

## **Asiatic Voice: No More Reconstruction, Construction or Deconstruction**

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### **Abstract**

Prejudices and biases influence most historians, constructing and deconstructing the past. Asiatic history is no exception. Like western history, Asiatic society is also subject to such forms of analysis, both from inside and outside Pakistan. In this paper I will show the failure of one of the most important models of nineteenth-century constructionism, especially in the context of Asiatic history that is given by Marx. I will limit myself to the analysis of Marx as a paradigmatic example of nineteenth-century constructionism. Additionally and necessarily I shall also argue that deconstruction, exemplified by Hayden White's notion of 'Metahistory', also fails.

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As a constructionist historian Marx coins the term the 'Asiatic Mode of Production' in *Grundrisse* to characterize Asiatic society as being stagnant and passive. The critique of the 'Asiatic Mode of Production' mostly developed in India and China is misdirected. Most of the critics identify the availability of sources present to Marx on Asia around 1850's which led him to flawed conclusions. Since critique targeting Marx on the basis of sources shares its basic presumptions with constructionism. So, it broadly involves all the fundamental flaws of constructionism. As compared to Marx's view of history, or Hayden's notion of 'Metahistory', I find Foucault's approach much more appropriate for the nature of the historical enterprise. The reason is because Foucault's analysis does not share the basic presumption of the reconstructionist, the constructionist and the deconstructionist models, i.e. modern historical *a priori*. Foucault argues that it is epistemologically possible to develop an internal account of history and so of the past despite the fact that the past can never be present except in the form of texts. For, an event recorded as history, and if taken as

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whole, has certain epistemological limits recognized in Foucault's analysis, permits historians a more convincing and appropriate way to understand the nature of the historical enterprise.

### **Reconstruction, construction, deconstruction**

In *The Nature of History Reader*, Alun Munslow and Keith Jenkins suggest that there are three basic genres for writing history: reconstructionist, constructionist and deconstructionist.<sup>1</sup> These genres primarily differ in their approach towards empiricism and language. Reconstructionists and constructionists believe in the disinterested pursuit of knowledge regarding the past. They believe in the epistemological gap between the past as an object of knowledge and the historian as a knower. The knower enjoying independence from the past is perfectly equipped with the analytical and descriptive tool, i.e. language, to know the past *as* a collection of contingent and specific events. They construe language as a purely descriptive tool, the correct use of which can produce an accurate depiction of the past. So the past is not fabricated through language, but rather shows itself through descriptive narration. The fundamental differences between reconstructionism and constructionism are in their views of the past, their approach and their methods of reasoning. A reconstructionist resists the attempt to translate contingent and specific events into laws in the belief that theory from outside intrudes in the domain of evidences. Yet, for a constructionist theory is fundamental and unavoidable.<sup>2</sup> Reconstructionist emphasizes the empirical-analytical approach which is directed to the concrete and specific whereas the constructionist approach is abstract-analytical which takes the concrete as point of departure to arrive at a possible universal law. The reconstructionist predominantly supports the method of inductive reasoning while deductive reasoning finds constructionism as its natural ally. Among the paradigmatic examples of constructionism are G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Lucien Febvre, Marc Bloch, Carl Hempel and Patrick Gardiner.

Apart from their differences, both constructionists and reconstructionists share the view that there is an epistemological gap between the past and the historian. Both presume that a historian does not construct the past but depicts it. For both, language is a tool of description. That is to say, the content, i.e. past events, ultimately

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow, *The Nature of History Reader*, Taylor & Francis e-Library ed. (London: Routledge Press, 2004), pp.1-18.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Booth, 'Evidence revised: Interpreting historical materials in sport history', *Rethinking History*, 9:4 (2005), pp.459-83.

determine the nature of the descriptive language to be deployed. Language emerges as a neutral and unadulterated. Language, for the reconstructionist largely provides the concepts in accordance with the evidences back there. Language does not disturb the objectivity of an event.

Deconstructionists call the fundamentals of reconstructionism and constructionism into question. In a broader perspective the deconstructionist fundamentally claims that historiography can never be a *depiction* of the past but rather it is narrative-making. The historian constructs the past. The past is not historical *per se*.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, narrative-making can only be accomplished through the use of language. Language, for a deconstructionist, can never be a transparent medium. So historicizing the past is primarily a literary activity that interprets the past from outside. Therefore, a historian does not enjoy epistemological autonomy as reconstructionists and constructionists presume.

