

An Interview with Sanjay Subrahmanyam

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The current issue of Cromohs is entitled 'From Comparative to Global History'. How do you see the relation between comparative history, connected history, and global history? Have we somehow gone 'beyond' comparison now?

Let us start with global history, because this is the object of some confusion, as we see from the recent book on the subject by Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (2016). In Conrad's view, global history is both 'an object of study and a particular way of looking at history', or what he calls a 'perspective'. He also tells us that there are three 'varieties' of global history (which he sometimes calls 'paradigms' or 'models'): one is a 'history of everything', the second is a study of 'exchange and connections', and the third is simply an attempt to place narrower cases in something called a 'global context'. How can something be a perspective, an object, a set of paradigms, and a group of models all at once? This seems to constitute sloppy thinking and careless use of language; it is not at all helpful.

Rather than such a hopeless muddle, in fact we need to think of global history as history on a large geographical scale that transcends the geographical divisions set by conventional area studies. And that is it! Now, there are various ways of going about this type of history. The time-honored way, certainly going back to Georg Hegel, Karl Marx, and Max Weber, is comparative history. There are more or less innovative ways of doing

comparative history, but I will agree that for historians—like sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, and so on—studying variation in space and time remains a key tool.

Yet when comparative history becomes mechanistic, repetitive, and obvious, or when its purpose becomes simply to show how Society A is a failed version of Society B (as occurred in connection with a lot of modernization theory), we need to look for other methodological approaches (which are, let me stress, neither paradigms nor models). One of these is ‘connected history’. Here, our purpose would be to transcend and bypass the conventional divisions imposed by the rather arbitrary way in which historians are normally trained, so as to redraw geographical boundaries in an innovative way. This does not mean we replace one set of rigid boundaries (say, of the nation-state) with another. Rather, the geographies have to be as flexible and varied as the problems. The following step, which is the really difficult one, is to multiply and read across archives and other primary sources, in keeping with the complexity of the problem. This is why it is easy to brandish ‘connected history’ as a slogan, but rather more difficult to execute it in reality. These days there is quite a lot of ‘fake’ connected history around, in which historians pretend to read materials and archives that they really have not mastered.

Does this mean we have gone ‘beyond’ comparative history? I don’t think so. Rather, I think we must continue to use comparative history, but in a more intelligent and careful way than was done in the 1970s and 1980s—when it was all too often just pushing through open doors with great fanfare. For example, I have a great interest in the comparative history of urbanism, but I really would not wish to return to a view whereby the only ‘real’ cities are in the Roman tradition, carried over into Christian Europe, and every other case is just a failed or flawed version of such a city. In this case, I am particularly interested in second-order comparisons. As such, if one compares the trajectories of cities which have been conquered, and where religious dominance has thus passed from one group to another, we are not simply comparing morphologies (the classic exercise), but processes of transformation accompanied by violence. In this way we have a set of commonalities, and can pass on to examine the variations.

How to do you see the relationship between the particular and the general in history, between the use of primary sources and the general synthesis, and between micro- and macro-history?

Even if we are not always looking for laws or models in history, the particular only makes sense in relation to the general. (In the US, they sometimes call this the ‘so what’ issue: yes, you showed this or that, but ‘so what?’) One uses the particular to build towards the general, but also, eventually, to question it. When a general history becomes so distant and disconnected from the particular that it is absolutely impervious to contradiction or

modification, it has, in my opinion, become pretty useless. This is what happened to Immanuel Wallerstein and his theory of ‘world-systems’ operation (beginning in 1974). Historians kept pointing out the hundreds and thousands of small and large factual and interpretational errors in his work (I wrote a brief article to this effect in the late 1980s, regarding South Asia), but this ‘school’ and its adherents could not have cared less. They saw all such errors as insignificant in relation to their grand model made of Teflon. On the other hand, we also have a sort of ‘fuddy-duddy’ version of history, which is only concerned with the examination of trivia, and which still survives, especially in some European institutions. Often this is a caricature of philology. But I have also come across historians, even in the US, who claim to refuse all forms of general categories, and state that they are totally uninterested in generalizations. I think this gives history a bad name, and allows others to make fun of the discipline as mere self-indulgence.

