 Independence of Sri Lanka, the 1977 UNP capture of power etc. To learn facts by rote or to memorize is what the acquisition of historical knowledge means for many. Gifted students are sometimes put off reading for a history degree as they assume it is purely a memory game. There is of course an important distinction to be made between the history that is taught in schools and history as research, between the history that is explained in a didactic manner and history in the making. In teaching, facts are already made. In research one has to make them. Even so, teaching history to children or university level students is much more than helping them learn a collection of facts. It should involve a reflection on sources of history and lead to an understanding of the discipline of history as critique rather than knowledge.

A historian, unlike a journalist writing history will not make a statement without offering proof of what he/she affirms. In that sense he has to have at his disposal an array of facts and references. These facts are based on sources which can be obtained from printed or manuscript documentation or oral evidence. To establish the relevance and importance of a source, the historian follows what is known as the critical method. To critique a document effectively one has to be a professional historian as the task entails confronting the document with a background knowledge of its topic and the place and period it originates from. For example, take a historian studying a petition to the Donoughmore Commission written by a group of women asking for the right to vote. He/she would be expected to locate this letter in time, space and academic context i.e to know the social and political situation of Sri Lanka during

that period, the circumstances of the authors of the letter, the body of literature that exists on the Donoughmore Commission, women's rights in Sri Lanka, voting rights in Sri Lanka and in general the new approaches to gender studies. Only then can the document be thoroughly critiqued.

The critical method is thus central to the discipline of history. There can be no history without critique for the simple reason that history is knowledge through sources. But history although it is made of the trilogy - document/critique/fact - cannot go forward without questions.

Questions

As early as in the nineteenth century Lord Acton warned students of history to study problems rather than periods. History can only advance through questioning and through the formulation of hypotheses. Sometimes the questions are implicit, but without them the historian will be helpless and disoriented. One will never find answers to questions that one has not asked. In this sense history is not different from other sciences. There is an interdependence between facts, documents and questions.

Historians of whatever school tend to respect the critical apparatus of their profession: sources, references etc. History does not permit approximation: a date or a reference is either right or wrong. It is not a question of opinion. To contest a particular reading of history, other facts, other dates or other references have to be put forward.

Epistemologically, the historical question plays a fundamental role. It is the question that constitutes the historical object. There are no historical objects per se. A history can be written of anything: climate, material life, techniques, economy, social classes, rituals, political parties, armaments, wars, religions, sentiments, emotions... It is the

question that constructs a historical object by proceeding to an original *découpage* in the limitless universe of possible facts and documents. Of course the question itself must be informed by a certain knowledge of the documentary sources available or the possible research methods to be used. R.G. Colingwood makes the point quite clearly : "Every time the historian asks a question, he has already in mind a preliminary and tentative idea of the evidence he will be able to use.."[1]. The document does not exist before the intervention of the historian's curiosity and anything can become a document. "Everything in the world is potential evidence for any subject whatever". If no written evidence is available the historian can make his honey, as Lucien Febre states, with other flowers.[2] The historian 's task is to give voice to silent objects such as landscapes or tiles, statues, monuments, cemeteries...

From the whole to the parts

History is not constructed by putting together elements called facts in the way a mason constructs a wall with bricks, one on top of the other. Neither is historical matter similar to a whole made of distinct small stones. If one were to describe historical matter, the analogy of a composite material would be the most satisfying. Each book or article written on a certain topic helps to create and recompose this composite matter. This matter is constantly changing with new research and new perspectives on a particular topic. For instance a historian researching the clashes that took place in Sri Lanka

[1] R. G. Colingwood, *The Idea of History*, (London 1964) p.281.

[2] Lucien Febre, cited in Antoine Prost, *Douze Leçons sur l'Histoire*, (Paris 1996), p. 82 (my translation).

in 1958 would provide new data and a new interpretation to the field of 'communal violence' as well as 'Sri Lanka politics'. History is constantly being rewritten when new data and interpretations are incorporated into the composite matter that constitute it.

Historical works

If you sift through the history section of any library the diversity of the books is striking. Antoine Prost has singled out three essential types of book: narratives, sketches and commentaries[3].

The first type, the narratives, can be characterised by a clear trajectory of a topic in time. The plan of the book, if not its title is mainly chronological. In its minimal form it starts from one element, goes on to another later in time, and explains how one went from one to the other although chronological order may not always be respected. The narrative can embrace very long periods such as a reign, a century or a millennium. But on the whole it is adapted to an explanation of changes (why has something happened?). It involves researching causes and intentions. In Sri Lankan studies a good example of a narrative would be Walpola Rahula's *History of Buddhism in Ceylon: the Anuradhapura period, 3rd Century B.C-10th Century A.D.*[4]

The second type, the sketch, is the mode of historical exposé that brings out coherent features. Essentially it answers the question: what were things like? The sketch as a

[3] Antoine Prost, ibid, pp. 239-241.

[4] Walpola Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon: the Anuradhapura period, 3rd Century B.C-10th Century A.D.* (Colombo 1966).

mode of historical writing is less focused on changes than on what conveys unity. It is usually chosen for works on a particular society or a social group at a given time. For example, Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society* or Kumari Jayawardena's *Nobodies to Somebody. The Rise of the Colonial Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka.*[5] Cultural history too sometimes needs sketches in order to give an idea of the mental world at a given time.

The third type, the commentary, is the rarest mode of historical writing. It starts off from the various interpretations that have been proposed by historians or contemporaries. It is in fact an essay that analyses other texts seen in context. Francois Furet's *Interpreting the French Revolution*[6] is one example. Sri Lankan historiography does not provide worthwhile examples of this genre as yet but one can imagine books of this nature taking stock of the different interpretations of the 1971 Insurrection for instance.

Of course, narratives incorporate sketches and sketches include narratives. Books are rarely uniform. Mixed forms are common. A typology is nevertheless useful for a student writing his or her first research work.

History as plot

Whether it takes the form of a narrative, a sketch or a mixture of forms any type of written history is a closed text. It is composed of an element that is arbitrarily carved from the limitless continuum of History. This is why when referring

[5] Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, Vol. I-II (London 1961). Kumari Jaywardena, *Nobodies to Somebody. The Rise of the Colonial Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka* (Colombo 2000).

[6] Francois Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, (Cambridge 1981).

to any historical enterprise some historians liken it to a closure. By closure it is meant that the historian makes certain choices when he/she asks a particular question and not another, and in so doing he/she is in effect drawing boundaries. For instance if the question relates to 'why the Mughal Empire collapsed in the eighteenth century he/she will have to define different frameworks for the analysis, formulate subordinate questions to the main question, define a period, a territory. In the creation of a historical oeuvre the first step is the act of cutting out *(découpage)* of the object.

In other words, it is when a historian configures the object that the plot is defined. An object is never ready-made because the historian has to construct it by defining a plot.[7] This process in turn begins with the cutting out of the object through the identification of a beginning and an end. The choice of chronological limits defines the evolution that one wants to explain and the question one wants to pose. The cutting out of the plot decides the direction in which history will be written. For instance an account of communal conflict that begins in the nineteenth century and ends in 1983 is not the same as if it started in 1956 and ended in 2000. Chronological cutting-out is also part interpretation. The first *découpage* suggests relatively old roots to the present communal conflict or at least that some connection exists between the last century and the more recent wave of conflict. While the second *découpage* presupposes that communal conflict is a purely contemporary phenomenon. A specific vision leads the historian to make a choice.

The definition of a plot also relates to the characters and scenes. A choice of the actors and episodes has to be

[7] The concept of emplotment has been most clearly used by the historians Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology* (Manchester 1984), and Hayden White, *Metahistory, The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore 1973).

made. Every history is implicitly composed of a list of characters and decors. Different plots can be constructed if one takes into account communal relations between ordinary people, men, women, and children in a village setting or if one looks at politicians and statesmen. Furthermore history is invested with a different meaning if one decides to visit homes of victims and refugee camps or if one limits one's purview to ministries and parliaments.

Construction of the plot also determines the level at which the historian places himself/herself. He/she has to choose the focal distance and the power of the lens as it were. Indeed any history can be related with more or less details. It can always be related in a new way, by adding more precise facts, by cutting out certain scenes or adding new ones by introducing new characters. History is always in the making; for this reason all truths of history can only be partial.

The features of the historical text

What makes a historical text different from a journalistic text is not only plot definition. If you open any book written by a professional historian certain external signs are evident, especially the presence of a critical apparatus, typically notes at the bottom of the page or at the end of the chapter.

References are essential to history: they are the tangible signs of the argument. Proof can be accepted only if it can be verified. Truth in history is what is proved. These marks of historicity have in the historical text a specific function: they send the reader outside the text, to specific and visible documents that have enabled the construction of the text. The outline or table of contents of a history book provides the reader with the canvas of the narration and the argument. The text is there to dress up the skeleton. Students are therefore recommended to start any book by reading the table of contents.

While the text of the historian is closed and finished, full of facts and precisions, references at the bottom of the page or at the end of the chapter play the opposite role by providing an opening to further research and an indication of the lacunas of the text.

An objectivised and authorised text

The historian's text presents another peculiarity. Throughout the text the personality of the historian remains hidden, unlike for instance in the text of the social anthropologist. The 'I' is proscribed except perhaps in the preface. In the same way the historian avoids taking sides, or displaying indignation or emotion in his/her text which becomes part of the anonymous discourse of history. The reason for this is that the book or article is written from the point of view of History itself. The author refers constantly to other historians and indicates that he/she belongs to a guild or corporation of historians. But more importantly he/she indicates that the text is located in a sort of collective hyper-text that he/she completes or renews on certain points, or contradicts on others. The text of the historian is more than a text: it is one element of a whole that he/she both overtakes and encompasses. This is where one can make a clear difference between the text of a professional and that of an amateur. The text of the amateur does not refer to the entire body of work that deals with its subject. He/she writes in an autonomous fashion as though no one had written before him/her, most often without footnotes or with very few.

Conclusion

The task of the historian is to represent and make the past intelligible: to attain this aim he/she has only words at his/

her disposal. In this sense history has a literary quality. Written history sometimes approaches a work of art and becomes for its creator a work of pleasure.

Among those who challenge the way history has been written one can discern distinct positions.[8] The innovator argues that history must be written in another way and in so doing, draws some attention to his/her work. In intellectual communities where history is predominantly written in the conventional manner, the innovator is often marginalised and obtains recognition only outside the boundaries of his/her own community.

The demystifier who draws inspiration essentially from the works of Michel Foucault argues that history is not a science but a more or less interesting discourse. Foucault, whom we shall look at in more detail in the next chapters, analysed the discourse of historians as a discourse of power. The linguistic trend in American academia brought reinforcement to this position in the English-speaking world. As a result the specifically historical process of work on sources and construction of explanations was left aside in favour of the sole consideration of the texts. The relationship between the text and reality disappeared and with it the frontier between history and fiction. The pitfalls of this type of position - which claims that historians do not construct knowledge about the past that others may use but that they generate a 'discourse on the past' will be examined in the last chapter of this book.

Suffice it to say here that the result of this demystifying epistemology has been the decline in the creation of works aiming at total history. Indeed works of synthesis such as Fernand Braudel's *Civilisation and Capitalism 15th-18th* centuries or Lorna Dewaraja's *Kandyan Kingdom* are very rarely attempted today. Such works, like those devoted to answering the big 'why' questions are in decline. This is not

[8] A. Prost, pp. 283-284.

because all historians adhere to the devastating critiques that reduce history to a historian's point of view. Most would accept that the foundation of their discipline is the supremacy of evidence. As Eric Hobsbawm writes: 'without the distinction between what is and what is not so, there can be no history. Rome defeated and destroyed Carthage in the Punic wars, not the other way round'[9]. Even those who critique conventional ways of writing history refuse absolute relativism and continue to believe that what they write is true. But unlike their predecessors they believe only in partial and provisional truths. For them a synthesis appears to be not only impossible but illusory. A belief in the possibility of a totality is considered dangerous. So in the twenty first century historians will continue to believe in proof, respect for complete information and exact details as far as their methodology is concerned but combine it with a more critical reading of sources. Many South Asian historians, even those whose work is inspired by Foucault and critical theory, continue to take this middle ground position as the critical apparatus in their writings easily indicates.

They are only too aware that a history without proof will disappear as a discipline and a craft.

[9] E. Hobsbawm, *On History*, (New York 1997), p. VIII.

2

New History and the Annales School

> The aim of the historian, like that of the artist, is to enlarge our picture of the world, to give us a new way of looking at things
>
> *James Joll*

New history strives to write a history without heroes, a history of the 'fragments' of society, of sea routes, of the pencil, of sustenance or of the potato. It tells the story of 'the blind alleys, the lost causes and the losers themselves'[10]. Everything has a history.

Adepts of 'serious' history in Sri Lanka, both in the specialised and general public, might dismiss these subject matters as inconsequential if not ludicrous and outside the scope or beneath the dignity of the professional historian who is, generally, less interested in the marginal than in the mainstream, in the particular than in the general, in the smaller than in the larger.

These are nevertheless some of the interests of 'new history' in France where la *'nouvelle histoire'* originated and in other parts of the world too. The words 'new' and 'history' seem contradictory at first sight. Is not history's concern with the past, with the old, the finished, the forgotten? When I speak of new history I mean a new approach in the writing of history.

[10] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (London 1963), p.12.

The Annales School

The origins of the term 'new history' is usually traced to France, the country that specialises in the 'new' in many fields whether it be innovations in cuisine, in the cinema or in the novel. New history is the history associated with the so-called école des Annales grouped around the journal *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*. I use the term 'new' with some irony, for 'new' history has, in the western world and particularly in France where the Annales school of history originated, already celebrated its sixtieth birthday. In other parts of the world - India, Japan and Latin America for instance - the reaction to the traditional paradigm has come later, in the 1970s and 1980s. But it must be noted that what Annales historians proposed is part of a longer trend and has parallels in other countries. In the 1930s for instance British historians such as Lewis Namier and R.H. Tawney critiqued narrative history. The term 'New History' in fact appeared in James Harvey Robinson's book of 1912 where he lauds total history. Only in France, however, did new history acquire centre stage and attract so many of the bright minds of the period, eventually itself becoming an orthodoxy[11].