Similarly, and preceding Jenkins and Munslow, Hayden White also rejected the possibility of writing history along reconstructionist and constructionists lines. In response to the possibility of a 'neutral narrative' Hayden White claims that historical writings are similar to the work of art and literature.<sup>4</sup> Discussing the nineteenth century so-called realists, such as Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville and Burckhardt in relation to Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Croce, White concludes that historical writings of the nineteenth century are *ironic* as they tend towards skepticism in thought and relativism in ethics. According to White, the predominant ironic mode of the nineteenth-century is not in fact due to the cultural conditions of Europe at that time. As is now all too well understood it is due to the deep linguistic structure that determines in advance the paradigm of historical explanation. The structure of language is such that the historian can only construct a narrative which imposes itself from outside the content upon the past. Historical narration is constructed through the linguistic tropes such as irony, metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche; the theories of truth: formalism, mechanism, organism and contextualism, and arch type plot structures of: romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire, and finally this produces the matrix of ideological implications: anarchism, radicalism, conservatism, liberalism. With these unavoidable linguistic protocols the historian approaches the past. The historian is now free to elect their preferred conceptions of truth, analysis, and ideological position. The choices

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<sup>3</sup> Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow, *op.cit.*, p.16.

<sup>4</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1975).

she/he makes give shape to the history. Inevitably, this has implication for the understanding of method and of course, what constitutes historical truth. So history, from the very beginning, is *Metahistory*. It can never be a representation *per se*, but a creation determined by linguistic structure. It is similar to literature and art in its basic orientation. However, as is also well understood, White later shifts the emphases from literature to ideology.<sup>5</sup> History, now becomes for White, not only literary but ideological and political as well. The argument offered here is that the historian can only access the inaccessible past by a mediation that renders historiography as narrative making. For White, because of the linguistic protocols the past remains transcendent in a Husserlian sense.<sup>6</sup>

## II

### **The worst case of constructionism: Marx's dialectical method**

For Marx, the past is not transcendent yet it is only knowable through the constructionist method. On the lines of constructionism, Marx introduces the dialectical method and labels it as correct. The constructionist methodology leads him to conceive that there is definitely an epistemological gap between the historian and the past, history is governed through the laws of economics, and these laws beneath historical events are known by a method what he calls the dialectical method. Marx, shifting from his earlier position on methodology taken in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*<sup>7</sup> and *German Ideology*,<sup>8</sup> claims in *Das Capital*<sup>9</sup> that the correct method of investigation is not purely empirical but dialectical. According to Marx, the social world consisting of social objects is dialectically interwoven with one another which make dialectical method the most appropriate tool to understand the same. In the social world the relations through which things are produced, distributed and consumed, namely a mode of production, play

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<sup>5</sup> Wulf Kansteiner, 'Hayden White's Critique of the Writing of History', *History and Theory*, 32:3 (1993), p.274.

<sup>6</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), p.62.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, in Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Press, 1975), p.336.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, in Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, *ibid.*, p.236.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, *Das Capital*, Vol.1, (ed.) F. Engels (New York: International Press, 1967).

a deterministic role.<sup>10</sup> Like a classical constructionist, Marx locates the mode of production as the driving force of human history. In order to reach at the laws of human history Marx introduces the terms 'simple' and 'abstract' category.<sup>11</sup> A category, for Marx, is not something that exists in itself like an empirical object in the external world. It is an abstraction of social, political and economic reality. Through abstraction, a natural choice of constructionists, one may identify the characteristic of various things in which they agree and exclude those in which they disagree.<sup>12</sup> According to Marx, in a given mode of production an objective understanding and a critique of previous mode of production is not possible until it has not attained, to a certain degree, self-criticism. The objective understanding of ancient, feudal and Asiatic societies became possible only when bourgeoisie society had already developed its own critique.<sup>13</sup> Believing in the epistemological gap between capitalist mode of production and previous ones in terms of self-criticism Marx is led to believe in the *objectivity* of capitalism to provide a neutral basis to analyze the previous modes of production. So the understanding of the pre-capitalist modes of productions cannot be attained through the categories of the same societies. Like a scientist Marx construes capitalist categories as an *epistemological key* to understand the previous and existing structures of a system.<sup>14</sup> It is some sort of code. If it is

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<sup>10</sup> Kate Currie, 'The Asiatic Mode of Production: Problems of Conceptualizing State and Economy' *Dialectical Anthropology* (Springer: Netherlands, 2004), p.252.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, (trans.), Martin Nicolaus (Pelican Books, 1973, p.103).

<sup>12</sup> 'Abstraction' plays an important role in Marx's dialectical method, however E.V. Ilyenkov overlooks its role, whereas P.J. Kain emphasizes it. Alfred Sohan-Rethel has developed an incisive work on ideological abstractions as Derek Sayers so did. Leszek Nowak, with the Weberian background reinterprets the relation between ideology and abstraction. Paul Sweezy emphasizes the particular aspect of abstraction in which it indicates the essentials of a problem. Ilyenkov E.V. *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism* (London: New Park Publications Ltd., 1982). P.J Kain, *Method, Epistemology and Humanism* (Holland: D. Reidel Publishers, Dordrecht). Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectuals and Manual Labor* (London: Macmillan, 1978). Leszek Novak, *The Structure of Idealization: Towards a Systemic Interpretation of the Marxian Idea of Science* (Holland: D. Reidel Publishers, 1980). Paul Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development* (USA: Monthly Review Press, 1956). Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, *op.cit.*, p.106.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.105.

decoded, the past may objectively be known. Following blindly the lines of constructionism, Marx claims that the approach to understanding society on the basis of categories is similar to the approach taken in the natural sciences.<sup>15</sup> If the theoretical framework based upon the hierarchy of categories is in place, concrete historical reality can adequately be studied. With this theoretical framework he approaches Asiatic history and arrives at a flawed conclusion regarding Asiatic society. The assumption of similarity between the methods of natural sciences and history – and sociology – was common during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Auguste Comte placed sociology at the top of the hierarchy from the viewpoint of objectivity which would enable a sociologist to study a society and precisely predict its future behavior.

