

Should the Enlightenment Be Provincialised?

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The Age of Enlightenment was not the fruit of European inspiration alone, and should also be considered in the context of a much wider space. A collection of articles reveals all the intensity of the French tradition of the critique of Orientalism.

Reviewed: *L'Inde des Lumières. Discours, histoire, savoirs (XVII^e-XIX^e siècle)*, Edited by Marie Fourcade & Ines G. Zupanov, Paris, Édition de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Purushartha Collection, n° 31, 2013.

Following on from the research carried out by Sylvia Murr (1947-2002), to whom the book pays tribute and who, before she died, was considered “the best specialist on discourse on India during the Classical Age and the Enlightenment” (p. 395), this collection, edited by Marie Fourcade and Ines G. Zupanov, researchers at the Centre d'Études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud (CEIAS), has a twofold objective: to make a contribution to “the study of the role of South Asia in Enlightenment Europe and the role of the European Enlightenment in South Asia” (p. 13). Going against a Eurocentrism that remains loyal to the diffusionist theory of a modernity that spread out from a European core across the rest of an entirely passive world, the two researchers' excellent introduction sets an ambitious task: to show that the Enlightenment was not an exclusively European production and that, from the very beginning, it was nourished from a variety of places and formed part of a globalised context and space (p. 14). The work does not, therefore, examine the French presence in India or Franco-Indian cultural exchanges (as Jacques Weber, Jean-Marie Lafont, Guy Deleury and Florence d'Souza in particular have done before); more specifically, it considers the exchanges that presided over the establishment of scholarly discourses in Europe and India¹. This aim translates into a specific approach that consists in putting an end to “a series of concealments, omissions, and banishments of the texts and documents that did not factor into the “meta-account” of British modernity” (p. 17) and, more broadly, European and Western modernity, and therefore in making a return to the “sources” (p. 24) through the texts of early Indian and European modernity while observing their movement from one area to the other².

The Enlightenment and Subaltern Studies

From this point of view, and in the light of judgments made by researchers such as [Jacques Pouchepadass](#) and Sheldon Pollock, our two editors are critical of Subaltern Studies, particularly Dipesh Chakrabarty and his book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000; French trans. 2009). They question their controversial, “victim” approach that is detrimental to historiographical accuracy, their deconstructivist

¹ It should also be possible to do the same with regard to cultural spaces other than India, and indeed other relations not involving Europe.

² For this type of work, see for example Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Texture du temps. Écrire l'histoire en Inde*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, Coll. « La librairie du XIX^e siècle », 2004; Kumkum Chatterjee, *The Culture of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal*, New Delhi, OUP, 2009.

rather than propositional approach that falls short of theoretical reflexivity, their tendency to over-simplify cultural differences in the name of an imaginary “before” that preceded their encounter, and finally their incapacity to historicise their own emergence when they themselves impose that same historicisation on other scholarly discourses (p. 23-24). To their mind, it is not so much a matter of carrying out a unilateral role reversal – with the European core replacing India on the fringes of modernity – as one of rebalancing the focus between European and Indian contributions to the Enlightenment.

However, how exactly should this act of rebalancing be understood? An unexplained tension runs through the introduction: on the one hand, we read that Indians contributed to the Enlightenment that is traditionally wrongly identified as being exclusively European following the eradication of Indian sources by Europeans themselves (p. 14, p. 28); on the other hand, we are told that Indians developed different Enlightenments (p. 15), even if that difference might originate in the circulation of texts that were partly shared (p. 27). Although the introduction is full of powerfully evocative examples that carry out a process of civilisational decompartmentalisation between the Persian world, the Hindu world (in Sanskrit or vernacular languages) and Europe (p. 26-27), this is a key uncertainty, which is left unresolved and carries within it the whole question of the past and future of humanity, between a universality already underway at the crossroads of civilisations and a rivalry between civilisations that may be hostile to one another or that can only reach agreement at a later time.

A French tradition of the critique of Orientalism

One might expect the thirteen articles that follow the introduction – a fourteenth is added with an account of Sylvia Murr’s scientific career (p. 393-408) – to delve deeper into a connected history that is situated close to certain historical junctures while opening up broad perspectives on the processes of cultural transfers and leading to a rejection of any cultural autarkies. Existing imagology studies on the representation of India in France (Catherine Weinberger-Thomas, Jackie Assayag, Christian Petr) might have been supplemented by European studies of Indian customs, and for the 17th and 18th centuries we might have had the equivalent of France Bhattacharya’s book covering the Hindu Renaissance of the 19th century, *Les intellectuels bengalis et l’impérialisme britannique* [Bengali Intellectuals and British Imperialism] (Paris, Collège de France, 2010). However, it has to be said that the articles making up this volume lag somewhat behind the introduction because, putting an end to the initial ambiguity of the title, *L’Inde des Lumières* [Enlightenment India], they deal almost exclusively with India during the European Enlightenment and neglect the Indian Enlightenment and *a fortiori* the mutual exchanges that would establish what they owe each other and how they differ from one another.