The French Annales school of history grew up around a new journal, the *Annales d'Histoire Economique et Sociale* founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febre, both teachers at the University of Strasbourg, and by Fernand Braudel in 1929. Rebaptised a number of times till it acquired, in 1946, its permanent appellation - *Annales- Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*- the periodical has been identified with the transformation of history writing itself in spite of the fact that the Annales school lacked a coherent program and that there was no real cohesion among individuals.

[11] Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, pp. 361-362.

To understand the Annales it must be made clear that although the problems studied by its apologists were very often chosen from within the national territory, they were treated merely as an instrument, an occasion. The avowed objective was resolutely methodological: to revitalise history - its methods, content, problems and ambitions. This is why its impact went far beyond the national boundaries of France as I will show later.

In what way was Annales mainly responsible for the renewal of history in France and the introduction of the concept of a 'new history'? First of all, it represented a radical attempt to displace political action from the centre of historical attention. The task of new history was perceived as that of uncovering the impersonal social forces which in reality fashioned human destinies and of evoking the slow rhythms at which social time in fact moved. It was a rejection of a traditional form of history-writing that had rested on the following beliefs: on the one hand, the dominance of exceptional heroes which leads to the writing of numerous biographies of 'great men', or 'historical figures'. Political history was condemned for focussing on routine events and for its attachment to the unusual or spectacular contained in wars and the exercise of power. Annalists saw political history rather as a play of more anonymous but infinitely powerful forces which owing to their magnitude determine its course or at least the limits in which it operates. On the other hand, the influence of the immediate and the dramatic in the lives of men and women leads to works focussing on tensions and crises, turning points to the detriment of continuities. Fernand Braudel's works show that beneath the rapidly changing history of governments, wars and famines there emerge other unmoving histories: the histories of sea routes, corn or gold for instance.

Secondly, along with this rejection of the political, the pioneers of new history set out to demonstrate that historians

must learn from allied disciplines if they are to deepen and enliven their understanding. Even more than the writings of Febre, Bloch's two decades of scholarship and publication established the intellectual foundations and fame of the Annales. Forty years before it became fashionable to combine history, sociology, anthropology and economics, Marc Bloch was already working in this way. Indeed Annales strived for a unification of the social sciences revolving around history[12] History would be a total history.

Before focussing our attention on the Annalists it is important to understand the intellectual milieu in which Annales originated and for this to look at the state of history and the social sciences in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The intellectual climate in France, at the turn of the last century was one of fierce competition amongst the social sciences. History was called upon to rejuvenate itself or retreat in the face of more dynamic disciplines. During those years, both geography and sociology (in the wake of the thrust of the Durkheimian School) staked their claims to a complete control of human society in the totality of its social, cultural and institutional forms of organisation. Sociology envisaged the fusion of social sciences into a single discipline. This in turn inspired the founders of the Annales to resume the task of unifying the social sciences. Their method conversely revolved around history which they believed to be more open to a dialogue in that it was more favorably disposed towards borrowing from other disciplines methods, concepts, typologies and hypotheses.

[12] eds. Maurice Aymard & Harbans Mukhia, *French Studies in History*, Vol. I, *The Inheritance*, (Hyderabad, 1988).

Genesis of New History: the German Conception of History

The idea of history as the unifying discipline of the social sciences was present at the turn of the eighteenth century in the German Conception of History but it faded in the early twentieth century. Manicas explains the eclipse of history in his excellent *History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences.* He speaks of an 'americanisation of social science' which took place at the turn of the nineteenth century and spread all over the world including France, Britain and former colonies[13]. This phenomenon involved defining social sciences in positivist and ahistorical terms and marking out the territories of each discipline. It meant both the separation of the social sciences from one another and from history. It also meant, often, the adoption of an unabashed technocratic stance. In other words, what we call history, political science, economics, sociology, anthropology that is the clear-cut disciplines we learn in school, the subjects we prepare for A'Levels or for a Bachelor's degrees did not always exist in their present form. They are fairly recent creations and must not be taken for granted. The social sciences as separate and distinct disciplines came out in their recognisable form no earlier than the end of the nineteenth century. The science of politics emerged quite early as the first modern social science in the works of thinkers ranging from Machiavelli to Hobbes. The Hobbesian idea that the science of politics was the science of government involved the freeing of the 'economy' from politics. Economics was born.

At the end of the eighteenth century history and society began to be looked at in new and different ways. There were the empiricists who believed that the construction of theory

[13] P. T. Manicas, *A History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, (Oxford 1987).

was irrelevant to science and that observation duly combined with reasoning was the foundation of historical knowledge. But for others, history became an immanent process governed by a principle or principles. The common ground was the attempt to develop theories of history in which history was conceived as the unifying discipline of the social sciences if not the exclusive human science. Thus new history's attempt to draw from various disciplines of the social sciences has its roots in eighteenth century German philosophy and history. There were in fact three main concurrent streams which I will mention briefly.

Hegel construed an idealist philosophy of history. The idea of Freedom was conceived as the Telos of history. Hegel's empirical concern was with the realm of thought, the ideas, beliefs, or more generally, the culture and the 'Spirit' of the state. These ideas were embodied in institutions. Institutions were investigated so as to discover the norms, values, goals and beliefs that people lived by. In his analysis, the mechanisms of the historical process were to be found by philosophy in the Dialectic of the Idea.

Parallel to Hegelian thought, scientific socialism developed a materialist theory of history according to which the concrete mechanisms of historical process are contrasted to the abstractions of the Idea. In addition to facts about culture, ideas, religion and so on one must consider the 'mode of production' (what is produced and how it is produced). Although Marx and Engels did not believe in historical laws, like all nineteenth century thinkers they could not free themselves from the idea that progress was inevitable. Alongside Hegel and the Marxists the Rankean stream of thought suggested a non-theoretical and politically neutral history.

But however different these three concurrent streams were, all participated in an attempt to develop theories of history in which it was conceived as the unifying discipline

of the human sciences if not the exclusive human science. This typically German conception of history did not survive the First World War. With the development of higher education, and the state's demands upon the University to solve the 'social question', social sciences became separate, technocratic disciplines as social scientists were transformed into professionals. History was left at the mercy of the onslaught of new and more dynamic disciplines. Some historians reacted by defining history in minimal terms for instance setting unbending rules on how political history or political biographies should be written and what constituted the matter of serious historical writing. Others, such as the founders of the Annales, Lucien Febre and Marc Bloch, succeeded in forging a history more representative of the richness of man's life in society. Febre and Bloch shared a common interest in geography and in collective psychology. Febre's most important work was his study in 'historical psychology' entitled *Le Problēme de l'Incroyance au XVI siēcle: la Religion de Rabelais*[14]. In this book he illuminated the mental beliefs of the age and argued that it was impossible to consider Rabelais an atheist or unbeliever in any modern sense. This type of work would lead to more studies of mentalities in the next decades. Bloch's main contributions to historical study were his investigations into the nature of feudal society. Unlike most other historians he did not focus exclusively on the seigneurial manor and its legal apparatus but unearthed the medieval village community. Bloch left behind an unfinished manuscript, *The Historian's Craft,* which can be read as a manifesto of the Annales school of the interwar years[15]. Apart from being a very personal testimony

[14] L.Febre, *Le Problēme de l'Incroyance au XVIe siēcle: la Religion de Rabelais*, (Paris 1947) cited in Arthur Marwick op.cit, pp.78.

[15] M. Bloch, *The Historian's Craft,* op.cit.

of Bloch's faith in history it provides wonderful discussion on a variety of questions ranging from the historian's method to historical criticism. He defined history as the 'science of men in time', the critical element being the human one.

Annales after 1945

Annales gained ascendancy in the post war period[16]. Although the rigid separation of social science disciplines into history, geography, economics, political science, and sociology survived at the tradition- oriented Sorbonne, the founding of the Sixth Section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes created an institute where research of the sort favoured by the Annales could be carried out. Febre became its first president, succeeded in 1957 by Braudel. The institution, which in 1975 became the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales with Braudel at its head, provided an establishment for the study of a new history where the frontiers between history, sociology and other social sciences were successfully blurred.

Today in France the most famous new historians and intellectual heirs of Braudel, Febre and Bloch are undoubtedly Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora. In a recent book they tried to delineate what constitutes new history and point out three processes which characterise a 'new history' approach[17].

[16] There are a few names and works which I must cite because they have become classics.
Lucien Febre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais* (Cambridge:Mass, 1982).
Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, Vols I & II, (London 1961).
Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation and Capitalism, Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries, 3 Vols* (London & New York) 1981-83.

[17] J. Le Goff, P. Nora, *Faire de l'Histoire*, Vols I, II, III, (Paris, 1974).

The first process is the posing of new problems which question history itself. New history entertains critical dialogue with existing grand theories such as structural functionalism or economic-determinist Marxism. Answers are shaped in response to abstract generalisations of theories. Thus history is written in an intellectual context which calls for appropriate tools of analysis. These can come from social sciences such as economics and demography: rather than swimming against the current, historians have bravely acquired quantitative methods to answer historical questions. In the same way, history has allowed itself to be pulled by ethnology into areas where the written word is no longer essential, often with splendid results such as Fernand Braudel's works on slow and long-term history. History can gain considerably by drawing from other disciplines and avoiding the practice of the policy of the 'closed door'. Braudel suggests that social scientists should be lifting 'trade barriers between disciplines' and sharing ideas and techniques[18].

The spirit and method of historical work often differ among proponents of 'new history'. New history does not necessarily rework or argue with over-arching theoretical paradigms. Some historians have adopted a comparative approach. The general results of such studies can allow students of other periods of time or of a similar phenomenon to ask interesting questions and suggest tentative answers. Marc Bloch, Braudel's teacher who kept aloof from theories, held the view that their task was only to help the historian look for better evidence about the past. But he, as well as more theoretically oriented historians wrote a type of history which belongs to universal scholarship. Bloch was a firm believer in the comparative method that involved comparisons within a single country or between different countries.

[18] F. Braudel, *On History*, (London 1980)

History, it is felt, should not be written in a void. When writing about a riot in Bengal or in Sri Lanka a historian could refer to the current scholarship and debates related to the 'crowd' and 'violence' and place his own work in a context, thus within the purview of an international intellectual debate. Theory and the comparative approach are the best means to cross cultures and reach out to other traditions.

The second characteristic of new history is the adoption of new approaches which modify, enrich but also disturb the traditional sectors of history. Religious history, literary history, the history of sciences, and the history of art focus on globalising concepts such as the sacred, the text, the code, power, and the monument while aiming at a total history.

The third process is an integration of new objects in the epistemological field of history. These objects would seem incongruous in traditional historical research. Let me illustrate this point with an example. Jean Paul Aron's work on cuisine and cooking studies nineteenth century menus[19]. He looks at traditionally taboo subject areas such as the body, appetites and desires and traces the golden ages of the 'table' in the manner in which the ups and downs of nations and churches are commonly examined. This type of study teaches us to draw interesting information from purely administrative documents (hospital registers), or menu cards of different restaurants. Through the skill of the historian insignificant objects become pertinent and reveals the mentalities, tastes and often permanence of culinary habits through political changes.

New history looks at climate, the body, myths, festivals, mentalities, the youth, the unconscious, the cinematographic image, cooking, material civilisation, techniques, and the

[19] J.P. Aron, 'La Cuisine: un menu au XIXe siëcle', in eds.J. le Goff, P. Nora, *Faire de l' Histoire*, Vol. 3, *Nouveaux Objects*, pp. 257-293.

book itself. It is a social history defined as history attentive to the structures of everyday life - that is with the politics left out - and is designed to replace the antiquated political history of kings, queens, politicians and presidents.

New History outside France

New history is not a purely French phenomenon. Reaction against the Rankean tradition of history also occurred in territories without any French influence. By the 1920s social history had won a secure place in the USA. The same independent evolution holds for British historical tradition. *The Economic Review* was born in 1929, the same year as *Annales*. In many ways the Annales school bears much similarity to work in local, cultural and oral history in Britain and the USA and to Indian Subaltern studies. It has also exerted a lot of influence on historical sociology or sociological history. Immanuel Wallerstein has even named his research establishment at the State University of New York, the Fernand Braudel Center. In America and Europe historians increasingly define their areas of specialisation through thematic categories - economic, social or cultural history, the history of writing, of witchcraft, criminality etc and less in geographical or national terms.

In the English speaking world the discipline of social history bore much resemblance to the new history of the Annales. But unlike the Annales that remains today - albeit loosely - as a focal point of historical scholarship in France, social history in the Anglophone world mutated into something else. A good starting point is the essay by British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm entitled 'From Social History to the History of Society' written in 1971[20]. In this

[20] E. Hobsbawn, 'From Social History to the History of Society', in E. Hobsbwan, *On History*, pp. 71-93.

seminal essay Hobsbwawm first explains what was meant by social history in the past, that is before 1971. Social history was used in three often overlapping senses:

- First it referred to the history of the poor or lower classes and to social movements of the poor (labour and socialist organizations)

- Second the term was used to refer to works on a variety of human activities that could be classified in such terms as 'manners, customs, everyday life', what the British historian G.M. Treveleyan called 'history with the politics left out'.

- In the third meaning, and for our purpose the most relevant, social was used in combination with 'economic history'. Often the economic part was more important. But it revealed an approach to history systematically different from the classical Rankean one.