### **Failure of dialectical method: the asiatic mode of production**

It was not before 1848 that the question of Asiatic societies attracted the attention of Marx.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps, Hegel's lectures on *the Philosophy of History* were the first source for Marx on Asiatic history. During exile in England, and because of financial reasons, Marx started writing articles on China (14 June 1853) and India (25 June) for the *New York Daily Tribune* during the time when the *East India Company* was establishing its rule in India.<sup>17</sup> Although many of the articles published in the *New York Daily Tribune* were largely concerned with political and social implications of British rule in India, Marx attempted at times to conceptualize Asiatic society.<sup>18</sup> First time, during the last months of 1857, Marx made a serious attempt to understand Asiatic history by making use of dialectical method.<sup>19</sup> Dialectical method is an instance of

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.106.

<sup>16</sup> It is not the first time that thinkers in the Western civilization attempt to conceptualize Asiatic society. Before Marx Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes, Quesnay Jean Bodin, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Boulanger, Anquetil-Duperron, Hegel and James Mill tried to theorize Asian societies. Most of these thinkers agreed, though with differences, that Asiatic society is stagnant, oppressive, religiously conservative, mystically oriented stationary society.

<sup>17</sup> The letters can be accessed on the following web page <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/newspapers/new-york-tribune.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> *New York Daily Tribune* was an American newspaper published from 1841 to 1962. Many of the articles were at, Marx's request, written by Engels.

<sup>19</sup> Indirectly rejecting Althusser's notion of epistemic break, Wittfogel attempts to establish that Marx, not breaking but following the fundamental lines of the nineteenth century European discourse interpreted Asiatic

pure constructionism. Marx characterized the epochs of historical development in the *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* as the Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal and the modern bourgeois modes of productions. It was the first time Marx introduced the concept of *Asiatic Mode of Production* as a force that 'conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life'.<sup>20</sup> Marx offered numerous reasons in different texts explaining the stationary and stagnant nature of Asiatic society. In June, 1853, especially the correspondence with Engels on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> and some articles published in the *New York Daily Tribune*, particularly *The British Rule in India* (25 June 1853) and *The Future Results of the British Rule in India* (8 August 1853), show that Marx claimed that neither the centralized administration, nor the climate, nor the nature of land in the Orient allow for developing the private landed property which freezes Asia, or, in the Hegelian terms, places Asia outside world history.<sup>21</sup> 1857 onwards Marx no longer seriously took the geological or administrative reasons, as suggested by Engels, in consideration for the stagnant character of Asiatic society. He, however, thought that Asiatic society is passive, had no potentiality *in itself* to march forward. For Marx, only western capitalism could influence, as an *external force*, or transform the character of Asiatic society.<sup>22</sup> The Asiatic mode of production, in contrast with the ancient or the feudal, cannot develop the contradictory forces either in form of conflict between slave and master, serfdom and feudal or worker and owner. The in-built inability of Asiatic society to produce *internal contradiction* is due to the following categories that are mutually interdependent. First, the individual in Asiatic society does not own but merely possesses property through the mediation of the community. The structure of Asiatic society, in any form or at any level, does not let the individual directly form a relation with the means of labor. It is not conceivable for

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society as being stagnant. Moreover, Wittfogel does not consider Marx's thinking on the lines of European discourse invalidate reflections on Asia. Anderson accepts the argument of Wittfogel but disagrees in part that Marx's understanding of Asiatic society as it is structured on the lines of European discourse invalidate Marx's perception of Asiatic society. K.A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957).

<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, (trans.), S.W. Ryazanskaya (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), pp.21-2.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Marx, and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Press, 1983), pp.330, 335 and 345.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formation*, trans. Cohen, Jack, edit. E.J. Hobsbawm (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1964), p.38.

the individual in the Asiatic society to hold property in separation from community. In Asiatic society the category of 'communal property' plays the same role as the category of 'free labor' in capitalism. Second, in most of the Asiatic forms there was a comprehensive unity standing above all the little communities as a sole proprietor.<sup>23</sup> It appeared either in the form of God or despot. As the sole proprietor, the despot or God provides unity to all existing particular communities. The individual is then, in fact, propertyless, or is himself a property. By consequence, the surplus product belongs to the highest unity as a tribute.<sup>24</sup> As the surplus labor only belongs to the despot it excludes the possibility of the development of a self-conscious class. Third, the transformation would have been possible if the Asiatic society was, even though at an initial stage it was communal, not self-sufficient. According to Marx, the small communities in Asia, fortunately or unfortunately, were self-sustaining units maintaining the unity of agriculture and craft. In these conditions slavery neither suspends the conditions nor modifies the essential relations of production as it did in the ancient society.<sup>25</sup>

