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ANOTHER INVESTIGATION  
OF POSTCOLONIAL FAILURE

**I**N THIS ESSAY I WANT TO TAKE UP A SET OF POSSIBILITIES opened up by two texts, Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and its Fragments* and Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*. A crucial, if somewhat under-theorized problematic in both cases is the question of the "limit," the limits of "community" for Chatterjee and of "history" for Chakrabarty. What makes such limits possible? What lies beyond or outside the limit? To put it another way: what are the tensions that inform these limits, and that bring them into crisis? It is my contention that certain questions can be opened up in this regard by bringing these texts into conversation with the philosopher Stanley Cavell, listening to his provocative encounters with the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*. What allows me to make these connections here is the recent work of Veena Das which uses Cavell and Wittgenstein in ways that point us to a somewhat different set of problems involving the production of knowledge. Centrally, as I will argue—for historiography, for anthropology, and other less disciplined encounters of thought in the world—the problems and possibilities open out onto the terrain of what has been named in philosophy as ethics. And Cavell takes us some distance in understanding the complex relationship between ethics and language. For me the immediate pressure for this conversation comes from utterances I hear in a very different sphere. In the past few months, more specifically since the time of the recent Gujarat "riots"<sup>1</sup> in India, in late February and March 2002, I have been

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NOTE: This essay was written in 2003, a few months after the Gujarat riots in India, a somewhat unprecedented event, in terms of the scale of the involvement of the state, in enabling and in many cases even perpetrating the violence. Although the texts, concepts and descriptions taken up by this text touch only briefly on the specific event of the riots, affectively, the argument carries the marks of the deep anguish of that period. The BJP, the Hindu nationalist party, which was implicated in those riots, subsequently lost the General elections in India in 2004, and is no more in power at the national level, although it is far from clear that riots had anything to do with their defeat in the elections. Is this "defeat" cause enough to move away from that earlier anguish, and toward a different set of affects or conceptual imperatives? This is hardly as self-evident as it seems. Firstly, because the Narendra Modi-led BJP state government, most directly implicated in those riots, is still very much in place in Gujarat, as are the deep societal polarizations (according to several recent observers), which have periodically provided the conditions of possibility for outbreaks of violence in the region. The present institutional differences between the national and the regional levels of government notwithstanding, it seems to us entirely antithetical to sustained political analysis, to have one's affects and imperatives entirely dictated by the political party which happens to be in power. Much closer to the concerns of this essay is the level of micro-

spending time at a number of internet chat rooms and websites, primary among which is Hindu Unity <<http://www.hinduunity.org/>>. This is a kind of coalition virtual space for the online platforms of a number of political/religious/social organizations, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Bajrang Dal, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Shiv Sena and the Nation of Hindutva among others.<sup>2</sup> In the language that I inherit and inhabit, we call these the representatives of the Hindu (far) Right. The conversations on these websites shake the ground on which I stand (which, as we will see, is a crucial concept for Wittgenstein). I cannot possibly be a part of these conversations, so I observe them and return to the safety of the people and the texts I consider my own. On numerous occasions in this essay I will use snatches of these conversations to ignite the discussion I want to have. There are then, two distinct but intimately related tensions at work here, simultaneously theoretical and pragmatic, each with its individual emergencies. Here is the first: These texts by Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty bring questions to the discipline of history that might usefully interact with anthropology, as it manifests itself in the recent work of Veena Das. The second is a somewhat deeper tension, between ontology and politics, to which perhaps neither can help us fashion an adequate response at this stage. However, I hope that the approach I try and follow here rearranges things somewhat, so as to let us look (again) at the nature of the problem.

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politics, in which domain several of the conflicts mapped here remain very much alive (related to but distinct from the institutional power gained or lost by Hindu Right organizations), simmering at the level of potentiality, and ready to coagulate again, at the macro-political, or institutional level, depending on future circumstances. In this sense it might be crucial to retain some of the anxiety and anguish of that period, since a lot happens when seemingly nothing is happening. But then, is it worthwhile in itself, to “repeat” that anguish? Here it would be crucial to hold such an affect in abeyance, placing some distance between events and the concepts which are provoked by it. I have, subsequently, discovered at least the semblance of a path, internal to the work of Cavell, and the lines of philosophy which this essay invokes, which leads away from some of the conceptual blockages that the latter part of this text describes (and which is partially the cause of its anguish), as regards, for instance “secular” writings on “religion”. For this, see my “Re-inhabiting Civil Disobedience” in Hent de Vries & Lawrence Sullivan (eds.) *Political Theologies* (Fordham UP, forthcoming, 2006).

- <sup>1</sup> The months of February and March 2002 witnessed intense violence in parts of Gujarat in India, directed mainly against the local Muslim population. Several residents of Gujarat, journalists, Human Rights groups, Gujarat-based NGOs and other observers described this period of violence as a pogrom, aided and organized by functionaries of the State, including the Chief Minister Narendra Modi, belonging to the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), which was also the ruling majority party at the central-national level at the time. I went to assist ongoing relief efforts in Gujarat in June 2002 with the Citizen’s Initiative, a coalition of Gujarat and Delhi-based NGOs. My account of this visit is in *Seminar*, “One Week in Aman Chowk”, Issue 517, September 2002, p. 78-85.
- <sup>2</sup> As a mode of trans-local, trans-national sociality, the internet chat room may well be the more dispersed, chaotic, and anonymous late modern avatar of the *adda*. (cf. Chakrabarty’s insightful discussion of the *adda*, as a space of gathering and conversation in *Provincializing Europe* (2000. Princeton NJ: Princeton UP). While it is possible to be a completely fictitious person on the internet, chat rooms are not as ‘anonymous’ as they are often made out to be. On the Hindu Unity chat site, for instance, there was an Amarendra Bhai (the moderator of the site) who several people seemed to know personally. Others working under aliases—Ganesha Devotee, Allah Isshaytan, Chakra, CurvedSabre are some of the regulars—were known to be skilled at particular kinds of statements and commentary.

Let us set up the philosophical grounds for our conversation by pointing to a certain kinship between *The Nation and Its Fragments* and *Provincializing Europe*, recognizing a similarity and a difference, each of which helps us locate respective points of contact with Cavell's work. For most of their empirical insights, Chatterjee and Chakrabarty's texts both depend on a very similar archive, one that we could call the archive of Bengali literary modernity/print capitalism. The actual methodological-theoretical practice that both Chatterjee and Chakrabarty bring to this archive rests largely on the application of techniques we have learnt from Michel Foucault. But let us concentrate a little more on this apparent similarity because on closer inspection it turns out to be a difference. To begin with we might say that "Communities and the Nation", the last chapter of *The Nation and its Fragments*, is the ground for the subsequent emergence of *Provincializing Europe* (in particular the last sub-section of the chapter, "Capital and Community").<sup>3</sup> I quote the relevant lines from Chatterjee's text:

If there is one great moment that turns the provincial thought of Europe to universal philosophy, the parochial history of Europe to universal history, it is the moment of capital—capital that is global in its territorial reach and universal in its conceptual domain. (1992, p.235)

As the opposition or counter-concept to the above global-territorial/universal-conceptual reach of capital, Chatterjee presents the notion of "community": an opposition he regards as "the great unsurpassed contradiction in Western social philosophy." Further, he argues, "Community" as an idea "remains impoverished and limited to the singular form of the nation-state because it is denied a legitimate life in the world of the modern knowledges of human society. This denial in turn, is related to the fact that by its very nature, *the idea of community marks a limit to the realm of disciplinary power*" (1992, p.237 emphasis mine).

