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MARGINS OF WRITING, ORIGINS OF CULTURES

edited by

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with contributions by

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A teacher holding class in a village on the Island of Argo, Sudan. January 1907.

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RESPONSE FOR THIRD SESSION: POWER AND CULTURE BEYOND IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY

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HYPERGLOSSIA AND THE DIVISION OF LINGUISTIC LABOR AS A RESEARCH PROBLEM

Some of my recent work on the history of culture and power in premodern India has been concerned to understand how small languages come to find a voice in a world of big languages. By voice I mean not only the capacity to record reality — what can be termed the documentary function — but also and especially the capacity to add to reality through the expressive, aesthetic, interpretative — what can be termed (following Dominick LaCapra following Martin Heidegger) the workly function — above all by enunciating matters of power and culture.¹ This binary characterization of function should not be very controversial. In modern Western universalizing theory it has become routine, however much the terminology used to capture the distinction may vary (the binary is sometimes expressed as content versus expression, or information versus imagination, or even, with a little tweaking, constation versus performance). But premodern local theories, too, have defined in their own way the workly function. One common distinction in Indian theory is between *kāvya*, what in English we typically call literature, and *śāstra*, science or systematic thought.

“Big” and “small,” however, are not very precise terms, though they are no less precise than other terms we might use. I often think of them as languages that travel much (the big ones) and languages that travel little (the small ones), though geographical dispersal, itself a relative measure, is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition of the bigness I have in mind since the capacity for the workly is also required. We also need to keep in mind the fluidity of the application of these terms, since small languages can become big — and indeed, big ones (such as Latin) typically start their careers as small. Sanskrit itself seems something of an exception to this rule, however, given its wide diffusion from a very early period through the movements of Brahman communities.

Once we look at actually existing languages some of this imprecision begins to recede. Chinese has been a big language for much of its history and by comparison Vietnamese and Korean have been small ones for most of theirs. This is not to say they were intrinsically small, it is to say that historically they never became big. The same is true of Sanskrit and the south Indian language Kannada, respectively, or Latin and Castilian (before 1492, of course, when *la lengua fue compañera del imperio*, a linkage to which I return below).

In understanding how small languages actually do find a voice I view two processes as significant. One of them, again not controversial, I call *literization*, my rebarbative translation of *Verschriftlichung*, the process whereby a language (or what thereby becomes a language)

* I thank Seth Sanders for both his initial invitation to participate in this fascinating conference and his careful reading of an earlier draft of this response.

¹ LaCapra 1983.

acquires written form. The other process is more complicated and I must use an even more barbaric word to do so: *literarization*, by which I mean the development of expressive capacities appropriated from a superposed, big literary culture. As just noted, finding a voice is not just about the ability to communicate, it is about varieties of communication. Something decisive in cultural and political history occurs when users of a language seek not just to write (by recording a bill of sale, for example) but to write literarily (by enunciating the fame of the king, for example). Users of small languages seek to make them big (or bigger) through this double process. There is no predetermination whatever in this, despite what cultural evolutionists would have us believe. Not all languages even come to be literized; many in India were not until missionary Christianity arrived. Even fewer are literarized. The time lag between literization and literarization can be substantial, sometimes many centuries, and when literarization does occur it signals a new cultural choice typically within the context of a new political state of affairs: the redefinition of the political order as empire in Rome, for example, as nascent nation-state in the later High Middle Ages, or as the “vernacular polity,” as I call it, in medieval southern Asia. Culture change and power change are typically coeval, and power has cared about culture seriously, if variously, long before modernity in the guise of industrialization and print capitalism, which most scholars have argued were the necessary preconditions for such care.²

The literarization of a small documentary language is a crucial moment in the history of the displacement of a big language. Before this occurs, its relationship to the dominant workly language is far more than what is usually called diglossia. That is the situation where two spheres of usage are divided between a higher and lower pole of the same language; the situation I am describing obtains between two unrelated languages. I have named this situation hyperglossia to indicate a maximal form of language dominance: one language is used for expressive purposes, another for the recording of the quotidian — and these languages are cognitively grasped as separate and distinct by the actors involved.