From Marx's analysis of capitalism it is very evident that a totality, like Asiatic society, can never develop the contradictory forces if it does not structurally possess the ability to construct a person as an individual. As in the Asiatic mode of production the individual does not own property whereby it excludes the possibility for a person to develop himself as an individual to produce an internal contradiction within the totality. Marx considers the ancient, the feudal and the bourgeoisie mode of production as progressive stages in the development of human beings. In this historical evolution the slave is becoming serf and thereby giving birth to a free worker. It shows the progress of humanity in achieving individuality by freeing itself from communal bonds in free actualization of labor capability. Marx, therefore, conceives that the principal line of demarcation between the capitalist and pre-capitalist economic formations is between free and bonded labor.<sup>26</sup>

Marx's characterization of Asiatic society in terms of 'Asiatic mode of production' was to become susceptible to various people, both

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<sup>23</sup> Deleuze agrees with Marx that Asiatic society is predominantly despotic. Despot as a socius determines the flows of desire. Gille Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, *op.cit.*, pp.473, 475 and 486.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.494.

<sup>26</sup> Anne M. Bailey and Josep R. Llobera, *The Asiatic Mode of Production: Science and Politics* (London: Routledge Press, 1981), p.26.



inside and outside the subcontinent. Critics so far look for external factors that led Marx to the wrong conclusions regarding Asiatic history. The thrust of their critique is that Marx, *unfortunately*, relied too much upon poor and wrong sources on Asiatic history. On the contrary, this paper argues that the selection or the availability of sources did not play a *major* part. The failure of Marx's understanding of Asia is neither due to his exclusive reliance on European sources, nor due to the unavailability of Asian sources to him, as popularly believed in India, China and Pakistan.<sup>27</sup> The problem is *not* external, the choice of wrong or the lack of good sources on Asia, but very *internal* to constructionism that Marx inherits through dialectical method. Because of this Marx unjustifiably believes in the objectivity of the past whereas the past can never be immediate and direct. He gives undue importance to the abstract theoretical framework to understand the past. Because of constructionist tendency he considers the dialectical method as an absolutely objective method that makes it possible to attain a disinterested view of history. For example, Hassan Gardezi in an article, 'South Asia and the Asiatic Mode of Production: Some Conceptual and Empirical Problems', revealed ethnic or Eurocentric elements in Marx's analysis of Asiatic society. Many historians did not agree with Marx's findings that Asiatic society was stagnant and had no potential to develop without the role of western civilization, such as D.D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to Indian History* and *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, and Thapar, *A History of India, Vol. I* believed in the internal dynamics of Indian society that had, over the years, brought about many transformations. On the different front, R. S. Sharma in *Indian Feudalism: c. 300-1200* out rightly rejected Marx's claim that there had never been a mode of production that might be identified with feudalism. For Sharma, although with some differences

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<sup>27</sup> There is no evidence that before 1848 Marx gave much thought to the question of the Asiatic mode of production. The writings in *New York Tribune* show that Marx studied the following literature on Asia perhaps in 1850s: Rev. C. Foster, *A Historical Geography of Arabia*; Bernier, *Voyages*; Sir William Jones *The Orientalist*; Stanford Raffles, *History of Java*; G. Campbell, *Modern India*; J. Child, *Treatise on the East India Trade*; Joseph von Hammer, *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches*; James Mill, *History of India*; Thomas Mun, *A Discourse on Trade, from England into the East Indies*; J Pollexfen, *England and East India* and Saltykow, *Lettres sur l'Inde* and some parliamentary notes on India. According to Kader, most of the writings that Marx read to understand Asiatic society were written by travelers, merchants, traders, British official and service men.

with the model of the European feudalism Indian society had been feudal. Taking a middle position, Gardezi agreed with the application of AMP, however the notion of Asiatic mode was justifiable during the period of the first and second BC but, after it, India witnessed the rise of independent landlords holding considerable powers. Irfan Habib wrote specifically on AMP and challenged its veracity on grounds of Marxist methodology, even as he never accepted the notion of Indian feudalism. Indeed, R S Sharma's *Indian Feudalism* itself faced serious questioning from other Marxists during the 1980s.

Additionally dialectical methodology does not trust the 'concrete'. At the outset it *suspiciously* takes the concrete with a view to understand its connection with fundamental category. Marx repeatedly tells us that the concrete cannot be understood in its own terms or in relation to another but rather it has to be linked with a theoretical framework in which the concrete makes itself *rightly* intelligible.

The fundamental category that guarantees the comprehension is only shown when the concrete is seen in *total* abstraction. Although Marx begins with the analysis of concrete it always remains a point of departure for him. The notion of fundamental category attained through abstraction further develops the orientation of the historian to simplify or to overlook the complexities in which different aspects of concrete are entangled. Because of these two reasons, the concrete, in dialectical methodology, not only remains inaccessible to human understanding but it also appears unworthy of analysis in its own right. So Marx invented a form of model that has little or nothing to do with the nature of Asiatic society but that he is imposing an alien interpretative structure. It is ironically that constructionist like Marx aims to retrieve the past yet the method he adopts keeps him aloof from the reality.