As regards the general synthesis as a genre of history-writing, it is certainly necessary, but above all as a teaching tool. I have taught now for over three decades, from first year college students to advanced seminars in India, Europe, and the US. There is no doubt in my mind that one cannot simply get into and engage with primary sources equally at all these levels. Even so, it turns out to be quite rare to find a general synthesis that is not based on a real engagement with primary materials, and is yet intellectually powerful. When I was a student, one such stimulating book—even for someone who was not a Marxist—was Perry Anderson’s *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1974). I rarely read such books for intellectual stimulation now. I find that a lot of them, even celebrated ones like the work of Jürgen Osterhammel on the nineteenth century, are just turgid compilations, accumulating narrative on narrative, or making long lists of this and that, with endless and undifferentiated bibliographies that don’t help critical thinking at all. After all, listing and analysis are far from being the same exercise. I also don’t trust such works regarding areas in which I am not a specialist, because I can see how prone to error they are in my own areas of particular competence.

I have written one book that comes close to a synthesis, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia* (1993, 2nd edition 2012); however, it contains a good number of primary sources, and the interpretative framework was also pushing the limits far from the received wisdom. If you compare it to the book written by John Russell-Wood at much the same time, *World on the Move: The Portuguese in Africa, Asia, and America, 1415-1808* (1992) you can see the difference. So, even if I were to write a synthesis, I would root it to as far as possible in primary and not just secondary sources.

As for micro- and macro-history, that is a somewhat different albeit related question. I follow our common friend and my former colleague Carlo Ginzburg in taking micro-history to be the very close inspection of materials, on the metaphor of a microscope,

whereas in macro-history one often paints with broader brushstrokes, using a more aggregative approach. Ginzburg mostly refuses to write any kind of history that is not based on a close engagement with primary sources, as I realized when I invited him to write a general chapter for *The Cambridge World History*. Also, he has also never much dealt with techniques of aggregation, like statistics, which economic historians inevitably use. For my part, I don't find myself firmly wedded to either viewpoint. Earlier in my career, I was more inclined to macro-historical projects than I have come to be. Yet I don't believe strongly that one of these is legitimate and the other is not. It depends on the problems and the questions to be addressed.

What is the role of chance in historical research?

Anyone who has worked in the archives knows that there is something of chance in the work one does. But how much? I think that, like a lot of games of chance, they are really games of skill with some element of chance involved. Today, if you give me a problem and I am looking for ways to address it, I would hope that I have better skills than I did in 1985. Let me give you a few examples. Some years ago, a colleague found an intriguing manuscript in a small library in Paris, and was unable to make sense of where exactly it came from, or its larger context, even though he could read it. We sat down and read it together for half a day. I then suggested that he look in one particular set of archives, and he immediately found documents that provided him with quite a lot of direct context. After that, he followed the threads into other archives, and eventually did a splendid project. Now the reason for this is that I had worked on quite similar things before, and he had not; this is like comparing someone in a Las Vegas casino who can count cards efficiently with someone who cannot.

I have also worked in archives which were so chaotic that one never knew if or when one would find things. In one case, in Portugal in the 1980s, I only found materials because the archivist took a personal liking to me, and decided to show me things that I could never have found. The same thing has happened to my wife, who worked on religion in rural Brittany, in small and obscure church collections.

Again, seeing the links between disparate things one has found here and there is quite another matter. This can require initial speculative leaps of the imagination, which vary a lot from one person to another. A well-known joke in Indian history circles concerns a historian who claimed that one of the Mughal emperors would appear in his dreams, and direct his researches, even helping him to read obscure documents. Of course that is not chance, but the workings of a powerful subconscious instinct. All of us must wish we had our own Mughal emperors sometimes.

What is the place of the ‘counterfactual’ in the work of a historian? Have you used it yourself? Does it permit one to advance new hypotheses? Is this linked to the relationship between fiction and history?

I consider the ‘counterfactual’ to be a somewhat lighthearted and playful, exercise, not to be taken very seriously. It therefore surprises me that historians can get into passionate arguments about it. Of course, if ever one advances a causal argument, it does mean there is an implicit counterfactual in the sense that removing the cause will remove the effect. (That does not matter to some of our colleagues, who will proudly tell you that they never make causal arguments). I have only engaged in it once, as a result of a conference to which Geoffrey Parker invited me at Ohio State University. In the conference, I became a bit alarmed because most of the papers seemed to be about assassinations. What if Gavrilo Princip had not killed Franz Ferdinand? Or if William III had been killed in 1690 in the Battle of the Boyne? So I made a Borgesian literary joke of it in my contribution, and even invented some nonexistent erudite references to put in the footnotes—but Parker’s colleagues were so annoyed by my attitude that they expelled me from the conference volume.

