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## Of Prisons, Tropics and Bicycles: A Conversation with David Arnold

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### Abstract

David Arnold who retired this year as the Professor of Asian and Global History at the University of Warwick remains one of the most prolific historians of colonial medicine and modern South Asia. A founding member of the subaltern studies collective, he is considered widely as a pioneer in the histories of colonial medicine, environment, penology, hunger and famines within South Asian studies and beyond. In this interview he recalls his formative inspirations, ideological motivations and reflects critically on his earlier works, explaining various shifts as well as mapping the possible course of future work. He talks at length about his forthcoming works on everyday technology, food and monsoon Asia. Finally, he shares with us his desire of initiating work on an ambitious project about the twin themes of poison and poverty in South Asian history, beginning with the Bengal famine in the late eighteenth century and ending with the Bhopal gas tragedy of the early 1980s. This conversation provides insights into the ways in which the field of medical history in modern South Asia has been shaped over the past three decades through interactions with broader discussions on agency, resistance, power, everydayness, subaltern studies, global and spatial histories. It hints further at the newer directions which are being opened up by such persisting intellectual entanglements.

### Keywords

Colonialism, medicine, subaltern, everyday, South Asia

**Rohan Deb Roy (R): Many look up to you as an inspiring historian. Which authors and events inspired you the most in becoming the historian you are? Who are your favourite historians?**

**David Arnold (DA):** I think that the inspiration I received from particular historians depended on the different phases in my personal evolution as a historian. The inspiration for much of my initial thinking about history came from the social history of the 1960s and 70s, particularly from the work of E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm and, indeed, the whole generation of people writing

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social history at that time. Their work seemed to be left wing, more political than much of what went before it, able to open up new and more popular domains of history in ways that seemed not only interesting in themselves but to fit the mood of the time. It took us away from the conventional histories of state, nation and church. Subsequently, I was interested in the linkages between history and anthropology, particularly through the historical anthropology of Bernard Cohn in the South Asia field but also scholars like Eric Wolf and his work on peasants. I continue to think that the link between history and anthropology is a crucial one for historians of South Asia and it continues to influence the way I approach history. Subsequently, Foucault has been the most important single influence on my work and my thinking about history. Of course, Foucault's work takes many forms and it is the early Foucault that I tend to go back to, particularly *Discipline and Punish* and the *Power/Knowledge* interviews rather than the later Foucault of *The History of Sexuality*.

My interest in history has changed over time and so the influences on it have also changed accordingly. I am not sure that I was ever inspired by any one particular book. It is more often the mood or the collective identity of a whole field of history writing that I responded to. I found the Annales School extremely stimulating not for any one single work, though I certainly found Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* and Marc Bloch's work on feudalism, particularly interesting, but it was the methods and approach of the Annales School in general that appealed to me without my necessarily feeling that any particular book was by itself inspirational.

**R: What about Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies collective?**

**DA:** At a critical stage in my evolution as a historian, and around the time that the Subaltern Studies group emerged, Ranajit was working on the *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*. What inspired me was more his work on that project rather than the book that appeared subsequently. We discussed parts of it, his ideas about inversion, territoriality and so on, over an extended period of time and I greatly benefitted from that. It was not so much Ranajit's published work, which at that point of time principally consisted of the book on the Permanent Settlement in Bengal, that I found inspirational as being involved in the early discussions of the Subaltern Studies group. *Elementary Aspects* is an important book, although I feel now with hindsight there are many things that it does not do that it might perhaps have done, and many assumptions that it makes about peasants that we might now look at rather more critically. I have in mind in particular the way it tends to see the peasantry and the subaltern classes as a kind of universal category from which one can draw parallels from Germany or France without perhaps fully recognising the historical and social specificity of the Indian situation.