### III

#### **Foucault and the failure of reconstructionism, constructionism and deconstructionism**

The idea of transcendent past or access to the past only by the constructionist method is paradoxical. It addresses a few but raises various questions that cannot be resolved on the discursive region occupied by Marx and White. For Foucault, the fundamental problem of both Marx and White is that they cannot break out of modern discursive region that led them to reduce transcendental part of human being to empirical.

According to Foucault, the birth and the development of discourses, including constructionism and deconstructionism in western history indicates that there are certain historical *a priori* condition that

determines not only the growth of discourses, but also the problems in which these discourses engage and the solutions they propose to resolve them. By historical *a priori* Foucault means that there are historical (temporal) conditions that in advance provide the basis to order things, to outline the speculative interests of the given period, limits theoretical options of the time and to constitute conditions in which a proposition is considered to be true.<sup>28</sup> So the historical *a priori* constitutes a 'discursive region' that makes discourses possible. According to Foucault, during the classical period, from the sixteenth-century up to the end of the eighteenth-century it is maintained without question that the objects outside of us furnish our minds with ideas. The mind transparently inhabits these ideas. It is thought that there is a natural relationship between the ideas and mind. The idea perfectly *represents* the object. That is why Foucault characterizes the classical historical *a priori* as 'representation'. Man must communicate the ideas through the proper use of words. During the classical period the studies never, at any stage, called the presumed transparent connection of the idea to the mind into question. The debates of the classical era solely focused upon the use of language. In the background of 'representation' the question which is so familiar to us, what language is never rises to the classical thinkers. The classical discourse's focus upon the appropriate use of language pushes Foucault to conclude that language in the classical era did not exist. For, the existence of language as an object of study does not occupy the discursive region within the classical discourse. In Foucault's view the important shift occurred at the end of the seventeenth century when the relationship between the mind and idea, and of idea to the object characterized in term of *representation*, was called into question. The critique of representation led modern thought to two distinct but extreme possibilities. On one extreme Kant considers transcendental subject as a source of knowledge. The Kantian critique of *representation* shows that the forms of sensibility and the categories of understanding are the transcendental roots of knowledge. Another extreme view is that ideas are historical. This position explains the formation of human knowledge on the historical grounds. Herder is one of important instances in this regard. Modern thought oscillates along these extremes. The critique of representation led the modern thought to the position of transcendentalism and historicism regarding the formation of knowledge. In the face of transcendentalism and historicism, language returns. Transcendental or historical explanation of the formation of ideas make

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<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Book Edition, 1994), p.157.

possible for language to become an autonomous and independent object of inquiry. Language that was a self-evident instrument of communication becomes an object of investigation in the modern world.<sup>29</sup> The discourse on language gave birth to opposite approaches, what Foucault calls formalism and hermeneutics. Formalists aim to purify language from the confusions, prejudices and inclinations through the formal techniques inspired by mathematics and science. Among the examples are Bertrand Russell and earlier Wittgenstein. In contrast to a formalist a hermeneutician aims to interpret truths hidden in language. Additionally, the return of language tends to lead language to absolute autonomy. In this realm nothing other than language exists. The speaker is nothing but a First Person Pronoun. He remains a part of speech. From Holderlin to Mallarme and on to Antonin Artaud language or literature achieved an autonomous status.<sup>30</sup> The theme of return of language constitutes a region of 'pure literature' that brought about an important turn in the philosophy of history which is conventionally known as 'linguistic turn'. This region provides a discursive area to the thinkers like Hayden White to conclude that historical writings are similar to the works of art and literature. Hayden White nowhere seems to question this discursive region constructed by the failure of the classical representation. He thinks in the area of pure literature that led him to reduce transcendental part of human being to empirical. White falls to the autonomy of language.

According to Foucault, Marx, like White, also thinks in the area produced by the fall of the classical representation. When representation no longer provides an adequate ground for the formation of knowledge, the value of a commodity cannot be located in the exchange as was the case in the classical era. For Foucault, the collapse of the classical historical *a priori* pushed modern discourse, Ricardo as an example, to the conclusion that the source of value of commodity is not exchange but labor. Commodities are valuable even if there is nothing in the market that can be exchanged for them because people work to produce them. Because of this reason value has ceased to be a sign, it has become a project.<sup>31</sup> Labor as a source of value further shapes the discourse of economics. By consequence economic and historical relations emerge as the production of labor activity. The notion of labor makes it possible to conceive historical and economic process in terms of linear series. The labor activity imparting value to the alien and indifferent world develops

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.304.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.42.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.254.

a conception of historical progress. It is the region of historical progress. It is the same region that gives birth to thinkers like Marx. Foucault writes that “at the deepest level of Western knowledge, Marxism introduced no real discontinuity; it found its place without difficulty... Marxism exists in nineteenth century thought like a fish in water; that is, it is unable to breathe anywhere else... (Marx) may have stirred up a few waves and caused a few surface ripples; but they are no more than storms in a children’s paddling pool’.<sup>32</sup>