Foucault's work has come to be accepted as divided into three related but somewhat distinct phases: archaeology, genealogy and ethics. The final phase of Foucault's work—*History of Sexuality*, "Technologies of the Self," "Self-writing"—explores the role of "technique" as a mode of relation to oneself and to others. The object of investigation in these cases being particular modes of relatedness; very much the domain of what we might choose to otherwise name as "community." While "discipline" and "technique" are not the same thing for Foucault, neither are they irreducibly different. Given the intricacies of technique, artistry and modes of relationality (all of which require training and practice) in no sense does something resembling "community" mark any sort of limit to the realm of disciplinary power. Clearly then, in *The Nation and its Fragments*, we are on the terrain of an archaeology of knowledge, not (yet)

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<sup>3</sup> Taking into account the fact that the chapter "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History" from *Provincializing Europe* was already in circulation at the time as an essay, and that there is obviously a process of cross-fertilization at work here.

primarily concerned with ethics. I continue quoting from the point where I left off above, as we approach the end of this crucial paragraph of Chatterjee's text:

My hypothesis, then, is that an investigation into the idea of the nation, by uncovering a necessary contradiction between capital and community, is likely to lead us to a fundamental critique of modernity from within itself. (1992, p.238)

We might say that this is precisely the investigation Chakrabarty undertakes in *Provincializing Europe*, though it takes him in a slightly different direction, and crucially so for our purposes. What is the nature of this shift? There are two, the first of which leads to the other. Firstly, Chakrabarty replaces Chatterjee's crucial 'capital/community' relation with another division—different yet similar. Via Marx and Heidegger, Chakrabarty differentiates between what he calls History 1 (the march of capital) on the one hand and History 2 (modes of being that interrupt the otherwise homogenizing tendency of capital) on the other. It is the question of modes of being that leads Chakrabarty towards what we might call an ontological self-examination; the 'making strange' of his own occupation as a historian and the disciplinary practice of historiography as one way among others of dealing with "pastness," one's own or another's. This leads Chakrabarty to move his primary focus from the "Nation" to "History" (keeping in mind that both of these are intimately related in postcolonial modernity). This move might more accurately be described as a turn from 'discourse' (power/knowledge) to "ethics" (technologies of the self). There are then slightly different Foucaults at work in these two texts. While *The Nation and its Fragments* is the Foucault of *Discipline and Punish* and *Birth of the Clinic*, *Provincializing Europe* (particularly in the more descriptive second half of the book) is the Foucault of the later *History of Sexuality* period. This opening into ethics gives us our first point of contact with Cavell: the Wittgensteinian formulation on the intimate relationship between ethics and language. Let us mark the relationship between Chakrabarty's "History 2" and Chatterjee's "Community" as a problem to return to, following our encounter with Das-Cavell-Wittgenstein.

Having established a difference, let us consider the similarity between these two texts, and establish our second point of contact with Cavell. Despite his move away, to a certain extent from Chatterjee, there is one crucial "postcolonial" problematic that Chakrabarty holds on to, which is the driving force of his text in some sense; namely, a "critique of modernity from within itself." He locates the philosophical basis for this critique in "a fault line central to modern European social thought...the divide between the analytic and hermeneutic traditions in the social sciences" (2000, p.17) with Marx on the one side, Heidegger on the other. The actuality of this distinction may be quite arguable, but for now let us accept this as our picture of Western philosophy and social theory, since it is a potentially useful cleavage. The question then arises: are there others at the point of this "fault line" that we can learn from? The maverick figure of the later Wittgenstein (more than anywhere, in the *avatar* in which he appears in the work

of Stanley Cavell) presents himself, standing in a different place from this philosophical binary. Throughout his work Cavell attempts in different ways to bring the analytic and continental traditions into conversation with one another, as also with other recognizable modes of thought in the world (cinema, literature), struggling to chart out his own (philosophy's) relationship to modernity. In terms of a basic problematic (finding one's place in the world), we do have some common ground to begin with. Our task at hand becomes somewhat simpler inasmuch as Veena Das has worked to domesticate this body of philosophical work for social theory in ways that address questions of violence, subjectivity, time and techniques of the self: things that surely tell us something about our place within modernity and the diverse modes in which people do (or are made to) inhabit it. Having established our two points of contact, we can now begin our conversation.

### The Eyes of a Child

What is it to inherit a life of thought? This is perhaps *the* crucial question of this essay. For Chakrabarty, the disciplinary practice of "history" has at its epistemological center, the figure of "Europe," a fact that can be confirmed by a glance at any bibliography or a closer analysis of the theoretical apparatus of historiography. Thus, histories that are named "African" or "Indian" are actually disguised histories of "Europe" (the figure of Europe being the imperial-conceptual center of world-history). Appropriately then, this encounter should begin with precisely this question: one that is in no way uniquely "postcolonial," but can be posed as such, and has been, quite forcefully so by *Provincializing Europe*. The question of inheritance is one that Stanley Cavell takes up each time he writes, a question that makes it his business to consider that what is at stake in this particular act of writing is also the continuation of philosophy as a human endeavour. His writing then, is an exploration by one for whom the relation between the past of his enterprise and its present has become problematic (as for Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe*, and as it has been for a significant proportion of anthropological texts for at least the last fifteen years). Thinking through this problematic brings Chakrabarty to the question of temporality, one that he works out mainly through his reading of Heidegger. As he puts it towards the end of the book,

Pasts are there in taste, in practices of embodiment, in the cultural training the senses have received over generations. They are there in practices I sometimes do not even know I engage in...Whatever the nature of these pasts that already "are", they are always oriented to futures that also already "are". They exist without my being decisionist about them. (2000, p.251)

In order to drive his point home Chakrabarty inserts a beautiful quote from the

Bengali poet Arunkumar Sarkar. Sarkar writes of his childhood (I quote from Chakrabarty's text):

Ever since I was a child, I was attracted to [the] sound [of language], and it was this attraction that gave rise to the desire to write poetry. My mother used to recite different kinds of poems, my father Sanskrit verses of praise [to deities], and my grandmother the hundred and eight names of [the god] Krishna. I did not understand their meanings but I felt absorbed in the sounds. (2000, p.251)

Let us listen to the first words of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, themselves a quote from Augustine's *Confessions*:

When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and grasped that the thing they called was the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having or avoiding something. Thus as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires. (Wittgenstein 1953: p.1)<sup>4</sup>

Both of the above (Sarkar and Augustine) are in some sense, scenes of "culture-as-inheritance," subjectivity in process in the meeting and conflict between voices and generations. Language, "sounds" and modes of expression in these cases are life-giving. One can sense here an allegory for Chakrabarty's "postcolonial' intellectual,"<sup>5</sup> reading the above passage from Wittgenstein (from Augustine) as Cavell does and sensing the presence of the child, who inherits his/her culture as if by theft (Das 1998, p.174): one who must divine speech for himself or herself, training the mouth to form signs so that he or she may use these signs to recognize and express his or her own desires. Reading Wittgenstein's text, one might say that the child does not disappear; it remains as a presence that haunts the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Chakrabarty uses three "postcolonial" intellectuals, Jomo Kenyatta, Anthony

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<sup>4</sup> In her essay "Wittgenstein and Anthropology", Veena Das refers to this, following Cavell, as a "scene of instruction." Das, V. 'Wittgenstein and Anthropology', *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 1998, 27: 171-195

While Cavell has written about this passage several times, the idea of "culture as inheritance" is explained for me most productively in his "Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture." See Cavell, S. 1989. 'Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture', in *This New yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>5</sup> I refer here to the first chapter of *Provincializing Europe*, also circulated as an essay, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History" in *Representations*, no.37, Winter 1992.

Appiah and D.D. Kosambi, to make an argument about what he calls “heterotemporality” or the fragmentary nature of the “now” in the face of anachronism(s), i.e. practices which cannot be explained by our “rational” selves. Kenyatta, as a child, serves as an apprentice to his magician grandfather, while Appiah, also as a child, hides in the corner of the room, watching his father pour Scotch on the carpet as an offering to their ancestors. Chakrabarty links this idea of an “anachronism” to a desire inherent in the “modern political subject” for “a certain degree of freedom with respect to the past” (2000, p.244). His move “beyond historicism” then, invoking Heidegger is to argue for the “now” as “constantly fragmentary and not-one,” “a radical sense of never being a totality” (2000, 250). While this is certainly a useful insight to reach, it is precisely in restricting this “not-oneness” only to the domain of temporality that the argument falls short (since to argue that the “present” is not-one is not to deny the possibility that it is made up of distinct layers of linear time, in a hierarchical relationship of past/present—traditional/modern, which is what Chakrabarty set out to argue against in the first place). An interesting formulation in itself, a “fragmented” or “multiple” present just does not solve the problem here. In these scenes of thought/culture-as-inheritance, what are the alternate vectors along which we can conceive of these disjunctions? What forms of separation do we encounter between these fragments, if we are not to label them simply as “temporality” at cross-purposes? Here we might stage our first encounter with Cavell, in order to introduce two crucial concepts he derives from his readings of Wittgenstein: “criteria” and “forms of life.”