Between the 1950s and 1970 social history emerged as a discipline within history, but unlike economic history for instance, historians felt its subject matter could not be isolated. Social history was understood as the history of society. In the 1970s Hobsbawm asked the question 'how are we to write the history of society'. To this he gave some suggestions:

1. Social history must be concerned not only with structures and their mechanisms of persistence and change and with the general possibilities and patterns of their transformations but also with what actually happened.

2. The history of society is, among other things, that of specific units of people living together and definable

in sociological terms. It is the history of societies as well as of human society (as distinct from, say that of apes and ants) or of certain types of society and their possible relationships (as in such terms as bourgeois or feudal) or of the general development of humanity considered as a whole.

3. The history of societies requires us to apply an approximate order of research priorities and a working assumption about what constitutes the central nexus or complex of connections of our subject. For example a social historian studying eighteenth century Brazil will give analytical priority to slavery over the Catholicism prevalent in society.

Hobsbawm then suggested that most interesting social history dealt with the following issues:

1. Demography and kinship
2. Urban studies
3. Classes and social groups
4. The history of 'mentalities', or collective consciousness, or of culture in the anthropologists' sense.
5. Transformation of societies (for example, modernisation or industrialization)
6. Social movements and phenomena of social protest.

Clearly there were many similarities in the themes and research areas put forward by Hobsbawm and the work on mentalities of the second generation of Annales historians. Hobsbawm's own work and that of the other Marxist historian E.P. Thompson display the same urge to broaden the boundaries of the discipline, open up new areas of research and explore the historical experiences of those men and women whose existence is so often ignored. They too wrote

a history in deliberate reaction against the traditional paradigm.

E.J. Hobsbawm 's interest in ordinary people can be seen in his entire body of work from *Primitive Rebels:Studies of Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries to Captain Swing* (1969) that captures the story of England's last agrarian rising in 1830.

E.P. Thompson can be considered the major figure in the late fifties and Britain's leading Marxist historian. He achieved world fame with his *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) that brings into perspective the aspirations and conscious efforts of working people, too often treated by other historians as an inert and faceless mass. The richness of this book resides in the fact that it provides insights not only into the fact of resistance but also into its limits. Thompson launched the Centre for the Study of Social History at the University of Warwick where he sponsored a new approach to the study 'from below' of the hidden complexities of earlier British society. History from Below came of age with Thompson's article of the same name that appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* of 1966[21].

Nearly thirty years later, as a descriptive framework for the 'actual practice of social history', Hobsbawm's list no longer serves and needs to be amended. Geoff Eley has argued that this is partly because new topics and research areas have emerged in the field of social history from medicine and public health to popular memory[22]. But more importantly the entire sub-disciplinary field has been called into question in the last decade. Hobsbawm's six categories together with

21 Arthur Marwick, pp.114-116.

22 Geoff Eley, 'Is All the World a Text? From Social History to the History of Society Two Decades Later' in ed Terrence L. Mc Donald, *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, (Michigan 1996) pp. 201-207.

conventional historical knowledge have been shaken by a shift in the very grounding of socio-historical knowledge.

Gender theory is transforming the basis on which we think about history. Whether as a dimension of analysis or an area of empirical work, women's history is absent from Hobsbawm's analysis. It was in the late 1970s that the first studies of the new women's history appeared. Many adopted a 'separate spheres' type of framework or subsumed women within the history of the family. More recently the shift has been from the history of women to the historical construction of sexual difference. Major areas of study such as popular culture, or class formation are being reshaped by the application of a gender perspective.

The writings of the French thinker Michel Foucault have had a significant impact on the new departures taken by social history. Foucault was completely absent from the pioneering works in the social history of crime, the law, and imprisonment in the 1970s. But since that time work on sexuality, (particularly the late nineteenth and early twentieth century constructions of sexual categories) on prisons, hospitals, asylums and other institutions of confinement, on social policy and public health and on the history of science and the academic disciplines have been permeated with Foucault's influence. Foucault has led to a fundamental redirection in the understanding of power: away from conventional, institutionally centred conceptions of government and the state and away from conceptions of class domination, towards a dispersed and decentred conception of power.

Finally there has been a discursive move from the assumption of an objective 'society' to the study of how the category of 'the social' was formed. Take for example the process of working-class formation and the growth of citizenship ideals in the early nineteenth century. Today the ideology of class, the insistence that class was the organizing

reality of emerging capitalist societies and the growth of specific practices and organizations (trades unions) around that insistence is the starting point for many historians. In these terms the history of class is inseparable from the history of the category. The focus is on the construction of class as a structuring and motivating category.

The social history of E.P Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm combined with the literary criticism of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggarth eventually led to the growth of cultural studies as a new field of study in Britain. In France, paradoxically the land of post-structural and postmodern thinkers from Foucault to Derrida, no such development occurred. Although the Annales historians played a crucial role in the rethinking of history along new lines, they were less influenced by gender and discourse theory than some of their contemporaries in the English speaking world especially in the USA. The term gender -*genre*- never acquired in France the seminal position it occupies today in intellectual life in the Anglophone world. But in spite of this feature, or perhaps because of this position at the border of critical theory, Annales historians never chose facility. In their monographs they showed quite clearly that the economic, social and cultural history they wrote could meet the exacting professional standards set by Ranke for political history. The importance of Annales is that it did provide then and does provide still a convenient point of reference. Owing to its preeminence it has come to represent an orientation, a direction rather than a received school and undoubtedly still attracts the most innovative research.

3

Selected Themes in New History Writing

To illustrate the interests of new history let me say a few words on its classical themes and look at some of the writings on these in more detail. There are of course many areas of research that I could mention but I have selected those I feel might be of special interest to South Asianists or that have already been explored by South Asian historians[23].

1. Notions of Time
2. Demography and the Family
3. Women's History
4. Oral History
5. Mentalities
6. Material Culture and Material Life
7. Groups at Society's Margins
8. Environment and the History of Climate

1. Notions of Time

Notions of time have been at the centre of new historians' preoccupations. New history has not undermined the belief that the question of the historian is asked from the present to

[23] M. Juneja & H. Mukhia, Seminar on 'New History', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4 June 1988, pp. 1155-1159.

the past and that it deals with origins, evolutions and itineraries in time that are fixed by dates. History, for conventional as well as new historians is a work about time. But in the case of new historians it is 'time' that is complex and constructed, with multiple faces. In Annales history the individual agent and occurrence cease to be the central elements in social explanation. Since events are constituted largely by the force of many different conjunctural and structural circumstances, there is no homogeneous or continuous time. Fernand Braudel insists upon the importance of the long-term (*longue durée*) with its stress on continuity. In his view, the movement of history is mediated through the relative immobility of 'structures', the relatively more mobile 'conjunctures' and the fast moving 'event'. His classic *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philippe II* is a blueprint for historians looking for actual physical structures which lie invisible below the surface of social activities and are subject to different rhythms of time[24].

Periodisation too is not taken for granted. New history posits that each historical object has its own periodisation. For instance it would not be pertinent to adopt a political periodisation for the study of an economic or religious evolution.

History is sometimes described as the science of the consciousness of time. Leibnitz defined time as the order of non-contemporaneous things. There is a today, there was a yesterday and there will be a tomorrow. But although new historians accept that the perception of 'before' and 'after' embodied in the notion of order and succession gives history its entire distinction and originality as a branch of knowledge, they stress that there is an absolute and a relative time. Time

[24] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, 2 Vols.* (London 1972).

can be appropriated by people in a position of social or political dominance. As K.N. Chaudhuri perceptively remark:

> 'Expressions such as idle, industrious, leisured and even obedient had little meaning without a concept of authority that appropriated in the name of duty the hours from the dawn to sunset in the lives of farmers and artisans'[25]

Time is social. It is the time of public collectivities, societies, states and civilisations. It serves as an anchor to members of a group. So the time of history is neither physical time nor psychological time. Recently, anthropologists have looked at the time of cultures and focused their attention on time as a marker of social transformation. They have shown us that there are different ways of understanding ideas and experiences of temporality. To illustrate this we can look at an essay by Jacques Le Goff, called *Merchant's Time and Church's Time in the Middle Ages*[26]. This essay traces the transformation of the notion of time from one of a cosmic, divine, even mystical entity to one where it becomes a commodity - measurable, and accountable in crass monetary terms. There was in fact a conflict between these two conceptions of time. The major points at issue were the following:

- Medieval clerics regarded time in the light of biblical texts but during the course of the twelfth century this traditional notion of time was shaken. This was caused

[25] K.N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe, Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750,* (Cambridge, 1990) p. 97.

[26] J. Le Goff, 'Merchant's Time and Church's Time in the Middle Ages', in eds Aymard and Muktia, pp.193-213.

> by the disappearance of the Roman Empire, the barbarisation of the West and to a lesser degree to the imperial restorations by Charlemagne and Otto. Christianity had to appeal to secondary causes both structural and contingent in fashioning explanations.
>
> Like the peasant, the merchant was first subjected to the cycle of seasons, the unpredictability of storms and natural cataclysms. But once commercial networks were organized, time became an object of measurement. For the Christian merchant, the time in which he worked professionally was not the time in which he lived religiously. Gradually the Church adapted to the changing conditions of nascent capitalism. Condemnation of the offences which went by the name of usury became less rigid. The length of time required for fast, abstinence and Sunday rest were no longer strictly prescribed but recommended. The merchant's time was freed from biblical time.

In the modern era, control over and classification of time were crucial. For instance the French revolution produced a new calendar and started counting the years from the beginning of the revolution. In Sri Lanka, less dramatically, the government of Dudley Senanayake attempted to introduce the lunar month with a five day and six day staggered week. Notions of time have recently been studied by historians of colonialism. Some of their studies have shown how colonialism imposed the western understanding of time as something that ruled the life of the indigenous people often perceived as 'lazy natives'[27].

[27] Frederick Cooper, 'Colonizing Time: Work Rhythms and Labor Conflict in Colonial Mombasa' in Nicholas B. Dirks (ed) *Colonialism and Culture,* (University of Michigan 1992).

2. Demography and the Family

Historical demography came of age in the 1950s in Europe when economic historians began to look into sources that had until then been exploited mainly by demographers. In France parish registers were subjected to new readings. A number of debates emerged. Among them was the thesis that demographic movements in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were linked to fluctuations in prices. Monthly and annual demographic curves were charted with the help of data regarding marriages, baptisms and deaths. To confirm or refute this interpretation historians undertook rigorous reconstructions of the history of families in micro-regions.

The family

In 1972 *Annales* published a special double issue on 'Family and Society'; in the same year in Britain and in the US there appeared two important works on the history of the family. The precursor of family history is the historian Philippe Aries who wrote *Centuries of Childhood* in 1960. In this book he suggested that pre-industrial society did not make any critical distinction between adults and children. Our society's perception is quite different; the distinction between children and adults is constantly made in our obsession with the education of children[28].

After Aries a number of controversies have emerged: the main point of contention is between historians who see a fundamental change in the modern period to 'affective individualism' involving the primacy of love over more prosaic considerations in marriage, and those who stress

[28] Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood. A Social History of Family Life* (New York 1962).

continuity. Historians still disagree over the structure, characteristics and significance of the family in past times. The evidence available is often fragmentary and uncertain.

3. Women's History

Women's history has emerged as a significant field in the last two decades. In Sri Lanka many courses incorporate issues dealing with women although at the undergraduate level women's history is yet to emerge as a distinct area of study. What is quite clear until the late twentieth century is the absence of women as authors and subjects of historical accounts. The reason is simple: the traditional time-frame of history has always been derived from political history. Women have been excluded from making war, wealth, laws, governments, arts and science. Men functioning in their capacity as historians, considered exactly those activities constitutive of civilization. Hence the domination of diplomatic history, economic history, constitutional history and political history in school and university curricula. In Sri Lankan history for instance, has there been any written history by women before the mid twentieth century?

The aim of women's history is to make women a focus of inquiry, a subject of the story, an agent of the narrative. In other words it is to construct women as a historical subject. Indeed the history of women is not the same as the history of men. There are different turning points for each sex.

In short women's history has a dual goal: to restore women to history and to restore our history to women. That means that women's history has two tasks:

- to challenge conventional history writing
- to emphasize that a representative history can only be written if the experience and status of one half of

humankind is an integral part of the story. Women's history must not be written as a separate chapter but, as Helene Cixous says, women must 'insinuate themselves into the text'[29].

In Sri Lanka the task of restoration has only just begun. The historical archive has little to offer and this makes reconstruction difficult. For example feminist historians have had to tease information out of census data to interpret demographic changes. They have also had to examine other scant sources - women's letters, diaries, autobiographies, and testimonies -in order to first locate them in history. Only then can they reinterpret and challenge the historical record. Writing a women's history only for women as is most often the case in Sri Lanka has its drawbacks. How many men whether students or academics read the work of Sri Lankan feminists whose focus is exclusively on women? A valuable women's history must throw light not only on women's experience but on social and political practices and in so doing permit historians to raise critical questions regarding the rewriting of history[30].

4. Oral History

Most professional historians are generally sceptical about the value of oral sources in reconstructing the past. Oral history - if one were to offer a definition - is history written with evidence gathered from a living person, rather than from a written document. The question is especially important for

[29] Cited in Ritu Menon & Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries. Women in India's Partition* (New Delhi 1998) p.10.

[30] See Joan Scott, 'Women's History', in ed. P. Burke, pp. 42-66

societies without written records such as many African communities. Traditional history has tended to deny a history to non-literate societies and non-literate communities. Since the beginning of the Rankean approach to history Africa has been seen as the ahistoric continent par excellence. It was firmly believed that Africa, the dark continent had no history before it was 'discovered' by the west. This view was shared by thinkers from the right and the left and not only about Africa. Karl Marx himself wrote that Indian villages simply 'stewed in the sun, unproductively reproducing themselves'[31].