So Karl Marx and Hayden White as examples of constructionist and deconstructionist historians occupy the discursive region produced by modern historical *a priori*. For Foucault, constructionism and deconstructionism are not the conflicting trends but rather complementary projects working on the same discursive region. Foucault identifies, among many, some fundamental problems of modern discursive region that can never be resolved until one thinks outside of it. Modern discursive region by the necessity of the critique of representation is leading the contemporary discourse to the reduction of transcendental character of human being to empirical and *vice-versa*. In Foucault’s view undue emphasis upon one part of human being, no matter either upon transcendental or empirical, renders the contemporary attempts to explain the formation of knowledge problematic.<sup>33</sup> Among paradigmatic examples of reducing empirical to transcendental are Kant and Husserl and of transcendental to empirical are Marx (and White). For Marx, the notion of the mode of production and the idea of linguistic trope for White explains the past and history. Foucault challenges the attempt to reduce transcendental to the empirical on two distinct grounds. Additionally he suggests that the questions raises on the modern discursive region cannot be resolved on the same. The first objection he raises against the attempt to explain the formation of knowledge on empirical, historical or linguistic grounds is that the attempt deprives itself from the normative character of knowledge. It looses the normative validity of knowledge. The second but more compelling and important objection is that the said attempt overlooks the role of individual in the formation and production of knowledge. The individual is somehow empirical (dependent) and transcendental (autonomous) at the same time. So the fundamental problem of Marx (and White) is that they are modern kind of thinkers trapped in the modern discursive region from which they

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.261, 262.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.333-34.

cannot break out.<sup>34</sup> The individual outside modern discursive region is empirical and autonomous in the formation of knowledge. In other words, he is both determined by the forces of history, language, culture or economics and autonomous in relation to them in the formation of knowledge. The empirical part of the individual because of determinism *connects* him to the past yet the connection is not transparent. The connection to the past can be restored as the individual is not only empirical but transcendental outside modern discursive region.

I, therefore, strongly suggest that we must approach history outside modern discursive region. The suspension of modern historical *a priori* shows that history has broad epistemological limits what Foucault calls 'practices'. I characterize practices as 'epistemological limits' because they provide a criterion to determine whether the understanding of history is internal or imposed from outside. So, history, for Foucault, is neither absolutely unstable nor absolutely stable. Most importantly the text is neither like an unbounded sea or abyss, nor like a closed system. It is between them. It neither imparts full freedom to a historian nor absolutely determines him. This conception of history and of a historian corresponds to Foucault's conception of man discussed above. The text that reports the past has broad *epistemological limits* which loosely determine the boundaries of interpretation. The epistemological boundaries of the text lie in practices. In this regard Foucault introduces a new archaeological method of historical investigation. The archaeological method premises that man is simultaneously empirical and transcendental. He is both determined and autonomous in the formation and attainment of knowledge. So, Foucault neither reduces history to a pure representation nor to an absolute aesthetic construction.

#### IV

##### **Archaeology: a method to develop an internal account of history to reconnect with the past**

The failure of Marx and White encourages me to take a different path outside the established frameworks of reconstructionism, constructionism and deconstructionism. I find Foucault's method of 'archaeology' more convincing as it addresses the problems of modern discursive region and overcomes them. Foucault characterizes the *Archaeology of Knowledge* as a methodological work. It throws fresh light on the issues of methodology that he employed in his previous works. The titles of Foucault's books suggest the importance he gives to

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<sup>34</sup> Steven Best, *The Politics of Historical Vision: Marx, Foucault, Habermas* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), p.104.

the notion of archaeology. For Foucault, much of history, including Marxist history, is written down with certain presumptions, objectives and beliefs that make it impossible for a historian to give an *internal* account of the past. Most of the commitments and presumptions originate on the modern discursive region. These prejudices and commitments shape nineteenth and twentieth century historiography. For Foucault, history needs to be understood from *within*, not from outside, which is only possible to approach history outside modern historical *a priori*. For Foucault, the transcendental part of the individual premises the possibility of thinking outside modern discursive region. Foucault introduces the term 'history of ideas' to designate the approach which attempts to interpret history from *outside*. In order to avoid an unhistorical account of history Foucault lists some prerequisites that are to be fulfilled before approaching historical events and practices. In the Husserlian fashion, though with a different aim and distinct metaphysics, Foucault strongly suggests *suspension* that is to be opted as a formal technique to think outside the framework of modern discursive region. By the consequence of modern historical *a priori* historians interpret historical events and practices with reference to the concepts such as 'language' and 'Asiatic mode of production'. Approaching history with these notions determines in advance the historian to arrive at the flawed conclusions. For writing history from within or to abandon the approach associated with the '*history of ideas*' we are strongly advised to think outside modern discursive region. According to Foucault, these concepts are developed within a modern discursive domain following certain rules that are only operative within that domain itself. Putting it differently, Foucault suggests, in one respect, that there were neither men nor women, nor even plants or diseases in the seventeenth century as these notions have developed with reference to the modern discursive domain. Of course, Foucault can never deny the existence of man, woman, or of a disease, rather he denies, though in dramatic way, the meanings that these concepts carry in modern discourse, which are not fundamentally shared by preceding discourses. We are encouraged to disassociate with all those notions that are developed in contemporary discourse before developing an internal account of history.<sup>35</sup> Understanding history from within does not signify the attainment of truth but rather a construction following broader epistemological boundaries of the text. The epistemological boundaries will not become visible until one thinks outside the modern discursive region because the modern discursive

