

Subaltern, Multicultural & Indigenous Histories

Winter School Overview

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The winter school opened a discussion on the relationship between analyses emerging from postcolonial writing and those being generated by the decolonising processes in Australia and the Pacific. With an opportunity over two days to explore the writing and current interests of Dipesh Chakrabarty, around 80 participants pursued questions like: What does indigenisation of the theory of history mean? How have subaltern histories developed and how do they relate to evolving forms of democracy? What are the politics of address in the writing of indigenous and 'multicultural' histories? To whom are we talking? What are the issues around translating language and concepts in intercultural histories?

Dipesh Chakrabarty offered two papers. In the first he discussed the critique of western history posed by recent post-colonial writing, including his most recent book, *Provincializing Europe*. Dipesh argued that western history had brought with it a key assumption about modernity: that of the rational, linear segmentation of time, so that however sympathetically the past and 'tradition' might be investigated, they are seen as always separated from the present. This is the concept of anachronism, by which the modernised subject, whether western academic or Indian nationalist, becomes aware of the separation of the past from their own period. In the Indian context, this has commonly been described as a difference between both 'peasant' and subaltern' groups within India on the one hand and the modernising nationalist middle classes on the other.

Dipesh argued against the assumption that modernity demands an inevitable separation between the past and the present: a dichotomy between 'tradition' and 'modernity', between the 'pre-analytic' and the 'analytic' or 'modern'. Instead, he called for a recognition of the 'entanglement of time', in which 'time comes to us in the form of a knot, rather than straightened out'. The result is a multiple or 'doubled' consciousness of time in which the past is a continuing presence within the lived experience, not only of 'peasant' or 'traditional' peoples, but that of 'modernised' and bourgeois groups under and after colonialism. So the concepts of modernity with which post-colonial elites and subalterns grapple are never entirely divorced from 'traditional' or pre-colonial structures of thought and meaning. Instead there is a continuing 'lived relationship' with pre-modern practices, which expand the meanings of western concepts like 'law' and 'land' by an ever present tension with a rich stream of non-western and pre-modern meanings. The methodologies of western history, which carefully apply the techniques of historicizing evidence, obscure the continuing presence of the past. This recognition of 'entangled time' was, Dipesh argued, a dimension of much new writing from Africa and India and he saw it as the responsibility of post-modern intellectuals to return this awareness of multiple or 'doubled' consciousness to the centre of the discussion.

In his second paper, an edited version of which is included in this collection, Dipesh reflected on the implications of this for the relationship between Indigenous historians and immigrant historians in Australia. He commented on the tendency within 'mainstream' Australian history, including the recent writing of much 'Aboriginal history', to construct an illusory polarisation between indigenous peoples and early European settlers, a polarisation which ignored the complex relationships of both these groups with more recent immigrants. In teasing out the implications of different paradigms of the colonial experience, conquest and colonisation, circulating in Australian debates, Dipesh referred to Mudrooroo's argument that indigenous people and post-colonial immigrants share not a 'history' but a 'predicament'. This is the experience of being colonised, and it is this, rather than a congruency of the empirical details of colonial histories, that offers fertile grounds for a conversation. Dipesh was particularly interested in land. This has been a central point of contestation between indigenous, 'settler' and newer immigrant groups during his time living in Australia. He reflected that this was a powerful example of the tension and resonance between western, non-western and 'pre-modern' meanings, and that the *idea* of land has now been both complicated and enriched by the conflict over invasion, native title and land rights. Dipesh expressed concern that much of contemporary non-indigenous history in Australia fails to recognise the degree to which both indigenous and immigrant histories destabilise the certainties of western history itself. This offers the possibility not of some simple agreement about the 'facts' of the past, but far more important possibilities for fruitful dialogues and expansion of historical consciousness itself as Australia decolonises.

Dipesh's reflections were given formal responses by Tony Birch and Wendy Brady, both indigenous scholars and activists, and by Devleena Ghosh, who has been investigating Indo-Fijian experiences in Fiji and Australia. Each, in papers, included here, takes up in different ways the themes emerging in Dipesh's work. Their writings address the relationship between indigenous historians, colonised immigrant analyses and the 'mainstream' histories which have engaged most directly with the legal system in, for example, the Mabo decision of the High Court in 1992. The theme of land and its meanings is prominent in the question of history not only in Australia but also in Fiji. Just as important in each of these essays is the theme of 'who speaks for whom?', a theme which takes on different dimensions in each of the contexts they are exploring, and demands a recognition of the lived complexities of colonial experience rather than simply the slogans arising from the dichotomised politics of colonialism.

The challenge to look beyond the simplistic polarisations generated by colonialism was taken up in the discussions between Dipesh, the three respondents and the 80-odd participants over these two days. There were a significant number of indigenous post-graduate students among the researchers who came from a range of cultural backgrounds as well as various disciplines, including cultural studies, history and writing and from creative work in drama and writing. Many of the same people were involved in the later 'Double Edged' conference where these conversations continued.

There were tensions during the winter school around the questions of how 'settler', recent immigrant and indigenous histories might be represented, but the workshops and plenary discussions offered valuable and rare opportunities not only to state formal positions but to open ongoing conversations around these unresolved questions. Penny van Toorn made a series of valuable interventions in the discussion around the question of indigenous agency in early colonial archival documents. Her argument has been developed to form the basis for the paper published in this volume.

One question which arose during the discussion was about the type of history which might correspond to a new awareness of the doubled consciousness of time. Dipesh proposed a 'translational history', which, in the example of land, would recognise that 'the concept of land has become so capacious that it can contain within it at least two very different concepts of land'. A related question was about how to write the insights of 'entangled time' and of multiple, resonant voices. Dipesh was asked by a number of participants how he actually *did* 'doubled consciousness' when he sat down to write. This discussion continued in the working groups between formal presentations, where participants explored the implications of various media and writing approaches which grappled with the insights offered by post-colonial histories.