
Marx on India: A Clarification

There is a large and by now fairly old tradition of cultural criticism which addresses the issues of empire as well as the uses of literature and the knowledge industry that generates imperialist ideologies both for domestic consumption within the metropolitan countries and for export to the imperialized formations, not to speak of the complicity of particular writers, scholars and scholarly disciplines. In other words, the body of work on cultural imperialism is very copious. Until about the mid 1970s, most of that scholarship had been produced by people who were either Marxists themselves or were quite prepared to accept their affinities with Marxist positions on issues of colony and empire; much useful work of that kind continues to be done even today. Within mainstream scholarship, the usual way of marginalizing that work was either to ignore it altogether or to declare it simple-minded and propagandistic. Dismissal by the post-structuralist critic is as a rule equally strident, though the vocabulary has of course changed. Instead of using words like 'simple-minded' or 'propagandist', one now declares that work of that kind was too positivistic, too deeply contaminated with empiricism, historicism, the problematics of realism and representability, the metaphysical belief in origin, agency, truth.

It has been Edward Said's achievement to have brought this question of cultural imperialism to the very centre of the ongoing literary debates in the metropolitan university by posing it in terms that were acceptable to that university. Sections of the Right could still attack him, as they loudly did, but the liberal mainstream had to concede both that he knew his

Spitzer and his Auerbach as well as they did, and that he certainly was not 'propagandistic' in the way the 1960s' radicals usually were. One of Said's notable contributions to the American Left, in fact, is that he, perhaps more than anyone else, has taught this Left how to build bridges between the liberal mainstream and avant-garde theory. The range of erudition has been a considerable asset, though not everyone who wrote from the Marxist position was necessarily less erudite. And there certainly is an eloquence, a style. But the notable feature, underlying all the ambivalences, is the anti-Marxism and the construction of a whole critical apparatus for defining a postmodern kind of anti-colonialism. In this Said was certainly among the first, and a setter of trends. The Marxist tradition had been notably anti-imperialist; the Nietzschean tradition had had no such credentials. Now it transpires that that is precisely what had been wrong – not with the Nietzschean intellectuals but with anti-imperialism itself. It *should* have been Nietzschean and now needed to do some theoretical growing up.

For buttressing the proposition that Marxism is not much more than a 'modes-of-production narrative' and that its opposition to colonialism is submerged in its positivistic 'myth of progress', it is always very convenient to quote one or two journalistic flourishes from those two dispatches on India, the first and the third, which Marx wrote for the *New York Tribune* in 1853 and which are the most anthologized on this topic: 'The British Rule in India' and 'The Future Results of the British Rule in India'. That Said would quote the most-quoted passage, the famous one on 'the unconscious tool',¹ is predictable, and there is no evidence in *Orientalism* that he has come to regard this as a *representative* passage after some considerable engagement with Marx's many and highly complex writings on colonialism as such and on the encounter between non-capitalist and capitalist societies. This is certainly in keeping with Said's characteristically cavalier way with authors and quotations, but here it gains added authority from the fact that it is by now a fairly familiar procedure in dealing with Marx's writings on colonialism. The dismissive *hauteur* is then combined in very curious ways with indifference to – possibly ignorance of – how the complex issues raised by Marx's cryptic writings on India have actually been seen in the research of key Indian historians themselves, before the advent, let us say, of Ranajit Guha. What this *hauteur* seems to suggest is that neither Marx's writing on India nor what Indian scholarship

has had to say about that writing is really worth knowing in any detail; the issue of Indian scholarship is in fact never raised – not even by remote suggestion. This, too, is curious. One would have thought that if some 'Orientalist' view of Indian history were in question, one obvious place to start looking for a discussion of that 'Orientalism' might well be the writings of precisely those anti-imperialist Indian historians who have been most concerned about the structure of pre-colonial Indian society and its contrasts with Europe at that stage – superb historians, I might add, by any reckoning.

It is not my purpose in this chapter to address the whole issue of Marx's writings on India, or to review the many Indian debates which have a bearing on the subject; that would be quite beyond the scope of the present argument. Rather, I should like to examine Said's summary way of dealing with this complex and highly contentious matter, to summarize some minimal background for putting Marx's journalism in perspective, and then to cite some representative opinions from the main currents of anti-colonial historiography in India, in order to illustrate the curious fact that Said's understanding is quite the opposite of what Indian historians have usually had to say about this question. This clarification is necessary because Said's position on this matter is both authoritative and influential, while the procedure in his treatment of Marx is a familiar one, as we saw in the case of Aeschylus and Dante in the previous chapter: he detaches a certain passage from its context, inserts it into the Orientalist archive and moves in different, even contradictory, directions.

The larger section of the book in which Said's comments on Marx are enclosed actually deals with English and French literary travellers in the Near East – Edward Lane, Nerval, Flaubert, Lamartine, Burton, and others. The appearance of Marx in this company is surprising, since he was not 'literary' in that sense, nor did he ever travel anywhere south of France. The distinction is important because the theme of the section is *testimony* and *witness* brought back in the form of travelogue, fiction, lyric, linguistic knowledge, to say 'I was there, therefore I know'. Marx clearly made no such claims. Said none the less goes on to quote the overly famous passage:

Now, sickening as it must be to human feeling to witness those myriads of industrious patriarchal and inoffensive social organizations disorganized and

dissolved into their units, thrown into a sea of woes, and their individual members losing at the same time their ancient form of civilization and their hereditary means of subsistence, we must not forget that these idyllic village communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism, that they restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it an unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath the traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies . . .

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindustan was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.

Now, it is obviously true that colonialism did not bring us a revolution.² What it brought us was, precisely, a non-revolutionary and retrograde resolution to a crisis of our own society which had come to express itself, by the eighteenth century, in a real stagnation of technologies and productivities, as well as regional and dynastic wars so constant and ruinous as to make impossible a viable coalition against the encroaching colonial power. Likewise, it is doubtless true that the image of Asia as an unchanging, 'vegetative' place was part of the inherited world-view in nineteenth-century Europe, and had been hallowed by such figures of the Enlightenment as Hobbes and Montesquieu; it is also true – though Said does not say so – that the image of the so-called self-sufficient Indian village community that we find in Marx was lifted, almost verbatim, out of Hegel. All this had been reiterated for the Left, yet again, by Perry Anderson in his *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1975), which had circulated widely while *Orientalism* was being drafted. Said's contribution was not that he pointed towards these facts (he emphasized instead, in literary-critical fashion, Goethe and the Romantics) but that he fashioned a rhetoric of dismissal, as we shall see presently.

In that rhetoric, moreover, there really was no room for other complexities of Marx's thought. For it is equally true that Marx's denunciation of pre-colonial society in India is no more strident than his denunciations of Europe's own feudal past, or of the Absolutist monarchies, or of the German burghers; his essays on Germany are every bit as nasty.³ His direct

comments about the power of the caste system in the Indian village – 'restrain[ing] the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath the traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies' – are, on the one hand, a virtual paraphrase of his comments on the European peasantry as being mired in 'the idiocy of rural life' and remind one, on the other hand, of the whole range of reformist politics and writings in India, spanning a great many centuries but made all the sharper in the twentieth century, which have always regarded the caste system as an altogether inhuman one – a 'diabolical contrivance to suppress and enslave humanity', as Ambedkar put it in the preface to *The Untouchables* – that degrades and saps the energies of the Indian peasantry, not to speak of the 'untouchable' menial castes. Conversely, the question Marx raises towards the end of that passage – 'can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia?' – may be objectionable to the postmodern mind because of its explicit belief, inherited from the more decent traditions of the Enlightenment, in the unity, universality and actual possibility of human liberation, but it is surely not generated by the kind of racism Said ascribes to Marx, as we shall soon see. It is also worth recalling that those particular questions – Is human liberation possible without the liberation of Asia? What transformation will have to take place *within* Asian societies in order to make that liberation possible? – have been posed again and again in our own century: most doggedly in China, Korea, the Indochinese countries, but also in those revolutionary enterprises which were defeated so many years ago that barely a memory now remains – in Malaya, Indonesia, the Philippines, India.

I shall return to the issue of accuracy, or lack of it, in Marx's judgement presently. (Now, after the experience of the history that Britain in fact made, *who* could possibly *want* an 'unconscious tool' of that sort?) The first issue, again in the Foucauldian terms that *Orientalism* popularized, is the methodological one: what mode of thought, what discursive practice authorizes Marx's statement? Said, of course, locates it in 'Orientalism'. In my view, the intemperate shrillness of those denunciations belongs to an altogether different theoretical problematic – or 'discourse', as Said uses the term. The idea of a certain progressive role of colonialism was linked, in Marx's mind, with the idea of a progressive role of capitalism as such, in

comparison with what had gone before, within Europe as much as outside it. In context, any attempt to portray Marx as an enthusiast of colonialism would logically have to portray him as an admirer of capitalism as well, which is what he wanted Germany to achieve, as quickly as possible. This idea of a colonial society giving rise to brisk capitalist development was also connected, in Marx's mind, with the North American experience. At the time when he was writing those much-too-well-known journalistic pieces on India, in the 1850s, the full colonization of Africa was still some years away, and although the process in Asia generally – and especially in India – was much further advanced, there was no *past* experience of fully fledged colonization in these two continents that was available for summation; the long-term consequences of full colonization in our part of the world were still a matter for speculation. Rammohun himself, indulging in the worst kind of speculation, had *recommended* the settling of British farmers and the insertion of British capital into the Indian economy, in order to buttress the 'constructive mission' of British colonialism, some thirty years before Marx offered his generalities. In other words, from the historical point of view, the status of Marx's writings on the possible consequences of British colonialism in India is not theoretical but conjectural and speculative.