What must be conceded is that there are limitations to the reconstruction through oral sources alone but that oral sources can contribute to correcting such perspectives. What are the oral sources available for the historian?

1. **Oral tradition:** that is oral testimony transmitted verbally from one generation to the next, or more.

Among these one can distinguish four categories.

- There is poetry including songs and lists.
- There are proverbs that provide much information on popular culture. These two categories are rote learnt but while the content of songs is generally fixed or frozen the content of proverbs can vary. There are often many versions of one proverb.
- Finally there are traditions not learned by rote: epics and narratives. By epic it is meant for example the Homeric epic or the Mahabarata that is the heroic poetry composed orally, according to rules. Of course the poems were written down subsequently.

[31] See Gwyn Prins, 'Oral History', in ed. P. Burke, pp.114-139.

2. **Personal reminiscence.** This is oral evidence specific to the life experiences of the informant, for instance private family stories. Jokes too are of value for the social historian. Under totalitarian or dictatorial regimes jokes reveal the flaws, faultlines and absurdities of seemingly unopposed power.

Oral history by reminiscence is often powerful for social history. But even if it is helpful and illustrative is it formative of explanation? Is it not trapped in the small scale? Oral history is best used with multiple, converging independent sources. It can provide the detail, the humanity, the emotion and also a welcome skepticism about the entire historiographic undertaking.

A good example is the research undertaken by the anthropologist Gananath Obeysekere on the tales surrounding Sigiriya. After listening to folktales recounted by villagers who lived in the area he was able to reconstruct a quite different account of the demise of King Kassapa from that described in the Mahavamsa[32]. There is a lot more that could be done. Historians in Sri Lanka have not exploited the fund of information that exists in the memories of its people.

For some areas of historical study oral testimony is invaluable since there is little other source material available. But as much as possible it must be checked against other kinds of source.

5. Mentalities

Histoire des mentalités is a French term. It can be translated into English as cultural history, although this itself has

[32] G. Obeysekere, 'Stories from Sigiriya Villagers: Supplement to the Mahvamsa', paper presented on 20 October 2000 at the Sri Lanka Historical Association Lecture Series, Colombo.

acquired a different meaning in the late 1980s and 1990s. George Duby for instance says that a study of feudalism must go beyond institutions, modes of production, social systems and military organisation and reach out to an understanding of a feudal conception of service, to a feudal mentality. In the same way the capitalist society that began to emerge in Europe in the sixteenth century was not only the result of a new mode of production, of a monetary economy or the creation of a bourgeoisie, it was also the result of new attitudes towards work and money, a mentality that since Max Weber one links to the Protestant ethic. So a history of mentality aims at satisfying the curiosity of historians who are eager to go further.

Robert Darnton who specialises in pre-revolutionary France explains that a history of mentalities treats one's own civilisation the same way that anthropologists study alien cultures. It is in short, he says, history in the ethnographic grain. It is a kind of cultural history that is not concerned with high culture or with the way thought evolved from philosopher to philosopher - historians of ideas focus on this area - but the way ordinary people made sense of the world[33].

What sources are available for a historian studying mentalities?

The methodology of the historian studying mentalities is very similar to that of the social anthropologist and sociologist. The difference between the inquiry of the anthropologist and that of the historian of mentalities, however, is that a historian researching, for instance, religious mentalities in eighteenth century India or Sri Lanka cannot base his/her understanding on interviews. He/she has to use archives as a substitute for fieldwork. Darnton suggests that

[33] Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and other Episodes in French Cultural History,* (New York, 1985).

if we want to understand the way of thinking in the past centuries we must set out with the idea of capturing otherness. For, in the past, people did not think the way we do today. The historian's task is to unravel an alien system of meaning. He/she is most likely to find something if he/she explores a document where it is most opaque and unclear. The sources available are many: from rituals, city plans, to folktales etc. Anything can be read for meaning, ie the meaning inscribed by contemporaries in whatever survives of their vision of the world.

There are of course methodological shortcomings. Among them are the problem of proof and the problem of representativness.

Folktales for instance can be taken as a source for the historian, who however can never form more than an approximative idea of how tales were told in the past. This is the case of folktales of the world including Sri Lanka. We do not know exactly when and where they were told or what their texts were. But they are often all that is left of oral traditions and the richest source at the historian's disposal if he wants to make contact with the mental world of peasants in the past. Another problem is the selection of a source. In what way is for instance the oral evidence of a particular worker recorded by a court in early nineteenth century Sri Lanka representative of the people's worldview? At the outset historians working on mentalities must not pretend to present a typical peasant, bourgeois or nationalist. But they can make connections between text and context in order to reach out to the symbolic world of the past.

Another pitfall resides in the relation between mentalities and social structures. Is there for each society at each particular period a dominant mentality or many mentalities? Lucien Febre was very critical of the notion of a Renaissance man, a pure abstraction in his view. Linked to this are the difficulties of perceiving transformations in

mentality. When does a mentality appear and one disappear? Jacques le Goff issues a warning that the history of mentalities may become an excuse for epistemological laziness, but if one gives it proper methods and tools it can play an important role as another type of history that probes on the other side of the looking glass[34].

'The Great Cat Massacre', an essay by the American historian Robert Darnton is a good example of what a historian of mentalities can read about the mentalities in eighteenth century France in a seemingly bizarre episode where cats were massacred by workers in a printing shop in Paris. Darnton uses the written account of Contat, one of the workers, as the main source of his study. Contat begins his account by saying how amusing the killing of cats was. Today's reader however, especially a reader from a Buddhist background, would not find it funny at all, would not get the joke. This inability to understand the joke indicates the distance that separates us from the workers of preindustrial Europe. What Darnton tries to do in this essay is to understand the joke. By doing that, it may be possible to comprehend a basic ingredient of artisanal culture under the Old Regime. The text of Contat reveals many things about early modern labor relations. The first explanation is that the cat massacre served as an oblique attack on the master and his wife. Hatred for the bourgeois was common among preindustrial workers. Indeed when one looks at the printing industry at the time there was dissatisfaction on the part of the workers. But why cats? Cats, it appeared, played an important part in some rituals especially during carnival and lent. During carnival the common people suspended the normal rules of behaviour and turned the social order upside down. In some ceremonies a cat was passed

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[34] Jacques Le Goff, 'Les Mentalités:une Histoire Ambigue' in eds Jacques Le Goff & Pierre Nora, *Faire de lHistoire Vol. III Nouveaux Objets,* p. 129.

around by youth who tore its fur to make it howl. Another occasion was the celebration of the summer solstice on 24 June: crowds made bonfires, danced around them and threw objects into the flames. Among these were cats tied up in bags, cats suspended from ropes, or cats burned at the stake. Cats also represent something mysterious and occult in many societies. The torture of animals, especially of cats, was a popular amusement in early modern Europe. Folktales, superstitions, proverbs and popular medicine provide some information for the historian. Cats suggested witchcraft. In popular tales cats could transform themselves into witches. They had occult powers. French folklore attaches special importance to the cat as a sexual metaphor. Women were identified with cats. In short cats bore enormous symbolic weight in the folklore of France. So when one rereads Contat's account these themes appear quite clearly. Sorcery appears in the qualification 'bedeviled cats'. The description of the fête resembles the atmosphere of the carnival. Contat then describes the trial that was enacted by the workers where the master and mistress were declared guilty. This episode recaptures not only labour relations under the Old Regime but also helps understand what constituted a joke in eighteenth century France[35].

Another area where historians of mentalities have done valuable work is in studies of the book and reading[36]. Reading is an activity that in all literate cultures is shared with ancestors, yet can never be a shared experience. Reading too has a history. In a Europe where the population was 100,000,000, at least 20,000,000 books had been printed by

35 *The Great Cat Massacre*, op.cit.

36 The most famous work on this topic is Lucien Febre and Henri Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book. The Impact of Printing 1450-1800* (London 1976).

1500[37]. But how can the historian recover the history of the book[38]? Quantitative methods has brought new perspectives. There have been studies by social historians of book circulation based on the measurement of networks and volumes of exchange where the book is treated as a commodity. Another project by historians of collective mentalities has been to understand the writing and reading practices of an entire society. The book is then a cultural sign.

In Europe a thematic analysis of titles of books published shows the replacement of theology as the main subject of books in the eighteenth century, by books dealing with the arts and sciences. For the historian of mentalities this can be interpreted as a move towards a secularisation of society. In most cases the world of reading was a limited one although one can look for popular reading material in order to understand the culture of the socially dominated. Other studies have tried to gather information on the reading public. This has been done by charting a map of bookshops and libraries in the country under review. In eighteenth century France for instance there was a concentration in towns with a parliament, a university, or college.

The next step is to look at the content or catalogue of public libraries at a given time. This has led in some cases to new discoveries. For instance it was always widely believed that the writings of Rousseau were very influential in pre-revolutionary France. But the analysis of five hundred eighteenth century library catalogues showed only one copy of Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Instead libraries were full of authors that are today completely forgotten. Other studies have used data from private libraries and the book as a

37 cit. in Benedict Anderson, op.cit., p. 37.

38 R. Darnton, in ed. Burke; R. Chartier and D. Roche, 'Le Livre. Un Changement de Perspective', in eds J . Le Goff and P. Nora, *Faire de l' Histoire*, Vol. III, op.cit. pp. 156-184.

criterion to draw socio-cultural hierarchies of a city or province.

Another interesting area of research has looked at the way people read. When they had only a few books - in Europe it was the Bible, an almanach, a devotional work or two - it was read over and over again usually aloud and in groups. Later the nature of reading changed with the emergence of mass readership. But there was no common trend. In nineteenth century Europe workers still enjoyed someone reading to them while they worked. This seems a common trait in many cultures as the popularity of the radio and later the television set shows. In many societies reading was a more private experience for the minority of educated persons who could afford to buy books. Many joined reading clubs.

In Sri Lanka there is room for research on a history of the book and reading habits. What role did the Sangha play in pre-colonial times? What were the books available before the printing press revolutionized reading? What information can we glean from records of the content of private libraries, libraries of kings, or of religious institutions?

Yet another pioneering area of the history of mentalities is the theme of collective attitudes towards and representations of death. Sources ranging from archeology of tombs to manuscripts and parish registers are used. Michel Vovelle has studied western attitudes towards death from the Middle Ages to the present day[39]. He shows for instance that from the mid-eighteenth century a decisive change in the relationship between man and the dead was manifested through an exile of the dead, the shifting of cemeteries from the churchyard to the outskirts of the city. The study of the

[39] M. Vovelle, Piété Baroque et Déchristianisation en Provence au XVIIIe siècle. Les Attitudes devant la Mort d'après les Clauses des Testaments, (Paris, 1973).

rituals, gestures of death and forms of body disposal is a fascinating if not morbid area of research for the social historian.

6. Material Culture or Material Life

The French historian Fernand Braudel is the best known proponent of the study of the changes in material life in time. His most famous work is *Civilization and Capitalism Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries, Vol. I The Structures of Everyday Life*[40]. What does Braudel argue in this book? He questions at the outset the traditional textbooks according to which the development of pre-industrial Europe consisted of its gradual progress towards the rational world of the market, the firm and capitalist investment and challenges the reading of the Industrial Revolution as neatly dividing human history in two.

Braudel shows that there were not one but several economies. The one that is most frequently written about is the so-called market economy. This includes the mechanisms of production and exchange linked to rural activities, to small shops and workshops. But there is another, shadowy zone, often hard to see for lack of adequate historical documents, lying underneath the market economy: this is that elementary basic activity which went on everywhere that Braudel calls material life or material civilization. The task of the historian is to describe the conditions imposed by material life: among them food and drink, dress and housing, demography and family structure, energy and technology...

Material life or material civilization can be understood through the examination of everyday life. Braudel makes a

[40] Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life. Civilization and Capitalism Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries,* Vol. I, (London 1981).

distinction between the event that is or is taken to be unique; and the every day happening that is repeated. The more often it is repeated the more likely it is to become a generality or rather a structure. It pervades society at all levels and characterises ways of behaving which are perpetuated through endless ages.

Sometimes a few anecdotes are enough to point to a way of life. There is a drawing which shows Maximilian of Austria at table in about 1513: he is putting his hand into a dish. Two centuries later an account of the time tells us how Louis XIV, when he allowed his children to sit at table for the first time, forbade them to eat differently from him. Indeed a tutor had taught them to eat with a fork. So when did Europe invent table manners? In another part of his book Braudel points to the similarities between a fifteenth century and an eighteenth century costume. Is the passion for fashion a peculiarly European thing? Through little details, travelers notes, a society stands revealed.

Food

Fernand Braudel devotes a large section of his book to the theme of food. Food in many ways bears witness to the social status, civilization and culture of men. The social historian can approach this area of study in many ways. One possible way is to look at dietary patterns: who ate bread during the fifteenth-eighteenth centuries? Or focus on selected crops such as wheat, rice, or maize which were the staple foods of the majority of the world's inhabitants, or the new taste for potatoes. Another fascinating area is eating habits. How did people eat? When did people begin to lay the table and adopt table manners? What were considered luxuries in the early modern period? What did the masses eat meanwhile?

To answer some of these questions we have many sources available. There is of course more information on

the food of the rich, thanks to paintings depicting feasts such as the Wedding at Cana by Veronese, cookery books that date back to 1391, menus of royal banquets, treatises on cooking. Painters have also been inspired by the sad lives of peasants in the seventeenth century. In more recent times, sources such as administrative documents can provide information on the quantity of food consumed per day and per individual at different periods. There is for instance a study by a French historian called Jean Paul Aron based on data collected in general hospitals in the mid-nineteenth century which I mentioned in a previous chapter. He gathers information on the amount of bread and meat consumed in 1846-47 and compares it to the situation in 1789. He also calculates it in terms of calories. The richness of Aron's work comes from his ability to relate the changes in consumption to political and economic events such as the failure of wheat cultivation in 1845[41]. It might be interesting to find out if similar data is available for colonial Sri Lanka and if so, whether it will throw some new light on the life of men and women under colonial rule. Material relating to India has started to be exploited. 'Cookbooks tell unusual cultural tales'[42]. Their spread is an important sign of what Norbert Elias has called the 'civilizing process' and they represent structures of class and hierarchy. Cookbooks in the preindustrial world are best documented in the agrarian civilizations of Europe, China and the Middle-east. The production of these cookbooks seems to have come from royal and aristocratic milieux.