This was the situation in southern Asia for a millennium when the Sanskrit ecumene flourished. Salient cases are legion, stretching from Tamilnadu, Karnataka, and Andhra to Cambodia and Java. But there is an ironic reversal built into the situation of hyperglossia. The very presence of a hyperglossic language is the primary condition of possibility for vernacularization, or the process by which an unwritten language becomes first literized and documentary, but then eventually aspires to wider dissemination through the process of literarization. In my parlance, preliterate languages are not called to be called vernaculars, they are not in fact languages. They are, again according to the conceptual schemes of their speakers (to the degree this is knowable in the absence of writing) only undifferentiated smears on a linguistic spectrum, unnamed often, perhaps even invisible in some sense. It is literization and, far more literarization — which typically includes “philologization” through the creation of grammars, dictionaries, and prosody manuals — that creates them as distinct vernaculars in the first place. This was certainly the case across the Gangetic plane in north India: it was only through the double process of literization and literarization (and chronologically only deep into that process) that what had long been called simply “speech” — *bhākhā* (or *bhāṣā*) and not Hindi or anything else — became cognized and differently named as languages, Gwalyari, Avadhi, Brajbhasha, and eventually (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) Hindi and Urdu.

The two most powerful cases of this model of vernacularization — of the elevation of a small language for literary and political work — are South Asia and Europe. Here the correspondences are astonishing, from the written emergence and literary career of Latin in the third century

² Most famously Gellner 1983.

B.C. — chronologically and morphologically paralleling Sanskrit — to the development of Old English (a Germanic language) in the ninth/tenth and Italian (a Romance language) in the thirteenth/fourteenth — chronologically and morphologically paralleling the emergence of Kannada (a Dravidian language) and Brajhasha (an Indo-Aryan language). But the model may not be universally applicable. So far as I can see, it does not really work in the Chinese sphere. Vietnamese and Korean, even despite the creation of new writing systems in the fourteenth or fifteenth century (prior to that period they were written in Chinese characters, much as Yiddish is written in Hebrew characters), did not achieve cultural-political independence until centuries later. As for “vernacular Chinese” itself, we are told that outside of the texts of early Buddhism, “the amount of unadulterated writing in the ... vernacular Sinitic topolects and languages is so pathetically small as to be virtually nonexistent.”³ Do the model and any of its associated theoretical consequences apply to the materials examined in this book? That is one question I want to ask very briefly in this response and I stress “ask” and “briefly” since it would be absurd for me to try to sort out these complicated materials myself.

I am also interested in the problems these papers raise in respect to political theory since I hold culture and power to be inseparable phenomena. Such theory has been important to me in trying to make sense of the dialectic of cosmopolitan and vernacular — or big and small cultural and political practices — in Asia. Here the challenge has been to find ways to understand these processes that are not hostage to the historical circumstances in which modern political-cultural theory arose and which that theory was designed to interpret.⁴ Last, I want to ask whether we can elicit from these papers any larger generalizations that enable us to use them comparatively, so they can illuminate and be illuminated by power-culture processes occurring at other times or at other places. This requires asking what kinds of explanatory frameworks are available for making sense of these generalizations.

The chapters of Paul-Alain Beaulieu, Theo van den Hout, and Paul Zimansky are extraordinarily rich in terms of their command of the data — it is not easy to believe that more than a few other people in the world command the knowledge they present — but a challenge for the outsider to synthesize, or even to understand fully in their complex implications. Let me just pick out a couple of things about them, in the hopes that my introductory statement may serve as a stimulus for the presenters themselves to do the synthetic work. What I offer are less comments than questions.

The division of linguistic labor offered by my model, its place in the relationship of big and small languages (hyperglossia), and the related division of communication objectives and of the languages appropriate for the different objectives (documentary and workly) is precisely one topic of Beaulieu’s paper. Certainly Aramaic in the Assyrian and Achaemenid formations has the role of documentary language, whereas Akkadian (or Middle Babylonian) is the superposed culture language par excellence, pushing out (if I understand correctly) even Neo-Assyrian, which remained almost completely and forever in the domain of the documentary. This seems to have been true also of Aramaic, even when it became, in my terms, quasi-cosmopolitan — “quasi” because though it traveled well it seems not to have undergone literarization in any serious way so as to become a medium for imaginative participation in a vaster world (Beaulieu uses the term “international vernacular”). We are told that “only one significant piece of ancient Mesopotamian Aramaic literature has come down to us.”⁵ The literary-historical situation may actually be rather

³ Mair 1994: 707, 725, and 730.