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<sup>35</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, 'Foucault for Historians', *History Workshop*, 14 (Autumn 1982), pp.11-14.

region overshadows them. That is why Foucault emphasizes the continuities that conceal or distort the epistemological boundaries must be suspended. Once the modern historical *a priori* is suspended, the entire historical field will be free. Foucault writes:

Once these immediate forms of continuity are suspended, an entire field is set free. A vast field, but one that can be defined nonetheless: this field is made up of the totality of all effective statements (whether spoken or written), in their dispersion as events and in the occurrence that is proper to them. Before approaching, with any degree of certainty, a science, or novels, or political speeches, or the oeuvre of an author, or even a single book, the material with which one is dealing is, in its raw, neutral state, a population of events in the space of discourse in general. One is led therefore to the project of a *pure description of discursive events* as the horizon for the search for the unities that form within it.<sup>36</sup>

With the *suspension* of modern historical *a priori* and its resultant concepts and forced commitments Foucault hopes that one successfully places oneself within history to understand it. By suspension Foucault does not intend to attain a *neutral* position but rather he aims to have an *internal* account of the text; an account of the text corresponding to the practices. So I partially agree with the argument of Alun Munslow that Foucault rejects the possibility of attaining 'objectivity'. However, in my view, Foucault always looked for an internal account of historical events. Otherwise, all historical studies of Foucault on madness, disease, discipline and power would make no sense.<sup>37</sup> Foucault knows very well that the absolute suspension of each and everything is not realizable as the individual is also empirical. A view of history corresponding to the epistemological boundaries constitutes an internal account of history. By implication, all history that is written down without suspension of modern historical *a priori* cannot be referred to, nor can it be considered

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<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, (trans.) A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp.26-7. Paul Veyne introduces the concept of the 'natural object' to show that Foucault does not believe in the trans historical objects and truths that exist beyond historical development. Deeply realizing the implication, he, in an interview, claims that the history teaches nothing as all the historical developments are intrinsically specific, sharing nothing with the contemporary societies. Veyne Paul, *Foucault and His Interlocutors* (ed.) Arnold Davidson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp.129-48.



as history. So Marx's account of Asiatic history is an ahistorical explanation. In the light of this realization one can understand that there are only a few books among millions on history that can be counted as historical and the rest are fictions. With both suspension and blockage, history according to Foucault, does not stay inaccessible because there is a lot of material that is not and can never be corrupted. Foucault identifies this uncorrupted material as 'practices'. That is why Foucault calls practices 'monuments'. These monuments, even though history is written on the modern discursive region, remain untouched by interpreters like Marx. For Foucault, monuments are *human past practices, including thoughts and writings*. The important thing about these *practices* is that they neither hide nor show beyond what they are. They are what they appear to be. The traditional distinctions between appearance and reality, mind and body, transcendental and immanent, or base and superstructure are foreign to these practices. So Foucault hopes that the notion of 'practices' offers a possibility of writing history without reference to modern historical a priori and its commitments. Analyzing practices at their surfaces *without* reducing them either to transcendental or to empirical is the business of a genuine historian. For Foucault, the historian has to avoid *interpretation* of history, which is only possible if he remains at the domain of the practices.<sup>38</sup> Because of this characteristic Foucault calls himself a *positivist*, as he avoids interpretation and stays at the *positivity* of the event reported in the text. Practices show the internal development of an event, the event that can only unfold outside the domain of modern historical a priori. Thus the understanding authenticated by the practices offers an internal perspective. Foucault does not prefer to use the term 'interpretation', however, in one sense he interprets history. Piecing together different practices to construct a consistent view of history is an interpretation. Foucault's refusal to use the term 'interpretation' is understandable because it belongs to the discipline of hermeneutics that he rejects. Foucault simplifies his methodology in the following manner:

...practices" as a domain of analysis, approach the study from the angle of what "was done" (not from the perspective of who or why it was done). For example, what was done with madmen, delinquents, or sick people? Of course, one can try to infer the institutions in which they were placed and the treatments to which they were subjected from the ideas that people had about them, or the knowledge that people

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<sup>38</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, *op.cit.*, p.109.

believed they had about them. One can also look for the form of “true” mental illnesses and the modalities of real delinquency in a given period in order to explain what was thought about them at the time.<sup>39</sup>