What gave these speculations their particular, progressivist slant, apart from a positivist faith in the always-progressive role of science and technology, was the prior experience of the United States, where a powerful capitalist society was then emerging out of a brutal colonizing dynamic – more brutal, in fact, than that in India – and was even then, during the 1850s, in the process of completing its bourgeois revolution, in the shape of the impending Civil War. Marx was wondering, even as the conflict in India waxed and waned, whether India might not, in the long run, go the way of the United States. The idea of 'the transplantation of European society' grew out of that analogy, which now appears to us altogether fantastic, but it is worth recalling that the gap in material prosperity between India and England was narrower in 1835 than it was to become by 1947, on the eve of decolonization. Marx was particularly concerned with the anachronisms of our pre-capitalist societies, the dead weight of our caste rigidities, the acute fragmentation of our politics, the primacy of military encampment over manufacture in our mode of urbanization, the exhaustion of the urban artisanate – due as much to levels of

direct appropriations as to the inability to find markets in the countryside – and other such distortions of development in nineteenth-century India, because these distortions were seen as impediments in the path towards a true bourgeois revolution. We need to keep the whole range of these complexities in mind while reading those journalistic pieces, even though Marx's understanding of Indian society was on some crucial points factually quite incorrect; indeed, the hope of brisk industrialization under colonialism turned out to be so misplaced that Marx himself seems to have abandoned it in later years. Here, in any event, is Said's main comment on Marx's passage:

That Marx was still able to sense some fellow feeling, to identify even a little with poor little Asia, suggests that something happened before the labels took over . . . only to give it up when he confronted a more formidable censor in the very vocabulary he found himself forced to employ. What that censor did was to stop and then chase away the sympathy, and this was accompanied by a lapidary definition: Those people, it said, don't suffer – they are Orientals and hence have to be treated in other ways. . . . The vocabulary of emotion dissipated and it submitted to the lexicographical police action of Orientalist science and even Orientalist art.

Several things in Marx's passage are – to me, at least – disagreeable, including its positivist belief in the march of history, and I shall return to some of my own reservations about Marx's writings on India. But having read it countless times over some twenty years I still cannot find in that passage even a hint of the racist 'lapidary definition' which Said claims to find there: 'Those people don't suffer – they are Orientals and hence have to be treated in other ways.' There is a different kind of blindness in that passage, but racism – and racism of that order – there is not. What is also striking about Said's comment is its reckless psychologizing impulse – not that Marx held certain views about historical development which led inevitably to this passage, but that something happened to him *emotionally, psychologically*. I should rather think that Marx's passage needs to be placed, if one wishes to grasp its correlates, alongside any number of passages from a wide variety of his writings, especially *Capital*, where the destruction of the European peasantry in the course of the primitive accumulation of capital is described in analogous tones, which I read as an enraged language

of *tragedy*, – a sense of colossal disruption and irretrievable loss, a moral dilemma wherein neither the old nor the new can be wholly affirmed, the recognition that the sufferer was at once decent and flawed, the recognition also that the history of victories and losses is really a history of material productions, and the glimmer of a hope, in the end, that something good might yet come of this merciless history. One has to be fairly secure in one's own nationalism to be able to think through the dialectic of this tragic formulation. Amílcar Cabral emphasized as much in his famous essay 'The Weapon of Theory', which he first delivered as a talk in Havana at a time when he was leading Southern Africa's most highly developed struggle against Portuguese colonialism.

Said's treatment of Marx is too impressionistic ever to come down to any real chronology, but if I understand him correctly he seems to be asserting that Marx *started* with 'some fellow feeling' for 'poor Asia' but then gave in to a 'censor' (Orientalism) which served to 'chase away the sympathy' and replaced it with that 'lapidary definition'. Marx, it seems, started in one place and arrived at another: what is rehearsed here for us appears to be a *chronology* of submission, or at least blockage. May one, then, quote from a letter he wrote to Danielson in 1881:

In India serious complications, if not a general outbreak, are in store for the British government. What the British take from them annually in the form of rent, dividends for railways useless for the Hindoos, pensions for the military and civil servicemen, for Afghanistan and other wars, etc., etc., – what they take from them *without any equivalent and quite apart* from what they appropriate to themselves annually *within* India, – speaking only of the *value of the commodities* that Indians have to gratuitously and annually *send over* to England – it amounts to *more than the total sum of the income of the 60 million of agricultural and industrial laborers of India*. This is a bleeding process with a vengeance.⁴ (original emphasis)

This letter was written towards the very end of Marx's life, and the 'lapidary definition' which Said puts into the mouth of Orientalism ('Those people don't suffer – they are Orientals') does not seem to have prevented Marx from describing colonialism as a 'bleeding process with a vengeance', the 'lexicographical police action' notwithstanding. Between the dispatch of 1853 from which Said quotes and the letter of 1881 cited above, there

had also been – in terms of chronology – the great Rebellion of 1857. This is not the place to review the complexities of Marx's analyses of that event, but it is worth recalling that he declared it a 'national revolt' and welcomed it as part of what he took to be a great Asian upheaval, indicated to him first by the Taiping Rebellion, against Europe – which was certainly more than what was said by the whole of the emergent modern intelligentsia of Bengal, which remained doggedly pro-British.⁵

Nor was Marx alone in this, either in the earlier or the latter part of his life. Engels, who had virtually forced Marx to take up that journalism in the first place, had this to say about what we today call 'national liberation':