I can’t say I consider an obsession with counterfactuals to be particularly useful for historians, or generative of interesting hypotheses. Yes, if there had been no Treaty of Versailles, many Germans would have been less resentful in the interwar period. Yet do we really want to go into wishful thinking, then, about how there would have been no Nazism? On the other hand, I appreciate a certain kind of historical fiction, which plays around with this sort of thing. As a child, I loved Alexandre Dumas. But I’ll give you two more recent literary examples. One is E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1975), which is set in New York in the early twentieth century, and is really a splendid comic exercise. In a very different and much darker mode, we have Philip Roth’s *The Plot against America* (2004). Both these novels work for me, but as novels. On the other hand, most of the novels I have read that are set in the early modern period do not. Even the best of them, like Orhan Pamuk’s *My Name is Red* (1998), seem based on anachronistic and even dogmatic impositions. It is not just me who thinks that; Pamuk consulted a certain number of Ottoman historians and art historians, and I have not met one who really liked the book.

Can you tell us something about your personal history, your training, the choices, intellectual influences, and encounters that mark out your itinerary?

I come from a family that is less of intellectuals than of bureaucrats and civil servants, though there were some scientists in the broader family milieu. This is typical of my community, of Tamil Smarta Brahmins. I studied economics at university, because

although I really loved the elegance of mathematics, I had friends who were far more talented at maths than I was, and there seemed to be no point in competing with them. So I went into economics without much thought, and studied it as an undergraduate for three years with not much enthusiasm. I continued to study it at an advanced level in my MA, at the Delhi School of Economics, and it was only then that I started to get a proper grasp of the subject. I was unfortunate in not having had many good teachers in either high school or during undergraduate years, and I envy those who have had that good fortune. But at the Delhi School of Economics there was a handful of teachers who were also state-of-the-art and world-class researchers (both in economics and social and cultural anthropology).

From economics, I then branched into economic history, which, along with the history of economic thought was my favorite part of the subject at that time. This is what I did my PhD on between 1982 and 1986, while still based in Delhi. The focus of my project was trade history, focusing on the early modern period, and I had to learn a set of new languages and skills for it, which I was young and enthusiastic enough to do. The choice here was whether to do my PhD in India, or—like most of my contemporaries—go abroad to Europe or the US. The latter would probably have allowed me to enter more smoothly into the usual powerful institutions and networks, like Oxbridge, or the Ivy League, or the *École normale*. We all know the kinds of rewards that people reap from having such networks, and their embedded structures of patronage. But I have always been rather perverse in my thinking. So I took the harder road, that of the ‘outsider’. Perhaps there was some cultural nationalism involved, as well as a sense of excessive pride (which is certainly one of my great failings, possibly inherited from my father). To cut a long story short, after a lot of painful experiences, I did manage to finish my thesis, which was eventually published as *The Political Economy of Commerce* (1990). During my PhD days, I had already begun to teach, and I continued to do so at the Delhi School until 1994-95, when I left for Paris, at the encouragement of two senior French historians, Denys Lombard and Jean Aubin.

Among the intellectual influences, there are too many to be mentioned, so I’ll just talk about a few of the most direct ones, roughly in chronological order. The first one was my thesis advisor, Dharma Kumar, who was an economic historian working mostly on South India. She was not very prolific, but wrote one important book on land and caste in colonial India, and also edited *The Cambridge Economic History of India*. From her I learnt two things: always to be sceptical of the conventional wisdom, and to push your intellectual limits as far as you can, without fear of failing.