⁴ See Pollock 2006b, chapter 13.

⁵ See Beaulieu, this volume.

more complicated than this since the biblical and Qumran Aramaic literature reflects an international milieu extending to Mesopotamia.⁶ But the absence of a rich archive of workly texts, especially those expressive-political and imaginative-aesthetic texts we now call literature, is puzzling and begs for some kind of explanation.

To some degree van den Hout's Hittite formation is at least partly accommodated in my model. Cuneiform Hittite was used for private-official documents, whereas everything public and monumental seems to have been written in Hieroglyphic Luwian. But surprisingly, Hieroglyphic Luwian was a very local idiom and by no means a superposed literary language; indeed, there seems to be a kind of inversion of functions of the language of the dominant and subordinate. So problems again confront us.

Just the opposite seems to be the relationship between Hieroglyphic Luwian and cuneiform Urartian in Zimansky's kingdom of Van. The situation here, we are told, was originally complicated by the presence of Akkadian. But early on cuneiform Urartian seems to have superseded Akkadian for symbolic functions, being used for display, far less significantly for administrative communication. By contrast, Hieroglyphic Luwian was reserved for such mundane tasks as recording measurements on jars.

With respect to the hyperglossia model, this does seem to hold for Beaulieu's material: standard Babylonian, the language of the late editions of Gilgamesh and of Babylonian science, was the expressive high language, whereas official Aramaic was the language of bureaucracy. It holds, too, though with more complications, for van den Hout's data: Luwian was used for public monuments, Hittite for the internal circulation of bureaucratic documents (but also some literary texts). For the ancient Near East, then, the hyperglossia model, like that of diglossia, may offer a useful hypothesis for further testing. On the other hand, both Hieroglyphic Luwian and cuneiform Urartian seem to violate the model of literization; as we can tell, their first and main written form was royal monumental inscriptions. If most languages have literariness thrust upon them, others may have been born literary.

It would be very helpful if all this mass of linguistic material were to be organized according to some agreed-upon taxonomy. I do not know whether the terms cosmopolitan and vernacular — by which I mean writing for and feeling oneself to belong to the bigger or the smaller world — are right for this time-space. And in place of documentary and workly a different distinction — between, say, language of record and language of display — might be more useful. But as an outsider it seems to me critical to get the ancient Near East terminological house in order, and to specify what categories refer to what ("official," "vernacular," and so on). Once this is done it would be especially helpful to have some kind of synthetic account of how languages may have moved from one category to another and when — which may enable us then to ask why they moved at all and why they moved when they did. What I have been unable to draw consistently from these papers are the great dichotomies that were to become evident in the worlds to the west and east, between languages that are imperial in their ability to travel far and enunciate the world in a workly fashion or a universalistic project, and languages that stay home and do the workaday tasks of documentary recording. Equally important for me — and again I get no clear sense from the papers — is the place of the literary in imperial language in the ancient Near East: what is the literary and how is it constituted as literary? (Both Sanskrit and Latin intellectuals argued this out with care, the Indians far more consciously than the Romans.) What do we mean, in emic terms,

⁶ See Greenfield 2001: 111–20 (I thank Seth Sanders for the reference).

when we speak of “Aramaic literature”? And when and how were the attempts made on the part of the documentary vernacular to seize eventually the prerogatives of the cosmopolitan world?⁷

WHERE DO EMPIRES COME FROM?

Moving from the more strictly language-oriented problems, let me turn to the problem of political change. What becomes apparent when reading the essays together is the degree of emulation found among political formations in the ancient Near East. This emulation was mediated through culture, powerfully affected by the element of superposition, and marked as a consequence by the incessant borrowing of cultural goods. Thus, Van borrowed from the Assyrians, the Assyrians from the Akkadians, late seventh-century Babylon from Sumer and Akkad, the Persians (though some scholars dispute this) from the Assyrians.