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41 Jean Paul Aron, 'La Cuisine. Un Menu an XIXe siēcle', in eds Jacques le Goff and Pierre Nora, *Faire de l'Histoire, Nouveaux Objets,* pp. 257-293.

42 Arjun Appadurai, 'The Making of a Colonial Cuisine. Cookbooks in India', *Comparative Study of Society and History,* Vol. 30, No.1, 1988, p. 3.

In India cooking is deeply embedded in moral and medical beliefs and prescriptions. Before this century the production of cookbooks was poorly developed. India did not witness an important textualization of the culinary realm. Why?

- Food is principally either a moral or a medical matter in traditional Hindu thought. There is an immense literature on eating but very little about cooking in Hindu legal, medical or philosophical texts. Hindu culinary traditions stayed oral in their mode of transmission and domestic in their setting. The textualization of culinary practice improved with the arrival of the Mughals in the sisteenth century. The famous Mughal administrative manual the Ain-I-Akbari contains a recipe section. Another turning point was the arrival of the printing press which led to the birth of the modern cookbook.

In India, Appadurai argues that the construction of a national cuisine is essentially a postindustrial and postcolonial process. As in China, premodern culinary traditions are largely regional and ethnic. In the national cuisine that has emerged in the last two decades, Mughal cuisine and colonial cuisine have been incorporated into a broader conception of Indian food[43].

7. Groups at Society's Margins

Another concern of new history is to gain insights into the working of society at its margins rather than from the discourses that emanate from the centre. Jacques Le Goff has,

[43] ibid.

for instance, studied the evolution of models of marginality in western medieval society. He shows that the forest was the marginal space - a place to which criminals, bandits, outlaws and suspicious religious men were relegated. The process of marginalisation eyentually led to confinement: the jail for the vagrant, the ghetto for the Jews, the maladeries for the lepers, and Purgatory for the dead[44]. Margin or marginality is a spatial metaphor referring to the relationship between the centre and the periphery. The study of how a society marginalises certain of its groups - witches, vagrants, thieves and lunatics, prisoners - brings into focus its norms. It is these norms that the mainstream must enforce. The norms of mainstream society keep changing over time and with these changes the groups that it banishes into its prisons or lunatic asylums change too. Michel Foucault has provided interesting insights into the study of margins. Two of his books are especially important. *Madness and Civilization* covers the period 1650s to 1790s, a period generally regarded as the Age of Reason[45]. Foucault claims this period saw the denial of madness as part of the human condition. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance the insane were familiar figures within society and the mad roamed freely. However from 1650 onwards European society began what Foucault calls 'the great confinement'. Suddenly a great number of people - the poor, the criminal and the insane - were incarcerated in hospitals, charitable institutions and workhouses all over Europe. The solution was to instill the work ethic into these people. What is important here is that what constituted normality was redefined during the modern era.

In his book on institutions, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that the birth of the modern era in the

[44] Jacques Le Goff, *La Naissance du Purgatoire,* (Paris 1981).

[45] M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York 1984).

eighteenth century created the disciplinary institutions that made the power to punish an essential function of society[46]. These institutions - hospitals, schools, military barracks and factories - were always based on certain standard concepts:

- strict timetables
- standardised architecture
- institutional uniforms
- ranks, classes and grades of inmates

Its aims were nearly always the same

- to control the individual's use of time and space
- to change the personality and values of the inmate
- to segregate members from their former culture
- to instill a disciplinary ethos in all those within the institution

In short, Foucault argues that inside schools, within families, in factories and in the former colonies of the Third World, people are not free as they imagine. His work has inspired many studies. Especially relevant to the Sri Lankan historian is the research undertaken by Indian historians that is grounded in Foucault's analysis of power-knowledge[47]

8. Environment and History of the Climate

Environmental history is a study of human engagement over time with the physical environment, of the environment as context, agent and influence in human history. This includes

[46] M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (London 1977).

[47] see chapter 5.

the study of climate, topography, animal and insect life, vegetation and soils. The history of environment is also a history of popular perception and experience, of folk traditions and religious beliefs and draws upon the insights of disciplines such as anthropology, art and literature. Environmental history differs in that sense from ecology that has tended to focus more narrowly upon the study of 'nature', the 'non-human world, the world we have not created'.

In France and the United States environmental history has been for some time a well established sub-field within history. In America environmental history emerged as a distinct field only in the 1970s in the wake of the modern environmental movement. In France environmental history stemmed from a long-lasting interest in agrarian society among reputed historians especially those of the Annales school. The history of climate, of man's relationship to nature is a dimension of history which Braudel classified as one whose movement was almost imperceptible. Climate has emerged as an independent field of history. *Times of Feast, Times of Famine. A History of Climate since the year 1000,* by E. Le Roy Ladurie is a classic translated into many languages[48]. The events in this history of climate unfold in a form parallel to economic events that is through short cycles as well as through long term movements.

Environmental history in South Asia has a distinctive feature as it constitutes a region that can be can be mapped out topographically by its mountain ranges and major river systems, its once vast forests, its deserts, its deltas and its offshore islands. It is also a region defined historically and culturally by its urban centres and by the criss-crossing routes of pilgrimage and trade. Owing to the variety of its ecological zones and linguistic and cultural regions, dealing with South

[48] Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Times of Feast, Times of Famine. A History of Climate since the Year 1000,* (London 1972).

Asia is in many ways comparable to dealing with a continent. Historians of South Asia have begun to use the concept of *longue durée* borrowed from the Annales historians. They have realised the importance of opening up the time frame of discussion of environmental change rather than merely concentrating on developments of the past century. Forests and water, the two natural resources perhaps most critical to the economic life of agrarian communities, are a significant area of research. Two important social groups neglected by historians are being looked at by environmental historians: pastoralists and fisherfolk. The themes of pollution and its roots, and environment as contested space are some of the interests of this new field in history[49].

This chapter tried to introduce very briefly some of the themes researched by new historians. In so doing it was compelled to leave many valuable writings unmentioned. The main idea was, however, to show that in new history what has changed is not the fundamental understanding of history nor the method of research - empirical research is at the heart of new history - but the subject matter, the emphasis, and the incorporations of new modes of analysis that improve and fine-tune traditional methods.

[49] Eds David Arnold, Ramachandra Guha, *Nature Culture Imperialism. Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia,* (New Delhi 1995).

4

New History in South Asia Subaltern Studies

History writing in South Asia has been largely influenced by the Anglo-Saxon tradition. In the past decade, however, history in India has grown in various directions. A transition was effected even earlier, some thirty years ago, from conventional political history to the study of socio-economic structures substantially moulded by classical Marxist analysis. Today many Indian historians whose work is at the intersection of anthropology, history and literary studies are moving towards the study of ideology, culture and social attitudes. Delhi university historian Romila Thapar and sociologist Veena Das have, for instance, studied ritual death and the structures of mourning in the Indian context. Perhaps the most important development of the last three decades in Indian scholarship has been the emergence of a collective of social scientists who call themselves the subaltern studies group.

The term subaltern is borrowed from the Italian communist thinker Antonio Gramsci's celebrated book *Prison Notebooks.* Gramsci took this term from the military word designating young officers under the rank of captain. In Gramsci's work the term acquires various meanings but the authors of the Subaltern collective adopt it in its most general usage of dominated groups as opposed to dominating classes. The dominated groups would become the centre of this new history from below, a people's history which focuses on the under classes - neglected segments of society such as peasants, women and tribals who were excluded from the master

narrative of history. Gramsci provided the Subaltern historians with a theoretical framework and influenced them into taking into account questions neglected by Marxist approaches relating to culture, ideology and the peasantry.

In Sri Lanka, no paradigmatic shift of any kind has occurred. A measure of our struggle to distance ourselves from the former metropolis is that in Sri Lanka many historians still claim to be Namierites.. that is followers of the British historian Lewis Namier, neglecting other approaches - whether indigenous or influenced by other European thinkers. A few individual historians are exploring new ways of writing and reading history but the establishment - epitomised in the Sri Lanka Historical Association - remains closed to any changes.

It is important for young historians of Sri Lanka to read the works of the Subaltern Studies group. Despite valid criticisms of some of their writings the Subaltern collective's endeavour has led to an entire questioning of the discipline of history and consequently to fresh insights that are most often lacking in our own historical writings.

The beginnings of the Subaltern studies group can be traced to the dissident Left milieu of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The political context was one where Maoist armed struggle - especially the Naxalite movement - in the countryside had been crushed by the state and where the traditional Left was in disarray. Generally the climate was one of disillusion among young intellectuals. Hopes were very temporarily aroused by the post-Emergency electoral rout of Indira Gandhi. This was also a time when western academics were questioning the validity of all historical meta-narratives especially the pertinence of the social democratic project of political, economic and social liberation founded on the heritage of the Enlightenment. Reason, science and history were being scrutinised anew.

The chief members of the subaltern study group were Indian and British historians who lived in India, Great Britain,

Australia and the US. All had read for higher degrees in western universities and had the opportunity to travel to and teach in different countries. They were in that sense open to a variety of approaches[50].

The first issue of *Subaltern Studies* appeared in 1981 under the direction of Ranajit Guha and includes the seminal text on the historiography of Indian nationalism[51]. In 1983 the first subaltern conference of historians and social scientists was held and since then regular meetings have taken place. At the same time as the journals were issued, a number of monographs of its allied researchers were published in India and in the West. This opened up a debate on the modern history of India and on historical writing in general. The work of the subalterns sought to rectify the elitist bias of Indian historiography and neo-colonialist historiography which credited the making of the Indian nation and the development of a national consciousness to British colonial rulers, administrators, policies, institutions and culture or to Indian elite personalities, institutions, activities and ideas. Guha argued that anti-colonial movements had been explained far too often in terms of combinations of economic pressures and mobilization from the top by leaders portrayed as manipulative in colonial and as idealistic or charismatic in nationalist historiography. He remarked that the 'unhistorical historiography' of colonial India left out 'the politics of the people' in favour of the nationalist elites created by the British. Hence 'the historic failure of the nation to come into its own' which makes 'the study of this failure (what)

50 Ed. Mamadou Diouf, *L'Historiographie Indienne en Débat. Colonialisme, Nationalisme et Sociétés Postcoloniales,* (Paris, Amsterdam, 1999).

51 Ranajit Guha, 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India' in ed. Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies I, Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi, 1982).

constitutes the central problematic of the historiography of colonial India'[52]. Another important text of the Subaltern studies group is 'The Prose of Counterinsurgency'[53] which indicates the theoretical operations that guide the Indian historian. In this article, Guha shows that the documents of historical analysis are always the documents of the dominant classes or in the case of the modern history of India - colonial archives. In both cases, according to Guha, the voices of subalterns are reduced to silence or displaced or transformed by the grammar of official discourse. Guha does not however deny the uses of colonial history: providing information on the structure of the colonial state, and above all facilitating the understanding of the ideological character of historiography itself.

Some texts

As an illustration of the type of research that Subaltern historians engaged in I have singled out a few of the texts that made me rethink my own work as a historian and that I feel have some resonance with the interests of historians in Sri Lanka. The Subaltern collective engaged in detailed work on colonial and postcolonial codes. Historians such as Shahid Amin, Gyanendra Pandey and Partha Chatterjee have looked at the nation as a historical construction that includes or excludes groups often through violent means. Chatterjee especially has demonstrated the manner in which nationalism appropriates the body of women to question both the issue of

52 Ranajit Guha, ibid, pp. 5, 7.

53 Ranajit Guha, 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency' in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York, 1988), pp. 45-86.

women's identity and the place of women in colonial and post-colonial societies[54]. Nationalism represents the women's body as the metaphor of the nation and its authenticity. In the 'Nation and Its Fragments' he introduces a new binary, material/spiritual or world/home. He argues that nationalists kept or created as their own an autonomous world of literature, art, education, domesticity and above all religion. They were surrendering to the West, meanwhile, on the material plane. Indeed the nationalists' efforts to eradicate colonial difference in politics and in the courts actually meant progressive absorption into the Western colonial project of building the modern nation state. Chatterjee's argument that women's initiative or autonomy in the nationalist era found expression only inside the home has been critiqued. It has been pointed out that he focuses too closely on how women preserved pre-colonial modes of being and resistance and rather than on how they struggled with a patriarchal domination that was overwhelmingly indigenous in its structure.

Pandey's work on communal violence has special resonance in Sri Lanka. His monograph entitled '*The Construction of Communalism in Colonial India*' explores the way in which riots and violence were reported and tabulated by colonial administrators in a way that emphasized religious conflict[55]. His reading of colonial sources against the grain is an example to all students of riots using official sources.

On 8 February 1921 Gandhi went to the district of Gorakhpur to address a meeting where between 150 000 to 250 000 people attended. Although he remained there only one day, over succeeding months the 'Mahatama' as an idea was reworked in the popular imagination. Shahid Amin has

54 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments. Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Delhi, 1995).

55 Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial India,* (New Delhi, 1992).

analysed the rumours concerning Gandhi's miraculous powers as an entry point to understanding the processes of an autonomous popular appropriation of messages from nationalist leaders. Amin looks at the way Gandhi is incorporated into the peasant consciousness by studying the local press of the period and their reports of rumours of miracles performed by Gandhi. The location of the Mahatma in popular belief and the way in which it informed direct action differs radically from the standard interpretation of Congress leaders[56].