### Criteria / Forms of Life

Kripke’s reading of Wittgenstein on the question of “rule-following” has come to be accepted almost without question. This has been quite unfortunate in terms of the uses to which Wittgenstein could be put within social theory.<sup>6</sup> In her piece “Wittgenstein and Anthropology” (1998) Das points out that scenes of instruction in the *Philosophical Investigations* raise the question of “what it is to be able to project a concept or a word or a procedure into new situations” (1998, 175). She discusses Kripke’s (1982) interpretation of Wittgenstein, where “our justification for saying that a child has learned how to follow a rule comes from the confidence that being a member of a community allows the individual person to act ‘unhesitatingly but blindly’” (1998, 176). This moment of her text is quite relevant to our discussion:

If we take the teacher in Kripke (1982) to be the representative of the

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<sup>6</sup> For a fascinating account of Wittgenstein’s ‘disappearance’ from the world of social theory and the complex politics of intellectual rivalries, read T.P. Uschanov’s piece “Ernest Gellner’s Criticisms of Wittgenstein and Ordinary Language Philosophy” in *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality, Politics*, London: Routledge, 2002.

community within which the child is being initiated, then I am compelled to ask whether the “agreement” in a form of life that makes the community a community of consent can be purely a matter of making the child arrive at the same conclusion or the same procedure that the adult would have applied. Rather, it appears to me that as suggested by Cavell (1990), this agreement is a much more complicated affair in which there is an entanglement of rules, customs, habits, examples and practices and that we cannot attach salvational importance to any one of these in questions pertaining to the inheritance of culture. (Das 1998, 177)

In order to illustrate this proposition Das draws on an example from Michael Gilson's ethnography of violence and narrative, *Lords of the Lebanese Marches*, of the story of the male child as he ‘becomes a man’ in Akkar, a northern province of Lebanon, through an initiation into the rules of vengeance. She analyses the example:

As for the young boy, it is his display of the aesthetics of violence that makes him a man. No one can say that he acted exactly as the elder would have acted in his place, for such scenes are also marked by contingencies of all kinds in which one might end up not a hero but a buffoon. Yet it is through the entanglement of rule, custom, habit, and example that the child has not only been initiated in the community of men but has also found his own style of being a man. (Das 1998, 178)

Crucial to this discussion is a re-reading of the key Wittgensteinian insight on the idea of “following a rule”: rules cannot be justified by reference to reality. This much we already knew from most modernist philosophies of language. Our “common” language cannot lay down the rules that will cover every conceivable circumstance. What then is the basis for our conversations? Following Cavell, let us now introduce the two conceptual personages I mention above: “criteria” and “forms of life.”<sup>7</sup> Criteria, to put it as briefly as possible, are the linguistic specifications in terms of which competent speakers judge whether something falls under a specific concept. Grammar (in this case philosophical, not linguistic) applies the word to the world (as criteria of individuation, i.e. what is to count as a “table,” or even something more abstract, as in for example, what is to count as “pain”).<sup>8</sup> Equally importantly, as a form of ethics, grammar links human beings with one another and aligns them with the world (since criteria also make manifest what counts as “human” beings). In other words, criteria specify what must be the case if something is to count as an instance of a certain kind. They are the conditions of possibility of any kind of knowledge-claim. Following

<sup>7</sup> In the following discussion I draw mainly from the following interpretations of Cavell: Stephen Mulhall's *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (1994, Oxford: Oxford UP) and his edited collection *The Cavell Reader* (1996 Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell) I also draw a lot from Veena Das: “Wittgenstein and Anthropology” (1998).

<sup>8</sup> For instance if I was to see a bleeding man crying and calling out to me, I would name it as an instance of “pain.” However, if I heard a tape-recorded scream I wouldn't say “The tape-recorder is in pain”. Also see Cavell's major text *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (1979.Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Cavell further, we would say that to agree in “criteria” means that we share routes of interests and feeling, modes of response, a sense of similarity, significance, outrageousness etc. To put it another way, we share in “forms of life” (Mulhall 1996).

“Forms of life” has also been a contentious term for users of Wittgenstein, so let us flesh it out a bit more. In his essay *Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture* (1989) Cavell points out that the term “forms of life” in Wittgenstein has typically been taken to emphasize the social nature of human language and conduct. However, it is not a conventionalized or contractual sense of agreement that is at work here. Cavell differentiates between a horizontal/ethnological sense of the term, and a vertical/biological sense (this is a very different take on a problem that Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe* senses as being one of translation-transition, and attempts to solve via the “History 1/ History 2” separation. Chakrabarty’s analysis remains in the domain of the “horizontal” forms of life, separated by different time-lines). According to Cavell, the “horizontal” sense of the term, “forms of life,” points to a notion of human diversity, in the fact that social institutions such as marriage and property vary across societies. The “vertical,” however, refers to the distinctions captured in language itself between the human and the non-human, the “so-called ‘lower’ or ‘higher’ forms of life, between say poking at your food, perhaps with a fork, and pawing at it or pecking at it” (Cavell 1989). The vertical sense of the term Cavell suggests “marks the limit of what is considered human in a society and provides the conditions of the use of criteria as applied to others” (Das 1998, 180). Thus, in the two distinct horizontal and vertical senses of the term “forms of life,” we have a double stress: firstly on *forms* of life, and secondly on forms of *life*. This much being clear, the question arises: if there is some sense of a “shared agreement” here, is there any source of insecurity? It is possible to argue that the entire *Philosophical Investigations* is dogged by, or working therapeutically against, the possibility—the threat and temptation—of an insecurity, that in the domain of philosophy has been named as skepticism. Equally, Cavell addresses this question in one way or another, each time he writes. Since “criteria” are based on agreement (custom, habit, practice etc.) they do not confer any permanence or certainty. The skeptical repudiation of such agreement is a standing human possibility. So in Cavell’s reading of Wittgenstein, what philosophically constitutes the everyday is “our criteria,” and the standing possibility of repudiating them.

I can hear the “skeptics” among us objecting—but how does this apply to “concrete” situations? Is “ordinary life” like this?<sup>9</sup> In fact, it is precisely on the

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<sup>9</sup> I will not go into the ‘application’ of these ideas at any great length because Veena Das has already used the above framework in a series of essays. It is interesting to think about this in relation to Subaltern Studies. It was a person with a very different set of tools, prior to the encounter with Cavell and Wittgenstein writing “Subaltern as Perspective” in the 1980s for *Subaltern Studies VI*. In that essay a number of questions were raised on rumour, violence, and how the “evented-ness” of something like a riot or an insurgency (or even something as “momentous” as the partition), the

question of the “ordinary” that Cavell has the most insightful observations to make. My own interest in this framework arises out of a puzzle I face regarding that fragment of the present political situation in India, to which I find myself most intensely adjacent. Inhabiting this conceptual space I find that it has been written and scratched over many times (witness the proliferation of the debate on “secularism”) but I want to visit it again, if only to understand why it has such limited room for maneuver. Specifically, I seek to understand the contours of a peculiar kind of failure encountered by writers and intellectuals in their criticism of the Hindu Right and religious mass movements in India. It is with this in mind that I read the texts of Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty, as being closest to the impulse that I have here (and perhaps this resembles an inheritance from Subaltern Studies): “failure” not as abdication but as a beginning. Working as they are within necessarily circumscribed formations, I take these texts not only as analytical elaborations of nationalism or the discipline of history but as words wanting to address the political life of the imagination, to which they bear a certain responsibility. Failure then resides not as something opposed to an a priori or fixed idea of ‘success’ but in a lack of productivity, a mode of being based solely on negation, an inability to engage with the spaces, now expanding, which constitute the domain of the Hindu Right. And it is in this inability to address a political crisis (more on this as we proceed) that I think there is something in the Wittgensteinian theme of language as experience (and not simply as message): of ourselves as the victims of a language that reveals things about us of which we are ourselves unaware. The sense here is of “being controlled by the words one speaks or hears or sees rather than of controlling them” (Das 1998, 185).

Let us move towards understanding more specifically, what this means. The Hindu Unity website ([www.hinduunity.org](http://www.hinduunity.org)) has a very active discussion board. On 11/29/02, Surinder Attri (registered as a Hindu Unity Advisor)<sup>10</sup> posted a comment on the “Origin of the term Mosque.” I quote:

1. Writes SS:

Examine the very interesting and derogatory term for the word ‘Mosque’ which originated from the Spanish word for Mosquito. Purportedly King Fernidad (sic) stated he wanted to swat the Muslim Moor invaders in Medieval Spain like mosquitoes!!! [His text now shifts to capital letters] ALWAYS CALL A MASJID BY ITS PROPER TERM MOSQUE AND HAVE

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primary object of inquiry for the historian, would then be *carried forward* into the weave of everyday life. Inasmuch as problems are ever “solved” in the social sciences, Das has answered these questions. I am thinking in particular of the essays “Violence and the Work of Time” (2000) in *Signifying Identities* (ed.) Anthony P. Cohen, New York: Routledge. See also “The Act of Witnessing: Violence, Poisonous Knowledge and Subjectivity” (2000) in *Violence and Subjectivity* (eds. Kleinman, Das, Reynolds & Ramphela), Oxford UP: New Delhi.

<sup>10</sup> To post to the list you have to be a registered user. When you post, a designation appears below your name, either “Registered User,” “[List] Moderator” or other possible designations. <<http://www.hinduunity.org/>>

THE ATTITUDE OF THE WISE SPANISH KING...We give our thanks to the Smart-Spanish King Ferdinand, for introducing us to his expert and thoughtful treatment of the Sullas. Ferdinand's Technique seems like a technique built for times like these (our times).

A number of responses followed in the next couple of days before the discussion ran out of steam. The next day "Mohammed Allah," a registered user, replied:

Masjid is amalgam of Arab words for "prostration" and "place". And that is exactly what sullas do between jihad and wife-beating. The sight of Muslim males prostrating on Temple Mount with their behinds pointed to the Dome on the Rock is as disgusting as it is revealing...

