

Discussion Paper: *Provincializing Europe* and Deprovincializing the Achaemenid Empire

Provincializing Europe contains meditations on historical methodology, theories of world history, and specific case studies from the perspective of a historian of British Bengal. Chakrabarty's focus on the social history of British Bengal is very far from my own speciality of war and politics in the Achaemenid empire. Chakrabarty's style of history is also one which I am not used to. Historians of ancient warfare, politics, and technology usually spend less time engaging with philosophers and literary theorists, and very few British, American, or Canadian ancient historians have chosen to engage with Marxist ideas since 1989. Nevertheless Chakrabarty's ideas have a broader relevance to Achaemenid studies. Since the Achaemenid History Workshops (1983-1990), Achaemenid historians have been trying to free their discipline from narratives centred on Greece and Greek sources and driven more by European needs than by the characteristics of the society studied.¹ This broadly parallels the goals of other scholars researching the subaltern, from women's studies to postcolonialism. Yet Achaemenid historians also face the difficulties that they are trying to understand the empire from outside and that the society which they study was itself a hegemonic power which forced disparate communities into one hierarchical political structure.

Historicism is one of the central terms of Chakrabarty's book, and one which he acknowledges has diverse connotations. Early in his book Chakrabarty defines historicism as follows:

We may say that “historicism” is a mode of thinking with the following characteristics. It tells us that in order to understand the nature of anything in this world we must see it as an historically developing entity, that is, first, as an individual and unique whole—as some kind of unity at least in potentia—and, second, as something that develops over time. Historicism typically can allow for complexities and zigzags in this development; it seeks to find the general in the particular, and it does not entail any necessary assumptions of teleology. But the idea of development and the assumption that a certain amount of time elapses in the very process of development are critical to this understanding.²

This definition suggests a sort of synthesis between insisting that each historical phenomenon must be understood in its original context, and ruthlessly ignoring these details in the search for universal principles. Elsewhere Chakrabarty calls these affective and analytical narratives.³ He criticizes both, the former because things characteristic of different periods can appear together, the later because it was used to present peoples outside of western Europe as backwards and in need of European governance.

Chakrabarty does not always use the term “historicism” in this way, however. He once calls John Stuart Mill's idea that Indians and Africans would pass through a period of government by

1 A good overview is available in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* s.v. “Sancisi-Weerdenberg, Heleen”
<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sancisi-weerdenburg-heleen>

2 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, reissue with a new preface (Princeton University Press: Princeton NJ, 2008) pp. 22-23

3 Chakrabarty p. 71

Europeans to achieve liberal self-rule “historicist” because it assumed that all peoples are headed in the same direction but that some arrive earlier and some later.⁴ On page 88 he speaks of “A certain kind of historicism, the meta-narrative of progress.” He also mentions “the standard teleologies one normally encounters in Marxist historicism.”⁵ All of these passages link historicism to the idea that history has a goal or a direction. In other passages he calls the idea that historical phenomena such as capitalism or modernity have a beginning historicist.⁶ The idea of a regular path of development from beginning to end is more important to Chakrabarty's understanding of historicism than his definition suggests.

Almost all scholars trained as historians would agree that historical phenomena need to be understood in the context of a particular place and time. That is one of the assumptions on which the discipline is built, and scholars who are more interested in generalization are likely to find more congenial homes in the social sciences. Not all are enthusiastic about categories such as “capitalism” or “modernity.” Since historians' *déformation professionnelle* inclines them to the particular, it often makes them reluctant to fit the details of the cases which they know best into universal terms which were not designed to fit them. Very few would support teleology, unless they inherited it as children, whether a religious idea of the Second Coming or secular dreams of the end of history. Thinkers not trained as historians often accept universal categories without emphasizing the importance of context in space and time. Ideas of a universal justice or excellence are very common, and Greek and Roman writers most often conceived of change as decline from a glorious past. Thus particularism, teleology, and universalism are not necessarily linked. It seems to me that in some cases, it would be clearer to address these individually rather than invoking the wider term historicism.