Although the evidence for this kind of emulation is everywhere in evidence in the papers, we are never told why it occurred. Yet the authors can hardly be blamed for what is in fact a huge lacuna in political theory. So far as I know we have no comprehensive account, let alone satisfactory explanation, for what is in fact a ubiquitous phenomenon of premodern (and, arguably, modern) polity. I have elsewhere tried to suggest some lines of inquiry by sketching out a strong thesis of political imitation in the case of the empire form.⁸

The empire form has been continuously recreated through a process of imitation that is historically specifiable and that seems to have run along two axes simultaneously: diachronic (through historical memory) and synchronic (perhaps through what archaeologists have named peer polity interaction). The course of imperial imitation can be plotted along these two axes among a range of embodiments: the Achaemenid version in Iran (followed by the Sasanid and perhaps the Ghaznavid); the Hellenic-Macedonian (followed by Byzantine); the Roman (followed by the Carolingian and Ottonian; the overseas imperial version of the early-modern era, Dutch-English-French-Portuguese-Spanish, and twentieth-century Fascist); the Maurya version in India (followed by the Kushana, and Gupta, and perhaps also the Khmer of Angkor in Southeast Asia). Other empires were joined in other networks of diachronic and synchronic linkages: the central- and inner-Asian version, for example, connected the Xiongnu, Turkic, Uighur, Mongol, and ultimately Mughal, Safavid, and Ottoman polities.

Empires and the coming-into-being of empires in antiquity were not a fact of nature but a fact of culture and thus required an instrumentarium of cultural resources, not least an imperial, monumental, universalist, disciplined-and-permanent (and not vernacularly lawless) language. Or rather, at some point empire came to require such a language. It was of no importance to the Mauryas (320–150 B.C.) but it was central to the Guptas (A.D. 320–550), of no interest to the Achaemenids (550–330 B.C.) but central to the last of the Achaemenids, Alexander (320 B.C.) and his successors, the Romans (27 B.C.–ca. A.D. 425). But what made imperial language necessary and what place did language have in earlier quasi empires (assuming if we agree with most scholars that the Achaemenid formation constituted the first political world empire)?

The implications of large-scale historical borrowing need to be theorized anew. Things are much more complicated than Marx believed, who saw political actors as nothing but con artists who “anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past,” using “time-honored disguise and borrowed

⁷ See Beaulieu, this volume.

⁸ Pollock 2006a, from which some of the following materials are drawn.

language.”⁹ Many of us have assimilated this deception model of historical change. It does not seem to me a very illuminating way of explaining social action, as I want now to argue.

CONCEPTUALIZING PREMODERN POLITICS

My goal in turning from these specific questions of culture and power in the ancient Near East to the matter of Big Theory is to provoke in the good sense (if there is still a good sense after the provocations of the president of my alma mater).¹⁰ I am concerned here above all with how we develop new higher order conceptualizations to explain new data. There is an obvious reluctance in all three chapters even to embark on this task, a reluctance insistently signaled by what used to be called the sanitary quotation mark, what we now call the scare quote (or “scare quote”). For me this is really the scary quote, wildly proliferating over the past decade and furnishing as clear a sign as punctuation can furnish of the crisis of explanation.

When I organized a project on the history of literatures in South Asia (since published as Pollock 2003), I came to believe that scare quotes were replacing thinking and I proscribed their use in the book. To be sure, scare quotes have their place in identifying a category or concept that is contested in its very definition (such as “disabled” or “race”), but they have none when they allow us to avoid the responsibility of specifying historically what constitutes the difference between the category and its doppelganger. I would like to suggest generalizing this practice of abstention. We should be prohibited from using any of the following, as they are used throughout the papers in this conference: “imagined communities,” “nation” and “national,” “identity,” “pure” language, and “propaganda.”