On the same day Aditya Bhaskara another registered user, changed the register of this etymological debate somewhat by inserting some "facts." He did not however depart from the basic theme.

While sullahs are useless low-lifes, like MOSQUITOES (sic) the Semitic root of the word MOSQUE predates the prophet Muhammad by thousands of years. The Semitic word SGD (to bow down, to worship) is the common root of MASGID (Aramaic), MISGAD (Hebrew) and MASJID (Arabic) for place of worship (Arabic does not have a G, only J, except in Egypt where every J is pronounced G). MASJID became MEZQUITA (Old Spanish), MOSCHEA (Old Italian), MOUSQUAIE (Old French) and finally MOSQUE. The word MOSQUITO is Spanish and Portuguese diminutive of MOSCA (fly) or MUSCA (in Latin).

The last posting I found on this discussion is dated 12/01/02.<sup>11</sup> The language of this discussion emphasizing the bestiality of the Muslim (male, in this case) tells us something about the agreement on which this discussion is predicated. As Aditya Bhaskara puts it, "sullahs are useless *low-lifes* (sic)": a *lower* form of life. What makes the sheer violence of this prose possible is that its object breaches not a horizontal but a vertical limit of the forms of life. Veena Das' writing indicates that periods of violence, such as a riot or genocide are times when *life* enters politics. "Violence and the Work of Time" (2000) describes the life of Manjit who had been abducted during the partition and was brought back by the Indian army. Over the numerous decades of their acquaintance, Manjit described to Das in intimate detail the shifting contours of the forms of domestic violence and familial conflict that pervaded her everyday life and kinship. However, she never once mentioned what had happened to her during the time she was abducted. Das suggests:

the non-narrative of this violence is what is unsayable within the forms of

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the day comes after the month in the way postings are dated in this website. This indicates that the website is definitely moderated from outside India, possibly from the U.S, since in India the date always comes before the month.

everyday life...the range and scale of the human which is tested and defined and extended in the disputations proper to everyday life moves through the unimaginable violence of the Partition into forms of life that are seen as not belonging to life proper. That is to say, these experiments with violence raise certain doubts about life itself, and not only about the forms it can take. Was it a man or a machine that plunged a knife into the private parts of a woman after raping her? Were those men or animals who went around killing and collecting castrated penises as signs of their prowess? (Das 2000, 70)

In the strange possibilities that technologies enable, a sphere such as the Hindu Unity discussion list renders these verbal experiments with life imminently sayable, as a mode of exchange and the formation of a community of "agreement," characterized as it is in its belonging-together by Nietzschean *ressentiment* in the strongest possible terms.

### Unmesh and the Professor

Let us return to the task of historiography via *Provincializing Europe*, turning our attention to the question of ethics, a term that denotes a set of problems somewhat more familiar to the domain of philosophy. We work through this keeping in mind our recent acquaintance with the concepts of "criteria" and "forms of life." The chapter on "Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts" in *Provincializing Europe* deals most directly with the writing of history as a "secular" disciplinary practice: one that cannot deal with the supernatural in terms other than those that objectify it as a "belief." Ranajit Guha cannot "believe" the Santal's statement, "I rebelled...because Thakur [a local deity] made an appearance and told me to rebel" (2000, p.103). Chakrabarty chooses to name these utterances "subaltern pasts," or "pasts that cannot even enter academic history as belonging to the historian's own position" (2000, p105). The strategy he proposes for the practitioner in these cases is to make the "unworking" of history visible. The specific efficacy of "subaltern pasts" is that they "make visible this disjuncture" (2000, p.109) between what can and cannot be sensibly written about. His suggestion: "Thus the writing of history must implicitly assume a plurality of times existing together, a disjuncture of the present with itself" (2000, p.109). This returns him to the theme of temporality—"What I have called subaltern pasts may be thought of as intimations we receive—while engaged in the specific activity of historicizing—of a shared, unhistoricizable, and ontological now" (2000, p.113). While Chakrabarty points to a significant problem here ("Time is out of joint"), we might point to two problems with the solutions he suggests. The first is relatively simple to describe. While Chakrabarty represents it as a problem of a specifically temporal nature (an irreducibly plural "now," an "anachronism"), I see it more as a problem of criteria (which involves more than a "temporal" disjuncture). The difference

between Ranajit Guha and the Santhal may or may not be one of “time” (who knows whether a chronicler closer to the Santhal in time might have been as uncharitable in his/her description?). This disjuncture might better be described as one of non-criterial difference. They cannot have a conversation because they do not share in criteria (their conception of vertical forms of life). The second problem with a “subaltern past” is a more troubling one, and it arises in part because Chakrabarty puts too little of his own subjectivity at stake in the question of what can (or cannot) be rendered “sayable” in “our” disciplinary practice. In order to think this through I return to another discussion on HinduUnity, posted by Unmesh, a registered user and a graduate student of an architecture course at an American University (which he doesn’t name). This was one of the longest discussion threads on the website in the month of November 2002. I quote:

Hello people,

This is the first time I am posting here. I am studying architecture and wrote the following paper for a History of Architecture class. The professor so far had seemed very good, open to architecture from other parts of the world (not just the west) and he spoke some broken Hindi (or he would say Urdu). So, I was taken completely unaware when, after having read the paper (I assume he never really said so), he came up to me in public and started verbally attacking me! First he called me a Hindu fundamentalist! (I said that was a contradiction in terms but if he chooses to call me that fine with me) then he started to say that I was brainwashed! (I said at least that way I had a clean brain).

Then he asked me if I thought that Hindus in India are under threat by the Muslims. Anyway, he went on to say that Hinduism is not even a religion, etc etc. Same old garbage that they come up with. He said he had heard all my arguments before (but he did not reply to any one of them). Of course he mentioned Gujarat (I asked him about Kashmir and Pakistan and Bangladesh and what is done to non-muslims there). As usual he did not have any answers, only name calling. Anyway, the moral of the story is that even among the so called “open, liberal, academic” Americans, many of whom are well read, our story has only reached from one side—the opposing one. Anyway, the paper follows:

“India and the Perversion of History”

Indians have always been notorious for their poor sense of history. This is not to say that they have a poor memory, quite the contrary; the oldest known texts (the Vedas) have been carefully preserved in India through remarkable oral traditions...”

The rest of the paper makes an argument about the “distortion of history” which arises because “the disenfranchised classes created through the leftover colonial system of education are the English-speaking intellectuals that the international

media gets its reporting through...they have definite communist leanings and are therefore anti-Hindu on principle."<sup>12</sup> However, the main vitriol of the paper is not directed against British colonialism. Predictably, it focuses on the "medieval period." The paper goes on to assert that "the Islamic invasion of India was one of the bloodiest in human history." The main body of the text records archaeological proof of the existence of a temple at the present site of the Babri Mosque in U.P, India. According to the bibliography, the source for the essay is a document entitled: "The Evidence for the Ram Janambhoomi Mandir, Presented to the Government of India, New Delhi, December 23rd 1990, by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)."<sup>13</sup> The essay further proposes to take up similar research at various sites through North India and Rajasthan. The essay and the posting seem to have struck a chord with the audience on Hindu Unity because it received numerous responses. These varied from sympathy to supportive advice, while others made calls to take institutional or legal action against the professor for "discrimination." There were numerous offers to print this paper in other forums. One "powerful" list member, Akashvani, asked for a copy to circulate in a number of "mainstream e-journals where I have influence."

Helpfully, Akashvani added:

If you are having trouble with your professor this can be handled as an academic freedom matter, and we can arrange to have some high-level clout behind you on this issue. [Caps in original] ABSOLUTELY NO FOUR LETTER WORDS OR UNPARLIAMENTARY METHODS OF ACTING WHICH HAVE GOT US A BAD NAME AT HARVARD, WHARTON, PRINCETON AND YALE. That is the type of elite Ivy League audience that I am talking about.

Let me forestall one objection. It can be said that to call this a "subaltern" rendering of the past is to lose all sense of the word "subaltern." Admittedly, this kind of a narrative about the past is global in scope (For "Hindus all over the world"), overwhelming in its nation-wide political presence in India and hyper-modern in its supremacist, ethnicidal vision. This is the frequent and somewhat inadequate criticism made most often by Indian intellectuals against the Hindu Right: that while it pretends to an "ancient" tradition it is hyper-modern and that its version of the past is "constructed," probably by a small group of elites. However, inasmuch as one can be sure of such things, I have seen such a narrative about the "medieval period" (and its direct correlation with the present) in operation in various sites of conversation involving very diverse

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<sup>12</sup> This is an argument leveled in India against leading historians such as Sumit Sarkar, K.N.Pannikar and others by the Hindu Right. Erstwhile journalist turned politician Arun Shourie, a leading spokesperson of the far right has been most vociferous in these attacks.

