People from Different Backgrounds Write Different Histories: An Essay on Historiography (Britain and India)

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Abstract
Back in the 1980s, with the publication of the Subaltern Studies series under the editorship of Ranajit Guha, a new way of writing history was proposed to the world of historians. The project, known as subaltern historiography, very quickly took the form of an emerging intellectual movement, conceived and developed in the spirit of the wider movement of Deconstruction. Very quickly, too, it started positioning itself, if not as an alternative to elitist historiography, at least as a serious counterpart to it. Looking back to the period, I must admit that I then saw the new movement as a driving force that was poised to revolutionize the whole concept of historiography. Whether it has succeeded in doing so or not remains to be seen, but I was so favourably impressed at the time that I recently decided to make the present flashback in order to show that it has, if anything, more strongly confirmed the belief that different people will always do things differently, especially in the field of history writing.

Beyond this observation, however, I started feeling the danger that the confrontation between the two schools might result in one-sided histories. Historians are usually intelligent people who can make allowances to avoid problems, but depending on one’s background (again) and one’s experience in the field, the line can be easily crossed. So I will also be raising the issue whether it would not be salutary to try and find a middle way.

Keywords
Historiography; Deconstruction; Subaltern studies; Elite history; Non-Violence

1-Introduction
Some historians, such as James J. McAuley, have conceived history as “a matter of interpretation”. Others, like Johan Huizinga, have seen it as “a work of art”. What clearly shows through both of these interpretations is the close link between historiography and the historian, whose social, cultural and political backgrounds are reflected in his writings. Is this statement strong enough to
allow us to affirm that historians from different backgrounds write different histories? In the following pages, I shall try to answer this question as regards the history of modern India, examining the two types of historiography that prevail in the region, namely, colonialist historiography and the relatively young but thriving subaltern historiography. Clearly then, the study will be limited to the colonial and postcolonial periods, with the encounter Britain-India as the focal point. There is no need to call upon any established scientific methodology as such; rather, a simple, down to earth comparative approach will be used in making a parallel between the ways of producing history texts by the elitist historians and by their subaltern counterparts. The same questions that are frequently asked in the domain of the media may well be relevant here: who writes history, from what sources and for what readership. In tackling these issues, I hope to draw the attention of historians on a possible danger – that of waging a sterile war of historiography, instead of finding a way to write true history.

2-General Observations

History concerns us human beings and it is likely that we will always need history, if only for the simple reason that we will always remain attached to our past, while we are living in the present and looking forward to the future. Our very existence, in other words, is and will stay contingent upon the passage of time and the events and circumstances that are attendant upon it. It is not easy to demonstrate the usefulness of history as such, but one can confidently assert that we need history for a multitude of reasons: first of all, in day-to-day life, history is eminently present just as literature is; to understand something better, we look into the literature about it, or try to answer the question “what do we know about its history?”. For example, when the physician draws up the health record of a patient, he is doing nothing less than making an overview of the history of the patient’s health; and examples of this kind can be multiplied ad infinitum. To add just one or two other instances, let us mention the case of a person behind the bar in a court of justice: that short biography of him/her the judge always makes before the case is heard, and which is a flashback into the person’s past in order to better understand his/her present condition, is nothing but a short history of the person’s life. What is biography after all, if not the private history of an individual? Also, when a person’s student records are examined to see if s/he is qualified for a job, or simply to allow him/her to register for a degree, what is considered, again, is his/her history as a student; for that purpose, there is even an official historical document commonly called a file.

What is also clear about history is the variety of purposes for which it is used: for instance, historiography is seen by many historians as an “ideological