The later works of the Subaltern historians on subjects such as the bureaucracy, colonial medicine, and the politics of drinking were very much influenced by the French thinker Michel Foucault. David Arnold's study of colonial modes of administrating epidemics shows that sicknesses became a way of reorganising the physical habitat, of aggression on the body and of violation of private spaces. He also looks into the protests displayed by the people to some of the colonial prescriptions such as transfer from home to hospitals etc...[57].

The work of the Subaltern group constitutes a considerable advance in historical research especially when they invite us to rethink the relation between history and anthropology. Unlike the anthropologist who tries to understand the family, kinship or tribe in everyday life, for the Subaltern historians the object of study is the 'contract' that these groups have been forced to establish between forms of domination that stem from the structures of modernity. In the work of the Subaltern historians we encounter the traditional groups studied by anthropologists but we see them

56 Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory. Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992,* (New Delhi, 1996).

57 David Arnold, 'Touching the Body: Perspectives on the Indian Plague' in ed. Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies V, Writings on South Asian History and Society,* (New Delhi, 1985).

engaged in conflict with the tribunals, bureaucracy, and the police. In a certain way the Subaltern historians have emancipated the study of tribes, castes and other groups by restoring their historical being. Indeed they have argued that it is not possible to conceive tribes or castes without taking into account changes - brought about by modern institutions of dominance - in the relationship they have with nature[58].

Critiques of Subaltern Studies

Sumit Sarkar, a historian earlier associated with the Subaltern studies group, wrote a virulent critique of the changes that have taken place in Subaltern Studies. He deplored the 'Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies'[59]. He argues that the emphasis is today less on underprivileged groups in Indian society such as peasants, tribals and workers than on critiques of western-colonial power-knowledge as opposed to non-western 'community consciousness'. The drift highlighted by Sarkar is indeed marked. While the essays written in the early 1980s were very clearly inspired by the works of British Marxist social historians such as Hill, Hobsbawm and Thompson, later works were imbued with the ideas of Foucault, Said and Spivak. Edward Said has described the historiographical effort of Subaltern Studies as 'history as critique of imperialism and imperialist knowledge'. Domination is conceptualised overwhelmingly in cultural, discursive terms and Marxism stands condemned as one more variety of Eurocentrism. Sarkar describes the changes within

58 Veena Das, 'Subaltern as Perspective' in ed. Ranajit Guha *Subaltern Studies VI Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (New Delhi 1989), pp. 309-324.

59 Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, (New Delhi 1997) pp. 82-108.

Subaltern Studies as 'debilitating in both academic and political terms'. The new trend, he claims, has gained Subaltern historians fame and adulation in the western post-modernistic counter establishment. Being adulated is not in itself a reason to condemn a group of historians as long as this adulation does not in any way affect the quality and the inventiveness of the work produced. Sarkar's sense of disappointment is understandable when one considers some of the work produced by the now sizeable Subaltern school in recent years. Most of them are written in an incomprehensible language, paying lip service to the trinity of Foucault, Said, and Spivak, while they are curiously similar in their content and form. Subaltern Studies has become an establishment of a sort.

Sumit Sarkar highlights the restrictive analytical framework of later subaltern writings: first with their emphasis on subaltern autonomy and then in their even more simplistic thesis of Western colonial cultural domination. He also argues that they have tended to reiterate the already said. Although they claim to be postmodern, there have been no real experiments with new forms of narrativization. Most of their writings read as a conventional history of ideas. Subaltern historians, he argues, did not invent a new paradigm.

Furthermore all history has been folded back into the single problematic of Western colonial cultural domination and other types of studies from economic history, environmental studies, to feminist history are ignored or dismissed. There are also serious political implications with regard to the overemphasis of cultural factors. Culturalism rejects the importance of class and class struggle while notions of civil, democratic, feminist and liberal individual rights - many of them indubitably derived from certain Enlightenment traditions - become delegitimized by a repudiation of the Enlightenment as a bloc. Words like 'secular', 'rational' or 'progressive' have become terms of

ridicule. The authentic is identified with the indigenous and both are located in the pasts of an ever receding community or a present that can consist of fragments alone.

One tends to agree with Sarkar's critique of the Indian historiography that has tried to transcend the manichean vision of colonial ideologies founded on the opposition of a civilised coloniser and a primitive subordinate. Indeed there is a real risk of replacing one dichotomy with another, or inverting it by opposing destructive imperialism to a resisting community of victims. In the same way, the acknowledgement of the violence and oppression that has come from the spread of the nation-state model to the rest of the world must not blind us to the potential for oppression and violence that exists in other social formations. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak too has taken the Subaltern Studies school to task for creating a monolithic category of 'subaltern' who is presumed to have a unitary identity and consciousness[60]. Critiques of Subaltern Studies have brought to light the main problem of studies of dominated groups which is their reluctance to reveal the ambivalences and ambiguities of resistance itself. However all things considered, in spite of this failing one must still recognize that this group of historians have succeeded in questioning the narratives, the documentary basis and the theoretical framework as well as the subject position of the author and in so doing have set an example to Third World scholars in Asia, Africa and South America.

Post-orientalist Scholarship

The influence of Subaltern Studies can also be found in the new post-orientalist historiography. Subaltern historians'

[60] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography' in eds. Ranajit Guha & Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, pp. 3-34.

reflection on the way histories are written in the Third World have highlighted the subaltern position of non-western histories and of the subaltern social groups. These non-western histories have been shown to be haunted by the spectre of Europe not only because of the scars of colonialism but also because of the way Europe perceives every process of state building, capitalist development and modernity by referring to its own self. Reduced to this vision, the history of Asian countries is perceived as characterized by the failure of the nation to realise its destiny and by the incapability of the bourgeoisie and of the working class to govern. The need to reorient the writing of history in the former colonies has been constantly stressed by Subaltern scholars. Their voice has been heard by a new generation of social scientists and historians who are sometimes referred to as post-orientalists. Coming from a perspective quite different to Subaltern Studies, and making an explicit reference to post-structuralism, post-orientalist historiography can be characterised by an attempt to make cultural forms as well as historical events dependent above all on power relations. A number of important works have emerged: among them studies of criminality which have demonstrated the power relations present in the classification of, and action taken against 'criminal tribes'[61].

Post-orientalist historians have pointed to the fact that all other histories, whether qualified as Indian, Chinese or Japanese, tend to become variations of a larger text that can be called 'history of Europe'[62]. Any scholar writing from the

61 See for instance Sanjay Nigam, 'Discipline and Policing the Criminals by Birth, Part 2: the Development of a Disciplinary System 1871-1900', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 22, No.3, 1990.

62 This section draws from Gyan Prakash, 'Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography', *Comparative Studies In Society and History*, (32), 2 April 1990,pp. 383-408.

Third World about the Third World still feels obliged to constantly refer to the history of Europe either in its theoretical framework, conceptual foundations or through comparisons. Whether it is E.P Thompson, Eric Hobsbawn, Fernand Braudel, or Robert Darnton, the models of historical enterprise for historians in the Third World are always at least culturally European. This little book is itself an example of this inescapable tendency. Historians of Europe, even those who are considered friends of the Third World do not feel the same obligation. Western historians produce their works in relative ignorance of non-western histories, without considering that this will affect the quality of their work. *The Journal of Asian Studies* would not send back an article by a European historian asking him to ground his work on the theories of Third World social scientists while Third World scholars are often told by reviewers to read Bourdieu and resubmit the article.

The fact that Europe as a subject of all histories is dominant, is a reflection of a theoretical condition that has deeply influenced how historical knowledge is produced in the Third World. Since the beginning of western thought philosophers and thinkers who have determined the nature of social sciences have produced theories that embrace humanity in its entirety. From Plato to Locke and from Marx to Rawls, these formulations were produced in relative ignorance of the majority of humanity that is of those who live outside the western cultural sphere. The paradox is that although we in the Third World are ignored by these theories we find them pertinent to the understanding of our own societies. Gyan Prakash, a prominent post-orientalist scholar has asked the following questions: What is it then that permits European thinkers to develop such clairvoyance towards societies they ignore at an empirical level and why are we in the Third World not able to do the same thing?

Prakash gives us an element of an answer when he points out that philosophers have attempted to answer this question

by reading into European philosophy an incarnation of universal reason. Edmund Husserl for instance argued that the main difference between oriental philosophies and Greek-European science lies in the capacity of the latter to produce absolute theoretical arguments while oriental philosophies have a practical-universal or a mythico-religious character[63]. This type of argument seems dangerously similar to one that sees the East as being today in a stage of development that Europe graduated from in the eighteenth century, that is an argument involving a retarded East trying to catch up with the advanced west. The question for the historian today relates more to the conditions under which history and the social sciences - which have been indigenous to the West -can be universal for the Rest. How do we resolve this dilemma between indigeneity and universality?

There are ideally two possible options for historians writing from the Third World who are conscious of the asymmetry of ignorance between the Third World and the West. The first is to attempt to develop an indigenous way of writing history and devise appropriate analytical tools to appraise society that do not emerge from the West. How can we reject reason and its values as part of the modernizing narrative of the state without referring to Foucault? Some scholars such as Ashis Nandy have succeeded to a certain extent but for many this has been a hazardous route that has led to parochialism and isolation from the invisible university. Moreover, this position is inevitably compromised since a purely indigenous social science is simply not possible today. Indeed the historian speaks from a position in time and space, he/she cannot possibly erase or abstract parts of his/her mental heritage - years of schooling and life experiences as a modern person living in a nation-state.

[63] Ibid.

The second position is to acknowledge the close complicity between 'history' and modernising narratives of citizenship, of the public and private spheres and of the nation-state and to realise that inside the discourse of history produced in the institutional site of the university, disapproval of such narratives is impossible if not dishonest. This is because of the universal acceptance of the nation-state as the form of community that is the most desirable and the consequent imposition of a western conception of history as a discipline in nation-states across the world. The historian of the Third World is therefore condemned to know Europe as the cradle of the modern and locate his own writings in relation to this situation. Prakash suggests that the answer may be the project of 'provincialising Europe'. This would not imply rejecting modernity, its liberal values, universals, science and reason and its globalising explanation. It is not cultural relativism as an alternative that is proposed. Instead it would necessitate the documenting of the historical process that permitted the reason of Europe to become evident beyond the land where it was born. It presupposes studying the modern as a contested site, to replace the given narratives of citizenship with others that demonstrate their own complicity with the repressive practices of assimilation of all other possibilities of human solidarity with the projects of the modern state. As the totality of the academic world is not independent from the totality of what the modern European has created within the university system this seems to be the most 'reasonable' position for the historian of the Third World.

5

Writing History: a Beginner's Guide

'Our humble notes, our finicky little references'
Marc Bloch

The Hellenic origin of the word history is 'inquiry'. In its broadest sense history is the investigation of documents - a document being, in Francois Simiand's words, a track, that is a mark perceptible to the senses which some phenomenon - in itself inaccessible - has left behind. Historians produce reconstructions or interpretations of the past: in doing this, their essential 'raw material' is the accounts, relics, traces and sources left by the past itself. Their central activity is to tease out information from often highly intractable material, to discover new sources and to develop new techniques for analysing them. But historians are also writers. Their discoveries must be written in an intelligible way and if possible in an appealing way to the reader.

The historian's four tasks

1. To find sources
2. To these sources, apply both their existing expertise in the society being studied and the technique of source criticism
3. To produce an interpretation from the above
4. To communicate this interpretation in the form of a piece of written history

This chapter is aimed at students who are writing a historical work for the first time. In most universities final year Special Degree students are expected to write a 50-60 page dissertation or an extended essay on a topic of their choice. This exercise is designed to provide students with a first experience in research and data collection. The true work of research, whether in the form of a dissertation, article or book sets out to extend knowledge, not simply to remain within the comfortable territory of a topic which has been already fully explored by other historians.

The first problem a young researcher is faced with is to select a suitable topic.

1. How to select a topic

Selecting a topic is not easy. There are innumerable options available but the student must choose a topic that has the following features:

- it has not been written about before.

This feature is not entirely necessary for an undergraduate dissertation that counts as one paper but it is a sine qua non for a doctoral or M.Phil dissertation.

- it must be 'researchable' i.e there should be sources available on this topic, both primary and secondary.

For instance, it is pointless for a student in a Sri Lankan university who does not intend visiting archives outside the country of origin to select a topic on the Russian Revolution since no primary sources are available in Sri Lanka.

A historical work is generally esteemed serious and scholarly to the extent that it is properly based on primary sources. The notion of historical research implies research in primary source material.

Primary sources are sources which came into existence during the actual period of the past which the historian is studying. Secondary sources are those accounts written later by historians looking back upon a period in the past.

Writing about sources, Marc Bloch says: The variety of historical evidence is nearly infinite. Everything that a man says or writes, everything that he makes, everything that he touches can and ought to teach us about him[64]. What is generally referred to as primary sources are government records, local records, other formal records (of parties trade-unions...),private business records, surveys and reports, chronicles and histories (memoirs, autobiographies), family and personal sources, polemical documents, media documents and artifacts of popular culture, guides and works of reference, archaeology, traces of material culture, literary and artistic sources, oral history and oral traditions etc...

- there should be a problematic, that is a guiding question which the dissertation will try to answer.

A dissertation is not an account or a story. It must answer a question and add something to the fund of knowledge about this particular topic.

My advice to a history student in search of a topic is first to think of what really interests you. One person may be interested in politics while another might be well versed in art or music. Choose a subject which you like, not what your guide tells you to do. Writing a dissertation is a lengthy process and if you lose interest somewhere in the middle there is a chance that it will never be completed. Having vaguely defined your area of interest look either for a source that has not been sufficiently exploited or for a source about which a new question can be posed. The issue of the question in

64 Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, (New York, 1953) p.66.

history has been dealt with in a previous chapter. But let me illustrate it here with an example:

Let's say you are interested in a topic relating to Sri Lankan politics at the turn of the twentieth century. Your next move should be to read extensively all that has been written on that topic, the secondary sources, as it were.