<sup>13</sup> On December 6<sup>th</sup> 1992, a mob organized by several Hindu right wing organizations demolished the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, U.P. It was claimed that this mosque was established at the birth-place of Rama, the historical-mythical hero of the epic *Ramayana*. This incident was followed by large-scale riots in several parts of India. The site, which remains disputed, has been an issue in several election campaigns in subsequent years.

kinds of publics, elite or otherwise. At *paan* shops,<sup>14</sup> public telephone booths, middle-class drawing rooms, in government offices at various levels, in ethnographic engagements in Delhi, and in Ahmedabad in the period very shortly after the recent genocidal violence; in all of these spaces and more, I have noticed traces of the kinds of narratives that present themselves in full bloom on the Hindu Unity website. What is at stake here is much less the question of “actually existing” subalternity (whether such a narrative speaks itself through the voice of an immigrant Indian businessman in New Jersey or a mill-worker in Nagpur), and more the problem of what can and cannot, or should not, enter the discipline of history, and how it might do so. The problem with “minority” histories, as Chakrabarty himself points out, is that they often throw the “mainstream”—the serious business of historiography—into crisis. The stakes then become too high for the question to be put to rest with a general (and by now all-too-common) indication towards a genially accommodative “multiplicity.” And yet, in thinking this through, we must not let our arguments and positions ossify, thereby strengthening existing boundaries and hierarchies and weakening the pluralist impulse from which someone like Chakrabarty writes.

Walking on this double-edged sword, let us return to Unmesh’s story. Shortly afterwards, Unmesh drafted a long email to his professor, which he also shared with his community of listeners on the Hindu Unity discussion list. Referring to the charges made against him, the letter begins, “Dear Professor, I have to confess that I was taken aback the other day, when we met in the lecture hall...” He starts by referring to a recent talk at their university by a certain Hansen (presumably Thomas Blom Hansen), on his new book on Hindu Nationalism.

... in fact to me it is quite unbelievable that this present speaker Hansen is able to write a whole book on Hindu nationalism without even once mentioning the people who sparked it, let alone any consideration of their work. I mean the intellectuals; people like Ram Swarupji, Sita Ram Goel, Arun Shourie, Girilala Jain, V.S.Naipaul and many others. And yet in Western academic circles this book has been hailed as being great, this can only happen if these academics are clearly biased and want a tradition of stereotyping to be reinforced or if they have so successfully created an “image” of what they think India is that even in the face of evidence they refuse to be fair.

Slightly later, Unmesh attempts to politely criticize his professor using an argument that we may find uncanny in its familiarity:

You really reveal an inherent bias (one that persists in Western scholars not only when they look at India but any non-European culture), that of looking at another culture through your own, using its terms and its history as a “universal”—the problem is that sometimes, especially in the case of India,

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<sup>14</sup> The Paan shop (betel-leaf) is a very popular, usually lower class, space of congregation in neighborhoods and localities in many parts of India.

these terms are simply not applicable and they just do not fit no matter how they are spun. Let me allow you the fact that the word “secular” itself must be a post-renaissance one, but the concept is not, and the concept is quite central to Hinduism, it is not only part of the practice of Hinduism (there was no overbearing church in India so no renaissance was needed to make it secular), but there is also some discussion on the idea of secularity as a concept.

Let me make two necessary qualifications at this point. The first is that the focus of my energies is not Unmesh, so I will not spend time violently undoing his argument by unpacking the numerous generalizations he makes, or by pointing to the fact that caste seems to be totally erased from his version of Hinduism, or easier still, by quoting the anti-Islamic tirade that follows in the next few paragraphs; all of which earn him a home in the virtual space of Hindu Unity. As for the second qualification: the fact that the tone of the above paragraph written by Unmesh (“You really reveal an inherent bias”...) bears some resemblance to *Provincializing Europe* (and to a lot of South Asian/African postcolonial writing) does not operate as a “devastating critique,” either of Chakrabarty or of postcolonial theory more generally (since for many people, all this “post-modern/post-structuralist” confusion seems to “weaken” the grounds from which to criticize the Right). On the contrary, we might say that it is possible to come from completely different ethical standpoints and reach similar conclusions on particular problems, or partially agree on certain things. Not to recognize this is to fundamentally weaken the possibilities of either a critique or a conversation.

My interest here is more in pushing the argument that Chakrabarty has set up. The limit point of the activity of historiography, as I have tried to argue, is not only a question of recognizing a radically plural “now,” as *Provincializing Europe* might conceptually suggest. For me, it is more a problem of criteria and forms of life. Further, once we do begin to recognize these disjunctures, qua Chakrabarty, we face a more knotty set of issues on the terrain of ethics. And when we speak of a political/ethical confrontation on the terrain of history, memory or representation, we are on risky territory indeed. Crucially, the way out of such a conundrum is not to strengthen some mysterious entity named “Reason” or to impose stricter limits on what can and cannot be said. What we will need to pay closer attention to is a lesson Foucault, Cavell and many others have taught us: “knowledge,” in all cases, is a *relation* (of domination/power or alternatively of belief, understanding or even of complicity). The task we set for ourselves at the beginning of this essay was to follow Cavell’s formulations on the relationship between ethics (a mode of relation) and language. Here is something like a first principle for Cavell: a relation is open to the possibility—the threat/temptation—of repudiation, however this may be staged.

Let me substantiate this abstraction by attempting to speak to Unmesh. What is the mode of relation between Unmesh and me? Suppose we were to have a conversation, we might (god forbid!) be able to agree on some things.

Representation, as he argues in the above paragraph, is fraught with problems. To begin with we might agree on a certain conception of “history,” an activity which does bear some relation to the present, and in how it comes to be constituted. However, if we began to discuss “politics,” or even the “history of India,” after two or three sentences we would probably begin to develop serious points of difference. But we would, still be “arguing.” In order to convince him I would quote my “higher” authorities. Depending on where the conversation went this would vary, but from a random sampling of my possible bibliographies, I would probably bring out Marx, or Foucault, or closer to home, Sumit Sarkar, or Partha Chatterjee or Gyan Pandey perhaps, on the construction of communalism, or Ashis Nandy, if I got desperate. Unmesh would now begin to quote (if I am to look up the bibliography of his essays) Veer Savarkar, Koenraad Elst, Francois Gautier,<sup>15</sup> Arun Shourie, B.B.Lal and others, whom I may or may not have heard of. Here our conversation would begin to fall apart. He would shout at my history “Communist!” I would shout at his “Fascist!” I could quote any number of classic texts from my canon but it probably would not make a difference. Unmesh’s relation to me is based on the skeptical denial of my claim to knowledge, negating any grounds from which I can speak. Following Cavell, I know that the mere reiteration of criteria cannot amount to a refutation of skepticism (1969, 238).<sup>16</sup>

So much for his relation to me, what can be my mode of relation to him? I quote the last lines of his second email as he tells his Professor:

You started this discussion by calling me names and challenging my position, I have tried to turn it into a discussion in the millennia old Indian tradition of philosophical and religious debates, so I am open to any considered (not name calling) response you might have as long as you extend the same courtesy to me.

Given that Unmesh is as strong in his beliefs as I am in mine, could I extend any courtesy to him? Could I call him anything but “brainwashed”? Probably not, and I couldn’t imagine it being any other way. There is a more frightening possibility: What if Akashvani (who claimed Ivy League influence in the posting above) could in fact collude with some “high-level clout” to take action against the professor and turn it into a matter of “academic” *freedom*? An intelligent conservative on Unmesh’s side might argue that doing research on “Temples in Medieval India” need have no necessary connection with killing people in present-day India, however obvious the connection may seem to the Professor. The professor might respond: this is a project with no intellectual solidity whatsoever, it is a political one, characterized by pure *ressentiment*. The

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<sup>15</sup> Gautier, the correspondent for the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, has been valiantly defending Hinduism against various kinds of “attacks,” particularly that of “Islam,” for the past couple of years. At this point he is probably the most popular foreign journalist on the Hindu Right web network.

<sup>16</sup> Cavell, S. 1969. *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge UP.

intelligent conservative could argue back: and isn't that how the best critical historiography has emerged: in a political, oppositional relation to what it perceives as the existing, unsatisfactory order of things. Look at the Subaltern Studies project, for instance. Why privilege class or occupation as one node of opposition over religion, another?<sup>17</sup> By now the professor's views are under threat. His arguments become more basic. Well, he replies, because those were relationships with concrete material significance: poor people without resources denied the possibility of livelihood, suffering from oppression of various kinds, including narrative erasure. Oh, the conservative shoots back, so you think "suffering" can only be of a material kind. Couldn't a rich man suffer deep anguish, could not his identity be erased, his story be left untold? In fact (fires the conservative at the professor), you are nothing but a bleeding-heart liberal, pretending to feel sympathy for poor peasants and urban indigents, ensconced in the comfort of your plush office. And so (concludes the conservative), if there is an unwritten academic rule among your kind that says writing for the disadvantaged equals intellectual relevance then why shouldn't Unmesh be able to write for the people that he thinks are disadvantaged? And at least he doesn't have double-standards, pretending to feel pity for some hypothetical poor from a safe distance.