There is evidently a different spirit among the Chinese now. . . . The mass of people take an active, nay, a fanatical part in the struggle against the foreigners. They poison the bread of the European community at Hongkong by wholesale, and with the coolest meditation. . . . The very coolies emigrating to foreign countries rise in mutiny, and as if by concert, on board every emigrant ship, fight for its possession. . . . Civilization mongers who throw hot shell on a defenseless city and add rape to murder, may call the system cowardly, barbarous, atrocious; but what matter it to the Chinese if it be but successful? . . . We had better recognize that this is a war *pro aris et focis*, a popular war for the maintenance of Chinese nationality.⁶

That is a wonderfully contemptuous word for the colonizers: 'civilization-mongers'! What one wishes to emphasize here is that the writings of Marx and Engels are indeed contaminated in several places with the usual banalities of nineteenth-century Eurocentrism, and the general prognosis they offered about the social stagnation of our societies was often based on unexamined staples of conventional European histories. Despite such inaccuracies, however, neither of them portrayed *resistance* to colonialism as misdirected; the resistance of the 'Chinese coolie' was celebrated in the same lyrical cadences as they would deploy in celebrating the Parisian communard. On the whole, then, we find the same emphases there as Cabral was to spell out a century later: colonialism did have, in some limited sense and in some situations, a 'progressive' side, but 'maintenance' of 'nationality' is the inalienable right of the colonized. For Indian historiography, meanwhile, this issue of the partially progressive role of colonialism has been summarized by Bipan Chandra, our foremost histor-

ian of anti-colonial thought of the Indian bourgeois intelligentsia, who is himself sometimes accused of being too nationalistic:

... most of the anti-imperialist writers would agree with Marx. They all, without exception, accept that the English introduced some structural changes and nearly all of them welcome these changes. . . . Their criticism was never merely or even mainly that the traditional social order was disintegrated by British rule but that the structuring and construction of the new was delayed, frustrated, and obstructed. From R.C. Dutt, Dadabhai Naoroji and Ranade down to Jawaharlal Nehru and R.P. Dutt, the anti-imperialist writers have not . . . really condemned the destruction of the pre-British economic structure, except nostalgically and out of the sort of sympathy that any decent man would have, that, for example, Marx showed for the 'poor Hindu's' loss of the old world.⁷

I shall have more to say about some other Indian historians and political leaders in a moment, but let me return to the passage from Marx which Said quotes, and to the methodological problem of how we read particular statements in relation to discursive practices, in terms to which Said would appear to subscribe. It seems fairly clear to me that what authorizes that particular statement – to the effect that the replacement of village society by industrial society is historically necessary and therefore objectively progressive – is by no means the discourse of 'Orientalism' (Britain, Marx says, is pursuing the 'vilest interests') but what Foucault would designate as the discourse of political economy. In other words, Marx's statement follows not *anecdotally* from Goethe or German Romanticism, nor discursively from an overarching 'Orientalism', but *logically and necessarily* from positions Marx held on issues of class and mode of production, on the comparative structuration of the different pre-capitalist modes, and on the kind and degree of violence which would inevitably issue from a project that sets out to dissolve such a mode on so wide a scale. One may or may not agree with Marx, either in the generality of his theoretical construction or with his interpretation of particular events, but the question about Said's method remains in any case, as much here as in the case of Dante: if particular representations and discursive statements – if in fact they *are* discursive statements – can float so easily in and out of various discourses,

then in what sense *can* we designate any one of them a discourse in which the whole history of Western enunciations is so irretrievably trapped?

The Foucauldian objection, in any case, is not the only possible one – to my mind, not even the more important one – against Said's procedure here. At the one point in *Orientalism* where he registers a considerable difference with Foucault, Said emphasizes his own belief in 'the determining imprint of individual writers' (p. 23). Yet when he sets out to debunk Dante or Marx or a host of others, what he offers us are decontextualized quotations, with little sense of what status the quoted passage has in the work of the 'individual writer' or what sort of 'imprint' he might have left – what responses the writing might have evoked – among scholars and thinkers outside 'the West'. These are complicated histories and this is not the place to examine all of them, but to the extent that Said's summary dismissal is fairly characteristic of some current radical understandings in the Anglo-American milieu – in its dismissal and its summary brevity – a few facts may be usefully cited.

Marx sent, in all, thirty-three dispatches on Indian affairs to the *New York Tribune* ('this wretched paper', as he unjustly called it in a letter to Engels in 1858) and thought of the whole enterprise as 'a great interruption' to the economic studies he was then undertaking, having put the defeats of 1848–49 behind him after writing *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. The likelihood is that the journalism might not have come if he had not needed the money so very desperately. Twelve of those dispatches were written in 1853, fifteen in 1857, six in 1858. The first thing to be said for this overly famous series, which got going with the dispatch of June 1853, is that there is no evidence that Marx was taking any regular interest in India before the beginning of that year; it was the presentation of the Company Charter to Parliament for renewal that gave him the idea of attending to this matter in the first place. That he read much of the Parliamentary Papers and the *Travels* of Bernier, the seventeenth-century French writer and medicine-man, very carefully before writing the first dispatch is clear enough, and his acuteness of mind is equally obvious from the great insights which are scattered throughout the series. But the overall status of that journalism cannot be separated from its immediate purpose, the general state of knowledge about India prevailing in England at the time (which was far more considerable than Said would grant, but still patchy

and frequently misleading), the web of prejudice which enveloped that knowledge (but the prejudice was not the only and not even an isolable fact), the relative novelty of the subject matter for Marx himself, and the stage in his own development at which these pieces begin; the drafting even of the *Grundrisse*, let alone *Capital*, was still some years away.

