I am extremely sorry that Peter van der Veer should regard my response to his comments on the essays on “‘Modernity’ and Its Contents” in the *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* (JESHO), collected for the Special Anniversary Issue of JESHO 40.4 (1997), as representing a ‘surprise attack’, questioning his scholarly ‘integrity’ and denying him ‘dignity’. This was certainly not my intention. But it is always difficult to express profound disagreement with a colleague’s views without risking personal offence. Moreover, in this case the risk seemed unavoidable: van der Veer’s comments (albeit invited) appeared so clearly to misrepresent and dismiss the essays (many of which were also invited) that it might have been thought an abnegation of editorial responsibility not to have made a response. I had hoped that, by explaining my objections at considerable length, it might have been possible to raise our exchange to the level of issues. Obviously, I was mistaken and am sorry that van der Veer should have found my reasoning so ‘tedious’: in matters of giving personal offence, I would certainly not wish to question his authority.

Nonetheless, the issues raised between us remain on the table and can scarcely be regarded as trivial since they concern basic questions of historical understanding and explanation. At core, my objections to van der Veer’s comments reflect the extent to which I take his perspective on the past to be a-historical, teleological and resting on conceptual confusions. In the two (of many possible) issues, which he now wishes to take up with me, he could hardly illustrate my case more clearly.

First, he objects to my point that ‘metropolitan societies were developing their own—and far more sophisticated—methods of domination over their own subjects than anything seen in any colony’. He holds that: ‘In my view

1) Van der Veer 1999, also, Van der Veer 1998; Washbrook 1998.

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 1999 *JESHO 42,4*
the difference between British citizens and Indian subjects is so marked in the colonial period that the assertion is completely mistaken. 3) But there are several problems here.

The first and most obvious is that, during the colonial period (and to a considerable extent even now) 4) there was no such juridical concept as a British ‘citizen’. The British, having no written constitution, were ‘subjects’ of a Crown in ways broadly congruent with their colonial peoples. 5) Nor was the matter merely a judicial fiction. It marked an extreme ambiguity in the definition of status, rights and identity, which permitted an authority located in a tiny island off the coast of North-West Europe to extend a global sovereignty for two hundred years. This ambiguity blurred the frontiers between ‘metropolis’ and ‘colony’ and generated complex relations between the claims to right of ethnicity and race, on the one side, and of class, gender and religion, on the other. Without it—and the, albeit indistinct, sense of a shared ‘imperial’ identity at which it hinted—it is hard to see why two-fifths of the world (including the English) should have submitted to the rule of an essentially German monarchy for so long.

In more practical terms, were the relations between the English, Irish, Scots and Welsh—who constituted ‘the British’—‘domestic’ or ‘colonial’ in character? 6) What was the status within the Empire of, say, the ‘white’ Afrikaaner vis-à-vis that of the ‘non-white’ Indian vis-à-vis that of the ‘white’ Catholic Irishman? What was the position of the propertied, male ‘non-Briton’ vis-à-vis that of the propertyless, female ‘Briton’? In the 1890s, when the Indian nationalist leader Dadabhai Naoroji was an elected member of the imperial Parliament in London, more than half the adult British population (including all females) did not even have the vote. Equally, in India certain ‘white’ British men faced sanctions not imposed on ‘natives’: at various periods in the Bengal army, ‘common’ white soldiers were flogged, whereas that punishment was considered too demeaning for Indian sepoys; ‘vagrant’ white men and women could also be summarily arrested and deported. None of this is to deny that powerful forces of British exclusivism and racism existed in the Empire. But they existed in forms qualified by many other principles of identity and discrimination. Van der Veer appears to be reading the entire history of the Empire against concepts of citizenship and ethnicity, which historically

3) Van der Veer 1999, p. 568.
4) Although, since 1971, the British have been citizens of the European Union.
5) Consider the celebrated ‘Royal Proclamation’ of 1858, which marked India’s formal inclusion in the British Empire, and which explicitly promised Indian ‘subjects’ of the Queen the same rights within the Empire as British ‘subjects’.