At this point, the Professor (and I along with him) have reached a position Cavell, following Wittgenstein, refers to as "bedrock": a place from where I cannot justify myself anymore. What remains then, as the basis of my actions? The answer: Belief, custom, habit, training, sensibility, orientation, and above all, the element of faith, all of which remain profoundly contestable. Here is the relevant line from the *Philosophical Investigations*: "If I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do...'" (1953, p.217).<sup>18</sup> Agreeing partially with Chakrabarty's formulation (not restricted anymore only to the domain of temporality) we might say that it is less that we take or "choose" our sense of pastness or criteria; rather it is criteria that take us. We (in social theory) are perhaps a little closer now to Guha's Santal when he says, "I did as my God told me to."

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<sup>17</sup> I face a similar problem in relation to the films of the documentary film-maker Anand Patwardhan, in "Work and Worship", *Critical Asian Studies* Vol.34, No.4 December 2002. A call for "necessary violence" as social transformation emerges at particular junctures from two quite different nodes, the extreme left, and more recently, from the extreme right, each with its specific histories and justifications. In the case of India, the extreme left has always had a very strong moderate left to counter it in its own language and its own terrain of mobilization. The Hindu Right has no such equivalent of an organized, moderate Hindu left. See also Ruth Vanita "Whatever Happened to the Hindu Left?" *Seminar* 509 (January 2002): p. 77

<sup>18</sup> Wittgenstein, L. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*. New York: Macmillan.

## Learning to Learn

Let us investigate the question of ethics from a vantage point where the (failed) argument with Unmesh would seem to take us. In what ways do we speak of a relationship—an opening—between oneself and another? This brings us to another problem that Chakrabarty poses, to which Cavell can perhaps now help us fashion a response. As we saw earlier, in his “Minority Histories” chapter, Chakrabarty attributes a certain auto-pedagogic function to “subaltern pasts,” namely that they make visible to ourselves the limits of our own disciplinary practice. This idea leads Chakrabarty in an interesting direction, one that he refers to in an email exchange with Amitav Ghosh,<sup>19</sup> subsequently published in *Radical History Review*. Towards the end of this exchange, in a mail dated December 22, 2000 Chakrabarty comments: “There is a fragment of a sentence from Heidegger which continues to intrigue me: ‘to hear that which I already do not understand.’” This quotation from Heidegger is brought up again in another essay, “Radical Histories and the Question of Enlightenment Rationalism: Some Recent Critiques of *Subaltern Studies*” (2000, p.275), where Chakrabarty (successfully in my view) tries to counter the charge that it is the “postmodern” turn in *Subaltern Studies* that has lessened the efficacy of its critical energies.<sup>20</sup> What is the significance of this quotation from Heidegger? One way we might take it is as the introduction of an element of uncertainty (about knowledge). In his exchange with Amitav Ghosh, Chakrabarty poses the problem as follows:

But let me put the question as a *problem of knowing* and we can work on it together (for I am not sure what my answer will be). Suppose we come across someone who looks to us subordinated and oppressed but who does not give us any signs of being in that state, at least signs that we could recognize? How do we know then that this person has actually developed ways of forgetting that state or not representing that state to himself or herself? How do we *know* that ours is a truer representation of the “deeper” facts of their life? Why could we not allow for the possibility that they have developed ways of living—life-forms—in which our very questions are of lesser relevance? (Chakrabarty/Ghosh 2002, p.165)

For Chakrabarty then, this is a problem of “knowing” (how can I be sure...?). Here we are on the terrain of a long-discussed problem within Western philosophy—surely one of its fundamental questions from Descartes onwards—the problem of *certainty* (how can I be sure of my knowledge, of others and myself?). Cavell takes up this problem by repositioning it; less as a problem of representation (“knowing”) and more as one of *presentation*. So in order to engage Chakrabarty’s problem, we must at this point introduce a third

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<sup>19</sup> Amitav Ghosh wrote to Chakrabarty after reading *Provincializing Europe*, and in a series of emails they had an argument. This exchange was subsequently published in *Radical History Review*, Issue 83, Spring 2002: 146-72.

<sup>20</sup> See Chakrabarty’s essay in Chaturvedi, V. (ed). 2000. *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, New York: Verso.

conceptual personage (after criteria and forms of life)—acknowledgement—which is perhaps Cavell’s signature concept. For Chakrabarty, to “hear that which I already do not understand” is to ask for *knowledge* of an other. Following Cavell, we can argue that this is less a problem of “knowing” and more the question of an adequate *response* (what can I do in order to show you that I have heard what you seem to be telling me?) In his earliest book *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cavell has a chapter entitled “Knowing and Acknowledging”. This essay introduces Cavell’s conception of *acknowledgement* as an apt summation of Wittgenstein’s remarks on the place of knowledge and doubt in relation to the grammar of psychological concepts. I quote portions of the essay relevant to our discussion:

One could say: Acknowledgement goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I *do* something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge.)...The claim of suffering may go unanswered. We may feel lots of things—sympathy, *Schadenfreude*, nothing. If one says that this is a *failure* to acknowledge another’s suffering, surely this would not mean that we fail, in such cases to *know* that he is suffering? It may or may not. The point, however, is that the concept of acknowledgement is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated...A “failure to know” might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A “failure to acknowledge” is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness. (Cavell 1969, 63-69)

The crucial point then in the problem that Chakrabarty raises but does not answer lies in the mode of response: whether or not your pain makes any *claim* on me. Unmesh’s emails above may well be a cry of pain of some sort. However, it does not make any claim on the Professor or on me, except to evince coldness (which is a presence, not an absence, as Cavell tells us above). For Chakrabarty, as for us, this is a question crucially linked to a disciplinary practice of writing: the ethics of history-writing, we might say, as it takes the form of an encounter between differing criteria, forms of life, temporalities, sensibilities, dispositions and faiths. Might these encounters, with a pluralist sensibility, take the productive form of a becoming-other? In a sub-section entitled “History as Democratic Dialogue with Subaltern” of the “Radical Histories” essay I mention above, Chakrabarty asserts: “I am trying to think my way towards a subaltern historiography that actually tries to learn from the subaltern” (2000, p.272). Gayatri Spivak has a similar idea in her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999),<sup>21</sup> which she names as “learning to learn from below.” Moving away from somewhat hierarchical spatiality (above/below), we might reposition this problem of “learning” as being one of acknowledgement (in Cavell’s sense); of “becoming-other” in the Deleuzian sense: as a question of “receiving” particular sorts of pain, suffering, or even knowledge. At this point it may be useful to

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<sup>21</sup> Spivak, G. 1999. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP).

listen to the last lines of Veena Das' "Wittgenstein and Anthropology".

My own fantasy of anthropology as a body of writing is that which is able to receive this pain. Thus while I may never claim the pain of the other, nor appropriate it for some other purpose (nation building, revolution, scientific experiment), that I can lend my body (of writing) to this pain is what a grammatical investigation reveals...The love of anthropology may yet turn out to be an affair in which when I reach bedrock I do not break through the resistance of the other. But in this gesture of waiting, I allow the knowledge of the other to mark me. (Das 1998, p.191-92)

### Constructing 'Community'

Difficult and knotty as they are, might these forms of becoming-other point us in new directions of belonging-together? Ethics is concerned both with ways of being with oneself (re-shaping oneself in response to an encounter) and equally, with modes of relationality; being and becoming collectively. Here we might broaden our concern with Chakrabarty's *History 2* (modes of being in the world) more emphatically to modes of belonging-together. This returns us to a point we had marked earlier in the argument: Partha Chatterjee's discussion of "community" in *The Nation and its Fragments*. What sort of a concept is it? In a somewhat inexplicable turn in political philosophy, the idea of "community" seems to have dropped out of the agenda for discussion for three or four decades following the Second World War (call it the collective trauma of Western philosophy?). Even till quite recently the debate has remained trapped within the dichotomies of liberal "atomism" and the communitarian "social thesis," and even here the disagreements have largely been restricted to the role of the state, taking for granted that we already know what a "community" is. Chatterjee, for one, does not do this. In the final chapter of *The Nation and Its Fragments*, "Communities and the Nation", Chatterjee turns to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* for his conception of "community." While Chatterjee's discussion is highly provocative, it can be said that "community" for him is locked too strongly into an oppositional embrace with capital (bearing what Wittgenstein would call a "family resemblance" to Chakrabarty's "History 2" in *Provincializing Europe*). We might argue that for both Chatterjee and Chakrabarty, it is as if "community" necessarily "interrupts" (their term) or is relatively innocent of the logic of capital. But let us look more closely at the specificities of the text. What if we were, for a moment, to unlatch Chatterjee's "community" from "capital" (however useful an articulation that may be within the logic that Chatterjee develops) and re-read it via Cavell? Despite the fact that "community" is, for Chatterjee, a somewhat residual category (in the wake of the march of capital), it does provide some sense of a secure foothold on the terrain of the social. What is the source of this security? Let us keep in mind that insecurity arises for Cavell/Wittgenstein in the temptation/threat of skepticism. Chatterjee spots in