No careful reader of *Orientalism* need be surprised by the fact that Said hangs the whole matter on a quotation from the first, most widely anthologized of those dispatches, without any effort to contextualize the writing.⁸ How little Marx knew about India when he started writing those pieces is indicated by the fact that he thought the title for all agricultural land was held by the sovereign;⁹ he had picked up this idea from Bernier and others, and the British authorities had done much to propagate it, since *they* were now the new rulers. Only four years later, when he came to write the second series of his dispatches on India, he had realized that this had been at best a legal fiction, but he still did not even begin quite to grasp the complex land tenure system in pre-British India and began having some sense of the intricacies only much later, after he had read Kovalevsky's *Communal Landholdings* (1879), when his main interest had shifted to the Russian *mir* and India figured in his studies only as a comparative case.¹⁰

The point is neither to suggest that those dispatches should be simply ignored as mere juvenilia, nor to argue in favour of an onward march in Marx's thoughts on India, from precocious insight to final clarities. The point, rather, is to emphasize far greater complexity than Said's summary procedures admit, and even to register a certain affinity with Harbans Mukhia when he remarks, in the course of what is clearly one of the definitive summations of how one is now to view Marx's writings on India in the light of more modern researches:

The notion of significant changes in pre-colonial India's economy and society is a recent entrant in Indian historiography; and no hard effort is called for to explain Marx's ignorance of it. . . . Yet the significant difference implied by Marx in the pace and nature of changes in pre-colonial Indian society *vis-à-vis* premodern Europe remains an important pointer to the different paths of development that those societies have followed for entering into the modern world.

Europe's stages of historical development — slavery, feudalism and

capitalism — are clearly enough marked. . . . Changes in India are long-drawn and gradual; they have the effect of modifying the existing production techniques and social organization of production; but they rarely overthrow an existing social and economic structure and replace it by a new one, by a new mode of production. *This is especially true since the seventh century A.D.* (emphasis added)

Then, after summarizing some of the social conflicts which beset India over the next millennium, from the seventh to the seventeenth century, Mukhia goes on to say:

As a consequence of these conflicts, the means of production were never redistributed until after the onset of colonialism; what was distributed and redistributed was the peasants' surplus produce. It was thus that even when crises created by such momentous events, as the collapse of the Mughal empire, occurred during the early eighteenth century, the empire was succeeded by the resurgence of the class of zamindars everywhere; the crisis, in other words, led to the resurgence of an old property form rather than the emergence of a new one.¹¹

We might add that Mukhia's is a very cautious and authoritative evaluation, by no means simply adulatory; he carefully documents how Marx was at least partially wrong on every count. He disagrees with Irfan Habib in matters both of detail and of emphasis in the latter's interpretation both of medieval India and of Marx's writings on the subject, but he, like Habib, rejects the idea of the so-called Asiatic mode of production as well as the alternative notion that pre-colonial India was somehow 'feudal'; these agreements and disagreements aside, he and Habib are entirely in accord on what Mukhia has to say in the above passage.¹² These two are, of course, among contemporary India's distinguished historians for the pre-colonial period and both doubtless write, even as they periodically disagree with each other on some key issues, from recognizably strict Marxist positions. Ravinder Kumar, an equally distinguished historian of both the colonial and the post-colonial periods who writes from within that other tradition also descended from strands in classical Marxism, the tradition of Left-liberal social democracy, basically confirms the same substantive prognosis:

... substantially self-regulating village communities, scattered over the face of the subcontinent, and characterized by relatively weak economic and cultural interaction with one another, constituted the distinctive feature of rural society over the centuries. Hence the vision of a timeless and static world which surfaces again and again in the historical literature on Indian civilization. The classic formulation of this vision is to be found in the memoranda penned by British civilians of the nineteenth century, who, while they overstated the case for changelessness, nevertheless grasped an essential truth about the structure and configuration of rural society in India.¹³

Marx's famous view of colonialism's 'double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating', which Said takes to be the epitome of 'the Romantic Orientalist vision' in which Marx's 'human sympathy' is 'dissolved', is thus one that has been debated very, very extensively, in explicit as well as implicit ways, by India's own most notable political thinkers (from Gandhi to Namboodripad) as well as Indian historians. It is unfortunate that Said is unaware of these complex intellectual and political traditions. There are innumerable things to be learned from them, but as regards the positions that have been given such credence by Edward Said and the subsequent Colonial Discourse Analysis groups, at least two general principles which govern the principal historiographic traditions in India – essentially humanist, rationalist and universalist principles – may be emphasized. One is that the right to criticize is a universal right, which must be conceded to everyone, European and Asian alike; what is objectionable is not the European's right to criticize Asians, past or present, but those particular exercises of this right which are manifest and arbitrary exercises of colonial or racial or any other kind of prejudice. In other words, criticism itself must be evaluated from some objective criterion of validity and evidence. The accompanying principle, necessarily conjoined to the first, is that the archive which we have inherited from our colonial past is, like any substantial historical archive, a vast mixture of fantastic constructs, time-bound errors and invaluable empirical information. This, too, must be subjected to the same kind of discrimination that we require for any other kind of historical investigation, whether the writer in question is European or non-European.

