

Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of History from Modern China

By Prasenjit Duara

Reviewed by Pete Sweeney for SISEA590 Professor Dong

It is with pleasurable embarrassment that I must now confess to having misunderstood Duara's concept of nationalism as advanced in *Sovereignty and Authenticity*. Perhaps it is the case that it is very difficult to understand his position on nationalism without understanding his view of what history is, but all in all I wish I had read this book before reading *Sovereignty* as it seems to bring so many of his points in that work into focus retroactively.

To be sure, I am not clear that I understand the particular subtlety of many of his points, and I'm confident that some passed over my head. For example, I am unclear on what exactly his idea of self-consciousness entails. "The self," he says, "is constituted within a network of changing and often conflicting representations." This is a theme that repeats itself in application to narratives of the history of groups as well. Duara advocates the study of *historiēs*, not History. A single, linear historical narrative is frequently the product of a "deep, tenacious and . . . repressive connection between history and the nation." So to my mind, Duara allows for the existence of actual national consciousnesses and identities, but notes that while they have no implicit need for a unified historical narrative that includes some and excludes others, nationalism does, particularly state-building nationalism. Duara coins a term for the process of defining your group identity in terms of who you are not: *discent*.

On the other hand, Duara specifically takes exception to modern solipsistic views that "privilege the present over the past . . . in which histories are *nothing* [my italics] but retrospective constructions to serve present needs." He posits and demonstrates, to my view, the idea that history is the product of a communal dialogue between the living and the dead using the metaphor of the telephone call. Duara prefers "bifurcated" histories that encompass many different strands; he

views linear histories, progressive/evolutionary histories, and “end of history” utopianisms more useful to politicians than historians, and utterly useless to historiographers.

In some places Duara draws some fine yet precise lines that delineate the difference between History and The Past. In others he asserts that lines are too precise, and should be blurred, as in the difference between tradition and modernity, or between modern national consciousness and traditional forms– he specifically takes issue with Anderson’s position that print media caused a paradigmatic shift in human national consciousness.

Duara’s take on the role Chinese religion played in the transition to modernity– and on religion as a whole– is fascinating. It is quite refreshing to read a scholar who allows such a generous space for the benefits of religious life and association in the development of viable societies. However, Duara appears to privilege small-scale religions over larger ones. While he notes that the Catholic Church did sanction “emergent regional states” in China, he also notes that religions with “authoritative religious texts” (he includes Buddhism here) were more amenable to state control. Although nationalists occasionally sought to rally the population against Buddhism and Christianity as symbols of foreign influence/imperialism, Duara suggests they ultimately found such religions preferable to the diffuse polytheisms of Chinese rural villages.

His narrative of the means the KMT tried to manipulate this sphere is instructive. On the one hand, the KMT moved towards “scientism” in which even Confucianism was ultimately discarded and in which folk “superstition” was immediately attacked. To this end, they engaged in a sort of temple–school swap, which provoked occasional and significant resistance, including protests by the secret society of the Small Swords that marched to the rallying cry of “Support Imperialism!” On the other hand, the KMT sought to use the secret societies in the resistance, and then discard their contributions later by excluding them from the historical narrative as racist or childish. Duara points out that the KMT sought to blame the secret societies for a racialism that was in some cases the product of the social Darwinism of the nationalist movement itself.

In its contradictory pragmatism, the KMT's approach was similar to the Communist's flip-flopping on revolutionary Chinese federalism; Mao began by lauding the Hunanese autonomist movement but ended his career by identifying with the centralizing first emperor of Chin.

While Duara generally considers the modernity concept as a convenient disguise for power struggles and evinces sympathy for spheres many would regard as "pre-modern" such as "the richness of associational life" in rural north China. However, he is wary of being painted as a sort of National Geographic-style sympathizer with all things indigenous and primitive. "For the record," he says- that he feels the need to put it on the record is telling- "I myself am committed to the goal of achieving and retaining what is of value in the discourse of modernity." Throughout the book runs a thin seam of this value. For example, he refers to the "emancipatory potential of modernity," a potential he clearly regards as only partly realized. He also gently (perhaps too gently) critiques Gandhi's complete rejection of the modern, the productive, the progressive as a form of totalizing utopianism i.e. a modern phenomenon itself.

All in all I found *Rescuing History* readable, comprehensible, and well-illustrated with historical support. It was also a more humane work, perhaps, than *Sovereignty*. While I found his frequent references to India and Indians somewhat incidental to the title of the work, Duara confesses this and explains that he is trying to come to terms with the "dilemma" that his work as a postcolonialist intellectual has "alienated me from worlds of which I had once been an intimate part."

I also found the concerns he expresses in the conclusion salient and useful. First, he raises the intriguing threat of a new multiethnic essentialism in which states assign ethnic characteristics to the division of labor, a sort of post-national capitalist caste system. I have myself observed this operating in the software industry without putting words to the phenomenon. Secondly, he evinces a hopeful attitude towards the reemergence of popular religion in China as a mechanism for reducing state control and creating a more inclusive "bifurcated history" of the nation and the national identity. "We tend not to equate religious space with civil society because the Enlightenment project was directed against the authority of the Church," he says.

Again, I have observed the tendency to view all religious developments through the template provided by the history of the European secular revolutions and the historical involvement of Church and State in medieval Europe. I understood it was limiting but it was nice to see it put so succinctly and simultaneously to have an alternative history- that of Asian religion- presented. This is precisely the sort of historical dissemination which Duara advocates, and at least in terms of process, it served to cement his core point.