Hegel's discussion of the bourgeois family a "suppressed narrative of community" (1992, p.233). On closer scrutiny one might say that the security of the term "community" for Chatterjee arises from Hegel's use of the word "love." I quote the relevant lines from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* also quoted in this chapter of *The Nation and Its Fragments*:

Love means in general terms the consciousness of my unity with another, so that I am not in selfish isolation but win my self-consciousness only as the renunciation of my independence and through knowing myself as the unity of myself with another and of the other with me. (1967 p.261-62 quoted from 1992, p.231)

Reading the above section in the *Philosophy of Right* we might find this dialectical self-other synthesis to be wedded quite deeply to Hegelian finalism, a fact that confers some stability to Chatterjee's conception of "community." A very different picture emerges if we consider Cavell's set of writings on the subject of "love." What we have in these cases is something like an ongoing journey: one that is open to re-negotiation, to breaking apart and coming together again, as is the case with the Hollywood "comedies of remarriage" (Cavell 1981) or equally, a relation that is somehow unsuccessful, as is the case with Othello and King Lear (Cavell 1987) or with the "unknown woman" of psychoanalysis and cinema (Cavell 1988).<sup>22</sup> The play of "love" is open to disaster as consequence (a stock theme of tragedy): not only to another, but equally, as is the case with Lear or Othello, in rendering one incomprehensible to oneself. If "knowing myself as the unity of myself with another and of the other with me" is the theme of "love" or "community," then let us consider that what philosophy has named as skepticism—as a standing human possibility—lies precisely in the denial of the flesh and bloodedness of the other; in the denial of the possibility of my being "joined" in language or in life to (an) other or to others.<sup>23</sup> Thus, as a theoretical concept Chatterjee's idea of "community" has a clear and present instability within itself, even when disarticulated from the logic of capital, its supposedly corrosive counter-concept.

If Chatterjee's principle of community becomes unstable when moved "inwards," what happens with a move outwards i.e. as a broader concept working as a "mode of solidarity" in modernity? Let us consider this in greater detail, in relation to the "innocence" of community and History 2 for Chatterjee and Chakrabarty respectively. For Chatterjee "the nation" has unfortunately

<sup>22</sup> In relation to the theme of "love," the three Cavell texts I am referring are: *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (1981. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP); *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare* (1987. Cambridge: Cambridge UP) and "Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Melodrama of the Unknown Woman" in *The Trial(s) of Psychoanalysis* (ed.) F.Meltzer, p. 227-58. (1988. Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

<sup>23</sup> In this regard Alessandra Tanesini has an interesting discussion entitled "In Search of Community: Mouffe, Wittgenstein and Cavell", *Radical Philosophy*. 110. Nov/Dec. 2001. More generally, here it would be interesting to follow some of the lines set out in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who reinvigorate conceptions of hegemony, in light of the work of Derrida and Foucault.

become “the only legitimate community in modern society...a role that must then be enforced by the disciplinary mechanisms of the nation-state” (1992, p.234). Again, valid as this may be within the particular logic of Chatterjee’s argument and a certain reading of the Foucauldian conception of disciplinary power, it fails if we try and think of these as words removed from contextual specificity, i.e. of these words as giving us an abstract language with which to talk “politics.” For example, we might pose the opposite question: What is the work of the term “nation” when disarticulated from the “disciplinary mechanisms” and the imaginary of the State (i.e. “communities” that might be dissatisfied with the modern political logic of the state, or even consider themselves above it)? If we are put the problem somewhat crudely, we might pose it as follows: The work performed by the term “Community” for Chatterjee and “History 2” for Chakrabarty is positive. These are modes of solidarity/ ways of being in the world ravaged by the disciplinary power of the state and the logic of capital, but in themselves full of the potential for liberation. This need not be the case at all (again it becomes a question of criteria).<sup>24</sup> The “negative” charge of these terms (community, modes of being) is at least as strong as the positive, and it may not be so easy to decipher, a priori, which is which. The productive investigation we might undertake is of the life of these terms in their variegated specificity.

Does Hindu Unity have a concept of community? How, in what ways, and to whom do they open themselves out and seek to be joined (we have a common history...)? Let us make one final foray into the virtual space of the Hindu Right. If you scroll down to the bottom left of the Hindu Unity website there is a long set of links to various far right Zionist and Jewish organizations, many of which are banned even in Israel because they are considered too extreme (some sites among these have strong arguments criticizing Ariel Sharon for being “too soft”). The particular site, which has the most to say on the question of “Hindu-Jewish solidarity” is the “Nation of Hindutva” site, one of the many links on the Hindu Unity platform, and perhaps the one that is the most theoretically rigorous. How do they define themselves? The first part of this site is a discussion of the terms “Nation” and “Hindutva” and how they link with one another. We may note here the close attention to translation. I quote:

In order to explain what exactly is meant by the “Nation of Hindutva”, it is necessary first to define each of the individual words, “Nation” and

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<sup>24</sup> While much has been written about as a critique of the state form, the slightest crisis in which we have any personal investment throws us right back into the demand for a value-free, neutral state e.g. the discourse of corruption, or the outrage with which commentators report “state complicity” in acts of violence, or the manner in which post-facto repatriation needs to be framed in the language of rights. Somewhat differently on the same register, Veena Das’ recent work also points us in another direction: it is not only that the State comes to be involved in a ‘crisis’, it is also a crucial part of the everyday in terms of framing expectations and negotiating interactions, particularly for disadvantaged groups, ref. “Technologies of Self: Poverty and Health in an Urban Setting” in *Shaping Technologies: Sarai Reader 03*, Sarai-CSDS, Delhi and The Waag Society for Old and New Media, Amsterdam, 2003.

“Hindutva”.

**Nation:**

“Whilst seemingly simple in meaning, this is a word which is often misunderstood...The fundamental point to note here is the difference between a “Nation” (or “Rashtra”) and a “State” (or “Rajya”). In essence, a “Rajya” is a geo-political designation, based on lines drawn on a map and little bits of paper signed by some (allegedly) important people. In contrast to this, a “Rashtra” is an entity which has as its basis a cultural, philosophical and ideological consciousness, a shared heritage and background and a common ancestral or inspirational root...A simple analogy would be that a “Rajya” is like a house, whereas a “Rashtra” is more like a home.

**Hindutva:**

[...] As for exactly what Hindutva is, it is the Dharma...Dharma is often translated (wrongly) as “religion”. Whilst religion makes up a part of Dharma it is only a part and not the whole of it. [...] So why is it that there can only be one Dharma (since obviously different people will have different experiences etc.)? Dharma is not directly about those experiences, but is based on Veda (knowledge), which is absolute...[if] they way of life of Hindus is known as Hindutva, how is it that this can be taken as universally relevant? As mentioned earlier, “religion” is an incorrect translation of “Dharma”, so what is the correct translation? It’s very hard to say, mainly because English doesn’t have any equivalent word. Some common translations are: Duty, Ethics, Code of conduct, Morals, Religion, Way of life, Natural Law ... This Dharma, therefore, covers the whole spectrum of human experience, and is thus relevant regardless of context, being based on that fundamental constant, nature—specifically in this case, human nature.

Next comes the building of a bridge with an other. The longest text on the site is an article by Shri Ranbir Singh “Lahori” entitled “Yehudi-Hindu Bhai Bhai (Jews and Hindus are Brothers).” The orientation to the past in this text is strongly futural. It begins with a quote from the Old Testament and attempts to create a connection “from time immemorial” between the Hindus and the Jews, since “Like the Hindus, Jews are an ancient people.” One sentence later we have jumped a couple of millennium: “New geo-political alliances form in the post-Cold War world as one enters the new millennium.” We shift back to Indian independence: “In 1947, the battle of Kurukshetra was truly lost when the Kaurava Congressiya of Nehru and Indira Khan, Rajiv Khan reduced the sacred Punyabhoomi to further oblivion.” The Indian National Congress according to Ranbir Singh, was fascinated by “Communism and Islam,” as a result of which they alienated “what could have been Bharat’s most supportive ally, Israel.” Fortunately, as Singh argues, Veer Savarkar, the original ideologue of Hindutva, saw the Jews as allies in a common struggle. He quotes from Savarkar’s tract *Hindutva*, “If the Zionists’ dreams were realized, if Palestine became a Jewish

State, it would gladden us almost as much as our Jewish friends." The main thrust of the rest of the argument (and the major purpose of the site) is to clarify the ways in which, following Savarkar, "the Hindu must look towards the Jew" as an example to emulate. What do Hindus and Jews have in common? Mainly, the text would argue, hostility from "Christianity, Islam, Communism and, in the Jewish case, Nazism." I quote further from different points in Ranbir Singh's text:

The Jews and Hindus have been victims of the dogmatic totalitarianism which has stalked the earth for two millennia...They have faced common enemies, being victims of the aforementioned dogmas: the religious dogma of Christianity, the colonialist Orwellianism of Islam, the pseudo-rationalism of Marxism, and the racial fundamentalism of Nazism. Presently they face two challenges. One is from a resurgent Nazism, presented by figures such as David Duke in North America, and Le Pen and Haider in Europe. Yet the most pressing danger is Islam, which aims at the conversion or physical liquidation of Jews and Hindus, and with that Israel and Bharat.