Before we go on to offer some comments on the politically contrasting

traditions, from Gandhi to Namboodripad, it may be useful here, without attempting a full résumé, to specify that Marx's position was in fact the exact opposite of what can accurately be called the *Orientalist* position in India, and that Marx self-consciously *dissociates* himself from that position when he declares earlier, in that very first dispatch: 'I share not the opinion of those who believe in a golden age of Hindustan.'¹⁴ The idea of a golden age in the remote past which India now needed to reconstitute – one that sections of Orientalist scholarship had inherited from strands of High Brahminism – was to bequeath itself to a great many tendencies in Indian nationalism, as we shall soon see. But then Marx moves quickly to dissociate himself also from the opposite position – most famously enunciated by the anti-Orientalist Macaulay – which saw British colonialism as a benign civilizing mission. Against that Marx is equally unequivocal, in the very next paragraph: 'the misery inflicted by the British on Hindustan is of an essentially different and infinitely more intensive kind than all Hindustan had to suffer before.' In short, the idea of 'the double mission' was designed to carve out a position independent both of the Orientalist–Romantic and the colonial–modernist.

The dispatch from which Said quotes was drafted on 10 June 1853, and Said has the liberty to believe that Marx's 'human sympathy' had, by the end of that piece, been 'dissolved'. The other piece by Marx, 'The Future Results of the British Rule in India', which has become equally famous, was drafted a few weeks later, on 22 July. Here, too, Marx says some very rude things, and he certainly has no 'sympathy', either for India –

... the whole of her past history, if it be anything, is the history of the successive conquests she has undergone. Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history . . . of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society. (p. 29)¹⁵

– or for Britain:

The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked. (p. 34)

In between, he also speaks frankly of 'the hereditary division of labour, upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power',¹⁶ but then comes the final judgement on the 'double mission':

All the English bourgeoisie may be forced to do will neither emancipate nor materially mend the social conditions of the masses of the people . . .

The Indian will not reap the fruits of the new elements of society scattered among them by the British bourgeoisie, till in Great Britain itself the new ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat, or till the Hindus themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether. (p. 33)

Three things need to be said about this judgement. First, no influential nineteenth-century Indian reformer, from Rammohun to Syed Ahmed Khan to the founders of the Indian National Congress, was to take so clear-cut a position on the issue of Indian Independence; indeed, Gandhi himself was to spend the years during World War I recruiting soldiers for the British Army. Second, every shade of Indian nationalist opinion as it developed after 1919 – from the Gandhian to the communist, and excluding only the most obscurantist – would accept the truth of that statement, *including* the idea that colonial capitalism *did* contribute 'new elements of society' in India, some of which have a very great need to be preserved. Finally, it should be of some interest to us here that Marx speaks of the 'proletariat' in the English context but of the 'Hindus' (by which he simply means the inhabitants of the country) in the context of India. In other words, only five years after his hopes for a European revolution had been dashed, Marx is hoping for three things in the short run: a socialist revolution in Britain, a nationalist revolution in India, and the break-up of the caste system. Those, he thought, would be the preconditions for 'the masses of people' even to start reaping any sort of 'benefit from the new elements of society'. Now, much later, India has of course become independent, but those two other issues – of class in Britain and caste in India ('the hereditary division of labour', as Marx puts it) – are yet to be resolved; and the resolution of the class question in India doubtless passes, even today, through the caste question.

This is hardly a 'Romantic, Orientalist vision'. But if we do want to have some sense of what a particularly Tolstoyan version of a Romantic, Orientalist statement in the Indian situation may have been like, we need go no further than the following from *Hind Swaraj*, by Gandhi, the admirer of Emerson and Tolstoy and Ruskin:

The more we indulge in our emotions the more unbridled they become. . . . Millions will always remain poor. Observing all this, our ancestors dissuaded us from luxuries and pleasures. We have managed with the same kind of plough as existed thousands of years ago. We have retained the same kind of cottages that we had in former times, and our indigenous education remains the same. . . . It was not that we did not know how to invent machinery, but our forefathers knew that, if we set our hearts after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fibre. They, therefore, after due deliberation, decided that we should do what we could with our hands and feet. . . . They further reasoned that large cities were a snare and a useless incumbrance and people would not be happy in them, that there would be gangs of thieves and robbers, prostitution and vice flourishing in them, and that poor men would be robbed by rich men. They were therefore satisfied with small villages.¹⁷