This focus on teleological historicism may have something to do with Chakrabarty's specialty. The period of British rule in Bengal saw many innovations spread from Europe to the colonies, many of them new such as the industrial revolution. Theorists of capitalism or “modern economic growth” or the industrial revolution do often see these as originating in Europe and the United States and spreading elsewhere at different times, whereas historians of urbanism or literacy are vaguer about origins and less proscriptive about the direction of change. He also engages with Marxist thinkers who often saw a fixed series of steps by which societies developed towards true communism. Chakrabarty acknowledges that seeing historical phenomena as both examples of general categories and as the product of development through time does not imply teleology.⁷ He certainly has a rich vocabulary for ideas in this area, including analytical, stagist, universalist, affective, hermeneutic, and teleological. I am not sure why he leans on a term, such as historicism, which has such diverse connotations. *Provincializing Europe* was assembled from pieces published over a decade, and that may explain some of the ambiguities.⁸

A second theme of *Provincializing Europe* is the paradox that scholars in former European colonies at once see how little European theorists knew about their countries and use these theorists'

4 Chakrabarty pp. 6, 8

5 Chakrabarty p. 93; cp. p. 235

6 Chakrabarty pp. 6-8, 47

7 Chakrabarty p. 23

8 Chakrabarty p. xxvi

work to understand their own societies.⁹ Scholars in post-colonial states are much more likely to appeal to European practices, parallels, and jargon than Europeans are to appeal to examples from the former colonies. If they refuse they find themselves intellectually disarmed and socially isolated. His own youthful struggles to understand India in Marxist terms shaped his later work.¹⁰

Students of the Achaemenid empire have also been more willing to appeal to European parallels than students of ancient European societies have been to compare the societies which they study to the Achaemenid empire. Plots of land which came with military obligations are called fiefs; the payment of silver instead of service has been called scutage.¹¹ Autobiographical royal inscriptions are called *res gestae* after the famous bilingual inscription of Augustus.¹² Salaried temple offices are called prebends, the Christian technical term, rather than by their Akkadian name.¹³ And two different succession struggles have been called “the long but single year” or “the year of four emperors” after Tacitus' description of the wars after the death of Nero.¹⁴ In contrast, students of Greek and Roman history very rarely compare the societies which they study to the Achaemenid empire or other Southwest Asian states. On the contrary, ideas of eastern influence on the Greeks, whether of an orientaling period in the seventh century BCE, or of Alexander the Great as the last of the Achaemenids, have faced increasing opposition.

At the same time, comparison is impossible to avoid. Writers who want a large audience are drawn to words with rich connotations, even if that requires calling short, straight two-edged Persian swords by the name scimitar.¹⁵ Even writers who are more careful with their vocabulary find that terms like “empire” invoke Rome and “king” medieval Europe.

Ancient historians are also forced to rely on comparisons by the nature of their evidence. When it became accepted that ancient literature did not offer a clear window into the ancient world, but merely one of several mirky reflections, it became necessary to appeal to some external standard to decide how to interpret the limited evidence which survives. Research into Roman economic and demographic history shows this particularly clearly, as the fiercest debates are less about the ancient evidence than about which modern model is the best fit.¹⁶ Researchers try to estimate Roman gross domestic product or life expectancy at birth, concepts which would enable the Roman empire to be compared to later societies, but which emerged from the very different context of twentieth century Europe and the US. Military historians similarly look for evidence for human behaviour in combat in other times and places to help evaluate and interpolate the fragmentary descriptions preserved from the ancient world.

9 Chakrabarty pp. 28, 29

10 Chakrabarty pp. ix ff.

11 eg. Guilliame Cardascia, “La Fief dans la Babylonie achéménide,” *Recuils de la Société Jean Bodin* [Bruxelles] 1 (1936) pp. 55-88, G. Cardascia “Lebenswesen in der Perserzeit,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 6 (1983) pp. 547-550; feudal terminology remained popular in Anglophone and Germanic scholarship through the 1980s, but has since fallen out of fashion, perhaps under the indirect influence of Susan Reynolds.

12 eg. *Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. II p. 559 “the Akkadian version of the *res gestae* of Darius I, the Behistun inscription”; A. Maricq, “Res Gestae Divi Saporis,” *Syria* 35 (1958), pp. 295-360

13 G. van Driel, “Pfründe,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 10 (2005) pp. 518-524

14 J.M. Cook, *The Persian Empire* (J.M. Dent & Sons: London, 1983) p. 129

15 eg. Peter Green, *Greco-Persian Wars*, Second Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) p. 79

16 eg. Walter Scheidel, Ian Morris, and Richard Saller eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2007) chapters 1 and 3

Eschewing comparison can lead to the idea of monolithic, impermeable cultures associated with Samuel P. Huntington. Specialists in ancient southwest Asia often use comparison to emphasize that the people whom they study had many things in common with better-known cultures. Rather than suggesting that the Achaemenids were backwards, Achaemenid historians often use comparisons to counter the idea of the Persians as the Other inherited from Greek literature.