From these readings - by consulting the bibliography and references - you will be able to construct a list of the sources that have been used until then to study this period. For instance, Colonial Office documents, administrative reports, Sessional Papers, census reports... From your readings you will be able to formulate a broad area of research to explore, for example, 'politics and the press in the early twentieth century Sri Lanka'. At this stage the problematic does not have to be clearly determined but should be at the back of your mind. What you ought to do next is to think of what sources are available for the topic apart from the obvious newspapers available at the archives. The approach of the historian is very similar to that of the private detective in search of clues and footprints.. You should ask yourself if any of the press magnates of the period kept diaries; if their private papers are available, you should try to trace the whereabouts of any surviving press people of the period and use them as living witnesses. Slowly, imperceptibly the question to be asked should take shape. It might be something like this:

What role did the vernacular press play in instilling modern political values in Sri Lanka during the late nineteenth to early twentieth century?

Every chapter, every paragraph, every sentence should be informed by this question. The dissertation should read as an answer to this question. Once the topic is selected half of the hard work is done. The rest should be pure pleasure. If you do not enjoy looking for data, constructing an argument, writing chapters, then you should quit historical studies and try out another discipline. Academics sometimes spend over

a year working on a article for a journal - writing it and rewriting it until they perfect the argument. Needless to say the editor of the journal will still usually find something to criticise! People who see historians toiling over an essay often ask what they will get for all this work? Money, fame? Neither is the answer, for the article if it is accepted by a refereed journal will be read only by a few hundred people and all its author will get is a few offprints of the article. So why write?... any historian will know what I mean when I talk of the pleasure one derives from archival research, and the satisfaction which can be gained from constructing a well-argued article out of a little known historical event.

Data

The entire operation of data collecting has changed in the last three decades. Fifteen years ago computers were already in use but researchers still went to the archives or library armed with a pen, pencil, rubber and reference cards. Nowadays many of us have access to laptop computers that can be plugged in at one's desk in the library. Whatever you read is entered in a file on your computer. For the sake of argument, let's assume that most students have access to a computer to type out their dissertation but have to take down notes in the old fashioned way. How should they proceed?

Taking down notes from primary and secondary sources

As far as practical, photocopy sections of books or entire articles that you find interesting and file them in alphabetical order in a folder, for future use. Copying by hand entire pages is a waste of time. On the front page of the photocopied section you should note the name of the book, its author, date and place of publication and page numbers. For a journal the name, volume number and page number should be indicated.

If photocopying facilities are unavailable, then taking down notes from the source is inevitable. When I began research on my Master's thesis years ago my Professor gave me a word of advice: he urged me take down notes on half sheets and to write only on one side of the sheet. At the top of each half sheet in the left corner the author, title of book, date and place of publication and page numbers of the section of the book from where notes are taken from should be indicated. In the right corner the topic covered in this particular card should be briefly indicated. Months later when I had collected over a hundred half sheets and attempted to sort them out I realised the value of this simple advice.

Resist the temptation to copy word for word entire chapters of books. Instead summarise the main ideas of the chapter. Citations - ie recording the exact words of the author - should be short and significant. For instance let's say our student researching the vernacular press comes across Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities and quite rightly feels it could add something to his/her dissertation. This is the type of card he/she should create:

Benedict ANDERSON — Nationalism, print-capitalism 19thc

Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism
Verso London New York 1991 (revised version)

Chapter 3 The Origins of National Consciousness (pp.37-46)

Argument
The convergence of capitalism and print technology created the possibility of a new form of imagined community which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.

Citation
'capitalism and print created monoglot mass reading publics' (p.43)

How to assess data

- **Evaluation of primary sources**

Primary sources must be scrutinized before being used by the historian[65]. He/she must ask a series of questions. First - is the source authentic, is it what it purports to be? The historian will have to use his/her skill to find out if the document is authentic or a forgery. Then he/she should find out the provenance of the document. For example data pertaining to the leaders of the Temperance movement in Sri Lanka found in colonial police files will tell us a lot about the fear with which the authorities looked upon incipient nationalism. The date of the source can also help the historian to locate the document in a proper context. Another important question to be answered is who created the source and with what purpose? The report of a communal riot by a colonial administrator might be written with the hidden purpose of confirming and strengthening religious divisiveness in a society. When assessing a source the historian must know how likely it is that the author of the source was really in a good position to provide first hand information on the particular topic.

- **Evaluation of secondary sources**

Secondary sources must equally be subjected to scrutiny before the information they provide can be usefully employed. Students often believe that what is printed is necessarily true. Today anybody can publish anything. Desktop publishing is so common that writing books has become a business of a sort.

65 Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, (London 3rd edn. 1989), pp. 208-217.

There are some useful ground rules to learn in assessing a secondary source. These rules are not foolproof but in most cases they work.

The publisher of the book tells us something about it. If a book is published at a university press for instance Cambridge University Press or Stanford University Press or at an academic press such as Sage Publishers the chance is that it has gone through a rigorous editorial scrutiny. Any manuscript sent to a university press is scrutinised internally then sent to one or two readers who are usually specialists on the topic of the book. Following the reports of the readers the book might be accepted by the press subject to certain changes. A book published by a reputed university press is therefore likely to be of some merit.

A greater degree of discretion should be exercised with self-published books which may not have had an editor or reader to verify the content and the language. While a university press bears the cost of publishing a book and gives the author a royalty fee for each copy sold, the author who publishes his or her own book has not only to pay for its production but also to market it. An author will usually resort to self-publishing when his/her book has been refused by publishing houses or when he/she is in a hurry to publish (publishing houses take on average two to three years to publish a book after a manuscript is accepted). Therefore, I recommend caution when using self-published books as sources. All books should nevertheless be subjected to some degree of scrutiny.

The next step is to check the origins of the book. If it is a book based on a doctoral thesis it is most likely to be well researched and of some standard since the author has spent at least three years writing it and its content has been judged by fellow academics. Books written in haste and published in haste are rarely worthwhile. But here again there are exceptions.

The bibliography and endnotes constitute a further check. Let's take for instance an Introduction to History published in 2000. If you find that all the reference and footnotes referred are from the 1950s and 1960s or if you find that there are hardly any references or footnotes, it might be safer to put the book back on the shelf and try another one. The lack of recent or extensive references suggests that the author has not kept up with the literature.

Lastly look at the name of the author. In the field of history certain names ring a bell. A book authored by a celebrated historian such as E.J. Hobsbawm, or E.P. Thompson is an immediate recommendation. In Sri Lanka, as elsewhere, certain names vouch for quality. But beware of titles. A book written by a Professor or a person with a Ph.D might not necessarily be better than a book written by a young researcher or a seasoned observer with no visible qualifications.

It is a good idea to peruse the introduction and the conclusion of the book: this is often enough to judge its quality.

You can also rely on the recommendations of your teachers, on annotated bibliographies that are often found in general books and on the literature survey found in the introductory chapter of any recent book published in a good press. This last strategy is known as cross-referencing, that is to jot down the references in one book and then check each of these references in order to jot down references found in each of these books. Mahatma Gandhi for instance has been the subject of a few hundred books in English. What books should the aspiring scholar read and what books should he/she put aside? If you take Judith Brown's biography of Gandhi, for example, her introductory chapter will give an assessment of the main works published on Gandhi. If you check each of these works in turn you will find in each of them references that are not mentioned in Judith Brown's book. You can then check these references for more data.

Historical writing

Even the most radical historians follow certain rules in order to be published in reputed journals or in a good academic press, and in order to be read and understood by other historians. Whether you publish in *New Left Review*, in *Modern Asian Studies* or in the *Colombo University Review* there are certain conventions that must be followed. As a young historian it is sometimes easiest to model your writing (temporarily) on the writing of an established scholar. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* is a model of good historical writing. His writing presents a fine balance between narrative and analysis, between a chronological approach and an approach by topic, and passages of pure description. Most of all he avoids jargon. Students today have an enormous range of good historical works to access.

It is often said that a good dissertation is like an iceberg. Only the tip is visible to the reader. The years and years of labour and research in archives should not appear in the text but be concealed either in footnotes or simply infuse the prose giving it exceptional depth and quality. From the knowledge derived from both primary and secondary sources the historian should be able to create a structure which will link arguments together into a logical and persuasive whole. As research proceeds ever faster - thanks to the speed and complexity of our new information age - writing can be constantly updated and the structure modified.

Quotations

Almost every piece of historical writing will contain direct quotations from source material. Novices in the field and amateur historians tend to pepper their writings with direct quotations in the hope that a string of quotations will make an academic chain. My advice to young historians is to avoid

indented quotations as much as possible and to try to merge them in the text instead. Quotations are illustrations - not proof - although, as Michel de Certeau points out, they convey the impression of truth and produce the effect of reality[66]. For instance a biographer of SWRD Bandaranaike might quote the statesman's 1926 pronouncement on the necessity of a federal system for Sri Lanka while another might quote his utterances at the Sinhala Maha Sabha on the necessity of a united Sinhala race.

> "A thousand and one objections could be raised against the system but when the objections are dissipated I am convinced that some form of federal government would be the only solution"[67].
>
> "I am prepared to sacrifice my life for the sake of my community, the Sinhalese. And if anybody were to try to hinder our progress I am determined to see that he will never forget"[68].

What would these quotations prove? Nothing at all. It does not make a case for anything except that at a particular time in a particular context SWRD Bandaranaike expressed some fondness for the federal idea and at another for the preservation of his community, the Sinhalese. A quotation can be more useful if the historian follows it with a discussion of a key word or an in-depth analysis of the entire quotation.

66 Michel de Certeau, *L'Ecriture de l'Histoire*, (Paris 1975).

67 Sri Lanka National Archives 25/25/13 Excerpts from 'Some Memories and Reflections' in *The Tribune*, 12 June, 1926.

68 *The Hindu Organ*, 26 January 1939.

Endnotes and footnotes

The entire thesis of a scholarly work is built up on primary materials. These sources must be identified for readers hence the note at the foot of the page or at the end of the chapter or book. Today most publishers have settled for endnotes as it makes for a simplified page layout but for a reader the footnote is much more convenient. Most American publishers and scholars use a different type of referencing where the name of the author, date of publication and page numbers are given in the text itself. Sasanka Perera has written a very useful guide to the American style of referencing[69]. In this book I have preferred the British system of referencing as it is still current in Sri Lanka and I personally feel it is the easiest on both the reader and the writer.

Whatever system one uses there is a golden rule: 'References are for use, not for show'. They are given for other scholars to use them in their own work, as guides for future research and they must provide the means of finding the document again. They are not there simply to prove that the researcher has done his work properly. There are certain conventions regarding the way in which a source has to be cited. Scholars have adopted the convention of italicising titles of published materials, while printing titles or citations of unpublished ones in ordinary roman. In the case of an article from a journal, it is the name of the journal that is in italics. There are many guides that give in detail all the conventions and it would be futile for me to try to summarise the *Chicago Manual of Style* in this little guide[70]. You will rarely find it useful to read such manuals from cover to cover. What you should do instead is to study in detail the footnoting in books and dissertations recommended by your supervisor

69 Sasanka Perera, සමාජයීය විද්‍යාවන් ලිවීම: රචනා සම්පාදනයන් හා ආචාර ධර්ම කෙටි හැඳින්වීමක්, (Colombo 1996).

70 *A Manual of Style*, (Chicago, 12th edition 1969).

and model the footnoting and referencing on them. Although some publications leave out the publisher's name - as in this book - it is preferable to include it in serious academic writings.

A typical footnote would be something like this:

1. Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. I (London, 1889), pp. 49-50.

2. Punjab Rev. and Agr., February 1878, A.10.

3. Akbar Ahmad, 'Nomadism as Ideological Expression: The Case of the Gomal Nomads', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 17, No 1, 1983.

If a source is used more than once in the dissertation it is not necessary to repeat all the information in the second or third footnote. Instead, one tends to use abbreviations or certain Latin terms such as op.cit or ibid. For example you may find a sequence of footnotes such as this:

23. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Times of Feast, Times of Famine: A History of Climate Since the Year 1000* (London, 1972)
24. ibid, p. 4
25. K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, 1985)
25. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, op.cit., p. 6.

How to Write a Bibliography

Writing a bibliography is an exercise that is often given to students by their supervisor as a first step into research. Fifteen years ago, before the ubiquity of the computer it was

common to write the name of books and journal articles one used on small reference cards which one organized in alphabetical order in a little card box. This practice is now passé. The entire operation of writing has changed so much that compiling a bibliography is no longer the tedious job it used to be. Many scholars have ceased to take down notes on paper and write directly on the computer. They might create a number of files and sub-files upon which they work in tandem going to and fro with one click. As soon as a new source is incorporated into the text this source can be added onto the bibliography file. While this facilitates the work of the historian, the underlying ordering of sources cannot be done by the computer. It is still the historian who has to determine how to arrange them and what information should be included.

There are many ways of writing bibliographies. But certain ground rules can be stated. Primary and secondary sources must be clearly separated. Sometimes material does not fit neatly into this categorisation. According to the context and the question posed they may apply to one or the other. For instance, a history of Ceylon written in the 1970s will be a primary source in a study of nationalism and historiography. It will be a secondary source for a conventional study of the Colebrooke-Cameron report for example.

Published books can be separated from published journal articles and dissertations should be arranged in a separate section.

Here again the best strategy is to obtain a few good books dealing with a topic similar to the one you are researching and to study their bibliographies. This is a much more rewarding experience than reading manuals on 'how to write a good bibliography'.