Said has recently included Gandhi in the category of 'prophets and priests'. I am not sure whether the above is to be read as prophecy or priestcraft, but Gandhi did write it, originally in Gujarati, in 1909. What is remarkable about this passage is that whether or not Gandhi knew it, he seems to be refuting Marx on every count. If Marx raved against the slow ('vegetative') pace of change in India, Gandhi admires precisely that kind of stasis, while his sense of India's eternal changelessness is much more radical than Marx could ever muster: that the Indian peasant has used the same kind of plough for 'thousands of years', while the education system has also remained the same, is said to be a *good* thing. The reason India did not have an industrial revolution (and was therefore particularly vulnerable to colonial capital, Marx might have added) is not that the antiquated systems of production and governance did not allow it, but that 'our forefathers', in their superior wisdom, had decided that it should be so; and we should of course follow in the footsteps of 'our forefathers'. If Marx had debunked the mode of medieval India's urbanization for being based upon royal courts and military encampments and conspicuous waste of the agrarian surplus,

Gandhi simply denies the existence of cities in our history altogether: no cities, no thieves, robbers, prostitutes, or divisions between rich and poor; only the idyllic village community, based on 'moral fibre'.

Gandhi, like Marx, was an extremely complex thinker, and I have no wish to reduce him to this quotation. I should clarify, therefore, that what I am illustrating here is not Gandhism as such but a certain way of idealizing a past by eliminating all its material co-ordinates – that is to say, a certain strand of obscurantist indigenism which unfortunately surfaced in Gandhi's thought much too frequently; which was radically opposed to the way Marx thought of these matters; and which still lives today, in many forms, under the insignia, always, of cultural nationalism and opposed, always, to strands of thought derived from Marxism.

As a counterpoint to that kind of indigenism, it might be useful briefly to recapitulate the views of an eminent intellectual of the political Left – E.M.S. Namboodripad, who recently retired from his post as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) – and who has written precisely on these same themes. In the course of a brief intervention in a seminar on Indology, Namboodripad speaks first of 'the kernel of truth concerning Indian society revealed by Marx', and then goes on to say, unwittingly shedding some light on that same paragraph which Said, unknown to Namboodripad, interprets in his own way:

Indian society had, for several centuries, remained in a stage of stagnation and decay; its destruction had come as the order of the day. Since, however, there was no internal force which could destroy the stagnant and decaying old society, the external force that appeared on the scene, the European trading bourgeoisie who came to India in the 15th and 16th centuries, particularly the most modern and powerful of them, the British trading-cum-industrial bourgeoisie, were the 'unconscious tools of history'. Marx the revolutionary therefore did not shed a single tear at this destruction, though with his deep humanism and love for the people, he had nothing but sympathy for the Indian people who were undergoing – and hatred for the British who were inflicting – immense suffering on them.¹⁸

Later in the same essay, having pointed out the progressive role Bhakti had played in the rise of the post-Sanskritic modern languages, Namboodripad

goes on to reflect upon the overall impact of colonialism on language and literature in India:

The efforts of the early European trading companies to popularize the Christian faith and the subsequent measures adopted by the British rulers to establish educational institutions in order to create a stratum of educated employees of the company, led to the development of a language and literature which was as popular in style as the earlier Bhakti works, but free from the limitations of the latter which was, by and large, confined to Hindu society and culture . . .

The development of the world market and the slow but sure integration of the Indian village into that world market broke the self-sufficient character of India's village society which has now become part of the growing world capitalist society . . .

This naturally reflected itself in the field of literature. Eminent writers in all the languages of the rapidly-growing world capitalist system were translated into, and exercised their influence over, the new generation of Indian writers. In other words, the world of Indian literature could free itself from the shackles of the caste-ridden Hindu society and its culture only when its economic basis – the self-sufficient village with its natural economy – was shattered by the assault of foreign capitalism. (pp. 42-3)

This 'assault', then, contributed to the widening of cultural horizons: a 'progressive' role, clearly, even though one has considerable reservations about some simplification here. But Namboodripad then specifies yet another dialectic specific to colonialism: the growth, on the one hand, of a dependent, comprador intelligentsia – 'the foreign and foreign-trained intellectual elite' who emerged as 'the dominant force moving the new bourgeois literature and culture of India' and were 'interested in decrying all that was Indian . . . as "barbarian" and "uncivilized"' – and, on the other, a 'false nationalism' which defended everything Indian, old and new, and relied for its arguments, ironically, upon that other body of imperialist scholarship which had taken to idealizing 'ancient Hindu society'. The praxis of the socialist revolution is then seen, in the closing paragraphs of Namboodripad's brief text, as the negation of the *whole* of that colonial dynamic, and as the precondition for 'that final defeat of the stagnating and decadent society and culture, inherited by the Indian

people from their several-centuries-old development since the pre-historic tribal societies were disintegrated and class society was formed under the garb of caste society'. This formulation, too, is notable for three different emphases. Some fundamental aspects of decadence and stagnation are acknowledged to be much older than colonialism itself; these aspects are not dissolved into the comforting category of the 'colonial legacy'. Meanwhile, colonialism itself is recognized as having come and gone without destroying 'the stagnating and decadent society'; colonialism's potential for constructive destruction was, after all, very limited. Finally, Nambodripad emphasizes that same tie between class and caste in India which we have noted above in the case of Marx and Ambedkar.