It is the task of historical scholarship, in its theoretical or interpretive capacity, to do the hard work of argument and conceptualization that we refuse to do when we blithely pass off this work to scare quotes. We need to grasp what precisely it is that makes the premodern political formation different enough from the contemporary nation that we have to qualify our use of the term when speaking of the ancient “nation.” These old polities issued no stamps, they had no flags, no national anthems, no knife-edged borders — but what in fact did they have that makes us hesitate about their status as power-culture formations, that makes us think of them as precursors of something most contemporary scholars (rightly or wrongly) believe was invented in the nineteenth century? The whole point of the exercise is to capture this premodern difference — if it is all more of the same why bother? And we must not let typography do that kind of work for us because it cannot.

The problem here goes beyond typography, however. The explanatory framework in evidence in these papers, above all, legitimation theory, derives from notions of power developed in modern Western capitalism to explain modern Western capitalism. What authorizes us to extend them backward in time to ancient Babylon or Persepolis? The explanatory laxity in these papers seems to me to stand in very stark contrast to the extraordinary rigor of their empirical work. The impression one gets is of astonishing labors expended to unearth the unknown, and then of complete indifference to the predictability of the interpretation. Again, what is the point of seeking to know the unknown if we are going to use it to tell the same old story, that all culture served merely to legitimate power, or to genuflect before models invented to explain very different historical periods with their very different technologies of dissemination? (After all, it is only print capitalism, according to the Andersonian model, that makes it possible for a community to be

⁹ Marx 1964: 15

¹⁰ See “Furor Lingers as Harvard Chief Gives Details of Talk on Women,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2005.

imagined at all.) Then, too, these models have been found problematic by social theory itself even for explaining the phenomena from which they were developed. Consider for a moment that now omnipresent conceptual object, identity.

For many scholars this term has lost all explanatory salience. Notice what two very serious social scientists, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, have to say on the matter: “‘Identity’ [is not] something that all people have, seek, construct, and negotiate. Conceptualizing all affinities and affiliations, all forms of belonging, all experiences of commonality, connectedness, and cohesion, all self-understandings and self-identifications in the idiom of ‘identity’ saddles us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary.”¹¹ Once we free ourselves from the vocabulary of identity we might see our way forward to freeing ourselves from the fact of identity, from assuming its transhistorical validity. In India, for example, I would argue that “ethnic identity,” at least in the sense that social science strictly uses the term — a community of common descent with shared memories and horizontal solidarities¹² — did not even exist in premodernity.

Even if it did exist, ethnic identity certainly had little to do with language. Multilingualism, even having multiple mother tongues, was the order of the day and not the exception, and often still is. A. K. Ramanujan, my late colleague at the University of Chicago, famously described how he grew up completely trilingual in the southern Indian city of Mysore, speaking Tamil in the kitchen, Kannada in the streets, and English in his father’s study.¹³ More than this: We find everywhere in the historical record what I would call decisionism in the use of language. Capitalist modernity has led us to think of language as not only a crucial but a necessary, inevitable — in Ben Anderson’s words, “fatal” — component in the process of self-definition. The materials I work with — and I believe this may be corroborated by the papers under review — suggest that this fatality is not transhistorical. On the contrary, people in the past would decide to use one or another language for one or another objective without any reference to identity. Think only of the Mughals of India, speakers of Chagtai Turkish who adopted Persian for their empire (while their subjects spoke and prayed in many languages, from Arabic to Brajhasha, from Sanskrit to Tamil).¹⁴

Before modernity, it was typically not identity but the particular genre of discourse in use that regulated language choice (religion was a far weaker determinant). This was true even in the early centuries of vernacularization both in India and Europe. As one historian of pre-nationalism has pointed out, in late-medieval Spain Castilian was used for solemn prose, Galician-Portuguese for lyrics, Norman for didactic works.¹⁵ Or as Charles V is said to have put the matter, “I speak Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse.” And this condition persisted until eventually, for reasons that have much to do with the power-culture conditions of early modernity in both worlds, every language began to try to do everything.

DOES LEGITIMATION EXPLAIN ANYTHING IN PREMODERNITY?

With these general observations in mind we may approach the more particular problem of ideology and its subspecies, the legitimation of power, in the explanation of premodern power-culture. This is a very complex question, too complex for a brief response paper, especially when I am already over budget. But I want at least to put this question on the table.