If comparison is inevitable, it would be better for students of Greece and Rome to make more comparisons to other ancient cultures than for students of the Achaemenid empire to make less. Yet any such change would face serious obstacles. The first is lack of knowledge. Comparisons usually point towards something which the audience is expected to be familiar with. An Anglophone writer can assume less knowledge of the Achaemenid empire among his readers than of Augustus' Italy or Tudor England, so comparing another situation to something in the Achaemenid empire may not be very revealing. The second is the old idea of Greek exceptionalism. While less likely to be explicitly stated in academic writing than it once was, it still has influence. In a period when the value of classical learning is widely doubted, classicists can be tempted to play along with the idea that the Greeks and Romans were uniquely important. Projects such as the Melammu Symposia encourage specialists in different cultures and types of evidence to work together, but they must still face these structural barriers.

A large part of the book is devoted to social history and the history of *mentalité* (or, as Chakrabarty would prefer, ways of being in the world). Chakrabarty studies Bengal under British rule and considers how, for example, realistic novels based on British models inspired Bengalis to empathize with widows and criticize the customary restrictions on their behaviour. This sort of work is not possible for any part of the Achaemenid empire, except to a limited extent at the top of society. We lack detailed descriptions of everyday life. The texts which survive were almost all written either by outsiders or by a few small groups such as religious leaders in Judaea, the cuneiform scribes in Babylon, and the kings. Although archaeologists and art historians have made great efforts to understand social history, without a foundation of texts these can only reveal so much.¹⁷

One of Chakrabarty's favourite case studies is the Santal rebellion in 1855.¹⁸ British records of the interrogation of prisoners have survived, and all the rebels insisted that their god had commanded them to rebel. Chakrabarty sees this as a problem for the secular historian who wishes to tell a story which the rebels would have recognized. The historian can ignore the rebels' words and invoke materialist causes, or empathize and speak about belief and claim, but he or she cannot write secular history and still give a god an active role.

It is even more difficult to interpret revolts against the Achaemenid empire. A number are known, especially in Egypt, Babylonia, and amongst peoples without cities who lived in the hills and mountains. Most are known only by dates, the names of leaders, and the narratives of campaigns against them. Should these be understood as struggles for control within the ruling

¹⁷ eg. Vadim S. Jigolou, *The Social History of Achaemenid Phoenecia* (Routledge: London and New York, 2010)

¹⁸ Chakrabarty p. 89, 102-108

class, or as popular movements inspired by a broad sense of injustice? Scholars at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth often appealed to romantic nationalism and imagined popular revolts against an empire which they assumed must have been oppressive.¹⁹ Since the later twentieth century scholars have often taken more cynical views or refused to speculate. Given the limited evidence it is hard not to be influenced by one's assumptions about the nature of politics, but postcolonial writers remind us that the question is worth asking.

Imaginative empathy is not completely beyond the pale in ancient history, although it is marginalized. While a sort of joking attempt to speak in ancient terms is accepted in lectures or conversation, works which explicitly identify with their subjects rarely pass peer review. Invoking the experience of ancient people tends to be left to popular writing, reenactment, and historical fiction. Yet this attitude of ironic distance has its limits.

More generally, postcolonialism has raised the question of whom one should empathize with. As late as the third quarter of the twentieth century, many scholars identified with the powerful and privileged in the societies which they studied. Postcolonial thinkers responded that many other perspectives were possible, that this sort of writing had been used to justify European empires in recent times, and that empires are ugly things. If we can understand anyone in the Achaemenid empire it is the kings, and perhaps some of the wealthy scribes and officials in Egypt and Babylonia. The vast majority of the population is visible only through house foundations and lists of workers. Empathizing too closely with the powerful could further the tendency to write history from their point of view and neglect other people and perspectives. Researchers into the Achaemenid empire are often worried about being seen as apologists.

A fourth theme is the search for the past in the present. Chakrabarty enjoys finding examples of the “primitive” “superstitious” or “pre-modern” in the recent societies which he studies. One of his examples is the saddle-quern, a pair of stones used to grind spices as recently as the 1950s.²⁰ Families of high caste used the saddle-quern to invoke protection for their babies during the 1950s. One Indian historian saw the quern and the rituals surrounding it as a legacy from prehistoric times, yet it was a living part of 20th century Indian culture. He uses such anachronism to complicate the idea that historical phenomena belong to specific times and places, an idea which he associates with historicism.