Given these circumstances the writer regrets that "Jewish groups such as JDL (Jewish Defence League) and Kach, who take their ideology from the late Rabbi Kahane, are condemned as extremist or even Nazi." Singh points to an important lesson the Hindus can learn from the Jews,

Hindus should thus recognize that Israel can be one of its few reliable allies. From Israel Bharat has much to learn. Instead of peace treaties it should have followed the Jewish state's example in annexing the lands of the aggressor. Pakistan is eager for war again. This time it will be different if Hindus follow the Israeli example. The jawans should carry the saffron into Lahore, which is the natural capital of East Punjab and the city of Lav.

The source of strength for the Jews, as Singh points out is that "they retain the memory of their Holocaust. We Hindus do not, to our eternal shame, even though it continues unabated in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Assam."

### **New Reflections on the "Revolution" of Our Times**

Spending time at places like Hindu Unity and Nation of Hindutva teaches me that all is not right with our critical energies. Fundamentally, the postcolonial activity of "critique" is strongest when directed against capital (our training from Marx) and more recently on the disciplinary mechanisms of the State and the organization of knowledge/power (since after "discipline," all processes of enumeration-classification have come to be coloured by a faint taint of villainy). Communities, in this framework, lose their "fuzziness" once they are statistically

enumerated, or alternatively they are subject to the plundering force of capital.<sup>25</sup> State and commerce in turn (by a Weberian jump) become imminently replaceable by the broader term “modernity.” Within these terms “critique” can barely sense the variety of energies let loose in the post-colony internal to the logic of self-formation and becoming (community, History 2). It cannot recognize “Hindu Unity” as a very contemporary, very frightening, aesthetics of the self emerging precisely from the process of domestication undergone within modernity, in order to “make it one’s own.” Neither conversation nor critique is possible in relation to Hindu Unity because fundamentally we cannot fathom their existence, or the sources of their (or our own?) desires and values. And liberal humanism provides us no basis at all, since as we have seen there are very different pictures of the human at work here, in the experiments with what Cavell/Das have called the vertical limit of the forms of life.

And there is another, deeper failure here. In some sense the post-colony is always already in crisis—of one kind or another—usually classified as “economic” (poverty, malnutrition, lack of basic health care, resource allocation etc.), or “political” (localized secessionist movements, exploited populations, internal colonialism). However, in the past decade or so, in the case of India, the rise to power of the BJP and the entry of the Hindu Right into the mainstream political arena marks a crisis of a different magnitude.<sup>26</sup> Admittedly, there are historically contingent reasons for this. Other narratives and particular circumstances buttress and legitimate this dominance.<sup>27</sup> But one cannot ignore the fact that along with everything else -available forms of identification, the forms of organization and pragmatic action open to political movements, the languages in which democratic demands come to be articulated—this is also a *crisis of thought*.

How do we deal with this crisis? Despite the strong terms of his critique of history and social theory in *Provincializing Europe*, the project of “social justice” (as he calls it) remains for Chakrabarty one to be pursued only in the domain of Reason (now rehabilitated) through the analytic framework of History 1 (2000,

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<sup>25</sup> Someone like Chantal Mouffe would think of this very differently. For her the “deconstructive paradox of community” is precisely that it is already demarcated. It is impossible to speak of an “us” without simultaneously demarcating a ‘them’. See in particular Mouffe, C. (ed.) 1996. *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, London: Verso

<sup>26</sup> This involves their overwhelming presence in states like Gujarat and Maharashtra among numerous others, through grassroots mobilizations that they have carefully nurtured for the past four decades or so, as also their hold over the central government, the reiteration of their narratives in innumerable forums (at the level of what we might call the “popular”), as also the gradual takeover of various institutions, including academic ones in many cases, by their agendas (which is not to say that any of these institutions were completely devoid of ideological content prior to this).

<sup>27</sup> In recent times the U.S “war on terror” or the ongoing “Kashmir conflict” with Pakistan are two instances. Consider several recent Hindi films (a spate of patriotic anti-Pakistan war movies with bearded Muslim villains, which are highly successful at the box office) and it is possible to hear a shrill note of jingoistic nationalism, which is quite “new” in many ways, as is the Hollywood style depiction of high-tech terrorism.

p.239, 250, 254). In light of the rest of the book, this is quite a remarkable assertion. But it isn't unexpected. I can say with some certainty that the terms of political discourse that we inherit (Chakrabarty and me) doubly mark us. Firstly, we must struggle very hard to overcome our "natural" position which is one of (liberal?) arrogance i.e. the inability to recognize oneself as possessing a faith, one that might be eminently contestable. A different but related problem: this heritage is equally marked by the impossibility of speaking as the holder of a "faith" in any sense, or to religion on the grounds of non-criterial difference (forms of difference which we are hard pressed to recognize in the first place). Thus, my present bibliography prevents me from producing any narrative in relation to Hinduism without descending into non-sense (another important term for Wittgenstein). It marks me, on the contrary, with a deep skepticism regarding its status as an epistemological ground on which to speak, and further, with an embarrassment of its ontology, one from which I must detach myself completely (if I had any attachment to it in the first place, or if I could know what kind of a thing it is about which to speak) in order to emerge as a sensible voice, even to myself. This is possibly one reason why a violent, vulgar, bastard narrative is increasingly received as the public voice of Hinduism, with its own life and legitimacy.<sup>28</sup> Still, we deny or wish away the existence of this narrative and these life-shaping practices. As a political discourse, the Hindu Right is received by "us" only as an "enemy" to *combat*. In many cases the demands of pragmatic action may require this mode of engagement.<sup>29</sup> However, we urgently need to come up with alternative forms of thought and engagement. Retaining our politics of opposition, we perhaps need to conceive of it differently—as a mode of being in need of *treatment*—as a psychosis or a neurosis, requiring a more patient, thoughtful, dialogic and long term engagement, one that we might call a "talking cure" (a cure which will affect "ourselves" as much as it changes anyone else). How is this to be done? At the very least Cavell's sense of criteria and forms of life offer us an opening towards onto-(theo)-logical investigations. But what forms of *acknowledgement* is it that this manifestation of rage and hatred demands? How does one participate in strengthening the possible nodes of pluralism present within such a form of life? What are the other (perhaps not directly related) processes that are coterminous with its diverse forms of becoming? What forms of conversation/ethical relationships are possible, or are already taking place? What are the limits (disciplinary, intellectual, imaginative)

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<sup>28</sup> For the moment I avoid the term Hindu Nationalism because that has to be worked out more carefully. As a tradition of writing, it pre-dates Indian independence by a number of years, as for example, Chatterjee's analysis of Bankim and others shows us in *The Nation and its Fragments* (1992. Delhi: Oxford UP).

<sup>29</sup> An example that comes to mind immediately is the infamous "Best Bakery" case in Baroda, where Zahira Sheikh, the prime witness to the murder of 13 people, turned hostile in court under pressure and had to leave Gujarat in order to demand a fair trial. The Gujarat court acquitted all the accused on the grounds of "inadequate evidence." In cases such as these "combat" is the necessary mode of engagement. Here we can learn from the work of initiatives such as the Bombay journal *Communalism Combat* (whose editors have presently taken up Zahira Sheikh's case after she reached Bombay), who are not only responding to "crises" in a stimulus-response mode of politics but carrying on independently, even at times when seemingly "nothing" is happening.

that might be tweaked or reshaped to allow a new set of participants to enter the fray? To consider these questions is the task of a concerned political philosophy, of anthropology, of postcolonial historiography in South Asia (where else?) after Gujarat. At this point we have very little to offer positively but for the spitfire fury of a soapbox rant. All subtraction and division with little or no addition or multiplication. This is a profound ethical, moral and philosophical failure. For the moment, this failure drives me to despair, back to Cavell, for whom to inhabit a space (in philosophy, in history and in modernity), is to inhabit it in mourning, as a space of devastation.

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