

THE ABUSE OF HISTORY II:

The 'New' Barbarians

By

Deepak Lal

In my last column I had discussed the work of various revisionist historians and anthropologists of India who claim that caste is an invention of the British Raj. In this column I would like to examine the ideological roots of this movement. There are a number of intellectual godfathers as far as I can judge. They are the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, the French philosophers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, the American literary critic Stanley Fish and the Palestinian born American professor of English literature Edward Said. A whole new field called 'cultural studies' has emerged in US and UK universities and is purported to be the fastest growing area in the humanities and social studies. If so, the 'new' barbarians are no longer without but within the gates, as the cultural historian Alan Bloom feared in his important book "The Closing of the American Mind".

This 'new' barbarism is a varied movement, which has incorporated various streams labeled semiotics, poststructuralism, postmodernism, critical theory, and postcolonialism. A brilliant book by an Australian academic, Keith Windschuttle: "The Killing of History" provides a lucid and understandable account of all these different strands. One common feature unifying all those practicing this higher nonsense is that, by and large, they are on the Left, but not on the traditional Marxist Left whose final defeat in the countries of 'really existing socialism' in 1989, has left few adherents outside the Communist parties in India.

It is here that, at least for the Indian proponents of this higher nonsense, Gramsci seems to be the pivotal figure. As the Cambridge Left wing political scientist John Dunn has noted (in his "The Politics of Socialism") one of the major preoccupations of socialist political thought in the West has been to secure the active trust and commitment of the working class in a democracy. Gramsci argued that the dominance of private capital in capitalist democracies was not due just to simple repressive force but because it had established a 'hegemony' of belief and sentiment in the wider civil society that capitalist relations in production "are either practically indispensable or essentially desirable in themselves: that there exists no morally or prudentially acceptable alternative to them" (Dunn). In this he is echoing David Hume who maintained in trying to explain why it is easy in 'democracies' for a few to have the implicit submission of the many that "as Force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is, therefore, on opinion only that government is founded." (Hume: "Of the First Principles of Government" in his Essays). The political struggle for power then takes "the form of a struggle to shape and dominate belief and sentiment, to establish what Gramsci called 'hegemony'" (Dunn, p.61)

In this struggle it would be helpful if the current 'hegemony' of capitalist beliefs could be undermined. This is where 'cultural studies' comes in. I cannot claim to understand the complexities of the prolix and often impenetrable writings of these purveyors of the new higher nonsense but taking Windschuttle as my guide I consider his summary of the three common elements in their

work as persuasive. These are first, a rejection of the scientific methods of the Enlightenment based on observation and inductive argument, and hence of history based on these principles. Second, they believe that truth and knowledge are relative and culturally determined. So there is nothing we can know with certainty. We just have 'texts' handed down to us which we can interpret as we will. Third, and most astonishing of all they believe that human beings cannot gain any direct contact or access to reality. We are locked in a "closed system of language and culture; which refers not beyond our minds to an outside world but only inwardly to itself" (Windschuttle, p.36).

This doubting of all material reality reflects an ancient argument going back to Plato, Descartes and Berkeley, which the late Oxford linguistic philosopher Professor J.L. Austin (in his "Sense and Sensibilia") labeled the pursuit of the incorrigible. - A hankering for something to be absolutely certain or something that will be always true. This hankering, as he shows, can be impossible to satisfy if -as is usually the case for these philosophical skeptics- "one rigs it so that certainty is absolutely unattainable" (Austin, p.104). For anyone plagued by this form of doubt- largely based on a misuse of ordinary language- there can be no better purgative than a reading of Austin's, "Sense and Sensibilia".

This skepticism bred by 'cultural studies', it is hoped can destroy the 'hegemony' of capitalist culture. It is further aided and abetted by postimperialism [in all these post-isms the usual hyphens are dropped by the literary critics who are in the forefront of the new barbarism]. The most influential work in this genre is Edward Said's "Orientalism". He claims that European writings about the Orient-travelogues, novels, and history- had "systematically disclaimed the insights of the people it claimed to tell the truth about". Much of the objective knowledge of these colonies was nothing more than stereotypes seeking to perpetuate Western dominance. The most cogent critique of Said's views is by the great scholar of Islam, Professor Bernard Lewis of Princeton and I commend anyone who is interested to read his devastating critique of Said ("The question of Orientalism" in his "Islam and the West").

But, ultimately all these critiques will fall on the deaf ears of the 'new' barbarians. For given their erroneous epistemological view that absolute truth does not exist or cannot be attained, "truth does not matter; evidence doesn't matter. All discourse [a favourite word of these barbarians] is a manifestation of a power relationship, and all knowledge is slanted. Therefore, accuracy doesn't matter; evidence doesn't matter. All that matters is the attitude- the motives and purposes- of the user of knowledge, and this maybe simply claimed for oneself or imputed to another. In imputing motives, the irrelevance of truth, facts, evidence and even plausibility is a great help. The mere assertion suffices. The same rules apply to claiming a motive; goodwill can be established quickly and easily by appropriate political support" (Lewis, p.115). That is the crunch. All that matters is the writer's political stance and support for what are the current politically correct attitudes of the Left.

It is a supreme irony that, the contemporary Left- and all these revisionists are its adherents- traumatized by the failure of 'really existing socialism' have moved so far from that body of thought - Marxism- which had eschewed idealism (by claiming it was material interests not ideas which influence human action as the latter are merely the epiphenomenon of the 'superstructure' which is determined by the 'infrastructure' of material interests), that it has now embraced the deconstructionists who represent the apotheosis of the idealist view. The passing of the Marxist illusion has led to its adherents claiming like the ancient Hindus that the whole world is an illusion- maya! All that matters are 'good' thoughts, attitudes and beliefs. Where the 'good' is defined as all the 'socialist' virtues, that is being pro-Arab (or pro the 'oppressed'), non-racist, non-sexist, non-casteist, non-homophobic, pro an anthropomorphic entity called 'the environment', pro 'animal rights' and so on. As there is no place for rational argument - as that in this world is meaningless-

there can be no meeting with minds, which do not accept these verities. But, if each person can only know his own mind, and there is no certainty that there is any material reality out there, how can each of these virtuous minds even recognize other minds whose motives they seek to judge. With no presumption that there are other minds, it would be pointless to talk or write. For this presumes that there is someone real out there to communicate with. The reductio ad absurdum of the epistemological position of these 'new' barbarians is that, the only logical position left for them to adopt is to proclaim with Hamlet in his death throes: "The rest is silence"!