Then, three scholars whom I met in the 1980s: Ashin Das Gupta from Kolkata, Luís Filipe Thomaz from Lisbon, and Jean Aubin from Paris. They were all interested in commercial and diplomatic history. Each one in his own way helped me to understand

how to deal with archives, and various ways of reading them. Of the three, Aubin had the greatest chronological range and the broadest set of technical skills, perhaps of any historian I have known. He set the bar very high indeed. You could say that each is, or was, a sort of ‘positivist’, but at the same time all of them—and especially Das Gupta and Aubin—had a very acute sense of the relationship between archival research and the production of historical narrative. You can see their influence very markedly in almost every book I wrote in the 1990s, with one exception. That exception is *Symbols of Substance* (1992), a book on court culture in South India that I wrote jointly with Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman. These two scholars, who are trained to study literature and religion, gave my work a strong cultural impetus, which was then carried on in other work I did with them. But this first collaboration eventually also influenced another collaboration—probably the most long-lasting and productive I have had—with Muzaffar Alam, starting around the early 1990s and still ongoing. Working with Alam and Narayana Rao also opened totally new doors for me, because both are scholars who are at least partly trained outside the western academic system (unlike all the other names I have mentioned). Narayana Rao learnt about literature through his family, and by spending time in literary circles in small towns in South India, and Alam was trained first in a *madrasa* in North India. I think it is important for us in the university not to denigrate these forms of training, especially for literary and humanistic study, but rather to valorize their positive aspects. Then, in the last ten or fifteen years, I have been lucky enough to have extended conversations and exchanges with a number of other historians, some of whom have been my colleagues in Europe or the US. They also include younger colleagues and graduate students, who have challenged and encouraged me not to slack off, but rather to keep pace with new and emerging research questions.

In your view, what is the historian’s craft? And what is his/her role in contemporary society?

The interesting thing about history is that, in and of itself, it has a relatively limited set of tools, and even its rules are more often like rules of thumb. The primary rule is some version of what the Germans liked to call *Quellenkritik*, from the nineteenth century. But there are obviously quite varied notions concerning how one goes about identifying a ‘source’, and then employing it critically. Even our definition of philology is no longer what it was in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the historian’s conception of what can and cannot be accepted as a source has tended to shift, or rather to broadly expand and become more inclusive, over time. As we know, in the twentieth century, oral history has had a substantial influence, which was combined with the multiple and profitable conversations between historians and anthropologists (even the structuralists). The key

thing is that history is constantly borrowing from other disciplines, some neighboring and some far away, and it is here that we have a real set of challenges.

The first challenge lies in the fact that we may have disciplines that are actually epistemologically incompatible. Therefore, combining them promiscuously may only lead to deep confusion. For example, there are parts of economics that are based on very hard and inflexible conceptions of the 'primitive' individual, and individual rationality. Larger structures are then derived from such postulates. Yet these postulates may run completely counter to what historians think of the functioning of real societies and the people who live in them. Such examples can be easily multiplied, and they are a good reason to avoid rushing blindly into inter-disciplinary studies regardless of the consequences.

A second problem is 'scientism', namely the genuflection of historians in front of what they imagine are the robust results that the hard sciences can give them. Not long ago, we had a fashionable wave, during which historians began to read popular versions of neurobiology and then make absurd claims, such as that European imperialism could be explained as 'hard-wired' into popular cultural attitudes. Or again, some historians have begun to use DNA testing in quite simplistic ways, when in fact it can only be used with an enormous amount of caution and reflection on the relevant categories, and statistical methods to be employed. At the other end of the spectrum, historians (especially in the US) are regularly tempted by recourse to the writings of philosophical schools which espouse extreme relativism, or propositions regarding the indeterminacy of meaning. In part, this is because people extract thin slices from the rich diet that philosophers offer themselves, and employ them pretty much as they please. Again, it is interesting to observe this in the US, where the word 'theory' is bandied about in history departments in the most cavalier way. All in all, I would say the historian's toolbox is open, and its contents do evolve, but some real control (and self-control) must be exercised so that the contents do not become a random collection of instruments.

Since history is not an applied discipline, the historian—unlike the sociologist or the economist—is not primarily a giver of policy advice to the powers-that-be. Oddly enough, much of what historians do is show that the conventional wisdom regarding the past is doubtful, or plain wrong. This may seem perverse as a way to make a living. Some people think that historians should be givers of moral lessons, who are trying to make 'good citizens'. I really cannot subscribe to that view. In my own work, I try frequently to argue that it is very difficult to draw straight lines between the past, the present and (therefore) the future. In short, at least for me, the historian should be a voice of caution and of scepticism, not a cheerleader.