Foucault here makes it very clear that only on the grounds of ‘practices’, the historical development of an institution or discipline, like psychiatry or the asylum are to be understood. At this point, importantly, the institutions or the epistemic notions like disease or madness do not provide the basis to link distinct practices to understand their growth, but rather the process is reverse. Not through the ‘subject’ of ‘practices’ but the ‘practices’ outside modern discursive region provide the ground to infer the notion of the disease in history. In the Foucauldian paradigm the historian is expected to infer the meanings that practices carry so as to develop the concepts on which the understanding of an institution or of an event is to be developed. From the practices the understanding of an historical event starts developing. Appreciating recently developing archaeological orientation of modern history, Foucault writes that archaeology neither interprets the text nor is interested in finding whether the text tells the truth or not. It instead ‘works on it from within and to develop it’. It gives an *intrinsic* description of the monuments.<sup>40</sup> Foucault’s fundamental preoccupation is to see the development of historical events *without* reference to modern historical a priori, which guarantees an internal account of history. Keith Jenkins is absolutely right when he complains, like Foucault earlier, that ‘history is always history for someone, and that someone cannot be the past itself for the past does not have a self...’.<sup>41</sup> Primarily because of this reason Keith Jenkins rejects the possibility of *comparative* history and labels the notion of *true* (better) *interpretation* as oxymoron. On the part of Foucault I can say that Jenkins, preceding White and Marx, thinks on the modern discursive region as he reduces transcendental to empirical. Foucault overcomes the problem mentioned by Jenkins with the introduction of ‘practices’ as a fundamental concept for writing an internal account of history. Thus practices create the possibility of a comparative history in which all interpretations do not stand on equal

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<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method And Epistemology: Essentials Works of Foucault*, Vol.2, (ed.) Faubion and James D. (New York: New York Press, 1998), p.462.

<sup>40</sup> For discussion on Archaeology, see Jeffrey Weeks, *op.cit.*

<sup>41</sup> Keith Jenkins, ‘On What is History From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White’ (eds.) Taylor & Francis e-Library (London Routledge Press, 2005), p.22.

footings; however, it suspects the possibility of a *true* interpretation. Practices are broad epistemological limits of history, so they provide a ground to determine to what extent the given interpretation of history incorporates practices. With the notion of practices one *reconnects* with the past that remains transcendent in deconstructionism. But why should one rely upon practices or why should one not deconstruct them as well?

Practices must not be deconstructed for one simple reason. Foucault's suggestion for writing and reading history without reference to modern historical a priori is nothing but a pure deconstruction of modern historiography. He deconstructs history not just for the sake of deconstruction. He deconstructs because it is written on modern discursive region. According to Foucault, practices occupy a neutral horizon. So we are not encouraged to deconstruct them but to construct an internal view of history to reconnect with the past.

## V

### Conclusion

Marx's dialectical method has certain in-built weaknesses that disable it to understand Asiatic history. Regarding the relation between western and non-western civilizations, the first major weakness of the dialectical method, especially when two distinct civilizations tend to understand each other, is that it approaches history in total abstraction. Following the fundamentals of constructionism the dialectical method explains Asiatic society in terms of Asiatic mode of production. With this approach one not only fails to acknowledge the importance of forces like religion, faith, customs, and cultural norms, but it also creates tendency to give undue importance to economic factors. The only understanding that will result out of this attempt will be of no worth to either society: western and non-western. By virtue of this in-built weakness the dialectical method, as I have already shown, fails to develop an internal understanding of Asiatic history. The second major internal flaw of the dialectical method is its treatment of texts. It develops an understanding of history on modern discursive region. It does not transform through deconstruction history into raw material (practices) so as to be able to develop an internal understanding of Asiatic history. It only sorts out what suits its formation and objective. It takes or leaves without deconstructing the given material in the form of bricks (practices) to see whether the building was rightly constructed or not. These are two major built-in flaws of dialectical methodology that cannot be removed by any kind of ad-hoc modifications until it gives up constructionism. Therefore, I think that the problem is not of choice or availability of good sources

on Asiatic history during 1850's, but rather the problem is modern discursive region.

Foucault's archaeological method in comparison to dialectical one is a more viable and appropriate tool especially when two distinct cultures with different historical backgrounds interact in order to understand each other. There are three reasons for this. When different cultures interact to understand each other there always arises greater difficulty in understanding as compared to when the question of meaning arises in the same culture. It is because human understandings *largely* functions through the historicity of the culture in which meanings are the *symbolic part*. The meanings, being cultural, only manifest themselves rightly within the culture. However, sometimes the question of meanings does arise as well within the same culture. In this context Foucault's archaeological method is the best method as it makes possible for a historian to experience the development of a historical event *from within*. At the outset, it puts one within the text to construct via deconstruction an internal account of history. Monument-based analyses manifest meanings in their own cultural contexts as the analysis is directed to practices. Additionally, it understands the domain of practices not through the established interpretations but, importantly, it constructs an internal account by piecing together different practices of a given society. With this specific orientation the archaeological method will be able to acknowledge the role of different forces in Asiatic history and will not commit a reductionist mistake to reduce either history to laws or to art.