

Historicism

Time and its discontents

Fall 2020, Week 3

Primitives, modernity and the pre-political

In 1959, the English historian Eric J. Hobsbawm published a small book on the history of peasant revolts against capitalist modernization in peripheral and impoverished areas of Europe (Sicily in Italy and Andalusia in Spain.) Hobsbawm described the content of his book in the following way:

This essay consists of studies on the following subjects, all of which can be described as 'primitive' or 'archaic' forms of social agitation: banditry of the Robin Hood type, rural secret societies, various peasant revolutionary movements of the millenarian sort, pre-industrial 'mobs' and their riots, some labour religious sects and the use of ritual in early labour and revolutionary organizations.¹

In reading this description, one might be inclined to think that Hobsbawm's subject was the peasant revolts in the European middle ages; his use of the adjective 'archaic' or 'primitive' betrays a temporal apprehension of these revolts. Yet, in reality, Hobsbawm was studying peasant revolts in Europe throughout the nineteenth century. If modernity started (or so they taught us in school) in Europe in 1789, how could European peasants be 'primitive,' 'archaic' when living exactly at the same time?

The key to understanding Hobsbawm's use of 'primitive' lies in the conception of 'political' espoused by the historian. Hobsbawm argued these revolts had an 'archaic' character because the historical actors that participated in them, the peasantry, did not have a political consciousness. Rather, they were *pre-political*. Hobsbawm said: "they [the peasants] are *pre-political* people who have not yet found, on only begun to find, a specific language in which to express their aspirations about the world."² In other words, they were *pre* and not fully political they were not able to assert their political demands in positive ways, meaning, they weren't able to say: "I demand better living conditions under this era of industrial capitalism." Instead, says Hobsbawm, they *reacted* to their impoverished status, fully relying not on modern tools of political agitation, like unions, printing libel and manifestos, organizing themselves in political parties etc, but on 'traditional' forms of organization: kinship, tribal solidarity, territorial links.

By now, you should have noted that adjectives like 'primitive' or even the prefix '*pre*' attached to political points to a temporal un-

¹ E. J. Hobsbawm. *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Manchester University press

² E. J. Hobsbawm. *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Manchester University press

derstanding of these people. Moreover, having just read Fabian's text, you can see that the of the *pre-political* betrays a developmental ideation of political consciousness: fully political consciousness takes place in urban centers of the most advanced European countries: the English proletariat is a fully political subject while the peasantry in the outskirts of Europe are *not yet* fully political. In that sense, the understanding of a *pre* and fully political consciousness is an example of what Chakrabarty calls 'historicist thought.'

So what's wrong with Historicism?

In simple terms, historicism was a way of grappling and understanding historical change. Historicism strived to show that it is history, and not Reason (à la Hegel) or Divinity, that determines each event. This had a very simple implication for the study of History: if you want to understand anything—be it events, texts, artifacts, etc—historically, you must pay attention to its *historical context* and its *historical development*. So, what's wrong with this? Shouldn't we pay attention to the context? Shouldn't we try to understand the meaning of something by studying the conditions in which it developed? Shouldn't we trace the origins of something through time? Let's say we want to study Shakespeare's plays from a historic point of view, shouldn't we also study Elizabethan literary tastes? A very trite turn of phrase in historical research is the "study of the conditions of production" of something, that is, the context, forces and historical players that made possible the emergence of, let's say, Shakespeare's plays. So a criticism to historicism means that we should *not* study the context in which Shakespeare's play were composed?

Not at all, of course. Chakrabarty defines historicism as "the idea that to understand anything it has to be seen both as a unity and in its historical development." This means, that whatever concept, event, idea, text, artifact, etc, we decide to study through a historicist prism, we would see the object gradually taking its final shape through history, but with a clear progressive and developmental movement, until it reaches its final form, which means, its full development. Thus, for example, if we were to study modernity under a historicist guise, we would see a *developmental* history, probably starting with Greek ideals of human being, passing through Renaissance configurations of the relationship between State and citizen, just to arrive to its final form, the (European) (man) subject of universal rights: free, equal (to other subjects), rational.

The criticism of historicism is not exclusive of postcolonial thought. That means, it is not a case of non-Western versus Western thought. In 1976, Michel Foucault described his own historical method as in-

debted to another European thinker from the 19th century: Friedrich Nietzsche. Although Nietzsche did not formulate a critique of historicism, Foucault finds in Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) a sort of a revolt against historicist thinking. A long quote illustrates the differences between a linear, developmental, stagist conception of the history of morals, and Nietzsche's approach, the genealogy:

Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times. On this basis, it is obvious that Paul Reel was wrong to follow the English tendency in describing the history of morality in terms of a linear development—in reducing its entire history and genesis to an exclusive concern for utility. He assumed that words had kept their meaning, that desires still pointed in a single direction, and that ideas retained their logic; and he ignored the fact that the world of speech and desires has known invasions, struggles, plundering, disguises, ploys. From these elements, however, genealogy retrieves an indispensable restraint: it must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history—in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles. Finally, genealogy must define even those in stances when they are absent, the moment when they remained unrealized (Plato, at Syracuse, did not become Mohammed).³

Let's put it another way: historicism's claim to *historicize everything* in order to *understand everything* hides an important aspect: that historicism did not historicize the structure of time in which it operates. Fabian argues that in the 19th century, time—as used by humanistic disciplines like Anthropology but History too—relied on an understanding of time in which time itself had been: SECULARIZED (no more sacred history), NATURALIZED (time was a variable in the physical world and not a human experience) and SPATIALIZED (the distance between places, people, events could be understood as temporal distance.) That temporal distance, of course, when laid out on a single, naturalized, secular and empty timeline, was understood in terms of developmental, stagist difference, i.e., if there was a temporal distance between Europe and India, it did not mean that there was merely a difference in the understanding of time, but that India was behind Europe in time.

That's the criticism that Chakrabarty levels against historicist thought: the idea that *something* belongs to a particular time and place and, importantly, to a particular stage of development. And again, this is not about The West versus the Rest, even though most of the relationship between Europe and the non-European world

³ Michel Foucault. Nietzsche, Genealogy, History. In John Richardson and Brian Leiter, editors, *Nietzsche*, pages 139–164. Oxford University Press

was mediated by historicism. As Chakrabarty mentions, historicist thought or historicism as a structure of thinking gets reproduced nationally and locally both in Europe and in the Third-World. Think again for example on the use of *pre-political* by Hobsbawm when referring to the peasantry in Europe.

References

- [1] Michel Foucault. Nietzsche, Genealogy, History. In John Richardson and Brian Leiter, editors, *Nietzsche*, pages 139–164. Oxford University Press.
- [2] E. J. Hobsbawm. *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Manchester University press.