¹¹ Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 2.

¹² See, for example, Hutchinson and Smith 1996.

¹³ Ramanujan 1999: 448–50; and compare p. xiv.

¹⁴ For a recent overview, see Alam 2003.

¹⁵ Armstrong 1982: 269.

Let me start with some quotes from various papers as they were originally presented at the seminar:

- **The growth of Assyria also entailed the growth of an imperial ideology.**
- An ambitious monarchy which propelled the old Babylon-centered theology and cosmology of the intellectual elites to the status of **an imperial ideology, propagated mainly in the numerous buildings inscriptions** of the dynasty. These inscriptions **legitimize the rule of the Neo-Babylonian kings** almost exclusively in their role as preservers and restorers of the rituals and temples of Sumer and Akkad.
- The creation of Achaemenid Akkadian was primarily motivated by **the need to appropriate the Akkadian language for the purpose of the imperial propaganda**, while at the same time signifying a rejection of the high cultural tradition conveyed by official literary Babylonian. **This would make the creation of Achaemenid Akkadian a pure ideological and political statement.**
- Moreover, the use of the **paleo-Hebrew script in the Hellenistic and Roman period (and even on the coins of the modern state of Israel) served an ideological purpose. For example, the paleo-Hebrew script suggests claims to antiquity and legitimacy.** It connected governments (e.g., Samaritan, Hasmonean, and Bar-Kokhba) and religious groups (e.g., the Qumran sect) with the golden age of ancient Israel.
- It is a statement of the obvious to assert that Sumerian was an integral part of the ideological framework of the Ur III state. After Akkadian had replaced Sumerian as the language of administration and propaganda during the preceding Sargonic period, Sumerian once again emerged in the south as the language of writing: portions of the Sumerian literary corpus better known from later Old Babylonian copies were composed at this time, likely originating as court performances as **Ur III kings sought to recapture the glories of a legendary Sumerian heroic age of which they saw themselves as heirs, such was the foundation of their legitimization.**
- Sumerian was not only the language of instruction, but also the language of the scribal milieu, the glue that held the scribal guild together. **And so it served a crucial ideological function in shaping scribal identity.**
- It seems very likely that the **Uartians developed a system of government which held these natural “islands” together through various military and ideological mechanisms** that left them with the capacity to function independently,
- Smith ... has argued that **display inscriptions advanced a claim to royal legitimacy by the king’s unique ability to transform and “civilize” the natural world** through construction.

I could have assembled precisely the same kinds of quotations from contributions to any conference on South or Southeast Asian premodern studies, where ideology in general and the legitimation argument in particular are the first choice in industrial-strength solvents for all historical problems. My difficulty with legitimation theory specifically — aside from the fact that it is entirely mechanical and utterly predictable — is that it makes a range of assumptions about the past that we are not authorized to make. This is where (to revert to John Kelly’s image) Weber’s worst nightmares would come true, where what was offered originally as a hypothesis has since hardened into an axiom. How legitimation explains anything seems itself never to be explained, let alone critiqued and defended, as Weber would certainly have insisted; instead, it is simply asserted as a fact of universal human behavior. Weber may have invited this consequence upon his head when he proclaimed that “*in no instance* does domination voluntarily limit itself to the

appeal to material or affectual or ideal motives as a basis for its continuance. In addition *every such system* [of domination] attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy,” though he did leave room for maneuver when he elsewhere added, “The usefulness of the above classification [of ideal types of legitimate domination] can only be judged by its results in promoting systematic analysis ... The idea that the whole of concrete historical reality can be exhausted in the conceptual scheme about to be developed is as far from the author’s thoughts as anything could be.”¹⁶ Legitimation as well as ideology (the latter in the strong and useful sense of the term — the systematic miscognition of reality through discourses that sustain asymmetrical relations of power — not in the imprecise sense of “idea system”) are terms invented to explain how power reproduces itself under the peculiar conditions of capital. Many have argued this out for ideology, though so far as I know there exists no in-depth critique of legitimation as a social-science explanation of the non-modern world. If the briefest and most selective quotation can capture such complicated matters let us note Claude Lefort: “Ideology is the sequence of representations which have the function of re-establishing the dimension of a society ‘without history’ at the very heart of historical society,” that is, of capitalist society; and Paul Ricoeur: “Ideology arises not on the collapse of the ritual dimension but from the open conflictual situation of modernity.”¹⁷