This idea is not unique. William Gibson's saying that “The future is already here - it's just not very evenly distributed” has become a cliché.²¹ The “plurality of the present” is also stressed by feminists, postmodernists, and members of subaltern studies. Although both part of the same time and place, the king's wife and a sharecropper in Babylonia would have had very different experiences during the Achaemenid empire. Scholars from many disciplines could agree that “women” or “peasants” who are separated in time have some things in common, even if they disagree whether to emphasize the similarities or the differences.

Searching for similarities between the past and the present certainly has some merit. Mud-

19 eg. A.T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1948)

20 Chakrabarty pp. 242-243

21 https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/William_Gibson

brick architecture in Afghanistan today bears some resemblance to structures from the Achaemenid Empire or even Catal Hüyük at the dawn of agriculture. “Modern“ cell phones and motorbikes can coexist with „ancient“ mud brick and rugs. Christians, Jews, and Parsees still revere texts which existed during the Achaemenid period. Whatever the nature of the “Babylonian captivity“ and the return of some of the Jewish exiles after Cyrus' conquest of Babylon, the idea of that captivity has become a living part of Jewish and later Christian traditions. There are also visible continuities from the period before the Achaemenid empire to the period afterwards, and the very idea of structuring history as a series of dynasties has been criticized.

The danger of this approach is that it can slip into the idea of the “eternal orient“ which Edward Said criticized. This theory assumes that oriental cultures are the same in space, so that Moroccans and Mughals are more or less the same, and in time, so that ancient Egyptians can be equated with Egyptian peasants today. It presents “oriental“ cultures as inherently backwards, static, and passive against a modern, dynamic, and active “west.“ Being too eager to see reflections of the Achaemenid past in the present has dangers. In 1989 Victor Davis Hanson linked Greek struggles against Persian armies with later wars:

From the Three Hundred at the pass at Thermopylae, to Xenophon's Ten Thousand in Asia Minor, to the frontier Roman garrison, the Crusaders, and European colonial troops, outnumbered Western commanders have never been dismayed by the opportunity to achieve an incredible victory through the use of superior weapons, tactics, and cohesion amongst men.²²

Scholars such as Ernst Badian have depicted the Achaemenid army in terms which owe more to European impressions of Ottoman and Mughal armies in the eighteenth century than to what little Greek, Roman, and cuneiform evidence survives:

Providing effective arms and training for the peasantry and making them play an equal part in defending the kingdom would have social consequences that no King had been willing to face. Hence hordes of primitively armed infantry had for two centuries left defence to noble cavalry, and Greeks had been hired to supply effective infantry without upsetting the traditional pattern of society.²³

It is therefore very important to consider one's choice of comparison, and to make sure that it is backed with specific knowledge and not merely general ideas about “oriental“ or “monarchical“ societies.

The four themes discussed in this essay only make up part of *Provincializing Europe*, and each could be discussed at greater length. Chakrabarty's specific topic of the history of European overseas empires and his thematic interests of modernity, capitalism, and Marxism are beyond my expertise. Ancient historians cannot use the anthropological, participatory approach to history which he promotes, and earlier attempts to find the ancient world in the present have often slipped into stereotypes about the eternal orient or rantings about ethnic pride. Nevertheless, I think that

²² Victor Davis Hansen, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, Second Edition (University of California Press: Berkeley and LA, 2000).

²³ E. Badian, "Darius III," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, Vol. 100 (2000) p. 258

many of the issues considered by postcolonial thinkers are relevant to Achaemenid history. Achaemenid historians are also trying to speak for a society which was pushed to the margins of historical narratives and the historical profession. The deconstruction of the ideologies which had been used to support European colonialism was certainly necessary before a large number of scholars could object to the way those ideologies had been used to write Achaemenid history. And Achaemenid historians also face the problem of attracting the interest of scholars in other fields while disagreeing with many of the narratives used to structure world history. Nor has military history been unaffected by subaltern studies and postcolonialism. While literally postcolonial works such as Gabor Agoston's *Guns for the Sultan* are easy to identify, writers who would be much less comfortable with the label such as John Keegan and Anthony Beevor have quietly widened their narratives to include civilians, journalists, support troops, and ordinary soldiers as well as the traditional generals and heroic officers.²⁴ It could hardly be otherwise. Historical writing is a product of a particular time and place, and the past fifty years have been marked by the formerly subaltern asserting their identities and stories. Historians can choose to enthusiastically participate or to grumble and keep their distance, but it is a part of their world.

24 Gabor Agoston, *Guns for the Sultan: Military Power and the Weapons Industry in the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), Anthony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (Penguin Books: London, 2003)