From the introduction to the articles that follow, the book limits its subject but maintains its interest. Except for the fact (important nonetheless) that a significant number of contributors to the volume are Indian or of Indian origin, this is not so much an equal contribution to a history or a reassessment of the Western arrow of time through a multiplication and/or an interweaving of accounts of the Enlightenment and modernity, or even a questioning of the very notions of modernity and the Enlightenment, as it is a critical reassessment of the proposals made by Edward W. Said in *Orientalism* (1978; French trans. 1980). Indeed, a temporal paradox meant that a seminal article by Sylvia Murr, “Les conditions d’émergence du discours sur l’Inde au siècle des Lumières” [The Conditions for the Emergence of Discourses on India during the Enlightenment], was published in 1983 in issue n° 7 of the *Purushartha* journal, while Said’s famous book had begun its conquest of

Anglo-Saxon academic circles but was generally being ignored in the French research world. In their introduction, Marie Fourcade and Ines G. Zupanov nevertheless highlight the fact that Sylvia Murr, while herself part of the French and European indological paradigm, also worked from a perspective close to that of Canguilhem, Foucault's professor, who inspired Said (p. 16-17). The book thus clarifies the origin, which is studied all too rarely, of what is and was French critique of Orientalism. On the one hand, Sylvia Murr's article therefore makes an important denial of what has been too hastily identified as French slowness to deal with the colonial question (in this case colonial knowledge) without a sufficient questioning of the very notion of slowness; on the other hand, and this is a novelty that should be highlighted in French social sciences, it leads to an acknowledgment of the important place that Said's work occupies in scientific research outside France.

The colonial question and the Enlightenment

Whether or not the articles make specific mention of it (p. 79, p. 191, p. 368), this book is generally written in the context of a critique of European Orientalist discourse as a discourse of Europe's symbolic domination of India, whether it be an article on Montesquieu (p. 79-107) or Diderot (p. 165-188), colonial clothing (p. 289-308) or the teaching of geography to Indians. However, while the book as a whole also has a particularly significant polyphonic effect when two articles put forward a different interpretation of the same author³, some of its contributors move away from a simple questioning of Orientalism and give a more complex and contrasting vision of European discourses on India in the 17th and 18th centuries. The philological reorientation that is made of the Saidian critical approach thus enables civilisational simplifications to be deconstructed by retracing the networks in which texts and practices circulated and by systematically focusing on the different historical, geographical and institutional contexts in which they emerge and develop.

It would seem, therefore, that Europe does not speak with one voice. The French perspective on India was not the same before and after the English defeated them and relegated them to a secondary position in the sub-continent following the Battle of Plassey in 1757; the English perspective on India was different from that of the French, the Italians, the Portuguese or even the Scottish, and Goan opera of the 1750s cannot be reduced to a mere celebration of Portuguese colonisation, without taking into account an aesthetic dimension that brings with it other issues. It should also be added that a number of contradictions and conflicts ran through this plurality, threatening the very core of European domination. It is not just the fact that the ethnographical integrity of Jesuit studies on Indian religions was hampered by a respect for Catholic dogma (p. 335-357), or that the philosophers, who all appealed to universal reason and freedom, at times decried the inaction, despotism and religious superstitions of Indians and eventually lent their support to the imperial conquests, while at other times they believed that the Indian states could be compared to the European states and were therefore capable of uniting in order to limit English power and promote a European-style balance of power (p. 209-227). It is also the fact that some major European figures of the 18th century such as the Scotsman William Robertson (p. 109-134) and the Irishman Edmund Burke (p. 189-208) showed their hostility to the colonisation of India and could therefore, at least to an extent, embody a counter-Orientalism. It finally becomes clear that in the 17th and 18th centuries in any case, it was not so much the justification of the colonial domination of India that inspired discourse on India as what Maurice Olender called

³ Sometimes the work of Bernier is thought of as a condemnation of oriental despotism (p. 85), while at other times it is the subject of a more moderate contextualisation (p. 79-107). The same is true of that of Diderot, which is sometimes presented as a celebration of colonisation (p. 165-188), and sometimes as a manifestation of its hatred (p. 191).

“scholarly appropriations” (p 135) – Sylvia Murr, meanwhile, talked about the “‘instrumental’ nature of indo-logical discourse” (p. 401) – whose main purpose had nothing to do with India itself but sought to strengthen Christian apologetics or else promote philosophical critique. These actions shared an aim, which was to show that, while the critique of scholarly reason may well exist, it should not only be established from the perspective of post-colonial studies but must also take into account the specific history of the different European cultures and the different fields of symbolic production.

This is without doubt the major contribution of volume 31 of the Purushartha Collection: it fosters the development that takes us from the Eurocentrism of old (at a time when Europe had a grip on most of the world) to more recent criticism of Eurocentrism (following colonial independence) and finally to the salutary acknowledgement of the nature – still under negotiation – of the relations between cultural spaces that respond to partly distinct agendas. It is no longer Europe that speaks for the world, or the world that claims to speak for Europe in retaliation, but areas of the world that are involved in their own specific dynamics as well as in exchange processes. This assessment, which is without doubt furthered by a new cosmopolitan awareness and a global rebalancing of power in favour of countries formerly dominated by Europe, such as China and India, brings about a complexification of the writing of history through the variability of the scales and connection between contexts, taking into account and moving beyond civilisational frameworks and national frameworks.

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