



## Notes on historical writing for all three worlds

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## Comment

### Notes on Historical Writing for All Three Worlds

I find myself in sympathy with many of the propositions and more of the sentiments in Renato Constantino's article "Notes on Historical Writing for the Third World" (*Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol.10 No.3 (1980) pp.233-240). The problem of the distortion in available sources makes it difficult to do justice to a "history of the inarticulate". The "fetish of objectivity" has introduced its own bias. And far too few historians seem to be unaware of the social and political implications of their labours. Yet Professor Constantino raises far more problems than he solves through his call to adopt "struggle" as the unifying thread for historical writing in the Third World, as no doubt he himself fully realizes. In what follows, therefore I would like to draw out some of these problems, not with a view to offering neat solutions, but in order to make historians more aware of the necessary theoretical content inseparable from the writing of history in all three worlds.

Professor Constantino defines history as "the recorded struggle of people for ever increasing freedom and for newer and higher realizations of the human person" (p.237). The sentiment underlying such a definition is, of course, admirable, and one to which I would readily accede. History, by this definition, is a process of liberation. But on what grounds is this claim made? Could not history equally be conceived as a process of increasingly subtle exploitation of man by man? The pattern of the past that we are able to glean from our inadequate sources is open to many different interpretations. History may be conceived as a process of liberation, but to go on to say that it should be so conceived requires some convincing support. Such support can only be theoretical. It must rest, ideally, on a universally accepted understanding of the processes of historical change, upon a comprehensive theory of history. Many theories of history would provide no support for a conception of the past as a process of progressive liberation: Toynbee's or Spengler's theories, for example. Others would: a Christian theory of history might ascribe such a design to the mind of God; in Marxist theory of history the step from capitalism to socialism in one which in some sense liberates members of the working class.

On closer examination, however, neither the Christian nor the Marxist theory of history provides entirely convincing support for a liberationist view of history. The Christian relies upon men's supposed knowledge of the "mind" of a supramundane entity, something about which, since Christ revealed no divine theory of history, there can be endless unprofitable speculation. Marxism for its part fails to explain why the transition from one economic mode of production to another should be "liberating", either in terms of an increase in freedom, or in terms of "the higher realization of the human person". Many would argue that socialism has not brought greater freedom; but it all depends what is meant by "freedom". Freedom to do what?

Marxism theory of history, it must be realized, is not itself a liberationist theory in the sense that it places "increasing freedom" and "the higher realization of the human person" at the centre of its theoretical understanding of the process of historical change. On the contrary, at the heart of Marxist theory of history lies a dialectical materialist view of historical change that depends upon contradictions developing between relations and mode of production. Economic forces impart the dynamism to history, not man's awareness of the need for change, nor any impulse towards a realization, in ever greater freedom, of an ever increasing human potential. This said, Marxism still provides the best theoretical support at present available for a liberationist theory of history, and Professor Constantino has clearly been deeply influenced by Marxist thought. He has, however, gone beyond Marxist theory in formulating his definition of history, but in so doing he has failed to develop adequate theoretical support for his position.

This lack of a liberationist theory of history underlies a number of the problems raised by Professor Constantino's paper. History can "serve as a guide to present and succeeding generations in the continuing struggle for change" only if it incorporates a theory of historical change which can be consciously applied. The past can hardly be "usable" unless we know *how* it can be used. We must understand how a conception of the past can be consciously applied to influence the direction of the future, or how men be being more aware of the developmental changes in material conditions of their world can better contribute to altering those conditions in determined ways. Classical Marxist theory is not at all clear on these points, and the more recent *ad hoc* additions of Neo-Marxism have failed to protect the core theory from the charge of inadequacy in explaining the role of human consciousness in the historical process. This is a big claim, one which Marxists will no doubt reject, but it is not one I want to argue for more fully here. All I will do is throw out the suggestion that, since Marxist theory of history taken in its historical context was advanced with the aim of liberating an increasingly large and downtrodden class (the industrial proletariat) through providing theoretical support for revolutionary political action, any future liberationist theory of history must be capable of accounting for liberationist aspects of Marxist theory of history as an historical development, and incorporate other liberationist aspects of Marxist philosophy, such as alienation theory. If such a liberationist theory

were to be constructed it would be likely to gain assent from committed Marxists, and could thus serve as the theoretical means of drawing together Marxist and non-Marxist historians under the broad umbrella of the liberationist quest.

The confusions which result from the lack of an integrated theory of history are evident in the problem of using struggle as a "unifying thread" in Third World history, while at the same time emphasizing the primacy of the economic base. If struggle promotes "even higher levels of political and economic awareness", in what sense can rising awareness be said to be determined, as part of the superstructure, by economic conditions? Struggle may raise political consciousness even where economic conditions remain unchanged. Not only must results be presented "as accretions of consciousness, as praxis from which people may derive lessons and on the basis of which theory may be formulated" (p.238), but it must be shown historically how theory can lead to a change in material conditions in a direction productive of greater "liberation". It is all very well to maintain that: "Objective developments in society result in the formation of a subjective factor *which becomes instrumental in realizing further developments*" (p.238 my italics), but we must be provided with the theoretical apparatus to demonstrate *how* this latter stage takes place in historical practice. Only thus may a rising level of consciousness in the present be effectively applied to further liberation as the goal of history. Again let me stress, I am not arguing against a liberationist view of the historical process. I simply want to point out that in order to be clear about the theoretical task that such a view entails, inappropriate theoretical constructs must not be permitted to intrude.