As an indication let me give you an example of the headings taken from a book dealing with modern Sri Lankan history.

Bibliography

(A) Unpublished sources

Public Records Office, Kew
Colonial Office Records
CO 54 series

Rhodes House Library, Oxford
Sir H.L. Dowbiggin, Mss

Sri Lanka National Archives
Private Papers
SLNA25/17/13 Typescript of speeches of A.M.A Azeez
Election Literature
56/A3/2 H.A. Kottegoda collection

Museum Library, Colombo
Letter by Sir Alexander Johnston, May 26, 1825

Other Private Papers

(B) Printed sources

Primary sources

Government of Ceylon Publications
Administration Reports

English and Vernacular Newspapers (selected years)
The Catholic Guardian
Viraya
Contemporary Journals (selected years)
Journal of the Dutch Burgher Union

Secondary Sources

Printed Books
Alatas, S. *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, (London, 1977)

Published articles
Barnett, M.R. 'The Emergent South Indian Tamils', *Ethnicity*, Vol.I, No. 1, (1974)

Unpublished theses
Peebles, P. 'The Transformation of a Colonial Elite. The Mudaliayrs of Nineteenth Century Ceylon' (Chicago Univ. Ph.D. thesis 1973).

Journals, magazines

Undergraduates often fail to see the difference between an academic journal and a magazine. Both are valuable but must be used differently by the researcher. If you are writing an essay on the European Union useful data can be gathered on recent developments in a magazine such as the *Economist* or *Newsweek*. But if you are writing an essay on Mahatma Gandhi an article extracted from the Cambridge University journal *Modern Asian Studies* or *Contributions to Indian Sociology* is a better source on the Mahatma than a special issue of the magazine *India Today*.

The ground rule is that if you are writing a scholarly paper about let's say India in the 1920s, for background work and analyses use books and academic journals. Magazines and newspapers of the 1920s can be used as primary source material for information on the events that took place and the ideology of the period. More recent magazine and newspaper articles (of the 1990s-2000) on the topic chosen can be read as they often provide useful summaries and some may be excellent - but they should remain in the hidden section of the iceberg.

How does one recognise an academic journal? After a few years of experience students generally know the reputed journals in their field of study. A good exercise is to pick one journal from the library and analyse its form and content. Take for instance *Modern Asian Studies*, or *Journal of Asian Studies*. The editorial board that appears in the first page of the journal is constituted by academics from different universities who are experts on the subject area of the journal. If you read the contents page, the topics are very specific and based on new research. Sift through the journal and see that the articles are detailed and heavily footnoted. Their authors are generally academics. Most journals have a section devoted to book reviews where recent scholarship is assessed by fellow-academics.

Plagiarising

The cardinal sin of the historian is to plagiarise, that is to claim as yours something written by another. There are different ways of plagiarising and they must all be avoided.

1. Straightforward plagiarising

Taking large sections from a published book, journal or unpublished work and reproducing them word for word without acknowledging their provenance by a footnote or inverted commas.

2. Plagiarising through translation

A common form of plagiarising and much more difficult to detect is when sections of a published book, journal, or unpublished piece of writing are translated from one language to another (most commonly from English to Sinhala) and incorporated without any reference to provenance. This type of plagiarism is common in newspapers but unfortunately also in dissertations by students and in books by academics. Most lecturers are sadly aware that students chose as their final year dissertation topics that they know have been selected in other universities in the country. All they have to do is to photocopy the Peradeniya essay and present it at Colombo as theirs. But in the long run it is the student who loses. Not only has he/she broken a cardinal rule, he/she has not received any training in research.

3. Half-plagiarising is still plagiarising

It is quite common to see undergraduates and popular writers citing a primary source which they have in fact taken from a secondary authority. For instance if a Sri Lankan

undergraduate student cites as a source private papers available only at Oxford University it will be quite clear to the examiner that the student has not made a special trip to Oxford for the purpose of consulting these papers and that he is willingly or unwillingly misleading his reader. What you ought to do is to include in the footnote the primary source involved as well as the secondary source where the source was found. For example:

1. Nathan Mss, as quoted by N. Wickramasinghe in *Ethnic Politics in Colonial Sri Lanka* (New Delhi 1995).

Plagiarising in whatever form must be absolutely avoided by the young historian. Most plagiarisers are found out at some point in their career. This should be a sufficient deterrent to lazy scholarship.

My final word of advice to the student writing a dissertation is to try to enjoy what you are doing and try to enjoy doing it as best as you can. This simple rule will ensure quality, originality and intellectual honesty: the three musts of historical research.

6

Conclusion

This book has assessed some of the redefinitions of the territory and methods of the historian which have occurred in the west and in India. The works mentioned have been selected either because they have been very influential or because they illustrate a specific trend in historical writing. In Sri Lanka some professional historians have begun to rethink the boundaries between social sciences. They have challenged the lack of renewal in historical studies in Sri Lanka, the total acceptance of the division of the social sciences into autarchic disciplines and the exclusion of history from the family of social sciences[71]. Indeed the distinction between history and the social sciences is an artificial one for there is no eliminating time from social science or theory from history. The divorce of history from social science is in some ways the most devastating development of what Manicas calls the americanisation of social science.

In Sri Lanka as in many other countries where this arbitrary branching of the social sciences has not been contested, the result is often an institutionalized impoverishment. Lack of funding is not the sole factor responsible for the stagnation of historical research. The absence of a dynamic research community at our universities structured around regular seminars and workshops and the absence of research journals of any international standard

[71] See for instance, Nirmal Ranjith Devasiri, 'The Formation of Sinhala Nationalist Ideology in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', (M.Phil, University of Colombo, 2000).

reflect a certain disenchantment with intellectual pursuits per se on the part of academics. The sclerosis of history as a discipline is the logical outcome of this state of affairs.

The state has tried to remedy the situation by bestowing history in schools and at the university with a quasi protected status. A more effective way of enticing good students to study history may be simply to teach it in a new and exciting manner, placing it at the forefront of politics and theory. There are of course a number of obstacles to such a venture, among which is a natural fear on the part of conventional historians that the oasis of epistemological peace they have safeguarded until now will be overrun by hordes of 'posts' - from postmarxism to poststructuralism!

A recent critique of postmodern conceptions of history[72] claimed for instance that new theories in vogue for a decade or so are killing the discipline of history. Three main reasons were given:

1. They reject the scientific methods which stem from the Enlightenment and are based on observation and induction.

2. They hold a relativist view of the concepts of truth and knowledge. Most deny that we can know anything with certainty and believe that different cultures create their own truths.

3. They deny the ability of human beings to gain any direct contact or access to reality. Instead they hold that men are locked within a closed system of language and culture. There is no past independent from ourselves.

[72] Keith Windshuttle, *The Killing of History. How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering our Past,* (New York 1996).

While this historian's concerns must be accommodated in any discussion of the drawbacks of new histories and theories, the contribution made by postmodern and poststructural approaches to the discipline of history must also be stressed. These new approaches have succeeded in undermining two fundamental precepts of mainstream history writing. The first age-old precept is that the argument of the text has to be distilled from a complex/narrative text (mainly archival sources) and then debated, detached from and free of the text. The second precept is that only what conforms to the canon will be focused upon and included in the historical body. This means in effect excluding anything produced by anthropologists or literary historians. The discipline rests on an 'esprit de corps', on a history written by historians. The work of a historian is not looked at by his guild as an oeuvre that invites various interpretations or alternative readings. Rather, what is discussed and debated is considered as the arguments, the 'truths' that inform it and are distilled from it. Historical work is neither read nor written as a narrative because most working/writing historians still view history as a meaningful account of the past rather than a positioned narrative[73].

A regime of truth

'We cannot invent our facts. Either Elvis Presley is dead or he isn't' wrote Hobsbawn flippantly in response to the postmodern thrust in the discipline of history[74]. Renewing the discipline of history is not synonymous with embracing a postmodern stand. A middle ground is always possible. Most

[73] Nira Wickramasinghe, 'History Outside the Nation', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1 July 1995, pp. 1570-1572.

[74] E. Hobsbawn, *On History*, p. 6.

new historians would not contest that what particularly characterises historical writing is a concern with change through time. History must in some sense tell a story: it must contain a narrative, a sense of movement through time. Of course explanation and analysis are required as well. Without analysis, history is incomplete; without chronology it does not exist.

History is nevertheless a positioned narrative in the sense that the truths of history are relative and partial for the following fundamental reasons. First objects of history are always contextual and what historians argue is always referred to specific contexts. Furthermore objects of history are always construed and constructed according to a historical point of view. This is why history can never be objective even if it yearns to be so. Rather than objectivity one ought to speak of distance or impartiality. Just as a judge cannot be totally objective in the appreciation of a crime where his own sentiments play a part but weighs the point of view of both the defence and the prosecution and asks questions without prejudgment, the historian can avoid unilateral perspectives. The historian must take a principled position that involves seeking a truth - truth meaning for the historian nothing less and nothing more than 'what can be proved'. It is through factual and systematic evidence that a regime of truth can be established. Factual evidence encompasses all the archival data, testimonies etc that can be put forward to prove a certain fact. For instance if a historian is trying to find out the number of people who died after a communal riot, he/she has an array of data at his/her disposal: reports, testimonies, newspaper accounts... His/her task is to weigh all this evidence and offer an interpretation which he/she thinks is closest to the truth. Systematic evidence relates to truths enunciated by the historian. Take for instance a statement such as: "The introduction of tea plantations in the Up-country led to the

pauperization of the Kandyan peasantry". Most history books are full of such statements. The task of the historian is to substantiate a statement with quantifiable indicators and statistical data pertaining in this example, perhaps, to loss of land and decline in living standards. The important fact here is that he/she must develop a clearly defined method, and use a corpus of texts that a researcher could also use and having used it achieve a similar result.

As the science of the mastery of the past and the consciousness of time, history has the tremendous advantage of being the most readable human science. But, the historical oeuvre, if it is to be something else than a second rate novel, must remain the product of a rigorous methodology, in Marc Bloch's phrase - a craft.

Glossary

Annales, Annales School
Annales is the historical journal founded in 1929 by Lucien Febre and Marc Bloch. The school loosely associated with it and with the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales is characterised above all by an insistence that history should make use of the discoveries of the social sciences and follow social science approaches.

Comparative History
History which, by fixing on like or analogous institutions or practices in different countries, produces comparisons and contrasts between these countries.

Conjuncture
favoured term of Annales historians - trend or cycle (e.g. of prices) seen as operating within the constraints of structure and the longue duree (long-term).

Contingency
Unexpected event or circumstance

Cultural Theory
An approach to the study of the Arts which stresses the importance of the social and historical context and is based on assumptions about class, ideology and the dialectic that draw heavily on Marxist ideas.

Culturally constructed
Created by the society to which they belong - as distinct from having any natural or universal existence (as in sexual practices).

Culture
A/the entire network of activities, practices and institutions within a given society
B/the artistic and leisure activities and products of a given society.

Discourse theory
An approach heavily dependent on Marxist assumptions about dominance and ideology which posits language as the central (and in some case only) subject for academic study.

Epistemology
The theory of knowledge

Hermeneutic
Pertaining to the understanding of texts

Hermeneutics
The study of the understanding of texts

Historicism
An approach which sees history as an absolute central discipline because it postulates that everything is explained by its past development, while at the same time insisting that each age has unique characteristics.

Historiography
The systematic study of historians' interpretations of the past

Ibid
(as used in footnote reference): means that the source is exactly the same as the one given in the previous footnote.

Longue Durée
Basic term of Annales school: the almost unchanging long-term structures of everyday life which act as a constraint upon shorter-term trends (conjunctures).

Mentalities
The mental sets, attitudes and outlook, of particular groups or even of whole societies.

Metahistory
Grand-scale theorising in history as in Marxism, or the writings of Spengler or Toynbee

Modernism
This term has come to mean the most recent phase of world history marked by belief in science, planning, secularism and progress. The desire for symmetry and order, balance and authority has also characterised it. The period is noted for its confidence in the future, a conviction that a natural world order is possible. The machine, gigantic industrial projects, steel, iron, and electricity - all are thought to be at the disposal of humanity to achieve this objective.

Op cit
Technical term used in footnotes, meaning the work already cited.

Paradigm
(in historiography) the (alleged) dominant approach to historical study in any particular period or society.

Postmodernism
The term postmodernism is used by a wide range of writers in ways that are often varied and sometimes even inconsistent. It represents the convergence of three distinct cultural trends.

These include an attack on the austerity and functionalism of modern art; the philosophical attack on structuralism; and the economic theories of postindustrial society. With postmodernism the struggle for universalist knowledge is abandoned while a search has begun for previously silenced voices, for the specificity and power of language and their relation to knowledge, context and locality.

Semiology
The science of the signs by which human beings communicate

Source, Primary
A relic of past age (document, artifact, etc.) which originated in that age

Source, Secondary
An interpretation written up later using primary sources

Structural
When applied to a 'force' or 'factor' in history, it means relating to economic, industrial and technological developments. When used generally of an approach to history, it means an approach which stresses such factors.

Structuralism
The belief in and study of unconscious, underlying patterns in thought, behaviour, social organisation etc. In structuralist theory a structure is a collection of laws or rules that governs the behaviour of any system. These laws always remain stable

Structure
Usually in historical discourse, used in the sense of a basic relationship or framework which explains other phenomena in the same society. As used by Annales school means fundamental characteristics of society which change only slowly and which constrain shorter term economic trends.

Subaltern Studies
Publication that focuses its attention on dominated sections in society with an approach strongly inspired by Antonio Gramsci.

Teleology
The doctrine of the final causes of things: interpretation in terms of purpose

Total History
History which endeavours to integrate together all aspects of human society, aesthetic and cultural, as well as social, economic and political, private as well as public.

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