How important is the place of ideology in your own work? To what extent does the present intrude on your questions, and your research?

First of all, I don't adhere to any explicitly named ideology. In India, the far right thinks I am a Marxist, while many Marxists are quite dismissive of my kind of history. I don't practice any religion, but I am not hostile to religion either. Of course, I would prefer to live in a tolerant and relatively peaceful society, which respects the right to cultural difference, rather than a violent one, which seeks to impose homogeneity on its citizens.

Whatever I may have believed when I was young, I am no longer sympathetic to the idea of even revolutionary violence in a 'progressive' cause, after seeing the experiences of it in the later twentieth century. So, in a loose way, some people would classify me as a 'liberal', though this word is in danger of becoming meaningless. At the same, although I am interested in global history, I don't subscribe to any view on 'globalization', or even use the concept regularly in my work. However, this cannot mean that my work is either the search for the 'golden age' in the past, or the bald denunciation of past societies in the interests of some future utopia. A good deal of what I study in the past is pretty unsavory, but there it is. At any rate, I cannot use the past to run away from the present.

I would think that if the present intrudes on my research questions, it must be largely in an unconscious way. In sum, it has certainly never been my intention to be some sort of 'counsellor to the prince', and to have Mr Modi, Mr Macron, or Mrs Merkel read my work, and thus valorize it.

How do you see the relationship between violence, religion, and identity-formation? In relationship to the world in which we live (be it India, Europe, or the US), is it correct to speak of the 'return of religion'?

This is a subject that I began studying in the mid-1990s. Perhaps I was unconsciously influenced by the political climate in India at that time. Whether in regard to South Asia, Europe, or the Middle East, it is clear that violence and religion have historically often gone hand in hand, because of the need to draw boundaries, to include and exclude, by force if need be. Projects of persecution are often at the heart of religious institutions. The experience of past persecution can be the justification for persecuting others in the present. Some researchers in India claim that all this is a purely modern phenomenon, and a product of the nation-state and its activities in the past two hundred years. I don't see how any serious historian can defend that position.

My main interest here has been in three questions. First, I have tried to show that important forms of sectarian violence existed in medieval and early modern India, but that they are not exactly what we call 'communalism' in India today, because the nature of the boundaries between groups is quite different. Further, along with my colleague Muzaffar Alam I have tried to show that early modern states such as the Mughals had a particular type of political theory, through which they dealt with such conflicts. This theory has a

genealogical relationship with what we call ‘secularism’ in India today, and is different from the French notion of *laïcité*. The second area of enquiry concerns the early modern European experience, especially in the Iberian world, but not just limited to it. I find it astonishing that the European approach to this question, centring around ideas like ‘confessionalization’, has been so blithely universalized, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I also find European self-congratulation on this matter more than a little troubling. The third question has less to do with my work as a historian, and is more relevant to me as an observer of contemporary political life. It concerns the omnipresence of religion in the US, where religion permeates nearly all of political life, and a good part of social life, too. In Canada, you have turban-wearing Sikhs in politics. In the US, to become acceptable, such Sikhs need to call themselves Nikki and Bobby, and convert to Methodism or Catholicism.

So the question of the ‘return of religion’ is quite different in India, western Europe, and the US. In the US, religion never went anywhere. It was always there, and God even forced the far better motto of ‘*E pluribus unum*’ to give way. In western Europe, the past two or three decades have seen a double return: the religiosity of migrant (often Muslim) communities on the one hand, and, on the other, the assertion not so much of religion as such, but of the Christian religion as a default social identity. I have no idea whether the leaders of the Front national in France are all believing Christians, but they certainly deploy that social identity, as do Les Républicains.

And finally, India is the most complex case. This is because ‘Hinduism’ as a religion only crystallized in the nineteenth century, in the face of polemics with Christian missionaries on the one hand, and Muslim publicists on the other. Actually, ‘Hinduism’ is still a highly unstable category, yet even in its present, unstable, form, it can be employed for political mobilization. In the next few decades, the close tie-up between this type of community-formation (which I prefer as an idea to identity-formation), religious adherence, and actual or potential violence seems sure to remain in place. But I would be only too happy to be proven wrong.

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