

MINORITY REPORTS. HOW TO WRITE A NON-EUROCENTRIC HISTORY OF THE COLONIAL PAST?

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What can it possibly mean, for the historian, to “give Minority Reports. How to Write a Non-Eurocentric History of the Colonial Past? a voice to the voiceless”? How can we, to quote the celebrated opening lines of E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, “rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” hand-loom weaver, the “utopian” artisan, from the enormous condescension of history”? In the 1970s, both British social historians and the Annales school reset the historical agenda by positing the historian as the one blessed – or doomed – with the daunting task of bringing back from the shadows

of public oblivion the poor, the uneducated, the many anonymous of the past. This reaction against a then dominant Whiggish history – that celebrated kings over people, scholars over craftsmen, generals over the rank-and-file, the successful urban merchant over the miserable landless peasant – doubtlessly stands as one of the most formidable political achievements of twentieth-century history. Those social scientists of my generation, who came of age in the early 1990s, a few years after the death of Michel Foucault and as Pierre Bourdieu stood side by side with railway workers on strike, decided to embark upon History-writing precisely because they believed in that trumpeted moral mission, sometimes in a feverish, almost messianic fashion. Yet, in this shift, there were still an even greater number of people who remained uncared for among those “poor stockingers” and “utopian artisans” who had yet to be “rescued from the enormous condescension of history”. They were, to put it bluntly, the formerly “colonized”: those millions of extra-European, non white, and often female slaves, captives and low-wage workers who, already by the mid-eighteenth century, had become the key labour component of the wealth-production process that led the West to pride and prosperity. If skeletons in the closet had finally been given a grave, innumerable cadavers hastily buried beneath the cellar’s floor still awaited their funerals. There were tombstones missing in the cemetery of so-called “capitalist modernity”. Gaining ground inside academia by the mid- to late 1980s, Subaltern and Post-colonial Studies denounced this omission. The Angolan slave shipped to Brazil in the hold of a Portuguese carrack, the Indian or Javanese coolie suffering hunger and mistreatment in a Dutch or British tea or coffee plantation, the native Mexican who broke his back day after day until his premature death in the mines of New-Spain: who took an interest in their lost lives? Who would write their forgotten history – the seemingly never-ending chronicle of their bloody “encounters” with the Wild White West?

There is something of a formidable challenge lying ahead if we are to answer this question. To label the people conquered and over-exploited by European imperial powers in Africa, Asia, or the Americas “the colonized”, to engage critically with officially sanctioned grand narratives of the “European expansion”, to shed light on the latter’s ugliest face of large-scale massacres and everyday humiliations, certainly is where our efforts must begin in order to break the silence surrounding slavery and colonialism. But lamenting Europe’s colonial crimes still sounds a lot like European history. To escape the grips of Eurocentrism, to reach out to the lived moral worlds of those who suffered from Europe, to recover fully their unique voices, one must stop thinking in terms of European chronologies, even if the latter are now self-critical in nature. The Angolan slave was not just a “slave of the Portuguese”; the Javanese coolie was not just a “colonial subject” of the Dutch; the Mexican miner was not just an “Indian” belonging to a Spanish *encomendero*. They were men or women born in societies that had a history of their own – a history articulated in oral epics or written chronicles that used calendars and cosmologies of a different kind, but of no lesser dignity, than those at play in the narratives of European conquests. That history started long before the venue of the Europeans, and it survived an imperial domination that, contrary to its self-confident assertions, was never able to fully displace or erase local worldviews.

Restoring dignity to these millions of people, treating them equitably, is not just a matter of

opening up a few lines in the table of contents of European history textbooks. It is to inquire into the way they wrote and made their own History in an equal share with that of the Europeans. Writing “world / global history” in a non-Eurocentric manner is to hear and learn from a Javanese babad (kingly chronicle) or an Aztec codex as much as from the European colonial archive. It is to turn the colonial into just a “moment” among many, even if a most traumatic one, in the *longue durée* historical journey of extra-European societies. “Hearing the voice of the voiceless of the past” therefore means hearing words and travelling across worlds that cannot be immediately comprehended. It is this experience of “estrangement”, to quote from Carlo Ginzburg’s famous essay, that one has to bring to the writing of “world / global history” if one does not want the latter to turn into yet another version of the West’s long jeremiad about itself. Technically speaking, that’s to say at the practical level of writing, one of the best ways to achieve this is to endorse a politics of “thick translation”, that not only gives ample room to the actors’ voices through long quotations, but that also puts into question its own disciplining choices. To give way to others’ voices in one’s own narrative is to stand at the edge of criticism and comment – so as to take a breath before jumping into interpretation. In order to unsettle the inequitable account of “first contact” situations, in which the European stands as the “hero on the move” and the Native as the passive spectator, one also has to depart from the Eurocentric causalities of the Grand narrative of “European expansion” by switching, whenever possible, to extra-European calendars and chronologies.

Romain Bertrand is a Senior Research Fellow with the Center for International Research and Studies in Paris (CERI, Sciences Po) and a member of the editorial board of the *Annales* history review. A specialist of the early modern and late colonial history of Indonesia, he has travelled widely in Southeast Asia and written extensively on the many-faceted “encounters” between the Dutch, the Malays, and the Javanese. His latest book, *History in Equal Parts. Revisiting the Narratives of an East-West Encounter (East Indies, XVIth-XVIIth Century)* (Paris, Seuil, 2011), endeavors to provide an “equal share” narrative of the first Javanese-Dutch contacts by drawing as much on European (Dutch and Portuguese) archives as Southeast Asian (Malay and Javanese) literatures. The book has been awarded two major French history prizes (the Grand Prix des Rendez-vous de l’Histoire de Blois in 2012 and the Prix Mémoires de la Mer in 2013). Bertrand’s current book project focuses on late sixteenth-century Spanish Manila, with the aim of revisiting the very notion of the European “Conquest” of the Far East. By deciphering in minute detail Inquisition trials involving Spanish settlers and soldiers accused of making bad use of local magic, it tries to show that what came to be called “Conquest” in official reports and history books in seventeenth-century Spain and New Spain, generated mere disillusionment and confusion at the level of the ordinary conquistador, who lived not in a world of neatly delineated “ethnic / religious identities”, but in a messy yet creative situation of permanent interbreeding with local Filipino societies. He is pursuing this project at the Archivo General de Indias in Sevilla and at the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City, where he recently completed a six-week stay with his partner and his 3 year-old son.