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Time's Monster: History, Conscience, and Britain's Empire

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History and history were the handmaidens of British imperialism in the 19th century. Historians wrote to justify the empire and history was used by politicians and public figures to rationalize conquering acts. At that time, the idea of progress that was derived from the Enlightenment and the development of capitalism after the industrial revolution dominated the intellectual landscape.

In all good conscience, well-intentioned people were convinced that it was their duty, their moral responsibility, to civilize people who had not yet experienced progress, meaning capitalist modernity. Capitalist modernity not only meant an economic system, but it denoted an entire intellectual apparatus and institutional practices. British imperialism originated as an organized system of economic exploitation through which, at the expense of conquered and colonized territories, Britain enriched itself.

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Introduction

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Policies aimed at improving and civilizing the people who lived in India, Africa and other parts of Asia that had been conquered by Britain had come to support this economic exploitation by the third decade of the 19th century. This reform effort was influenced by a swayed historical sensibility, which first denied that places such as India had histories of their own and then proceeded to imply that the only possible history was the one that the British empire established and fashioned. Historians and intellectuals were complicit in this project, as Priya Satia convincingly demonstrates in her book.

There was a two-pronged strategy to justify conquest at the academic level: Empire and Reform. India is not only the most typical case but also the most important. The first step was to deny that India and its people had a history of their own. In his influential writing 'History of British India,' James Mill claimed that India's history could be written as part of British history. The German philosopher, Hegel, admired the literary and cultural achievements of India but believed that India had no past. Hegel wrote:

> "Anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of the treasures of Indian literature can see that this country, so rich in truly profound spiritual achievements, has no history."

More than once, he has made the same claim. Even Karl Marx argued that India was trapped in a warp of "changelessness" (read no history), which he conceptualized as the "Asiatic mode of production" as a characteristic. The lack of history made India inferior to Europe, so India was not yet prepared to accept the gifts of freedom and liberty offered by the Enlightenment. For India to receive the gifts of independence, democracy, and capitalist modernity, they had to be prepared (reformed). A benevolent despotism was the best that a nation like India could hope for until the liberty and democracy training was completed. John Stuart Mill wrote in On Liberty- one of the foundational texts of liberalism- that, "Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of affairs before the time when humanity has evolved to the point where it can be improved through free and equal discussion. Until then, they have no choice but to submit to an Akbar or a Charlemagne, if they can find one."

This explicit declaration left unclear how long it would last for the tutorials on independence and democracy and it nurtured what was called "the illusion of permanence" by the historian Francis Hutchins. In 1872, Gladstone, the liberal prime minister, wrote to Lord Northbrook, the then viceroy of India, "when we go, if we are ever to go." and, of course, there was no recognition that the British empire, on which the sun was never meant to set, was built on vile invasion, theft, plundering and systemic abuse of India's people and wealth. All of these aspects of the empire were justified by the British civilizing project-the onerous White Man's Burden. Conquest and exploitation were never accepted as part of a well-thought-out policy design product. As historian J.H. Seeley (in) famously stated, the empire was acquired in a fit of inattention.

It is important to criticize Seeley and his ilk because his influence lasted far beyond the 19th century, and Priya Satia does so with great force. In the second half of the twentieth century, historians started to investigate the activities and functions of the English East India Company in terms of "self-interests" of

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individuals or groups of individuals, influenced by Lewis Namier's method of historical research. Thus, plunder and conquests were not the results of policies but self-seeking aspirations of men at the outposts, whether they are governor-general or private traders. Thus, imperialism vanished as a category to be replaced by interest-group competition.

The opposite of imperialism-nationalism-also came to be seen as an extension of this form of analysis as the product of conflicting self-interests of displeased elites. More recently, a "new imperial history" has emerged on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, attempting to deny the coherence of imperialist policies. Instead, there were a variety of projects with various objectives, as well as the tantalizing prospect of several imperial futures. The empire, it is inferred, originated from this mess. It is equally important to emphasize, at the heart of the Satia book, the double standards used by British historians, intellectuals, and policymakers of the nineteenth century: independence and democracy at home, despotism in the territories conquered. These double standards were developed by conquest and empire-building, to which most British were complicit, wittingly or otherwise. Partha Chatterjee, a social scientist, has coined the phrase "the rule of colonial difference," which works as follows:

> "When a supposedly universally valid normative proposition is held not to apply to the colony due to some inherent moral deficiency in the latter. As a result, even as the rights of man were declared in revolutionary assemblies in Paris in 1789, the revolt on Saint Domingue (now Haiti) was suppressed because those rights could not apply to black slaves."

The operation of this rule was motivated by the belief that what had occurred in a small part of the world, Europe, was fundamentally superior to what existed in other parts of the world, to the institutions and the ideas that had evolved there. A province of the globe claimed to be the globe.

While the strength and lucidity of the claims of Satia are admirable, it is also apprehensive about using "conscience" as a category of historical analysis. Are human beings, even decent, well-intentioned beings, always guided by their conscience, or are they always true to their conscience? Let us consider a group of exceptionally gifted 20th-century individuals who, in good faith, pursued an illusion. Three of the best historians of the second half of the last century (in my opinion)-E.P. Thompson, Christopher Hill, and Ranajit Guha- were/are all people of great intellectual wisdom and dignity. They can be characterized by no reckoning as men without conscience. But for most of their adult lives, before the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, all three embraced and justified Stalinism as members of the Communist Party, a dictatorship that systematically exploited the people of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It is hard to understand by consciousness this process of following an illusion before a disruption kills innocence.

Very notably, Satia mentions the example of the historian Margery Perham, or dame Margery as she was referred to in Oxford, who, due to the rediscovery of her Christian faith, moved from being a liberal imperialist into a skeptic of the empire. The example may be given by Edward Thompson, the founder of E.P., or by Charles Freer Andrews. He, as Christian missionaries, could never reconcile with British imperialism and remained lifelong friends of Indian nationalists.

The larger argument that I am trying to make through these examples is that consciousness is an individual-centered entity almost by definition. Imperialism, most emphatically, is not creating an empire. Individual fears and anxieties-or, to put it another way, consciousness-operate and register at a different level than state policy that led to imperial expansion and the rhetoric that justified it. The views of the empire's paladins were molded by the dominant discourse emanating from the intellectual machinery of the enlightenment in the 19th century. Even people with "conscience" could not avoid the contagion of this discursive formation more easily. Despite his understanding of the violence associated with British rule in India, Karl Marx saw British rule as an unconscious instrument of history.

The book of Priya Satia dazzles by its insight but also points to other riddles and mysteries that historians have to address and decipher, notably self-conscious radical historians.

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