Moreover, the underpinnings of the concepts of ideology and legitimation have been in hot water in the past decade, at the hands of social scientists themselves who find they make no sense even for capitalist societies in the way we normally think of them. For the sociologist Nicholas Abercrombie and his collaborators, ideology works not to create false consciousness in the masses but to build ruling class consensus. Social scientists who work in peasant societies, such as James Scott, argue that ideology is basically meaningless there: no one is listening. And even if the dominated in the past were listening, why believe that elites sought to secure their consent by the false consciousness of ideology, or sought to convince them of something in which they didn’t believe themselves? — and we are committed to just this interpretation if we say they are deploying culture for purposes of what our contributors often call “propaganda.”

Indeed, legitimation implies the attempt, through the application of ideas or acts, to make a political or other phenomenon appear to conform to a set of norms when *ex hypothesi* it does not. Such an assessment of a theory of action is vulnerable to a host of criticisms. It rests either on a model of consensual rational choice that is largely belied by experience, or else on a conspiracy theory of politics: “legitimation” suggests a knowledgeability on the part of rulers that is unavailable to people at large, who are therefore cultural dopes and dupes, since they are induced to believe in ideas opposed to their interests as rulers know them to be. Moreover, from what vantage point, in a world of continuous political practices — that is, in the world of premodernity — would it be possible even to perceive the asymmetry between political fact and political norm that legitimation would be called upon to reconcile? In the historical experience of a Luwian or Assyrian, there had always been kings, who had always exercised power in a given way. No one had ever experienced anything else; no standard of comparison existed for doubting the inevitability of kingship, which accordingly approximated a natural law. In other words, you only need legitimation when something is, in objective fact, illegitimate. But where does that objective fact of illegitimacy come from, from what norms of legitimacy does it deviate? Rulers in antiquity could indeed be just or unjust, true heirs or false, and they could most certainly terrify or mollify.

¹⁶ See Weber 1978/1: 56 and 63 (emphasis added); 216 respectively (and cf. p. 263).

¹⁷ Lefort 1986: 181–236; Ricoeur 1986: 259–61. See Pollock 2006b, chapter 13, from which these paragraphs have

been adapted, along with the paraphrases of the ideology critique from the oeuvre of the sociologist Anthony Giddens.

But there is no reason to assume they cared, let alone needed to secure the assent of their subjects to the legality and validity of their rule. The requirement to elicit such assent is a necessity of modernity, where coercion has been limited by, for example, constitutional freedoms.

What if rulers were not manipulators and the ruled were not dupes? What if people believed in what they were doing? What if power and culture bore a completely different relationship to each other in premodernity from what we find under the very peculiar conditions of capitalist modernity? We cannot even begin to ask such questions if our kneejerk explanation is legitimation, ideology, and propaganda.

In closing let me try to put the methodological proposal here in the broadest terms possible. I suggest we develop theory and devise an explanatory apparatus open enough to allow us to be *surprised* by the past. That's not how we should always and forever start out since there are indeed long-term continuities in history (to say nothing of the hermeneutical prison house constructed by our own historicity). But that is how I think we should strive to be: open to the unpredictable. A graffito I saw in almost-post-modern Berlin in 1989 captures something of what I am trying to describe. Marx famously argued, against the philosophical idealists, that it is lived social reality that calls the tune for our thinking: "Es ist nicht das Bewusstsein der Menschen, das ihr Sein, sondern umgekehrt ihr gesellschaftliches Sein, das ihr Bewusstsein bestimmt." In short, "Das Sein betimmt das Bewusstsein," being founds consciousness.¹⁸ The graffito writer argued otherwise: "Das Sein *verstimmt* das Bewusstsein," being confounds consciousness. Life and history, in other words, can astonish us.

¹⁸ Marx, *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, in Marx and Engels 1956–1968: vol. 13: 9.

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