The importance of developing a global liberationist theory of history becomes clear when we consider the questions of nationalistic and partisan scholarship. Here I must take exception to Professor Constantino's suggestions on a number of specific points. However, I suspect that given a comprehensive and developed liberationist theory of history, many of these differences would disappear. I cannot agree that "the nationalist viewpoint is an indispensable prerequisite to the attainment of a liberation history", or that "it must constitute the ideological framework to which historians must adhere" (p.234). In a world both more closely integrated than ever before and in which inequalities of wealth and opportunity (of potential for liberation of mind and body) are so evident, it would seem to me essential to look beyond national confines. But not only, in this age of multinational corporations, must modern and contemporary historians maintain an awareness of supranational factors, but they should also extend self-determination as a liberationist goal to the subnational level of minority groups and cultures. Also every Third World historian of the colonial period in the overwhelming majority of Third World countries which have been subject to the indignities of colonialism must look further than his own nation. Far from being indispensable, therefore, the nationalist viewpoint provides an increasingly less appropriate framework for historians concerned with the present social and political relevance of their work. In a global age where our concerns must be with the problems of global

liberation unconfined by narrow national, or racial, or cultural preoccupations a broad world theoretical framework is essential for the promotion of a liberationist history.

One can see immediately the appeal of nationalist history for Professor Constantino, however, when he says that nationalism provides the student of history "with a definite point of view". The lack of a "point of view" from which to write history is sorely felt by all historians not ideologically committed to a clearly formulated theory of history, such as Marxism. For the Marxist historian, however, the problem is non-existent. No matter what the special interest of a Marxist historian, the "point of view" from which he approaches his work is not in doubt — at least in broad terms, although there are varieties of Marxism . . .! The liberationist historian is not so lucky. "Liberation" in what sense? Of whom, from whom, and so on? It is the lack of any point of view emerging from a theoretically grounded *world* liberationist conception of history that forces historians to fall back upon some other framework. Nationalism is simply the most evident, the one which requires least justification, and thus least theoretically demanding.

Nationalism as a framework for the writing of history leads naturally, as Professor Constantino recognizes, to the quicksands of what he calls "partisan scholarship" (p.235). The goal of partisan scholarship is "to counter the weight of colonial ideas masquerading as 'objective history'." Only colonial ideas? Then who are responsible for these? Historians writing during the colonial age, of the colonized as well as the colonizing power? Or do we include neo-colonial ideas? Presumably it is open to anyone to be a "partisan", and not simply Third World historians. But a partisan for whom in a case such as the history of the nations of Indochina, my own special area of interest? For a nationalist historian there is no problem (take the Vietnamese view of China), but for someone lacking such single-minded commitment it is another matter (what of Kampuchea and Laos?). Partisan scholarship, like the nationalist viewpoint, can all too easily result in the simplification of history, the refusal to recognize problems. Propaganda written for the most excellent reasons can never escape being propaganda — unless treated as an historical source!

Let us pursue the problem a little further. How does the historian in the First world write the history of his nation's colonialism? Does he adopt a "nationalist viewpoint"? Why should his partisan scholarship be exercised on behalf of? Is his job simply to damn his ancestors for the benefit of the descendants of their victims? If so he will surely need a better reason for doing so than pure altruism. We are all the product of our experience, influenced by our age and its intellectual environment, and such conditioning is hard to shake off. Yet the liberation of the human species requires the widest possible participation. What we need, once again, is a broad theory of history to which historians of both colonial and colonized powers can give assent. Only thus will they be able together to contribute to a new history which is liberating for both.

Partisan history all too easily reduces to a "heroes" and "villains" approach to the past which is at best a simplification and at worst a disabling

distortion. During the colonial era not all colonists lacked sympathy for the oppressed or failed to act according to their conscience; not all "real people's heroes" were above brutality or the exploitation of their fellow men. To label historical heroes or villains in whatever righteous indignation only too easily obscures the need to understand historical change. History as the hagiography of revolutionary heroes can distort the problems modern revolutionaries must face. Propaganda can lead to false estimates of possibilities for present action, so that what might have been achieved is lost. If history is to serve the present it must make men aware of both the direction and the dynamics of the process of liberation. And this is only possible if present conditions can be analyzed in the light of a liberationist theory of historical change, and if that theory relates to the practice involved in applying increased awareness to advance the process of universal liberation.

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## Reviews

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**Sohanlal Datta Gupta, *Comintern, India and the Colonial Question, 1920-37*, Monograph No.3 of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. (K.P. Bagchi & Co., Calcutta, 1980.)**

Dr Gupta has written a detailed study of the Third International's wrestlings with problems of liberation and socialist movements in the colonies, with India in the forefront because it played throughout "an essentially important role" (p.1). This is a much and hotly debated subject, with participants both Eastern and Western, and one as Gupta says of "incredible complexity" (p.3). His starting-point is the colonial debate at the 2nd Congress in Moscow in 1920, where Lenin was the presiding genius, and M.N. Roy another prominent figure. As a member of ECCI, the executive committee of the International, Roy was to be often in the limelight down to his expulsion soon after the 6th Congress, and the running debate owed some of its terms of reference to him.

Communism in India in his time was represented by no more than a few scattered, divided groups, yet Roy, who seems always to have been a man of theory and imagination rather than practical grasp, was convinced that an industrial working class was rapidly emerging and would soon be ready to take the lead; in the peasantry he had relatively little interest. His optimistic estimate of the working class was bolstered by a belief that Britain, shaken by the Great War, had changed its mind and was now investing more capital in India, and helping to industrialize it, partly with the aim of satisfying and neutralizing the bourgeoisie. On this ground Roy firmly rejected any collaboration with the bourgeoisie in the struggle for national independence, as futile. Anticipating some thinking of a later day about the revolutionary torch being taken over by Maoism and the Third World, Roy was prepared to affirm that Europe's socialist future depended on such colonial movements, which