What Nambodripad specifies at the end is a particular contradiction in the cultural logic of colonial capitalism: a certain democratization of language, some secularization of ideological parameters, some denting of insularity; but also, decisively, the creation of a dominant intelligentsia which merely oscillates between ideological dependence on the fabrications and sophistries of advanced capitalism on the one hand, and indigenist, frequently obscurantist nostalgia on the other. The issue he finally raises is that of agency. To what extent can even the patriotic section of the bourgeois intelligentsia, divided as it is between metropolitan theorizations and idealized indigenisms, fulfil the tasks of the very anti-imperialism it so stridently preaches? Through what location, affiliation, praxis?

The basic thrust of Nambodripad's argument is unassailable, even though he makes at least two sizeable errors: in exaggerating the 'self-sufficiency' and 'natural economy' of the pre-colonial Indian village, and in assigning too one-sided a role in the democratization of language and literature to the missionaries and the colonial educational apparatus. We shall touch upon the latter issue at slightly greater length in the next chapter, but it is worth emphasizing that neither error is a matter of 'Orientalist' or any other a priori discursive position. They can be seen as errors thanks to the historical research which has become available especially over the past thirty years, and the same criteria of validation and evidence apply in Nambodripad's case as in any other.

That Marx picked up some phrases from the Romantic lexicon is in fact a minor matter, and whatever injury is done to one's national pride can easily be overcome by recalling the colourful epithets he uses for the European

bourgeoisie. Two other kinds of problem are in fact much more central to what went wrong in Marx's writings on India. The first is the issue of evidence. Modern research shows that each of the props of Marx's general view of India – the self-sufficient village community; the hydraulic state; the unchanging nature of the agrarian economy; absence of property in land – was at least partially fanciful. Research in all these areas is still far from adequate, but the available evidence suggests that the village economy was often much more integrated in larger networks of exchange and appropriation than was hitherto realized; that the small dam, the shallow seasonal well and the local pond built with individual, family or co-operative labour were at least as important in irrigation as the centrally planned waterworks; that property in land and stratification among the peasantry was far more common than was previously assumed; and that agrarian technology was, over the centuries, not nearly as stagnant. The fact that Marx did not have this more modern research at his disposal explains the origin of his errors, but the fact that he accepted the available evidence as conclusive enough to base certain categorical assertions on it was undoubtedly an error of judgement as well.

But this error of judgement was also a theoretical error and a violation of the very materialist method which he did more than anyone else to establish in the sciences of the social as such. The danger in the practice of any materialism is that whereas it begins by opposing all those speculative systems of thought which make universal and categorical claims without the necessary physical evidence for the grounding of such claims, its own sustained oppositional practice tends to push it in a direction where it is impelled to assert universal laws of its own, different from those it opposes, but without sufficient evidence of its own; a materialism which does not sufficiently resist such pressure, and does not recognize the gap between the validity of a universalist aspiration and the paucity of both evidence and method that might in fact give us a universal history of all humankind, becomes speculative in its own way. The period of Marx's work in which those journalistic pieces were drafted is riven with contrary pulls towards the most concrete engagements, as in the *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, and brilliant but flawed speculations about a systematic, universal history of all modes of production, as in *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*. The drafting of *Grundrisse* – which Marx started after writing his 1853 articles on India,

and which ranges from broad summations of transcontinental systems to the most minute movements of commodities – was in a way the transitional text. By the time he came to write *Capital*, the aspiration to formulate the premisses of a universal history remained, as it should have remained, but the realization grew that the only mode of production he could adequately theorize was that of capitalism, for which there was very considerable evidence as well as a largely adequate method, which he himself had taken such pains to formulate. It is from the theoretical standpoint of *Capital*, as much as from the empirical ground of more modern research in past history, that one can now see the brilliance, but also the error, in many a formulation about India.

'Indian Literature': Notes towards the Definition of a Category

One of my difficulties with the *theoretical* category of 'Third World Literature', it should be clear enough, is its rather cavalier way with history; its homogenization of a prolix and variegated archive which is little understood and then hurriedly categorized; its equally homogenizing impulse to slot very diverse kinds of public aspirations under the unitary insignia of 'nationalism' and then to designate this nationalism as the determinate and epochal ideology for cultural production in non-Western societies; its more recent propensity to inflate the choice of immigration into a rhetoric of exile, and then to contrive this inflation as the mediating term between the Third World and the First. Kosambi once said: "The outstanding characteristic of a backward bourgeoisie, the desire to profit without labour or grasp of technique, is reflected in the superficial "research" so common in India."¹ Ironically enough, so much of what is published in the metropolitan countries displays this very characteristic of the 'backward bourgeoisie' when it comes to the 'Third World'.

I find it all the more difficult to speak of a "Third World Literature" when I know that I cannot confidently speak, as a theoretically coherent category, of an '*Indian*' Literature. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is not to pose, category by category, an 'Indian Literature' (the national specificity) against 'Third World Literature' (the tricontinental generality) but, rather, to explore some of the difficulties we currently have in constructing such a category. One of my arguments here is that we cannot posit a *theoretical* unity or coherence of an 'Indian' literature by assembling its history in terms of adjacent but discrete histories of India's major